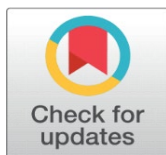


# A HISTORICAL STUDY ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF SALESIAN MISSIONARIES TO EDUCATION IN ASSAM

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## ABSTRACT

The Salesians of Don Bosco are well known for 'Don Bosco' educational institutions. Right from the very beginning of Salesian presence in Northeast India, "Don Bosco", has been synonymous with good education. Don Bosco institutions have sought to impart quality education, relating the knowledge of science and technology, to knowledge of humanities, reinforcing it with the values of Don Bosco's way of education as a source of meaning for life furthering the process of learning and building a society that transcends caste and creed. In Assam region of India, the work of the Salesians was greatly appreciated by the people in general as well as by government officials and others in responsible positions. The main educational centre's set up by the Salesians in the bigger cities of the region attracted students from throughout the State of Assam and perceptibly helped further their economic and social development. The present paper, attempts to highlight some of the significant contribution of Salesian missionaries in the field of school education, technical education and infrastructural facilities in state of the Assam.

**Keywords:** Salesians, Don Bosco, School Education, Technical Education, Infrastructural Facilities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1813 the British Parliament removed most of the restrictions on the missionary activities in India. Clause No. XXXII of the Charter Act of 1813 allowed the freedom for propagating Christianity and with it the missionary movement entered into a crucial phase in North-East India. (Lal, D., 1988). The American Baptist Mission, the Anglican Church, the Indian Home Mission (Lutheran Church), the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church and several other denominations made their inroad in northeast India in subsequent years for their missionary activities.

The modern Missionary educational work in Assam can be traced back to the British Baptists, who in 1829 started a branch of Serampore Mission in Guwahati at the request of David Scott, the first agent to the Governor General in the North East Frontier. (Kaur, C., 2000).

Simultaneously, the Guwahati Mission School was founded at the initiative of Mr. Adam White, Assistant to the Commissioner in Lower Assam. This school was a result of collaboration of local authorities and Missionaries, where Mr.

White was assisted by Reverend James Rae, a British Baptist Missionary from Serampore and some other European gentleman from Guwahati, "The Gauhati Mission School was first school started by Missionaries in Assam. (Ahmad, S., 1992).

Don Bosco was born on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1815 in a small town at Morialdo in a hamlet of Becchi (Writh, M., 2000), near Turin in the region of Piedmonte, kingdom of Sardinia Italy. His original name was Giovanni Melchiorre Bosco and known commonly Don Bosco in the later period when he became a priest. Don Bosco founded the Salesian Congregation a Clerical Religious Congregation of Pontifical Rights on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1859. (Writh, M., 2000). The followers of Don Bosco are called Salesians. The Salesians of Don Bosco are Religious Congregation of men belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. The Salesian Society, founded by Saint John Bosco (Don Bosco) takes its distinctive name from its patron Saint Francis De Sales who was a Catholic Bishop of Annecy in southern France. The objective for which it was founded may be best seen from the opening words from the Salesian Constitution: the Christian perfection of its associates obtained by the exercise of spiritual and corporal works of Charity towards the young, especially those who are poor, and the education of the boys. (Motto, F., 1982).

## 2. ARRIVAL OF THE SALESIAN MISSIONARIES IN ASSAM INDIA

The Salesians of Don Bosco arrived in Assam, Guwahati on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1922. The first group of Salesians comprised of eleven members. They left for Shillong the following day to begin their missionary work. The group consisted of Mgr. Louis Mathias as the leader, Fr. Giovanni Deponti, Fr. Emmanuel Bars, Fr. Giuseppe Gill, Fr. Giuseppe Hauber, Fr. Paolo Bonardi, Bro. Pietro Aprile, Bro. Mario Calzi, Bro. Agostino Conti, Bro. Laureano Santana and Bro. Gumersindo Cid. (Thekkedath, J., 2005). These missionaries came from four European nations of Italy, France, Spain and San Marino.

