

“DON BOSCO” IN NORTHEAST INDIA – A NAME SYNONYMOUS WITH CHANGE AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH EDUCATION AND SKILL-TRAINING

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Don Bosco had himself thought of sending missionaries to India already after his visits to Pope Pius IX in 1876 and 1877 with the intention of taking up the Vicariate-Apostolic of Mangalore. However, the urgent and constant demands for personnel from South America forced him to shelve his plans for India¹. A few years later, in 1883-1884, Mgr. Paul-François-Marie Goethals, Vicar-Apostolic of Calcutta, with recommendations from Baroness de Monin of Belgium, invited Don Bosco to start an orphanage at Giridih in southern Bihar, which at that time was under the jurisdiction of the Vicariate-Apostolic of Calcutta. However, Don Bosco was not able to respond positively to this very attractive offer due to the lack of personnel². During the tenure of Don Rua, the first successor of Don Bosco, the Bishop of the padroado diocese of Mylapore, Mgr. Antonio de Souza Barroso, began insistent correspondence with the former to have Salesians come to work in his diocese. However, his transfer to Oporto in Portugal in 1889 prevented his desire from being fulfilled. His successor, Mgr. Teotonio Manuel Ribeiro Vieira de Castro, who, at the end of his studies in Rome had gone to meet Don Bosco in Turin and had actually met him at Mathi³ entered into correspondence with Don Rua from 1901, insisting that some Salesians be sent to his diocese. His efforts bore fruit and the first batch of six Salesians reached Thanjavur, Tamilnadu in January 1906. But, the Salesian presences – that of Thanjavur and Mylapore – started by this group would last only till 1928 when the Salesians were forced by circumstances to withdraw from the Diocese of Mylapore⁴.

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¹ Cf Mathew KAPPLIKUNNEL, *Their Life for Youth, History and Relevance of the Early Salesian Presence in India (Tanjore and Mylapore, 1906-1928)*. Bangalore, Kristu Jyoti Publications 1989, pp. 10-12.

² Cf George KOTTUPALLIL, *Don Bosco, Don Rua in India*, in “Indian Missiological Review” 10 (1988) 54-56.

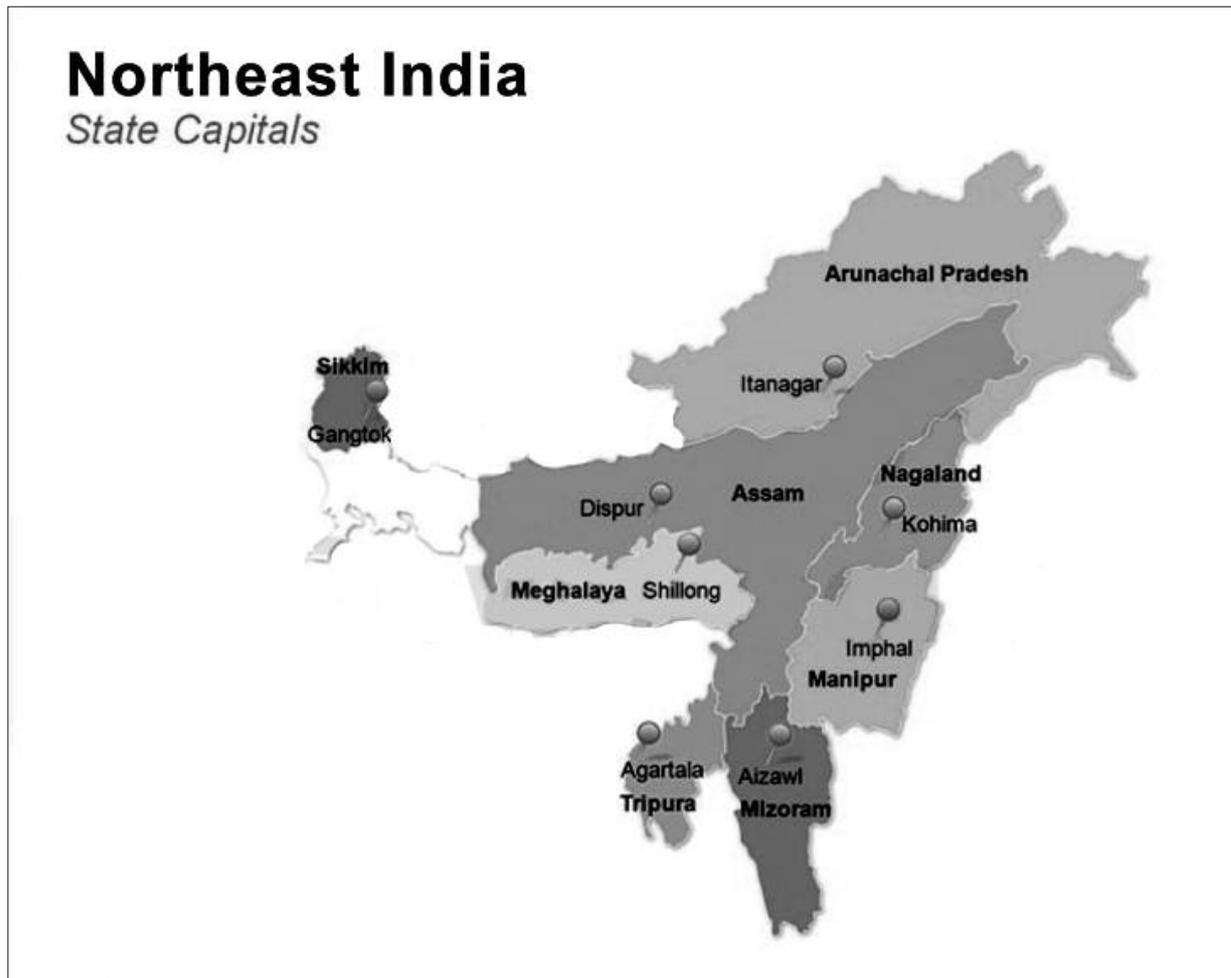
³ Cf Joseph THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians of Don Bosco in India from the beginning up to 1951-52*. Vol. I. Bangalore, Kristu Jyoti Publications 2005, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-80 for a better understanding of the reasons for the withdrawal.

