

MILES BRONSON : HIS MISSION OF CIVILISATION IN THE NAGA HILLS

S.K. Barpujari (Gauhati)

Ever since the British annexation of Assam in 1826, the authorities at Fort William had to confront with the arduous task of pacifying the warlike tribes inhabiting the hills of the North-East Frontier. In the beginning, these tribes were left to themselves except for occasional expeditions for punishing them for raiding the borders of British territories. Soon it was realised by local authorities that such a "do-nothing" policy was fraught with dangerous consequences. They became convinced that punitive actions alone unaccompanied by measures of a solid nature would not secure the peace in the frontier. David Scott, the first Agent to the Governor-General in the North East Frontier, attempted to 'civilise' the Garos by introducing Christian education among them and for that purpose he started a school at Singimari. In view of the declared policy of religious neutrality, the Home authorities expressed strong disapproval to Scott's scheme for "attempting to propagate Christianity among the natives".¹ His worthy successor, Francis Jenkins was also convinced that the Singphos, Khamtis, Nagas, etc., could not be "raised in the scale of civilisation and their country be rendered of importance to the state" unless they were redeemed from their predatory habits by spreading Christianity and education. Although the policy of the Government remained unaltered, Jenkins was not prevented from inviting Christian Missionaries to undertake the task of civilising the backward tribes of the North-East Frontier.

In early 1835, an official invitation was sent by Jenkins to the American Baptist Missionaries then in Burma ; the latter were too glad to seize this opportunity for working among the Shans as "part of a great Central Asian strategy".² Reverend Nathan Brown, an expert linguist and Oliver Cutter, Printer, arrived at Sadiya with their families on March 23, 1837. To begin with, they started a school and a printing press donated by Jenkins himself. Soon they realised the need for additional Missionaries to undertake works among the Singphos and other tribes. The Home

Board designated Miles Bronson and Jacob Thomas, two young Missionaries for the same. They with their families left Boston, in the United States of America, in October, 1836, and after reaching Calcutta, they left for Sadiya by boat in April next year. Unfortunately, most of the members of the party fell sick on the way and Bronson became the worst sufferer. His friend Jacob Thomas advanced in a small boat towards Sadiya to bring medical help, but before reaching the place he was drowned in the river by the falling of a huge tree. This was a "severe blow to the Mission and a continuous source of sorrow for his close friend Miles Bronson".³

Notwithstanding these misfortunes, in April 1838, Bronson with his family moved to Jaipur to work among the Singphos, where they were provided with accommodation by C.A. Bruce, Superintendent of Experimental Tea Gardens in Upper Assam. The European residents of the locality made contributions towards the well-being of this new station and "several ladies of their families joined with the Missionaries in opening schools and in teaching the heathen children."⁴ Jenkins donated Rs. 500 and offered an equal amount for the post of a Superintendent of Schools whenever the same was created by the Board. Bronson found the Singpho work "to be extremely difficult if not impossible". He was attracted by another people whose field appeared to be more promising—they were the Nagas living in the vicinity of Jaipur. They were known as Namsangias to the Assamese from Namsang, the village of their residence. These Nagas belonged to the Nocte clan now inhabiting the Tirap District of Arunachal (NEFA). By this time, Brown and Cutter also realised that Sadiya was not the place to reach the Shans whose country lay between Assam and Burma. They, therefore, decided to shift to Jaipur to work among the people of the plains.⁵ Desirous as he was to work among the Nagas, Bronson who was also an expert linguist like Brown learnt their dialect, prepared a speller and a simple catechism in their tongue. He found the Nagas friendlier than the Singphos and it was a matter of satisfaction for him that he was able to talk with them in broken Assamese.⁶