Before the Salesian missionaries arrived in Shillong, the Salvatorian missionaries worked from 1890 to 1914. The Salvatorian Missionaries (mostly from Germany) left Shillong in 1914 due to pressure from the British government of that time. The Salesians carried on the mission works as well as educational activities. Some of the prominent Salesian missionaries who contributed to the growth of the church and educational activities were Mgr. Louis Mathias, Mgr. Stephen Ferrando, Fr. Constantine Vendrame, Fr. Michael Balavoin (among the Khasi-Pnars,) Fr. Aloysius Ravalico, Fr. John Larrea, Fr. Peter Bianchi (among the Nagas,) Mgr. Orestes Marengo, Fr. Henry Frassy, Fr. John Baptist Bussolin, Fr. George Stadler (among the Garos,) Fr. Leo Piasecki, Fr. Remus Morra, Fr. Joseph Zubizaretta (among the Assam tribes) and so on. Most of these missionaries were multi-faceted persons who contributed in different fields ranging from church activities to education and social service (Kottupallil, G., 1988).

In the past one hundred years Salesians of Don Bosco has played a key role in the growth and development not merely of the Church but of society at large in the entire region. Some important contributions of the Salesians to Northeast India in this past one hundred years will be discussed subsequently.

## 3. DON BOSCO'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

The system of education provided by the Salesians of Don Bosco is founded on three fundamental pillars they are **Reason**, **Religion** and **loving kindness**. St. John Bosco, affectionately called Don Bosco, was not a theorist but a practical man with a compassionate heart and zeal to save the youngsters from all the perils and with a dream to provide them with holistic education. He rejected the repressive system of education and chose the '**Preventive system of Education**' instead.

The Preventive System demands from the teachers a well-planned, suitable, interesting course of studies for the students. In a preventive system of education students should know in advance the year's general program, the monthly and weekly proposed areas to cover. A teacher, who does not conscientiously prepare his classes, fails not only against the Preventive System, but also against justice. Teachers are assistants, guides and directors, and should be found mingling often with the students. They should join, if possible, in student activities, be present in recreation with them, not as supervisors, but as assistants.

The educator in a Salesian school seeks to minimize the negative effects of the so-called "generation gap" fostering the proper balance between authority and permissiveness, by blending freedom with responsibility, integrating the old and

the new. In a word, he fosters true and genuine humanism. To stop at human values and not go beyond was inconceivable for Don Bosco. Thus, he placed great emphasis on the second factor of the Salesian Educational System that is Religion.

#### **4. SALESIAN CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOOL EDUCATION**

A thorough and detached analysis illustrates that the Salesians as they accepted the mandate to initiate their work in Assam to elicit maximum response from the people whom they came to serve kick-started Don Bosco Primary School, Guwahati in 1922. Gradually the Salesians converted the institution into an English medium school in 1962 and upgraded it into higher secondary in 2009 with affiliation to Central Board of Secondary Education under the guidance of Principal Fr. Joseph Thelekkatt. Furthermore they opened in 1928 Don Bosco Technical School in the town to give vocational training to the needy students; the same was later shifted to Maligaon, Guwahati where it equips scores of students with industrial jobs (Kumpiluvellil, L. & Charles, P. 2006; Maliekel, G. 2009).

Barpeta Road Mission was one of the earliest catholic establishments in the Assam Valley. It served as a launching pad for several other missionary ventures. It was also a center from where priests visited and established other Mission centers. The pioneer missionaries who deserve special mention are Fr. Michale De Valle, Fr. Zannon, Fr. Guido Colussi, Fr. Mora, Fr. Benedict Kiro, Bro. Fioredda and many more, both living and dead (George, M.C., 1999).