If this first coming of the Salesians to India did not bear the desired fruit, their second coming to Northeast India in 1922, under the dynamic leadership of Fr. Louis Mathias, was to be a success from the start. The activities of the Salesians starting from the Northeast have helped to carve out a special niche for Don Bosco in India as an agent of change and development through the empowerment of the young realized through education and skill training.

The present paper, after having presented the Northeastern region of India with its various challenges, and indicating the missionary efforts in the region before the coming of the Salesians will proceed to assert that the name “Don Bosco” was from the very beginning associated with change and societal transformation realized through education and that it continues to be regarded as such to this day.





1. Understanding the Term Northeast India

Northeast India is the eastern-most region of India. It is linked to East India via *The Siliguri Corridor* with a width of 21 to 40 kilometers squeezed between Bhutan and Bangladesh. The Northeast, as we know it today, was not part of any overall Indian political establishment till the British East India Company took control of it after the First Burmese War (5th March 1824-24th February 1826) through the Treaty of Yandabo⁵. The region formed a part of the Bengal Province of the British up to 1873 when Assam became a province by itself.

At the time of the Indian Independence from British Rule in 1947, the Northeastern region of British India consisted of Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura. Subsequently, from out of the larger territory of Assam, Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh in 1975 and Mizoram in 1987 were established. Manipur and Tripura remained as Union Territories of India between 1956 until 1972, when they attained fully-fledged

⁵ Cf Maung HTIN AUNG, *A History of Burma*. New York and London, Cambridge University Press 1967, pp. 214–215 for the terms of the treaty.

statehood. Sikkim was integrated into the North Eastern Council as the 8th state in 2002⁶.

The independence of the country and the subsequent divisions left the region with more than 4,500 kilometres of international border (about 90 per cent of its entire border area) with China (southern Tibet) in the north, Myanmar in the east, Bangladesh in the southwest, and Bhutan to the northwest.

Northeast India constitutes about 8% of India's land extension; and as is evidenced from the 2011 census, is sparsely populated with but a population of approximately 40 million, which is 3.1% of the total Indian population. The people belong to 220 of the 635 tribal communities of India speaking as many languages or dialects.

The city of Shillong served as the capital of the Assam Province created during the British Rule. It remained as the capital of undivided Assam until the formation of the state of Meghalaya in 1972 when Dispur, a part of Guwahati, became the capital of Assam and Shillong, the capital of the newly formed state of Meghalaya.

The region with its difficult terrain, extremes of climate, diversity of flora and fauna, variety of tribes which are often at odds with each other and easily distinguishable from the rest of the Indian population, long international borders which favour infiltration, has for long been a challenge from the point of political organization, civil administration and of course evangelization.

From the religious point of view, due to the efforts of the Hindu missionaries from Bengal, the people in the Brahmaputra, Barak and Imphal valleys and in the Tripura plains have been hinduised. However, the hill tribes, in general, were not inclined to accept Hinduism and with time there began a movement towards Christianity which eventually led to four of these states having a very high percentage of Christians (Nagaland 89%, Mizoram 87%, Meghalaya 70% and Manipur 34%). However, given the fact of these states not being very densely populated, the total Christian (Catholic and Protestant) population in the region adds up to only about 7 million out of a total population of 45 million. Nevertheless, for those who accepted Christianity it became the agent of differentiation and group identity formation, and without doubt, through education as an instrument of change, social transformation and westernization as well as national integration⁷.

⁶ Cf "Times of India", 10th December 2002.

⁷ Cf Dr. Isaac PADINJAREKKUTTU, *The Catholic Church in Northeast India: A Socio-Historical Profile*. Paper presented at the Workshop on *The Catholic Contribution to Indian History, Society and Culture*, organized by the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, Rome & Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru, at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (Bengaluru, 24-25 July 2015), p. 1. Education favoured national integration because the educated and skilled people from the Northeast moved to other parts of the country in search of jobs and motivated by opportunities in government services and politics.

2. A Brief Historical Sketch of the Pre-Salesian Catholic Missionary Efforts

The first recorded contact of the Northeast with the Catholic missionaries was in 1627 when the Tibet-bound Jesuit missionaries, Stephen Cacella and John Cabral visited parts of Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam. Later, the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith formed the Prefecture of Tibet-Hindustan in 1703 and entrusted it to the Capuchin Fathers of the Italian Province of Picenum in the Marches of Ancona⁸. However, on the insistence of the Vicar-Apostolic, Giuseppe Antonio Borghi, Bishop of Batsaida, that he be relieved of part of his work, on 21st March 1846, Pope Gregory XVI created the Vicariate Apostolic of Lhasa and placed it under the care of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP). Due to the unfavourable political situation prevailing in Tibet and China's opposition to let the French Missionaries pass through its territories on their way to Tibet, missionaries like Nicholas-Michel Krick and Auguste-Étienne Bourry were obliged to seek entry into their mission through Northeast India, permitting them also to render some spiritual assistance to the local Christians. Nevertheless, the region continued to remain without any organized missionary presence.

