

Government schools and quality education

■ Swapnanil Barua

If the 'child is the father of the man', then a school is the father of the mind of the child. A good school system is indicative of a developed society in both economic and social terms and a poor society is indicated by bad schools. An imperfect educational system leads to poor human capital formation in a country, which in turn does not produce social and intellectual leadership to break the cycle of intellectual and economic poverty. We can draw inference from a John Kennedy quote in a different context- American roads are good not because America is rich, but America is rich because of its good roads. Unless the roads of education are good, there is no hope of our State coming out of its low rungs in the developing state hierarchy. Assam ranks in the twenties in the development scale among the thirty-three odd states of India, in overall parameters, be it human development index or per capita income.

Assam has over 4000 higher secondary schools of which 51 are fully government schools and the rest provincialised (i.e. salaries of teachers are paid by the government). The saga of government schools in Assam began in 1834 with the setting up of the Guwahati Seminary in 1835, which became the Cotton Collegiate School of today. This school produced the first ICS from Assam in Anandaram Barooah and the two doctors Col Julnar Ali and Col Sivaram Bora by the 1860s. This was followed by the Dibrugarh Government School in 1840, Sivasagar Government School in 1841, Silchar GHS in 1863, Nagao GHS in 1864, Tezpur GHS in 1868, PR Govt HS Goalpara in 1868, BARPETA GHS in 1871, Dhubri GHS in 1879, Shillong GHS in 1880, Jorhat

GHS in 1883, Karimganj GHS in 1884, Bezbarua GHS Golaghat in 1886, Gurdon GHS Nalbari in 1887, Mongoldoi HS in 1903, Hailakandi GHS in 1903, North Lakhimpur GHS in 1915, Kokrajhar GHS in 1936, Tirap GHS in 1938, Jowai GHS in 1941, Aizawl GHS in 1944. Records of the Kohima GHS where Padmanath Gohain Baruah served, were not available on the net. Haflong GHS in 1952 and Diphu GHS in 1956 were the first of government schools set up after Independence. Post Independence many schools in Guwahati and the schools set up by Congressmen in protest of the Cunningham Circular were taken over by the government. These institutions were the pride of Assam till the 1980s, where the quality of education was excellent, with an all-round development of the students be it in academics, sports, cultural activities, etc. The infrastructure of the schools was imposing with most schools having a big playground attached to the school building.

Getting admission into these schools was a matter of pride for the students who competed for the limited seats from all middle and primary schools of the district. The schools had hostels, where getting a seat was even more difficult. Parents took houses on rent to put their wards in these schools or students stayed as day scholars in the homes of grandparents or relatives. The School Tournament was the test of comparative quality between the schools, a matter of prestige and pride for both students and teachers to win in this

School Tournament or doing well in the school final exams. Eight of the top ten in the school leaving examinations were from these government schools till the 1980s. Each school had a legendary headmaster or principal or a famed maths or English teacher, who made it to local folklore. They were not only good teachers but became legends, known throughout Assam. Most of the stu-

...the quality of the government schools nosedived after the commencement of the Assam Agitation. The members of the student bodies of these schools became leaders and soldiers of the agitation and boycotting classes at the drop of a hat became a rule rather than an exception. Few teachers instead of enforcing discipline, decided to join hands with the agitators in their bid to enjoy moments of glory.

dents who shone in life later, came from these government schools. Poor students also got a chance to study in these schools because of minimal fees and merit scholarships for the bright ones. Textbooks were passed on by the students to the next class after promotion to the next higher class. Sewing your own note books and covering them up with brown paper was a ritual at the beginning of a new academic year. The best boys got the first roll numbers in the class register. Social work was an integral part of the educational calendar, be it in flood relief or campus cleaning. Teachers were transferred from one government school to another, giving local students the best teaching

from the best teachers of the State.

However, the quality of the government schools nosedived after the commencement of the Assam Agitation. The members of the student bodies of these schools became leaders and soldiers of the agitation and boycotting classes at the drop of a hat became a rule rather than an exception. Few teachers instead of enforcing discipline,

decided to join hands with the agitators in their bid to enjoy moments of glory. The others decided to look the other way than fall into the category of 'Badans'. Discipline and obedience and the commitment to learning and excellence were lost forever. Come 1983, the interference of the Hiteswar Saikia government in school administration was the last nail in the coffin of government school education. It destabilised the administrative hierarchy with pro-government teachers raking in undue

benefits and many ineligible incumbents making it to the posts of government school teachers. The gains of nearly a century were lost in a matter of months. Teaching and discipline in government schools were lost forever, the results of which were evident in the dismal performance of these government schools in the school leaving examinations. Quality teaching could not wait and therefore private schools came in to fill the void, giving rise to the education industry. Saint Edmunds Shillong was the first high school in the private sector set up in 1915. Private schools in Assam began in the 1930s, set up by the public and later received

assistance from the local boards and government. They were called government-aided schools.

The government gave grants towards meeting the deficit between fees collected and payment of teachers' salaries. Later the government took over paying the salaries of these provincialised school teachers under the Assam Secondary Schools (Provincialised) Service Rules, 2018. As of now there are 3949 such schools employing nearly 50000 teachers. They are selected by the district selection committee and have to work within the district, often in the same schools lifelong. Only the headmasters are selected by the government. The employment status of the provincialised school teachers remains nebulous, whether they are government servants fully or partially. Hence, bringing them into a disciplinary framework is difficult. Yet, they form a bulk of teachers in the high/higher secondary schools of the State. Can the government keep a quality check on these teachers when it has failed to keep a tab on quality tea in the fully government schools? The political executives now manning the education sector are themselves products of bad schooling, having been school students during the agitation days. It's only now when they are sending their children to the best schools in the country, are they being exposed to the concept of a good school imparting quality education. Will they decide to make the government schools in the district headquarters quality schools of yore if not of Doon School standards? It's only after the restoration of the old glory of the government schools in full can the government improve the teaching and infrastructure quality of the 4000 odd provincialised schools. Till then Assam's future development is at stake.