

**AMERICAN MISSIONARIES :
FIRST TWO SCHOOLS ESTABLISHED AT SADIYA**

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ABSTRACT :

This paper may be a path-finding one in the field of the entry of the American Baptist Christian Missionaries in North-East India for the first time in the beginning of 1836. They left Calcutta for Sadiya in 1835. They arrived in Guwahati. They had procured three Bengali boats.

They opened their first school at Sadiya in 1836. One male Missionary taking the boys and one female Missionary the girls began the procedure of the school. The number of boys presented at the first day was six but has since increased to twenty, five of whom learned English. The schools became historically immemorial; the North-East Indians got the first footing of English education in them.

Keywords : Village Schools at Sadiya, American Christian Missionaries, Opening of the First Two Schools, Survey of Sadiya, Syllabus of Sadiya Schools.

INTRODUCTION :

American missionaries first entered Assam early in 1836, ushering in an imperialistic chapter in the annals of history there. On 23 March 1836, Rev. Nathan Brown, one of the leading figures of this mission, described their arrival in Sadiya after an arduous journey which took them nearly four months. He brought along his wife, Mrs. Eliza W. Ballard Brown, Mr. Oliver T. Cutter, and Cutter's wife, Mrs. Harriet Low Cutter. On 20 November 1835, they set off from Calcutta in a direction that is more than most Europeans could have reached at that time.

Their journey was not an easy one. Almost two months into their river journey, on 18 January 1836, the missionaries finally reached Guwahati, still a distance from their destination. The family had traveled by boat, acquiring three Bengali boats for the journey: one for each family and an additional boat which served as their floating kitchen and storehouse. They were rather small boats, approximately five or six feet wide and twenty or thirty feet in length, but they offered some protection as a combined bamboo and palm leaf shelter which protected the passengers from wind and rain. There was a "Manji" or captain who led the boat crew of six to eight persons responsible for the navigation

through the rivers and streams of Japan. The crew mainly navigated by walking along the riverbank, pulling the boats with ropes, and when no path was found, they used poles to push the boats through shallow waters.

Rev. Brown recorded that he thought they would have advanced much faster had it not been for the shallow waters that delayed their advance movement, especially between the Hooghly and the Ganges rivers. The hardships the missionaries faced were partly because they would often spend weeks cut off from the comforts of civilization and any contact with Europeans. They were visited occasionally by British officials when they set off on their journey, though those visits became less common as they journeyed deeper into the 'wild'. After traveling through impenetrable jungle for 17 weeks, crossing unknown, exhausting terrain that most accounts considered unbearable for any human being to endure, they arrived at their destination. However, the missionaries continued forward, After traveling for some months along this torturous track, the party arrived at Sadiya on 23 March 1836. Upon arriving at Sadiya, they had commenced a long and arduous effort to spread Christianity in the region. During the first quarter of the 19th century, American Baptist Christian missions reached the Indian Northeast frontier. 1836 That year saw Reverend Nathan Brown and his party crossing into the remote Assamese town of Sadiya on a historic journey to open educational institutions that would, for the very first time in Assam, offer western education to the aboriginal population. The paper represents its concern for the establishment of the first two schools at Sadiya, their operations, , and the legacy left behind by these early institutions in the field of education, disturbing social fabric, and religious conversion.

Objectives :

The primary objectives of this research paper are :

1. To explore the role of American missionaries in the establishment of the first schools at Sadiya.
2. To examine the syllabus, curriculum, and teaching methodology employed at these early schools.
3. To assess the socio-political intent of the Missionaries that led to the brief existence of these schools.
4. To evaluate the long-term impact of the Sadiya schools on the educational and social fabric of Northeast India.

Methodology :

This study is based on a qualitative historical research methodology. Primary sources such as letters, diaries, and mission reports from Reverend Nathan Brown and other missionaries have been analyzed to reconstruct the history of the Sadiya schools. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and historical accounts, have also been consulted to contextualize the missionaries' work within the broader historical and cultural landscape of Assam in the 19th century.