In 1834 with the erection of the Vicariate-Apostolic of Bengal and the entrusting of it to the Jesuits of the English Province of the Society, the entire Northeast also passed under its jurisdiction. However, given the "unsettled situation" of the Vicariate, nothing much could be realized by way of actual mission work. The "unsettled situation" is a reference to its changing hands from the Jesuits to the Diocesans and of being bifurcated later, and given to different congregations (West Bengal with its Centre at Calcutta to the Jesuits and East Bengal with its headquarters at Dhaka to the Congregation of Holy Cross (CSC). Further, each of the two missionary corps faced difficulties by way of personnel, making it hard for either of them to make much progress⁹. That the paucity of missionaries had a telling effect on the mission can be the better understood from the fact that although already in 1853, the Vicar-Apostolic of West Bengal, Mgr. Patrick Carew, had invited the Pontifical Milan Foreign Mission (PIME) to work in the Central Bengal Mission, with the intention of creating a Prefecture-Apostolic there, the move did not succeed.

The situation of the mission at the time may be best seen from the *Chronicle of the Station of Guwahati (Assam)* started on 1st January 1909 by Fr. Rudolf M. Fontaine SDS, a handwritten document preserved in the Archives of the Salesian

⁸ Cf Pellegrino DA FORLÌ, *Annali dei Cappuccini*. Vol. IV. Milano, Tipografia di S. Giuseppe 1885, p. 115; which states: "Since 1703 the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of Faith has assigned to the Capuchins of the Marca d'Ancona the Mission of Tibet!". But the Capuchins were expelled in 1760. In 1820, Rome erected the Prefecture of Tibet-Hindustan into a Vicariate with its headquarters at Agra.

⁹ Cf *History of the Archdiocese of Calcutta*, in <http://www.archdioceseofcalcutta.in/archdiocese.html>; <http://directory.ucaNews.com/dioceses/bangladesh-dhaka/3> (20 november 2015).

Province of Guwahati, Assam¹⁰. Following the Apostolic Visit to the region of Mgr. Étienne-Louis Charbonnaux¹¹ and basing itself on the suggestions of the Apostolic Visitor, the Propaganda applied itself to the task of establishing the Catholic Hierarchy in India. Thus, the Prefecture Apostolic of Central Bengal to which was added Northern Bengal and Assam, was erected and handed over to the PIME in 1870 with Antonio Marietti as the Vicar. In 1871, Fr. Jocolo Broy PIME was sent to the Assam Mission as the Resident Missionary. For the next 18 years Fr. Broy, single-handedly did heroic work in the region with little support even from his own congregation. A fatigued and a rather disillusioned Fr. Broy joined the Jesuits of Calcutta in 1890 and died in 1900¹².

In 1889, the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam including the whole province of Assam and the civil administrative districts of Bhutan and Manipur was set up and entrusted to the newly established German Congregation of the Divine Saviour referred to also as the Society of Catholic Education or simply as the *Salvatorians*. A group of four Salvatorians under the leadership of Fr. Otto Hoffenmueller reached the mission in 1890 and with Shillong as their headquarters began the first organized mission work in the region¹³. Despite several setbacks, including the death of the superior within six months of their arrival in Shillong, the mission made rapid progress and by 1906 there were 1,800 Catholics, 25 chapels and 19 stations, 15 elementary schools, 2 orphanages, 4 charitable dispensaries, 1 asylum for aged women and a small hospital in Shillong¹⁴. By 1912, the number of

¹⁰ This speaks of the first Catholics to settle permanently in Guwahati being the members of a French family – the Delemoigerie – consisting of two brothers, Louis Mathew, and his brother Charles Williams who reached there in December 1848. The author refers to the death of the two MEP missionaries, Krick and Bourry, in Arunachal Pradesh and of how occasional the presence in Guwahati of a priest was. In 1869 for instance Fr. Beboit Adolphe Mercier had come all the way from Dacca (Dakha) and baptized the Delemoigerie family making the to and fro journey of about 1000 miles on foot. It also says that the Catholic population in Guwahati in 1889, the year of the erection of the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam on 13th December was made up of 106 Europeans and Euro-Indians and 200 Indians.

¹¹ Cf Thomas ANCHUKANDAM, *Catholic Revival in India in the 19th Century: Role of Mgr. Clément Bonnard (1796-1861)*. Vol. 2. *From the General Division of the Indian Missions to the Death of Mgr. Bonnard (1846-1861)*. Bangalore, Kristu Jyoti Publications 2006, pp. 514-542, for an understanding of the reasons for the visit as envisaged by the Propaganda Fide and its impact on the process of establishing the Indian Hierarchy in 1886.

¹² Cf Syiemlieh MAGDALYNE, *Fr. Jocolo Broy. A Missionary Without a Mission*, in “International Organization for Scientific Research. Journal of Humanities and Social Science” vol. 19, issue 9, (Sep. 2014) 37-40.

¹³ Cf J. THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians...*, I, p. 89.

¹⁴ “A Prefecture Apostolic in the ecclesiastical province of Calcutta, India, established in 1889. It is served by the «Society of the Divine Saviour», whose mother-house is at Rome. The priests have a residence at Shillong. Assam includes the civil province of Assam, with Bhuthan and Manipur. The native population is 7,000,000. The Catholics number 1,800, and are attended by 6 secular and 10 regular priests. There are chapels in Shillong, Gowhati, Bondashill, Railing, Laitkinsew, Silchar, Cheerapoonjee, Lamin, and

Catholics had gone up to 5,000 and they were under the care of 15 priests. Unfortunately, however, three years later, in 1915, in the context of the First World War, the German Salvatorians had to leave Assam as the British considered them, "enemy aliens"! The missionaries were taken to an internment camp at Ahmednagar in July 1915 and from there deported to Germany in March 1916¹⁵.

