CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The influence of Western rationalism, the Bengal Renaissance and the spread of education brought in the idea of the individual being a free agent having infinite capacity to progress. It gave impetus to the educated Assamese to voice their individual opinions on different subjects, which most importantly also included issues concerning the role and status of the Assamese women. With the changing background of Assam after the opening up of the country by the British, efforts to lift womanhood to a higher social level was also initiated by the Christian missionaries. In fact, the arrival of the missionaries provided an outlet for the flow of certain Christian ideas into the Socio-cultural life of the Assamese society.

The later decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century in Assam was therefore characterized by efforts to realign societal norms on modern lines without completely disassociating from the main tenets of its tradition. It was an age of contrary pulls in the realm of society, politics and intellectual ideas. The forces of tradition proved to be too powerful to make any effective changes in the condition of women.

The handful of Assamese intellectuals of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, some of whom were also social rebels on individual planes, failed to co-ordinate their efforts to build up Assamese women’s individual identity which was submerged with the identity of men. They perceived of changes which they thought was best for women, but the women themselves did
not participate in it nor were they asked to do so. This further marginalized many aspects of women's lives. It was a natural outcome of the prevalence of a dominant patriarchal society in Assam. The middle class educated Assamese reformers like their other Indian counterparts in different parts of the country were deeply attached to their tradition. They wanted not a revolution but reform in gradual doses. Their aim was to create an ideal woman or ‘Bhadramahila’, who would make a fine balance between the cherished traditional ideals like chastity and devotion to husband, to the modern or western Victorian ideals of the domestic angel based on the concept of domestic bliss centered around neatly organized small households with a wife who is an efficient manager as well as proficient in feminine accomplishments. However, this newness was not conceived to be on equal footing or equal opportunities with the male. Their perception regarding gender relations did not give any space to the women and marriage was reserved as the 'main career' for the Assamese women. Partha Chatterjee had rightly made the observation that reform agendas on women did not challenge the existing patriarchal authorities and the 'new woman' was subjected to a new form of patriarchy.¹

The arrival of the Christian missionaries in Assam saw another thrust in the efforts to improve the conditions of women. But it was no secret that charity, philanthropy and humanitarian works undertaken by the missionaries were methods of influencing people and attracting converts.² The belief that women needed to be brought into the fold for making conversions permanent appealed to

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the Christian community in America. Therefore, working for the education of the natives was part of the proselytisation job of the missionaries and hence women’s education was a special task. The missionaries began work among women in Assam with the setting up of schools. Initially, a few ‘bazaar’ or street girls were persuaded to attend schools as parents were reluctant to commit their children to the care of a Christian teacher. Though, the missionaries could achieve only a limited success in their endeavour, yet it cannot be denied that they were the pioneers of women’s education in Assam.

Emphasis was laid on women acquiring some education so that they could become good wives, good mothers and thereby run a family properly. The influential Assamese middle class had through the print media primarily reflected a very gender biased view regarding women’s education. They believed in the necessity of some education, but reiterated that it should not be such that would instill in a woman, a desire or ambition to compete with men. The aim was not to make women independent or equal partners of men in the family, leave alone public life. It was feared that with modern education women would try to subvert the old established values, become more fashionable, demand more economic freedom and not recognize their duties as wives and mothers. Therefore, the emerging identity was of a ‘domestic woman’ who was not only ‘well’ educated, but could also maintain the key tenets of tradition, primarily through her role as a good nurturing mother and dutiful wife. Even the educated women advocates of social reform, and who were the recipients of male patronage, by and large conformed to the traditional notions of womanhood.

Gradually with the progress of modern education and the changing mental perception of the people, education of women received the approval of the public at large, though with certain reservations. But as the people were unaccustomed to sending their daughters to school, the zenana system was taken recourse to. But as it proved to be expensive, cumbersome and largely ineffective, the necessity of sending girls to formal schools was realized. But the setting up of institutions for female education proved to be full of difficulties and in spite of the courageous efforts of the missionaries to start the first girls’ school, no real advance of female education was observed until the second half of the nineteenth century when the colonial government came forward to offer financial support and devised plans to attract girl students. The urban middle class also joined in supporting formal education for girls.

Female education in Assam initially centered only on Primary education. Marriage was the only engrossing thought as there was the absence or a very few women role models in the higher rungs of the academic ladder. But with social customs and conventions gradually losing force, the girls along with their guardians began to look beyond the Primary school stage. High Schools and Secondary schools were set up by the end of the first half of the twentieth century, besides, colleges too had a sizeable number of women in their rolls. Women got enrolled in institutions of higher education both within and outside the province, with a few like Lila Devi even venturing beyond the shores of the country. As a corollary to changes in the outlook of the public in regard to the education of women, objection against co-education also diminished. The changing social environment also enabled many women to continue their education even after marriage. The General Report on Public Instruction in
Assam, 1932-33, had observed very correctly that conservatism, tradition and prejudice relating to female education was losing ground and the only brakes in progress was the lack of funds and teacher training schools in Assam. A general awakening among women themselves had further helped in the progress of their education.