In the cold season of 1838, Bronson left for Namsang to gain first-hand knowledge about the Nagas, their temperament, habits and ascertain whether his presence among them would be welcome. It should be remembered that this was a time when the Nagas like other tribes of the North-East Frontier were suspicious of the white men. They considered them as "Company Men" whose intrusion into their hills had aroused jealousy and wrath against them. The Missionaries whether they belonged to America or England were all the same to them. They were branded as agents of the East India Company whose "late movement in the Muttock" had made them more suspicious.⁷ As was expected, Bronson was not allowed to enter their village at once but after a palaver in the usual Naga

fashion for six days with the village elders. While he was discussing with the Nagas his plan for opening a school at Namsang, he heard that the Khamtis had unfurled the standard of revolt against the British. In January 1839, Sadiya was attacked and the insurgents burnt houses and villages and killed several Europeans. He, therefore, hurried back to Jaipur.⁸

On his return, Bronson found "the schools broken up and the whole population distracted with alarms and rumours of approaching war". Even in the west of the district of Sibsagar, the Angami Nagas continued to raid British villages of Nowgong and North Cachar. Notwithstanding such a situation, Bronson made a second visit to Namsang in December to make preliminary arrangements for starting a school and a Chapel. He built a house on a hilltop overlooking the village. Mr. and Mrs. Bruce who were interested in Bronson's work provided all possible help and encouragement. Captain Hannay, Commandant of the Assam Light Infantry also gave material support to the project as "such work would contribute to the British policy of pacifying the Naga tribes without having to assume administrative control over them."⁹

On March 14, 1840 Bronson brought his family to Namsang for permanent residing at the place. The journey from Jaipur to Namsang was a tedious one and was done on elephants provided by C.A. Bruce. Bronson started the school with the assistance of his wife and engaged himself in the translation of the scriptures. He was assisted in this project by all the local officials and European residents. Jenkins took so much interest in the work that "he made frequent communication directly to the Board, setting forth its condition and wants, and recommending the measures he deemed important for its growth".¹⁰ To establish a school was one thing, but to find out pupils was another. Habituated to agricultural and warlike pursuits Naga young men could not be spared from their duties in the fields, salt-wells and Morungs.** To have girls in schools was beyond their comprehension. "You cannot teach our females", they said, "they are trained to bear burdens, to bring wood and water, and to make the salt by which we earn our subsistence".¹¹ There was also the notion that young men related to the chiefs were fit to receive education and the common people could not be benefited by it. Besides these, he had to confront himself with the difficulties of communication, inhospitable climate, absence of medical facility and forlorn nature of the station. "We have never been quite as much alone as just now having always had some brother missionary or atleast some English person with whom to associate", thus wrote Bronson to the Board from Namsang.¹²

At the request of Jenkins for additional Missionaries, the home Board designated Reverend Cyrus Barket and his wife. Bronson's own

sister Rhoda also came to assist her brother in the Namsang work, but she became sick immediately on her arrival. As the Barkers were more interested in working in the plains than in the hills, they did not visit Bronson. Naturally he had to work alone save with the help of his own family members. After a residence of few months almost all his family members including himself were afflicted with sickness. In spite of these, the school work was progressing well and after persuasion most of the chiefs agreed to send their children to the school; soon they became acquainted with the "rudiments of learning". Although in the beginning it was found difficult to maintain routine and discipline because of their untamed spirits before long they became regular and eagerly "looked forward in anticipation to the study period".¹³ Bronson taught them the Gospel and to change their rude habits he imparted instructions on professional arts—that of preparing tea and salt. On the subject of redeeming the Nagas frequent correspondence passed between the Missionary and Agent to the Governor-General.

After his arrival at Namsang on March 14, 1840, he wrote to Jenkins :

It strikes me that we should aim at benefiting the people everyway in our power; and perhaps nothing is more needful than to correct their indolent habits and to introduce among them the manufacture of tea on the following plan. *v/z.*, to get all engaged in the cultivation of the plant and in the manufacture of green tea, which could be sold in this state to Mr. Bruee of some company at one rupee per seer or one one-fourth per seer. The process of crushing the leaves thus far is so simple that little instructions would be required to enable them to carry on the business independently. The profit would all be theirs and tend to get industrious habits introduced. Besides it would send a lot of tea into the market without trouble and care on the part of the Superintendents. It would also help to civilise the people and it would enrich and improve the country and line the Nagas to the company.¹⁴