With the Salvatorians being forced to leave the Assam Mission, Archbishop Meuleman of Calcutta became the Administrator Apostolic of the mission and he with the help of the Jesuits – one of whom, Fr. Paul Lefevre was chosen as the Vice-Administrator – kept the mission going. However, the Jesuits who looked after the mission from 1915 to 1922 insisted that they be relieved of the task¹⁶. This forced the Propaganda to look around for another group of apostolic workers who would be in a position to take charge of the mission. Thus, the Salesians of Don Bosco, entered the scene, and were destined to script one of the more glorious pages in the history of the Catholic and Salesian missions.

3. Salesians in the Prefecture-Apostolic of Assam

The arrival of the Salesian missionaries in Assam in 1922 was a landmark in the history of the Church as the many educational institutions they founded, introduced the people to a new life of faith and all-round development. However, it is also be noted, that the Superiors were quite reluctant to take up the responsibility for this very difficult mission.

Although the first formal written request on the part of Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum, the Prefect of the Propaganda Fide, to Fr. Paul Albera, the Rector Major of the Salesians, was made, on 28th June 1920, already from February 1919 informal negotiations had been on. The response of Fr. Albera was that given the actual situation of the Congregation, the Salesians would be very grateful to His Eminence if he would ask some other congregation to take charge of the Prefecture of Assam. However, His Eminence was not one to be put off easily and renewed his request again on 24th May 1921 pointing out for better effect that the Protestants already had 600 schools in those parts in comparison to the 9, which the Catholics had. Fr. Albera, in his letter dated 17 June 1921, once again pleaded inability to cater adequately to the mission but concluded saying that if despite everything the Propaganda continued to insist he

elsewhere, in all 25 chapels and 19 stations. There are 15 elementary schools; 300 pupils, boys and girls; 2 orphanages under the direction of the Sisters of the Society of the Divine Saviour; 4 charitable dispensaries, 1 asylum for aged women, and one small hospital at Shillong. The non-Catholic sects number 17, and count 18,000 adherents". Data gathered by Thomas J. SHAHAN for *The Madras Catholic Directory*. Madras, s.e. 1906, p. 190.

¹⁵ J. THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians...*, I, p. 91.

¹⁶ I. PADINJAREKKUTTU, *The Catholic Church in Northeast India...*, p. 2.

would accept it more out of loyalty and obedience than from confidence. He also asked for some time to make the required preparations before actually sending over the missionaries. The Propaganda, insisted that the Salesians take up the mission despite the sacrifices involved. Hence, on 21st July 1921, Fr. Albera wrote to the Prefect of the Propaganda:

“Since the Holy See insists on the Salesians taking up the mission, the only thing left to us is to respond in the words of the gospel: «at your word, I shall let down the net» and to place our meagre strength at the disposal of the Holy See for the fulfilment of this task!”¹⁷.

This act of obedience and sacrifice will amply be rewarded by the Lord who made the Assam Missions immensely fruitful.

The first group of 11 Salesians – 6 priests and 5 coadjutor brothers under the leadership of Fr. Louis Mathias – reached Guwahati on 12th January and on the very next day left for Shillong, which was to be their headquarters, reaching there at about 2 p.m. Thus was launched the work to script a brilliant chapter in the annals of Salesian history and in the Mission history of the Catholic Church.

The dedication and initiatives of the Salesians who reached Shillong in 1922 proved effective. Right from the beginning, they came to enjoy great esteem and their contribution towards education and development appreciated and lauded by all. The Salesians effected a wonderful turnaround for the Catholic Church in the Northeast with an evident respect for the people and culture of the region as well as with the collaboration of all people of good will – diocesan clergy, other religious congregations, members of other religions, members of the Salesian Family, and well-disposed government officials.

Today there are three Archdioceses and twelve dioceses in the Northeast catering to a total of 1, 592,569 Catholics through 441 parishes and other institutions. There are in all, 633 diocesan priests, 804 religious priests, 3362 religious sisters and 163 religious brothers engaged in apostolic activities. The impressive services rendered by the Church in the Northeast include 1 national university (The Assam Don Bosco University), 24 colleges, 86 junior colleges, 368 high schools, 342 primary schools, 12 hospitals, 198 primary health centres, 453 social welfare centres, 20 spiritual animation centres and 5 nursing colleges. There are also 2 studentates of theology, 3 studentates of philosophy, 2 spiritual orientation centres as well as minor seminaries in all the twelve dioceses¹⁸. Indeed the region has come a long way from the time, when exactly hundred years ago, the German Salvatorians were forced to leave the mission and a reluctant Society of Jesus took charge of it *ad interim* only to pass the “burden” on to the reluctant shoulders of the Salesians!

¹⁷ J. THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians...*, I, p. 94.

¹⁸ I. PADINJAREKKUTTU, *The Catholic Church in Northeast India...*, pp. 5-6.

In fact, even a casual visitor to the region today 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. "Don Bosco", which without exaggeration can be considered a password in the region, in effect, bespeaks change and transformation realized through education and skill-training.

Right from the very beginning of the Salesian presence in Northeast India, "Don Bosco", is synonymous with good education. The name "Don Bosco" is so popular, and one might even say, coveted in the region, that it has prompted many others, including non-Catholic organizations, to start schools under the Don Bosco banner. This 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".

4. The Perception of Don Bosco in the North East¹⁹

To find out how Don Bosco is perceived in the region, the following procedure was followed: a) a study was made of the relevant reports of the visitors to the Don Bosco educational and technical training institutions in the region from 1923 to 1952; b) a study of some of the recent writings about Don Bosco in the newspapers in the region; c) a look at a couple of government ordinances; and d) a survey done, albeit on a limited scale, in the two cities of Guwahati and Itanagar. Interestingly enough the results seem to converge and help one to assert that Don Bosco is perceived in the region as an educator who helped to change and transform society through the many educational institutions named after him.