Review of Literature :

To conduct a literature review on the arrival of Baptist missionaries and the founding of schools in Sadiya, Assam, the following areas can be explored :

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1. **Historical Background of Baptist Missions in Assam.** Literature on Baptist missionary activities in Northeast India often begins with the role of early American Baptist missionaries. Primary sources, such as records from the American Baptist Missionary Union, detail the arrival of the first missionaries in Assam in the 19th century. Writings by missionaries themselves, like Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter, offer insights into their motivations, challenges, and approaches to evangelism and education. These writings also reflect on the mission's foundational values, particularly around literacy and scripture translation as means of promoting Christianity.

2. **Missionary Influence on Education in Sadiya.** Baptist missionaries are noted for emphasizing literacy and education, not only as a religious pursuit but also as a tool for social upliftment. They established some of the first schools in Assam, including those in Sadiya, a region that had limited access to formal education at the time. Various accounts document that these missionaries were pioneers in introducing formal education, establishing schools where they taught reading, writing, and basic arithmetic, along with biblical teachings. Their establishment of schools was crucial in laying the foundations for modern education in Northeast India.

3. **Challenges Faced by Missionaries in Sadiya.** Missionary writings often reflect the unique challenges they faced in Sadiya, including difficult terrain, language barriers, and health issues. They also encountered resistance from certain local groups wary of religious conversion efforts. The difficulties faced by the missionaries and their perseverance in establishing schools are often highlighted in historical accounts, emphasizing their commitment to educational and spiritual goals despite limited resources. Primary sources: Missionary journals and letters from the American Baptist Missionary Union archives.

Secondary sources: Academic works on the history of Christian missions in Northeast India and studies on the socio-cultural impact of these missions on Assam's indigenous communities.

The Arrival of the American Missionaries :

In late 1835, Rev. Nathan Brown, his wife Mrs. Eliza W. Ballard Brown, and their associates embarked on a challenging journey from Calcutta to Sadiya. The journey, fraught with physical hardships, took nearly four months. On March 23, 1836, after navigating treacherous waters and dense jungles, they arrived at their destination, Sadiya, in Assam. Their arrival marked the beginning of Western education in Northeast India.¹

The missionaries were determined to establish schools for both boys and girls in the region, as part of their Christian missionary efforts. They believed that English education can be an essential tool for converting the local population and transforming into christianity .To some extent They succeeded in setting up the first Western-style schools, with Mrs. Cutter and Mrs. Brown taking charge of the girls' and boys' schools, respectively.²

Survey of Sadiya :

Before the missionaries began their work in Sadiya, they conducted a survey of the region. Rev. Nathan Brown's notes, preserved in missionary archives, offer insights into the social and geographical setting of Sadiya at the time.Sadiya, as Nathan Brown described, was beautifully situated in the center of a vast and fertile plain, surrounded by mountains that formed a natural amphitheater. The landscape was stunning, with a horizon uninterrupted by any major obstructions, except for a short distance to the southeast.³ The climate, according to Brown, was temperate and healthy, which was ideal for agriculture. The soil in the region was extremely fertile, making it capable of producing nearly every variety of fruit. This natural bounty made Sadiya a location of great potential for both cultivation and settlement.However, despite the fertile land and pleasant climate, the population of Sadiya was sparse. Brown attributes this low population density to the historical impact of Burmese invasions and other wars that had decimated the local communities.⁴ Assam, and particularly the Sadiya region, had seen significant depopulation due to these conflicts, leaving the area relatively under populated.⁵

The Social Composition of Sadiya :