As regards the introduction of the art of tea among the Nagas, he proceeded with great caution so as not to directly ally himself with the company. He persuaded them to "become acquainted with the whole business so as to secure to themselves all its advantages." He assured them that on their agreeing to take up this trade, the Agent would assist them to get their Barries (meaning lands under cultivation) and would also send up well qualified persons to teach them how to manufacture the article and afterwards would secure the same to them as hereditary property and be ready to pay them a good price for all their tea."¹⁵

In spite of such inducements, the Nagas expressed their inability to undertake this profession saying that "from days of old they had always lived on their salt that God gave them as a means of subsistence and this work suits them and allowed them to be idle when they wished and to hunt

and sport when they pleased, but tea would require them to labour incessantly"¹⁶. As to Bronson's further suggestion that "they might form a small village on the tea ground out of the various villages that were tributary to them, the members of which should do the work and receive the portion of the profit", they cut short by saying "we gave the tea to the Ber Sahab (meaning Bruce), let him do with what he pleases as far as we have salt why do we want the tea".¹⁷

Being impressed by Bronson's pioneering work among the Nagas, Jenkins recommended the former's plan to the Government for approval and grants in aid. The Agent was convinced that without "proper co-operation with that gentleman and the encouragement of the Nagas to cultivate the product of their hills and tea in particular.....there seems to be little hope of effecting any great change in the habits of the people or of our being able to avail ourselves of the great natural resources of their fine tract of mountain country."¹⁸ Although the Government expressed its happiness at Bronson's success among the Nagas, it rejected Agent's proposal to sanction grants to the Namsang project as "it would not be consistent with the principles upon which the Government hitherto acted ...were the aid of the Government be given to an establishment with professed missionary views". However, as a special case the Agent was authorised to spend an amount not exceeding Rs. 100 a month for "objects of practical utility connected with the improvement of the Naga country".¹⁹

Bronson also wrote to the Agent from Namsang to suggest to the Government of India to take up the management of the salt-wells to half of which it had the rightful claim. In this connection, it may be mentioned that the region inhabited by the Eastern Nagas contained salt-wells. An official report of 1840, states that the Nagas living near Jaipur, Namsang, Paniduar and Berduar lived mostly by the manufacture of salt, which they retailed to the people of the plains.²⁰ Bronson was sure that if the Government took upon itself the manufacture of salt and if the Nagas worked in the salt-wells belonging to the Government, they would get due rewards for their labour. Its effects on the Nagas would be "most salutary" and the Nagas would feel that they were not so very independent as they believed. "Nothing that is so likely to prevent their improvement in civilisation". Bronson added "atleast as their perfect independence of feeling and this is strengthened by the ready sale of their salt which is ample to support them should they increase a hundredfold".²¹ He also drew the attention of the Agent that the last Ahom monarch Purandar Singh asserted his rights over the salt-wells and was able to keep "the Nagas much more under his control than the Government now have...he made them look to him in all important matters and when they did wrong,

he chastised them".²³ But the Government of India in 1841 after the receipt of Strong's (Sub Assistant, Sibsagar) report, not only abolished all duties imposed by the former Government but made over the salt-wells to the Nagas. The abolition of the vexatious duties brought peace and goodwill among the Nagas and gave a great fillip to the extension of trade and agriculture, but that the surrender of the salt-wells increased the insolence of the Nagas.²³

Bronson was the first Christian Missionary to settle among the Nagas to establish a Mission in their hills. Unfortunately, odds were too heavy against him from the beginning. Hardly had he settled at Namsang, his whole family became ill; he himself was not spared. His sister Rhoda who was ailing since her arrival in Assam ultimately succumbed to her illness. After recovery from a protracted illness, Bronson thought "to remain among the hills would endanger not only his health, but his entire future usefulness as a missionary".²⁴ He, therefore abandoned the hills and retired to Nowgong in October 1841 to take up new work in the plains. But he never forgot his Nagas. Towards the close of 1841, he wrote to the Agent that the prospect of missionary operations in the Naga hills appeared to be very small for the time being. He also said that while his school was in operation he had "nearly all the son of the chiefs who made such proficiency as to be able to read the elementary books ...prepared for them, several could write extremely well ...and even now they read together daily". He also saw a great desire on their part "to learn the native Bengali character and ... would now learn to read their own language even in this character with greater zest than they do the Roman".²⁵