4.1. From the reports in the early years – up to 1952

Once Mgr. Mathias, the leader of the Salesian pioneers, was asked as to what he would propose for the development of the youth of the country. His instant reply was: "Teach them a trade so that they can earn a living". In fact, he would often tell the Salesians: "The best contribution we Salesians could make to this country is to build schools where young people would learn arts and trades, technical and professional subjects!"²⁰. Down the years, the Salesians proved

¹⁹ Right at the outset one must point out that when speaking of Don Bosco in the Northeast of India, what we are referring to is the "Don Bosco" the people of the region have been introduced to by the Salesians and through the institutions established by them.

²⁰ Louis KUMPILUVELIL – Charles PANACKEL (eds.), *A Journey with the Young: Don Bosco India Centenary 1906-2006*. New Delhi, Salesian Provincial Conference of South Asia 2006, pp. 271-272.

themselves capable of realizing this vision and that is how from the very beginning of their arrival to the present day the Salesians are perceived in the Northeast, and, it might be added, also in the rest of India.

In the Northeast, the work of the Salesians, was greatly appreciated, by the people in general as well as government officials and others in responsible positions. The main educational centres set up by the Salesians in the bigger cities of the region, attracted students from throughout the Northeast and obviously helped further their economic and social development.

At the beginning of 1923 when the Director of Public Instruction visited the Don Bosco Technical School in Shillong, he was genuinely amazed. He asked the Minister of Education to go and see the school. The minister came and was loud in his praise²¹.

In 1925 the Governor of Assam, Sir Henry Kerr, after a brief visit to Don Bosco Technical Institute, Shillong, wrote to Mgr. Louis Mathias: "I had not the slightest idea that you had such a variety of works going on. I hope that in a short time, your young and versatile Salesians will make their presence felt all over Assam..."²².

In 1930 Don Bosco Technical School held its first public exhibition of works done by the students. The Governor, his wife and other dignitaries visited the exhibition and expressed their appreciation. None of these people had ever thought, that boys could be trained to such a high standard of working skill. In fact, the governor's wife wanted to return the next day to the school and find out for herself whether the pupils really were capable of such workmanship. She came and she got all the proof she desired as she moved from department to department²³.

In April 1931 Mr. S.C. Roy, the Inspector of Schools, visited St. Anthony's, to make sure of its efficiency, before sending his recommendation to the university of Calcutta to recognize it as a high school. The inspector warmly recommended that St. Anthony's, which had started high school classes in the years 1929-31, be recognized as a high school. In response to this recommendation, the University of Calcutta issued an order in June 1931, granting the school provisional recognition for two years. Here are some excerpts from the inspector's report:

"I have paid visits to the St. Anthony's School on several occasions during the last few years and was always favourably impressed by the tone and atmosphere that prevailed in the school. The staff and the pupils formed a happy family exhibiting signs of loving care and attention on the part of the former and willing obedience and service on the part of the latter. The quality of teaching impressed me favourably... The library is fairly large... the school is better equipped than many

²¹ Cf *ibid.*, p. 271.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ J. THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians...*, I, p. 172.

of our recognized high schools in the plains. The maps, the charts and apparatus are provided amply for class subjects... the playground provision is excellent. The school is surrounded on three sides by large playgrounds... the conduct and discipline of the boys were found satisfactory on every occasion of my visit!"²⁴.

Examinations were conducted in the industrial school in August 1931. All the examiners were outsiders, each one an expert in his trade. They had words of high praise for the training given in the school as also for the work of the boys. For example, the owner of the Ri Khasi Press was full of admiration for the work of the Salesians and told the boys how fortunate they were to be trained in such a school. The examiner of the carpenters was a Protestant from Mawkhar. He declared that the Protestants did not have even a shadow of an institution of the kind he saw there. He also said that if he had not seen it with his own eyes, he would not have believed that boys of 12, 13 or 14 could produce such works²⁵.

The appreciation of the officials for the work of the Salesians in the technical field was evident also at the time of the inauguration of the second exhibition organized by the Technical School from 15th to 20th October 1931. The exhibition was opened by Mr. Keith Cantlie, I.C.S., Deputy Commissioner. He showered praise on the school and declared it the first in merit in the region. He also strongly criticized the government school and said that he was ashamed to be the head of it²⁶. The Governor and his wife too paid a visit to the exhibition going around the workshops to see the boys at work and pronounced themselves quite impressed with what they saw²⁷.

There were also several other visitors who went away with very favourable impressions about the work of the technical schools. Thus on 30th August 1933 Lady Joyce Keane, wife of the Governor of Assam, and on 30th October Lady Marie Willingdon, wife of the 22nd Viceroy and Governor General of India came to visit and left with very favourable impressions. The chronicle reports also an interesting detail. The vicereine in a moment of enthusiasm kissed one of the little tailor boys²⁸.

In 1932, the editor of a Calcutta newspaper paid a visit to the technical school in Shillong and then wrote that he was really taken up with the sound principles on which the vocational school was run, adding: "Nothing more than ten years ago, the people of Assam had not even heard of arts and crafts"²⁹.

²⁴ Archives of St. Anthony's School, Shillong: *Chronicles of St. Anthony's School, 1928-1967*, quoted in J. THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians...*, I, p. 170.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁶ Archives of Don Bosco School (ADBS), *Chronicle of Don Bosco Industrial School and Orphanage 1931-1939*, quoted in J. THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesian...*, I, p. 174.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²⁹ L. KUMPILUVELIL – C. PANACKEL (eds.), *A Journey with the Young...*, p. 271.