The parish of Bengtol, dedicated to Blessed Michael Rua, was carved out of the parish of Barpeta by the late Rt. Rev. Orestes Marengo SDB, the then Bishop of Tezpur. The new parish was officially inaugurated on 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1966 with Fr. Joseph Zubizaretta (fondly known as Fr. Zubi) as its first parish priest. It was already being visited by the Salesians who were then residing at Barpeta.

Don Bosco School, Dibrugarh, upper Assam initiated with primary classes in 1931 by Fr. Leo Piasecki, S.D.B. reached maturity with Higher secondary having practically 1500 students on its rolls. An Assamese medium enterprise, Don Bosco Memorial Evening School up to Class IV in the same premises of the above school is a living monument to Don Bosco in his death-centenary 1988 catering to the educational requirements of several needy local tea labourers who are maintained totally free. The successful students are helped with fees and books to pursue their studies elsewhere till Class X.

Don Bosco School, Golaghat, Assam inaugurated in 1945 catering to the male students of Assam in Assamese medium and those from Nagaland especially the male Lothas in English medium with a hostel for all. With the gradual diminution of Assamese medium students the Salesians adopted English medium in 1990 and in the meantime Sacred Heart School (1952) of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC) had become a high school. However, Salesian Society started in 1998 Don Bosco Jivan Jyoti School at Rangajan eight kilometers away from Golaghat town and Don Bosco School at a different spot on the national highway to Dimapur, Nagaland.

#### **5. ADMISSION IN DON BOSCO SCHOOLS**

Don Bosco schools in Assam have opened their door to all the students irrespective of caste, colour, creed and economic background. In most of the schools the rush for admission is always on the rise. Since the school fee is very reasonable and school ensures quality education, many parents prefer Don Bosco Schools to other private schools and government schools. However, since these are self-financed institutions and run with tuition fees collected from the students some students perhaps could not get admission in the school. In response to this, the Salesians have opened evening schools to cater to the poorest of the poor. Don Bosco Higher Secondary School Pan Bazar, Guwahati has been providing evening school educating the poor of the neighbourhood.

#### **6. QUALITY AND EXCELLENCE**

These are the two aims of the Don Bosco schools all over the world. Don Bosco schools have always been the torch bearers of quality and pioneers in experimenting with innovations in imparting education. They have in general maintained high standards and have thereby always attracted the cream of the student community. The role of Salesians in the field of education in Assam has been great and the contribution of the Christian communities to the literacy drive in the region has received much appreciation. Not only has the Salesians in Assam educated a large population, it has also inspired other communities to run schools and colleges following the patterns of Don Bosco institutions.

## **7. TEXTBOOK AND PUBLICATIONS**

The Salesians have also contributed to the education of Assam by publishing textbooks for the school children. Fr. Sebastian Thazhekadavan, former headmaster of Don Bosco School Dibrugarh published two text books: General Knowledge book for classes V and VI and value education book for classes IX and X. A textbook for Mathematics was prepared by Fr. Thomas Arackal and later it was published by Oxford publication. Fr. Thomas Kalapurackal produced the book of General Knowledge which was bi-lingual, both Assamese and English (Aelavanthara, S., 2019). Under the guidance of Fr. Jose Umbavu Thattil and Br. Benjamin Engti Kathar, Don Bosco School Umswai produced more than 50 textbooks in Karbi and Tiwa for primary school students.

### **Vernacular Language Schools**

Although many of the Don Bosco Schools are known for their educational transaction through the language of English, there are some schools that were initially started as vernacular schools. The first school in Golaghat was an Assamese medium school in 1952 (Aelavanthara, S., 2019). Similarly, Don Bosco School Damra and Don Bosco School Barpeta have provincialized Assamese high school functioning even now.

### **Co-curricular and Extra-curricular Activities**

Don Bosco Schools gives a lot of significance to the holistic development of the educand. This facilitated by numerous co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Don Bosco Schools therefore gives a lot of importance to Scouts and Guides, NCC, Environment Club, Dance Club, Drama Club, literary Club, Excursions, Competitions, Sports and the like. These have contributed towards the development of personality and leadership among students.