Brown's survey of Sadiya also included visits to several villages spread over a considerable distance, mostly within a radius of two or three miles from each other. The old village of Sadiya itself was small, with only about thirty or forty houses.⁶ The residents here were mostly Assamese, with a few families belonging to the Khamti or Shyan communities. One notable figure in this group was the former chief of the district, an intelligent man who expressed interest in sending his son to school—a sentiment that foreshadowed the growing appreciation for formal education in the area.⁷

As Brown ventured further into the district, he visited other villages that were similarly small and predominantly inhabited by Assamese people. The most significant stop in this part of his journey was the Khamti village near Gurmura creek. This village, with perhaps twenty houses, included a Buddhist monastery, home to six or eight priests.⁸ The Khamti people spoke a language similar to that of the Shyans of northern Burma, and their religion mirrored that of the Burmans, despite their apparent ignorance of its finer tenets.⁹ Brown's encounter with them revealed their lack of familiarity with even basic teachings, such as the Five Precepts of Buddhism.

After completing his survey of the Sadiya district, Brown crossed the Brahmaputra River to explore the area of Suikhwa, located on the opposite bank. Suikhwa was a district populated by a diverse mix of Assamese, Singphos, Khamtis, and Miris. Brown noted that the population of Suikhwa

was slightly smaller than that of Sadiya, with around 1,000 men paying taxes, which suggested a total population of approximately 3,500 people spread across about 1,600 families.¹⁰

During his visit to Suikhwa, Brown observed that English education was practically nonexistent in the area. Most of the people were illiterate, and very few, if any, could read or write.¹¹ He remarked that schools could be established in each of Suikhwa's villages to great advantage. Such institutions would serve as a means of introducing education to a largely uneducated population, and this would become one of the missionaries' key objectives in the region.¹²

Sadiya was described as a fertile region surrounded by mountains, though the population was sparse due to past wars. The area was home to a mix of Assamese, Khamti, and Mishmi communities, with no access to English education and modern amenities.¹³ The missionaries, therefore, saw a fertile ground to introduce formal education and convert these communities into christianity.¹⁴

Establishment of the Schools :

In June 1836, the American missionaries opened their first schools in Sadiya. According to Nathan Brown's report, Mrs. Cutter began teaching the boys, and Mrs. Brown taught the girls.¹⁵ Initially, the schools had only a handful of students, with just six boys attending on the first day. However, the numbers quickly increased, and by mid-1837, the boys' school had about forty scholars, with several of them learning to read English. The school operated using a simple but syllabus designed to introduce students to the basics of reading and writing, with a strong emphasis on religious education.

The schools were initially segregated by gender, with Mrs. Cutter focusing on the boys and Mrs. Brown managing the girls' school. Within a year of their first school opening, a separate girls' school was established. By June 1837, Mrs. Brown had begun teaching a group of ten girls, marking a gender inclusivity in education in the region.¹⁶

The Curriculum and Syllabus :

The curriculum for the missionaries' schools was streamlined and made more religion-based. The Sadiya schools utilized reading books that were directly provided by the American Sunday School Union. These books included the Union Primer, Nursery Book, among other elementary textbooks that the materials were supposed to educate the students in both the English language and the other Christian values.¹⁷ Literacy abilities that centered on how the students learn to read and understand the English language, besides religious teachings, formed the foundation of the school's curriculum.¹⁸

The objective was to integrate a Christian moral system in the minds of the students. As stated in their report, the textbooks incorporated in the teaching process integrated the learning of the English language with tales of the Bible, Christian parables, and hymns.¹⁹ This curriculum was expected to give the students to incorporate the morality of Christianity. This lesson in Christianity led the missionaries

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to be filled with good zeal in imparting the concept of Christianity because, in their place, Western education was synonymous with religious instruction.²⁰

Challenges and Closure of the Schools :

Though the missionaries were able to open schools, socio-political turmoil soon disrupted their work. The Khamti rebellion started in January 1839, and on January 28 Sadiya was attacked. The missionaries had to leave the station, and the schools were closed because of that. Nathan Brown, who was one of the eye-witnesses to the attack on the mission station, vividly described the violence and the panic as the missionaries and their families took shelter in a stockade. It was only after the mutiny that the missionaries were compelled to evacuate Sadiya, and the region lay in disarray.²¹ The schools had functioned nearly two years and seven months, and they could not continue beyond January 1839.