In November 1950, His excellency, Jairamdas Doulatram, Governor of Assam, opened the Industrial Exhibition at Don Bosco, Shillong. After the exhibition, while addressing a large gathering of people, he said:

“Now I understand how a boy can be taken from the streets or from the jungle and transformed into an active young man, useful to himself and to society. The educative method of Don Bosco does these marvels.

«My dear boys, your Rector told me that you are 250 in the boarding. But now I tell you that from today onwards you will be 251, because I too want to remain here with you, to receive the benefit of the education of Don Bosco»”.

Later, the Governor asked for a life of Don Bosco, and after glancing through its pages, said: “India needs a man like him!”.

He was so enthusiastic and so well impressed that at the end of the exhibition he invited all the Salesians of Don Bosco to tea and showed himself extremely friendly and familiar when they went to the Governor’s House³⁰.

Years later, the Minister in-charge of Tribal Welfare, after visiting the Salesian Mission in Imphal, told the gathering:

“I know the Don Bosco School in Shillong and have always been an admirer of the work there. The Government of India is happy to know that there are people like you, dedicated, sacrificing, and disinterested, who give themselves totally for the education of our people. I am sorry to say that as yet the government has not reached the point where they can do as good a job.” Turning to the students, he continued: “You are fortunate, you lads, because you are in a school of Don Bosco. Here you will learn many things, good and useful, for your life. Always remember the Salesian Fathers who care for you more than your relatives do!”³¹.

An exhibition of arts and crafts was organized from 13th to 17th August 1938, by the Don Bosco Industrial School. Mr. G. P. Hogg the acting Governor of Assam, solemnly inaugurated it in the presence of a distinguished assembly. The acting governor, in a special way praised the devoted service of the Salesian brothers who had made many personal sacrifices for the sake of the orphans. During the five days of the exhibition, visitors came in their thousands. Many articles were sold and a good number of orders registered. In an effort to make Don Bosco better known, about 3,000 copies of the booklet “Father of Orphans”, were distributed at the gate³².

³⁰ ADBS, *Chronicles of DB Technical School (Sept. 1950 to 1960)*, entries of November 1950, quoted in Joseph THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians of Don Bosco in India from the beginning up to 1951-52*. Vol. II. Bangalore, Kristu Jyoti Publications 2005, pp. 1270-71.

³¹ L. KUMPILUVELIL – C. PANACKEL (eds.), *A Journey with the Young...*, pp. 271-272.

³² J. THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians...*, II, p. 1248.

St. Anthony's School and College had resounding success in many areas that year (1940). A University Commission visited St. Anthony's College on 28th May. The members were extremely satisfied and declared that they had not seen another college with so much order and discipline as St. Anthony's³³.

The inspector of Schools of the University of Calcutta came towards the end of February 1941 to inspect St. Anthony's School. He left on 1st March with the remark that "he was really glad and enthusiastic for the marvellous work the Fathers and the Brothers do in the school".

The Minister of Education and Industries of Assam paid a visit to the house on 17th March. The minister said that the previous year a grant was given to the college because he had spoken to the premier about its financial difficulties. He also gave the assurance that the government would continue to do what it could³⁴.

The industrial schools of Shillong and Guwahati were the chief boasts of the mission. Fr. Joseph Bacchiarello, the Rector of Don Bosco, Shillong, claimed that more than 200 boys had completed the full course and were occupying good positions in society. The Home Minister of Assam declared that the Don Bosco Technical School of Shillong was the best in the Province³⁵.

Governor Jairamdas Doulatram was really enamoured of what he saw at the Don Bosco Technical School when he visited the place. It is possible that he would have also read the life of Don Bosco prior to his visit. On 1st December 1951, he wrote to the Principal:

"I cannot forget the effect on my mind of a rather brief visit to Don Bosco Technical School. It created in me the feeling that work of a great moral and economic value was being realized in the school, of which the world should know much more than it does. Don Bosco was a great man, a man with a big idea and a man who achieved success in giving form to it. The Don Bosco Technical School in Shillong is only one of the many efforts resulting from his great inspiration. The school has many lessons for a circle much wider than the students whom I found within its premises. I wish the idea behind the school, could be taken up by social workers all over the State of Assam, and in each principal town an institution based on this great idea could be set up, may be with modifications to suit local requirements.

My heartfelt congratulations to those at the head of this institution at Shillong who continue by their watchful care, to shape the future of the school on right lines. I am sure they would share my feeling that they are doing a great work, a work of economic, moral and psychological transformation of those who might otherwise become adrift and be a burden upon and not a help to the society!"³⁶.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 1256.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1257.

³⁵ ASC A908 copy of the report on the Assam Mission to the Propaganda in 1938.

³⁶ J. THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians...*, II, p. 1274.

On 29th April 1952, Don Bosco Industrial School had the honour of a visit by General K. M. Cariappa, the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army. After meeting the staff, he inspected the workshops where he chatted familiarly with the boys and was highly satisfied. He wondered at the work done by such small boys. He promised to send someone to file the whole institution³⁷.

It was not only civil servants and government and military officials who were impressed by what the Salesians were doing in the name of Don Bosco. Ecclesiastics who visited the region were also lavish in their praise.

In 1924, the Holy See sent Archbishop Alexis-Henri-Marie Lepicier to India as Apostolic Visitor to study and report back on the religious situation of Catholic High Schools and University Colleges. The Monsignor spent 16 months in India visiting educational institutions and assessing their performance. One evening, towards the end of his month-long stay in Shillong in April 1925, one evening the Visitor took Msgr. Mathias by hand, and told him in words filled with emotion: “Monsignor, Monsignor, fill India with Don Bosco, for you have a sure and effective method for educating young people!”³⁸.