Nagas no doubt availed themselves of the opportunities offered by Bronson's school, but no one openly accepted the Christian faith. He himself felt discouraged at the prospect of Nagas becoming a "reform-civilised and Christian people". To bring about such a change, he admitted "a mightier than human arm" would be necessary. He was not successful from the missionary point of view, but there is hardly any doubt that his influence brought a profound change in the character and habits of the Nagas. Bronson remarked "the change in the people is striking, when I first came up here, men, women and children were running this way and that, leaping down precipices and fleeing to the woods for their lives". "Now they are ready", he added "to keep about my house all the day and each one seems desirous to supply me with something which I need. I never received so much hospitality from strangers in a heathen land before".²⁶ Unfortunately, he had "to pull up stakes and leave" after a "short sojourn of eight months" in the Naga hills. While leaving the Nagas to their own fate, Bronson lamented "we could not but weep as we turned from the spot—bereft of health—and leaving behind us no one to carry on

the labours of love among this perishing people".²⁷ Nothing practically was done to continue Bronson's unfinished works until Reverend E.W. Clark came to join the Sibsagar Mission in 1871-2. In spite of the short duration of Bronson's missionary work among the Nagas, he achieved more than what was expected. For the first time, Bronson was able to obtain a personal knowledge of the Nagas living on the border of British territories. His visit enabled Europeans to reside constantly amongst them without the slightest apprehension of danger. "If he had been able to remain at Namsang for another year or two", Downs rightly says "it is likely that the first church among the Nagas would have been established in 1842 rather than 1872".²⁸ In fact by his pioneering services Bronson paved the way for future Missionaries to work upon. "The Nagas remember Clark or Rivenburg to-day, but "it is highly doubtful that any of these would have had the opportunity to render service they did if it had not been for the foundations laid by Miles Bronson".²⁹

REFERENCES

1. Barpujari, H.K. : *Problem of the Hill Tribes, N.E. Frontier*, p. 67.
2. Downs, F.S. : *Mighty Work of God*, p. 17.
3. *Ibid* p. 19.
4. Gammell, William : *History of the American Baptist Missions*, Boston, 1850. Chap. XVII.
5. Ward, S.R. : *Glimpse of Assam*, Calcutta, 1884, pp. 207 ff.
6. Downs, F.S. : *Mighty Works of God*, p. 22.
7. Letters Received from Miscellaneous officers, Assam Sectt. Records, Vol. V (A) 1840, Bronson to Jenkins.
8. Gammell, William ; *History of the American Baptist Missions*. Boston, 1850. chap. XVII.
9. Downs, F.S. : *Mighty Works of God*, p. 23.
10. Gammell, William ; *History of the American Baptist Missions*, Boston, 1850, Chap. XVII.
- ** The Morung is an essential institution of the Nagas, It is the nerve-centre of Naga community life. It serves the purposes of a "guard-house, recreation club, centre of education, art and discipline".
11. Quoted in Sword, V.H. *Baptists in Assam*, Chicago, 1935, pp. 61-3.
12. *Ibid*.
13. *Ibid*.
14. Letters received from Miscellaneous officers : Assam Sectt. Records, Vol. V (A), 1840, Bronson to Jenkins.
15. *Ibid*.
16. *Ibid*.
17. *Ibid*.
18. *Ibid*.
19. *Foreign Political Proceedings* 1840. Nov. 9. No. 82.
20. Mackenzie, A. : *History of the Relations etc.*, Calcutta, 1884. p. 92.
21. *Foreign Political Proceedings* 1840. November 9. No. 82.