### **Scholarships and Concessions**

There are many educational institutions wherein the institution itself provides scholarships. Most of the Don Bosco schools and colleges have scholarship programme for meritorious students as well as students hailing from economically backward families. There are numerous such examples some of the beneficiaries of such scholarships have achieved great heights in the social strata. Some of the scholarships include Zubi Scholarship: internal funding from Bengtoli, Fr. Sebastian Karotemperelli Scholarships, Fate Bene Fratelli external scholarship mainly from Italy. It can be proudly said that there are schools which cater to students who are below the poverty line. For example, in Don Bosco School Tinsukia 84% of the students are from below the poverty line families and the school voluntarily supports them (Aelavanthara, S., 2019).

### **Empowerment of Girl Students**

Most of the Don Bosco Schools in Assam uphold the dignity of women and their vocation in life, going beyond mere stereotypes. They ensure that the students and the whole institutional community accept and practice gender sensitivity, equity and equality in the class, in norms for selection of the student leaders and in attitudes that gets manifested in the language and behaviour. Their aim is to promote a gender-empowered society in India, to redress, in some measure, the great sufferings of millions and thus contribute to restore gender justice. One of the major contributions of the Salesians has been the empowerment of women through quality education of girls and formation of women leaders through their schools.

### **Orientation Programme and Professional Interaction**

Don Bosco Schools have created a mechanism to conduct an orientation programme for teachers (Varghese, P., 2009). There have been number of inter-school training programmes and induction programmes conducted by various provinces at the province level and intra-province level. It has helped in sharing, exposure and strengthening of teaching methodology of teachers.

### **Value based Education**

Value education is essential to rejuvenate the moral degradation of youth and to bring orderly sequence, security and progress of the youth with society. In Salesian institutions moral values and ethical behaviour is taught through class room teaching, value education and community service. The methodology of conducting value education include sharing experiences, narration of moral stories, role plays, Salesian goodnight talk (a short good thought given before going to

bed), mentoring sessions with students and teaching about social sensitivity. This has helped in channelizing youth power towards building a humane society based on moral values. Value based education include imparting values like punctuality, hard work, honesty, loyalty, courtesy, dedication and co-operation are encouraged in the school through individual and group counseling (Varghese, P., 2009).

Salesian education also highlighted the weaknesses towards the weaker sections of the society. Therefore, it gave access to education to all sections of Indian society to get educated irrespective of caste or creed and created awareness amongst the people towards social evils that had developed in the system. This has brought social awakening and awareness amongst masses about their rights and duties.

### **Outreach Programmes**

Outreach programme is a transformative community engagement initiative designed to empower students with practical experience in social interventions. Don Bosco schools started primarily to provide education to the marginalized and those living on the fringe of society. There was hardly any monetary gain in mind in the starting of a school. For instance, Don Bosco School located in Dergaon was started with the intention of providing education to the Mising tribe residing along the bank of the River Brahmaputra. These tribe had no access to quality educational institutions (Aelavanthara, S., 2019). Other outreach programmes include career guidance, counseling services, conducting workshops and awareness campaigns on various social issues such as gender equality, poverty alleviation and community development. Students are to record their participation in every activity of outreach programmes in student extension activity card.

### **Don Bosco Alumni/Don Bosco past Pupil Association**

Don Bosco Schools continue to involve the past students through Don Bosco Alumni or the Don Bosco Past Pupils Association. As per the Salesian tradition, the past students too are counted as members of the Salesian family. They are invited to join the Don Bosco Alumni group of the school and establish a link with the Don Bosco Alumni International. There are many Don Bosco School Alumni groups immersing themselves in humanitarian groups like free education, conducting health camp, conducting awareness programmes, raising fund for a good cause, conducting competitions. All these show that Don Bosco's charism is shared by many who have come to study in Don Bosco Schools.