4.2. *Recent reports*

The fact that the Salesians of Don Bosco are still viewed as providers of quality education may be seen from the various reports appearing in some of the dailies in the region. *The Shillong Times* dated August 10, 2015 spoke of Don Bosco in the following words:

“The Salesians of Don Bosco, a Congregation that is modelled around the life and ideals of St. John Bosco, known as a friend and educator of youth...Don Bosco is above all religions. He stands out as an educator whose ideals have spread far and wide!”.

On 11 August 2015 the editorial of *The Economic Times*, Kolkata, which is widely circulated in the Northeast had this to say about Don Bosco:

“St. John Bosco, the 19th century saint Italian priest was beatified in the 1930s for his efforts to educate deprived children with care, rather than with the cane. Assam as well as most Indian states, are beneficiaries of his efforts... He stood for enlightenment and the pursuit of knowledge”.

The Editorial of *The Assam Tribune* dated Sunday, August 9, 2015, stated:

“Assam and the Northeast – considered a remote hinterland of so-called mainstream India – too have been a beneficiary of the liberal education espoused by

³⁷ ADBS, *Chronicle of DB Technical School from Sept. 1950 to 1960*, entries from January to April 1952, quoted in J. THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians...*, II, p. 1275.

³⁸ L. KUMPILUVELIL – C. PANACKEL (eds.), *A Journey with the Young...*, p. 283.

Don Bosco and his successors. So much so that Don Bosco schools are household names in present day Assam and the worth of the education imparted in these institutions is borne out by the overwhelming zeal of the parents in having their wards admitted in Don Bosco Schools. Although run by Christian missionaries, a vast majority of Don Bosco's students in the state happens to be Hindus and would vouch for the organization's liberal credentials!"

Mr. Saikh Md. Sabah Al Ahmed in his letter to the editor published in the *Assam Tribune* dated Guwahati, Monday, August 10, 2015 wrote:

"If one goes to the rural areas of Assam, one could see the numerous schools set up by the Salesians (followers of Don Bosco), apart from the Don Bosco schools set up inside the remote tea gardens of Assam. Moreover, the orphanages, child care centres and programmes like Snehalaya (work for street children) etc., speak for themselves".

On the same date Susmita Goswami wrote in her letter to the editor of the *Assam Tribune*:

"Don Bosco was a true lover of mankind whose love for the poor and the downtrodden and passion to ignite an ignorant mind was incomparable. He worked relentlessly so that darkness of ignorance cannot jeopardize the free flow of spirituality... I think this great pedagogue of all time should not only have a place in the heart of our city but also in all our hearts so that we too may follow the path of St. Don Bosco and create the fortress of wisdom as wisdom is the weapon to ward off destruction!"

4.3. *Administrative steps by the government in favour of Don Bosco*

The esteem in which Don Bosco is held in the region is also evident in the fact that on 14th July 2015, there was a government notification for the erecting of a statue of Don Bosco opposite the Nabin Bordoloi Hall, Dighalipukhuri, Guwahati³⁹. This notification was further studied at a meeting presided over by Dr. M. Angamuthu, IAS, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup (Metro), Guwahati and the decision was taken to erect the statue on government land in view of the worldwide Bicentenary Celebration of the birth of Don Bosco⁴⁰.

On 13th August 2015, the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup (Amingaon) wrote to Fr. Vattathara Thomas the Provincial of Guwahati:

"I am directed to inform you that the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam desires to set up high-end schools in every district to boost up the education sector of the state and to

³⁹ Cf Government notification No. DA5R 305/2015/4 by Deputy Secretary to the Government of Assam (W), Public Works Roads Department, Dispur, Guwahati – 6. Dated 14th July 2015.

⁴⁰ Cf Minutes of the meeting held on 5th August, 2015, in the chamber of the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup (Metro) Guwahati.

promote a competitive atmosphere which will benefit all stakeholders. Your organization being a highly recognized institution, I would like to request you to kindly come up with a project to set up a school in Kamrup District. The District Administration is looking forward to extend all possible support to facilitate setting up of such projects”⁴¹.

However, it must also be pointed out in this context, that there is the feeling arising from the increased commercialization of education in India and the increasing right-wing Hindu radicalization of the Indian society that “Don Bosco, an Italian Christian Saint-educator, who has created a record in the modern world for propagating institutional education and didactics” has not found a place in the consciousness of the people of Assam and the Catholic Church which he represented despite the record-breaking services rendered in the field of education and health has not found even a little space in the consciousness of the Assamese people due to the lack of contribution towards the language and culture of Assam. This is also due to the feeling that the services that they rendered were “commercial services” benefitting more the English-speaking sections of the Assamese Society⁴².

4.4. *The results of a survey*

A recent survey, though limited in scale, held in the cities of Guwahati and Itanagar in the second half of July 2015 for the purposes of this paper too showed that the overwhelming majority of the respondents found in Don Bosco an educator par excellence who has contributed very significantly towards the overall development of the North Eastern region.

4.4.1. The background of the respondents

The respondents represented a good cross-section of the society with varying educational qualifications.

1	Ph.D	9
2	M.Phil	2
3	Post-Graduates	7
4	Under-Graduates	16
5	S.S.L.C.	8
	Total	42

⁴¹ Notification from the Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup (Amingaon), dated 13th August 2015.

⁴² Cf Dr. Nagen SAIKIA, *The Statue of Don Bosco*, in “Amar Asom”, (Assamese Newspaper), August 17, 2015.

