

DON BOSCO” IN NORTH EAST INDIA - A NAME SYNONYMOUS WITH CHANGE AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH EDUCATION

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Evangelii Nuntiandi, the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI, dated 8th December 1975, spoke of the need to address the great complexities involved in human advancement and liberation (No.6) and exhorted those engaged in the proclamation of the Gospel to work for the total well-being of people (No.31).

Reflecting on the life, words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth, the ultimate point of reference for any believer, Hans Küng, in his celebrated book *On Being a Christian* stated: Jesus did not proclaim any theological theory or any new law, nor did he proclaim himself. He proclaimed the kingdom of God: God’s cause (=God’s will), which will prevail and which is identical with man’s cause (=man’s well-being)¹

The nearly 100 years of the Salesian evangelization efforts in North-East India was in line with the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and in keeping with the magisterial teaching, as well as the scholarly thinking in the academic circles of the Catholic Church. Evident was also an untiring commitment to the total well-being of all the people in the region – irrespective of religion or caste. Through educational and social developmental activities the Salesians engaged themselves in the ushering in of the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by the Lord in His “Nazareth Manifesto” (Lk 4: 16-19) and that with an evident respect for the people and culture of the region as well as with the collaboration of all people of good will. The educational and social involvement of the Salesians also led to the coming over to the Catholic fold of not so insignificant a number of people from among the tribal population who were until then not in the political and developmental schemes of the government. Neither the British Colonial Government, nor the Government of Independent India, did anything substantial for the socio-economic development of the region. This lack of governmental attention was particularly glaring in the area of education, rightly considered, the vehicle of individual and societal progress.

Today even a casual visitor to the region will be impressed by the well-deserved esteem that “Don Bosco” enjoys, among people of all walks of life – politicians, army personnel (who are well deployed in the area on account of its strategic position), academicians, members of other religious congregations, and the general populace. Such esteem is the result of the services, especially of an educational and developmental nature, which have resulted from the Salesian presence in the region. “Don Bosco”, which without

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¹Cf.Hans Küng *On Being a Christian, Twenty Propositions* "The Christian Challenge", pages 313-316, 1979 (<http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/challenge.html>).

exaggeration can be considered a password in the region, in effect, bespeaks change and transformation realized through education

The present paper, ***Don Bosco in North East India – A Name Synonymous with Change and Societal Transformation through Education***, is an attempt to present the general perception about “Don Bosco” in North East India.

In keeping with its stated scope, the paper starts with a historical note on the sporadic contacts Christianity had, with this geographically and culturally challenging region from the first half of the 17th century. It then dwells on the first organized attempt of the Holy See, towards the end of the 19th century, to have a more stable presence in the *Assam Mission*. Though the *Propaganda Fide* entrusted the mission to the German Salvatorians, in 1915, in the context of the First World War, the British ejected them from the region as “enemy aliens. The paper then goes on to indicate the “Jesuit Interval” from 1915 to 1922, when a reluctant Society of Jesus, agreed to administer the mission “till alternate arrangements would be made”. Finally one comes to the eventual handing over of the Assam Mission to the Salesian Congregation, whose Superiors too, at that point in time, were reluctant to accept this responsibility! However, the dedication and initiatives of the Salesians proved fruitful and right from the beginning, they came to enjoy great esteem and their contribution towards education and development appreciated and lauded by all.

Today, as it has been right from the beginning of the Salesian presence in North East India, “Don Bosco”, is synonymous with good education. This has prompted many others, including non-Catholic organizations, to start schools under the Don Bosco banner. This situation has prompted the Salesians in the South Asia Region to initiate a process of patenting “Don Bosco” with the aim of preventing the unauthorized use of this “brand name”.

It is also to be taken note of that the Salesian involvement in the region was with the necessary respect for the nature and culture of the people and through networking with as broad a cross-section of the society as possible, not excluding non-Christians. This was in line with the generally liberal outlook of the country as expressed among others, by Sri Naryana Guru (1856-1928). Narayana Guru spoke of ‘*Om Sahodaryam Sarvatra* (universal brotherhood) - One *Jati* (caste) One Religion, One God for Man ... *Whichever the religion, it suffices if it makes for a better man!*’² This in effect was along the lines of the lofty philosophical and spiritual ethos of Hinduism expressed in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* with its celebrated prayer: *.asato ma sadgamaya, tamaso ma jyotirgamaya, mrtyorma amrtam gamaya* meaning, “Lead me from the *asat* (the untrue) to the *sat* (the true) .Lead me from darkness to light. Lead me from death to immortality!”³

Indeed what the Salesians in North East India have done is to work for the total well-being of the people primarily through imparting quality education in the name of Him who had come to give life in its fullness (Jn. 10:10) and who declared Himself to be the Truth, the Way, the Life (Jn. 14:6) and the Light (Jn. 8:12).

² http://www.thefullwiki.org/Sree_Narayana_Guru).

³ Brhadaranyaka Upanishad — I.iii.28. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishads* dates back to the 7th century BC and deals with some of the central philosophical concepts of Hinduism especially on the nature of the ultimate reality (*brahman*) and describing the character of and path to human salvation (*moksha*).has this very enlightening prayer