### **Salesian Contribution to Technical Education in Assam**

In Assam, the province of Guwahati, Don Bosco Institute (DBI) and Bosco Reach Out (BRO) took the lead in implementing technical education to the youth of the region. The Salesian Institutes of Maligaon, Don Bosco Social and Technical Training Institute Tezpur. Most of these institutes make use of the existing facilities in order to accommodate the training programmes. Some of the courses that these centres offered to the students are Web Design and Development, Automobile repair, Electrician and wireman, Carpentry, Tiles Making, Hospitality (Housekeeping, F&B Service, Front office), Machinist, Tailoring, Welding and Fabrication, Motor Vehicle Driving; Short term computer training (CCA, DCA, MS-Office, Hardware, DTP, Tally (GST)). Other training programmes include spoken English, Beauty and Spa Therapist, BPO call centres, Refrigerator, Air Conditioners, Washing Machine (RACW) repair and maintenance. These Salesian centres that conduct skill training programme have benefitted financially as well as received greater visibility in their neighbourhood. Besides the financial benefit the Salesian institutes have received, a number of young people have obtained employment, which would have helped in the economic mobility of their families.

### **Infrastructural Facilities**

Today, once can notice imposing and magnificent Don Bosco School buildings. In many areas the houses were initially thatched sheds for schools, teachers' quarters and for the Salesian residence. But the evolving and dynamic nature of the Salesian educational approach ensured that the buildings continue to progress from very scruffy settings to state of the art infrastructure. Don Bosco schools continue to strive to provide the best infrastructure possible to the students. The school buildings today are the symbols of development, modernity, security and stability.

Infrastructural facilities have been highlighted under the following headings:

(i). Buildings: All the Missionary schools in Assam have their own buildings. Most of the buildings are Pakki (concrete cemented structure) and has 2-4 storey foundation. Most of the Missionary schools are located in congenial and healthy



surroundings. They are located in the suburban region or in the outskirts of the city which is free from noise and disturbances. Moreover, majority of the Missionary schools have facilities for expansion and extension of the school buildings.

(ii). Hostel Facilities: As regards the hostel facilities, most of the schools have residential facilities with separate accommodation for boys and girls. Most of the Don Bosco school institutions in the rural areas have a functional hostel with moderate capacity. It primarily caters to the students coming from the remote areas.

(iii). Furniture: It has been found that all the Missionary schools prefer desks and benches instead of chairs and tables for the classroom. These are properly arranged and are convenient for work and are also suitable for the correct postures of the pupil. Apart from the classrooms, the library, the reading room, the principal's room, the staff room and the office of the schools are found to be well-furnished and properly arranged.

(iv). Play-grounds: All the schools have facilities of playground within its campus. The area of playground varies from 1 acre to 10 acres.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The contributions of Salesian missionaries in Assam have made an everlasting impact on the educational development among the people in the region. The approach of Salesian work seems to be very pragmatic as they work as an insider by looking at people's problems and then acting accordingly.

The Introduction of education into Assam precisely at the time when changes were taking place would be regarded as historical accident. The fact is that Salesian education is serving an important social function in the Northeast in particular and that accounts for the large numbers who embraced the faith. The Salesians over the last hundred years have entered into the field of higher education in a considerable way. Similarly, all the courses offered in the technical institutes are aimed at helping the young trainees to increase their workplace skills and effectiveness as employees. Over the years, the technical schools have enhanced their efforts towards complete skill training initiative for young unemployed youth of all categories by developing specific curricula and plans for employment opportunities. This has resulted in offering many new and attractive skill training of varied interests for a diverse group of people in the region. The qualitative change that distinguishes them from the rest of the society is definitely the work of the education they have received. The search for identity of the tribal communities and the fulfillment of it in their community is a unique force of transformation of their lives from being head hunters to being civilized citizens of modern India.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest between them.

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