Among the respondents were politicians, social activists, doctors, those involved in government administrative service, journalists, engineers, lawyers, doctors and a former Chief Minister of the State of Assam, Shri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta⁴³.

The break-up according to religion of the respondents was as follows.

1	Protestants	16
2	Catholics	8
3	Hindus	15
4	Buddhist	1
5	Donyi Polo	1
6	Atheist	1
	Total	42

The association of the respondents with the Don Bosco institutions ranged from 38 to 3 years and could be characterized as ranging from a regular collaborative association to occasional meetings.

4.4.2. The questions and the responses⁴⁴

a) *Has your association and knowledge been limited to the Don Bosco institutions or have you also read the biography/life-history or in other ways acquired some knowledge about the person of St. John Bosco popularly known as Don Bosco?*

1	Knowledge of Don Bosco limited to Don Bosco Institutions	31
2	Have knowledge about Don Bosco Institutions and also have read about his life and works; I admire the fact that he was a visionary who used education as a tool to modernize and reform society	13
3	Have read about Don Bosco's life and his spirit	2
4	Have only a limited knowledge coming from contact with individual Salesians and some personal reading	2
5	Know him as someone who was a great champion of the downtrodden	2
6	Have only a limited knowledge gained through personal contact with some Salesians	1
7	Knowledge limited to what was heard from friends	1

⁴³ Shri Mahanta who has been associated with Don Bosco for the past 30 years was the leader of the Assam Movement and President of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). He was the Chief Minister of Assam for two terms (1985-1990; 1996-2001).

⁴⁴ In some cases there were more than one response from the same person to the same question.

The overwhelming evidence is that the respondents (as seen from the above-given responses 1 & 2) have come to know of Don Bosco through the institutions specially the educational institutions and have but a limited knowledge of the person of Don Bosco.

b) *What is your Perception of St. John Bosco, popularly known as Don Bosco?*

1	Nothing very specific	14
2	A visionary and a compassionate human being	5
3	Father and friend of the youth	9
4	A visionary educator who made a difference to the world	4
5	A saint who educated the youth	4
6	A divine soul who brought changes to the world (especially for the poor)	4
7	A saint who promoted human science and relations	2
8	Someone who struggled to serve society	2
9	An apostle sent by God	1
10	A spiritual person	1
11	One who brought the Gospel to the people	1
12	A role model	1

c) *What have you to say about Don Bosco Institutions? From your own experience⁴⁵?*

1	Have made excellent contributions in the educational field	15
2	Have contributed to social development oriented to the poor	11
3	Instill discipline and help one to be a better human being	6
4	Impart education with a spiritual and moral content	4
5	They are wonderful/very good	3
6	They impart spiritual formation	2
7	Am proud of being a Bosconian	1
8	They prepare people for a career	1
9	They have formed many leaders	1
10	They provide education and an all-round formation	1

⁴⁵ There were four respondents who did not answer to the point. One also appeared to be quite negative saying that the Don Bosco institutions make the students become very selfish and unpatriotic.

d) *From what you have heard from others*⁴⁶?

1	Only good/appreciation from others as an educational institution	29
2	Do a lot of social service on behalf of the downtrodden	3
3	Are engaged in youth empowerment	1
4	Have a liberal outlook and are socially involved	1
5	Are good at imparting English education	1
6	Impart discipline	1
7	Impart leadership qualities	1

Evidently, the picture that emerges also from this limited survey is that Don Bosco, as represented by the Don Bosco institutions and the Salesians, is that of an educator who has contributed and who continues to contribute through the many Don Bosco institutions to the transformation and growth of the individuals and of the society in Northeast India.

Conclusion

As this paper has amply demonstrated the perception of Don Bosco, whom the people of the Northeast of India came to know primarily through the Don Bosco institutions in the region, is that of an educationist who through his sons has proved to be a potent force for the transformation of the society. This is the impression of people belonging to different religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds as also government servants, politicians and professionals in various fields. This is a justifiable assumption given the changes witnessed in the region after the coming of the Salesians and comparing it with the situation prior to the Salesians setting foot in the Northeast.

It is also to be noted that some Salesians who have rendered their educational services in the Northeast have been recognized as outstanding educationists also at the national level. A case in point would be Fr. Joseph Arokiasamy (1913-1982), the Principal of St. Anthony's School, Shillong. A man of great competence and vision, he contributed at the highest levels to the cause of education. He served in the University Grants Commission and the National Integration Council of India besides being chosen as a member of the Guwahati University Syndicate, the Meghalaya Educational Board, and the Meghalaya Planning Commission. On account of his vision, great culture, vast knowledge and concern for his alumni as well as on account of the great esteem in which he was held by the Salesians them-

⁴⁶ Seven respondents did not answer to the point perhaps on account of their not having understood the question well. There was also one respondent, who felt, that Don Bosco was an *alienating Christian institution*.

selves, the student body, the staff, the University and the government, he was often referred to as a “Legend” or an “Institution” by himself⁴⁷. One might also add in the context of the present paper that Fr. Arokiasamy was, a true son of Don Bosco who made the father and his system of education known at the various levels in which he operated.

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*”⁴⁸! 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 untrue to the true, lead me from darkness to light, lead me from death to immortality!”⁴⁹.

Indeed, what the Salesians in Northeast India have done is to work for the total well-being of the people primarily through imparting quality education and life-skills to the young. They did this 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).

⁴⁷ L. KUMPILUVELIL – C. PANACKEL (eds.), *A Journey with the Young...*, p. 256.

⁴⁸ http://www.thefullwiki.org/Sree_Narayana_Guru (20 november 2015).

⁴⁹ *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* – I.iii.28. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 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 describes the character of and path to human salvation (*moksha*).