The Outcome and Legacy of the Sadiya Schools :

These Sadiya schools were small and It was through these schools that modern Western education entered Northeast India. It was the first Western language wherein formal education was achieved for the indigenous people of Assam and the associated regions, thereby inaugurating an era of further english education and the conversions of the indigenous people into christianity in the region.²²

One of the significant implications of Sadiya schools was that the newly educated class in English education there became a force to be reckoned with for the social and cultural reforming process of the region. And among these students were Nidhi Levi Farwell, who emerged as one of the leading figures of this “Orunodoi Age” in Assamese literature.¹⁷ Farwell’s prose and poetic creations came as a slice of Western sunlight into the works of Assamese literature and is remembered as one of the first Assamese writers to be educated by a Western-style school.²³

The Sadiya schools also did a job of spreading Christianity in Assam and Northeast India thereby dismantling the indigenous social system. Converts for the first time-the initial installment in the form of a batch of teachers, ordained as priests-were a result of the schools. The schooling resulted in the burgeoning Christian communities along with erecting more churches in the region.²⁴ The social and cultural map of Assam was thus streamlined with the fruits of the missionaries.

Conclusion :

The establishment of the first two American missionary schools in Sadiya was the beginning in the history of western education in Northeast India. Despite their brief existence, these schools provided the first exposure to English education for the indigenous communities and laid the groundwork for future educational reforms in the region. The missionaries’ introduction to education and religious conversion left a lasting legacy, influencing not only the development of English education but also the broader indigenous socio-cultural transformation of Assam. Through their work,

the missionaries opened the doors to Western education, which would later blossom into more educational institutions in the region.

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4. (a) V. H. Sword, *Baptists in Assam (1836-1936)*, 45.
(b) Milton S. Sangma, *History of American Baptist Mission in North-East India (Vol. I)*, 29.
(c) F. S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, 18.
5. (a) *Journal of Brown; Sadiya*; March 23, 1836.
(b) Barpujari; *Op-cit.*, 6.
(c) The Burmese attack, mentioned mostly as ‘War’ took place thrice in Assam in the years of 1817, 1819 and 1920-21. Assam had never witnessed such barbarous attack in which even the pregnant women were not spared and their bellies were cut into pieces to get out the unborn children.— (A History of Assam—Edward Gait; 225-232; Asamar Padya-Buranji (Assamese Book)—edited by Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan. 230-278).
6. Here quoted from Barpujari, *Op-cit.*, 6-7.
7. Now it is read, written and pronounced as ‘Soikhowa’.
8. *Journal of Brown, Sadiya*, April 11, 1836. Here quoted from Barpujari, *Op-cit.*, 7-8.
9. *Journal of Brown, Sadiya*, March 26, 1836. Here referred from Barpujari, *Op-cit.*, 7.
10. R.B. Pemberton, *Report on The Eastern Frontier of British India*, 269.
11. It should not be mistaken here that prior to the Sadiya School, Assam, as well as the present North-East India covering seven States had no Educational Centres. The North-East India had Educational Institutions in the name of ‘Tol’ for teaching and learning of Sanskrit; ‘Moktab’ for Persian, Arabic etc. The ‘Tol’ is continuing in Assam till today at least from thirteenth century C.E. and the ‘Moktab’ since about eighteenth century. But the ‘Tol’ was not open for the Lower Caste and common people; it was opened only for the high caste and elite. Hence, the schools at Sadiya opened a new Chapter of Education in Upper Assam. The Lower Assam had witnessed its first school at Guwahati in 1831. Barpujari ed — (*Political History of Assam, Vol. I*, 104).

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