The progress in the education of women, however, failed to usher in a level playing field for women vis-a-vis men. The education system in Assam, as in the rest of the country was meant for men and which was only partially adapted to make possible the entry of girls. Syllabus, curriculums were all on the basis of sex, and an unwritten code of conduct all worked against women. There existed enormous disparity in the number of girls and boys under instruction. Though education was sought for women, it was primarily for its own sake and not as a means to independent livelihood. The scope of remunerative employment even for University educated women was either none or very limited. Thus, as female education had no economic functions, its scope was limited to one of social development.

Education, however, helped a section of the women to become assertive and play socially useful roles, even though social space was sharply divided into masculine and feminine. In fact, the educational experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Assam produced a 'new woman' with interests that went beyond the household. As the women became educated, she combined in herself the dual responsibility of managing her domestic and professional responsibilities efficiently. The 'new woman' was expected to

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bridge the gulf between the educated man and his uneducated counterpart, but without displacing gender specific roles.

Although women's education was geared primarily towards creating good wives and mothers for those men who had risen on the economic and social ladder of colonial society, it also facilitated women's literary activities. Women's writings in Assam which emerged during the colonial period reflected the paradoxes and complexities of their lives. However, all these women writers functioned within the patriarchal framework and their writings hardly went beyond the prevalent societal norms. The few who moved beyond that frame introduced new issues which were related to their needs, feelings and expectations as women, rather than what was expected of them. A few advanced men of the period also held less conservative views on women's role. Their writings projected women as wanting to have more control over their social, economic and public lives, thus sharpening the conflicts women faced in their daily existence. In the context of the prevailing atmosphere, the very fact that women were able to express their views publicly, however moderate they might have been, can perhaps be considered a big leap forward.

The spread of education had helped to generate awareness among the people, especially its womenfolk, regarding the health and nutrition of their family by doing away with unscientific and unhealthy practices and beliefs.

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The social reform movement in Assam was however limited success. Most of the advocates of social reform were from the upper caste, so it was natural that they were primarily concerned with the evils prevalent in upper caste Assamese society. 9 But the peculiar features of the Assamese society rendered the problems of the upper caste society isolated phenomena rather than the general rule. Prevalence of certain customs like child-marriage, prohibition of widow-remarriage, seclusion and segregation of women, especially among the upper-caste, had generated much debate and discussion. The voices of educated Assamese women concerning these serious issues were mild and not strong enough to bring about decisive shifts in the prevalent practices. The Child Marriage Restraint Act or the Sarda Act of 1929, the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 (Act V of 1856) and similar other legal sanctions were positive interventions on the part of the colonial government to liquidate at least some of the sufferings of the colonial women. However, the practice of child marriage among the upper castes continued to be rampant, as a consequence, the number of child widows also continued to be large. Despite sastric and legal sanctions there was no indication of the acceptance of widow remarriage among the upper castes. Engulfed in an unfavourable social environment, widows continued to lead reclusive and degraded lives.10 Moreover, domestic values like seclusion and segregation, despite the emerging discourses were able to hold ground. Societal norms set for women continued to be based on age-old prejudices and not on reason or sympathy11 for prejudices die hard not only amongst the

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9 Ibid, p 132
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
unsophisticated masses, but even among the enlightened section of the urban areas, for orthodoxy was the prevailing order of the day.\textsuperscript{12}

It is apparent that the class and caste conscious elites had very limited agendas regarding the lower class and although the contemporary Muslim society was not free from many social evils like purdah and polygamy, there were very few discourses on them as they were largely left untouched.

Women's perception of 'tradition' underwent changes under the influence of education and influx of new ideas. But it is important to note that they did not totally negate local as well as broader pan-Indian hues. In fact, the western ideas did not retain their alien character, as they were often merged with traditional views, sometimes to revitalize tradition and sometimes to reshape the new ideas in the light of tradition.\textsuperscript{13} Further, the ideal Assamese family during the period of study remained joint families, which in most cases acted as a preserver of tradition. Shift in traditional values and customs, especially those concerning women, must also be seen in the light of 'social norms are not immutable, even if the time frame of changing such norms may be a long one.\textsuperscript{14}

With the formation of women's associations in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially the Assam Mahita Samiti (A.M.S.) in 1926, a campaign was set afoot for the removal of disabilities affecting women of Assam. It became the medium for expression of women's opinions. While women had always been taught to care for their families, the A.M.S encouraged and enlarged the social role which also included activities outside their home. The A.M.S.

\textsuperscript{12} H.K. Barpujari, \textit{Assam in the Days of the Company}, Shillong, 1996, p.3.  
\textsuperscript{14} Suruchi T. Bjorkert, \textit{op.cit}, p.262.
despite being apolitical, supplemented the Congress efforts in arousing and consequently drawing the women of Assam to the national movement. It also took effective steps in encouraging and popularizing spinning and weaving, besides playing a creditable role in the anti-opium and the anti-untouchability movement of the province. What needs to be recalled is that their attempts to change the social reality for women were played in an environment that could be especially cruel to women who did not conform.\textsuperscript{15}

Lastly, the mass participation of women of the Valley in the nationalist movement for independence stood in sharp contrast to the earlier state politics when female participation was restricted to the members of the royal and noble families and that too only on a few occasions. The contemporary social condition did not permit the emergence of women as a socio-political force. The primary constraint for women was to come out onto the streets without challenging the prevalent domestic customs and traditions. But the emergence of Gandhi along with his political language, and strategy brought about a steady reconciliation of domestic and public values. The non-violent feature of the movement also facilitated women's equal participation.

Family dynamics played an important role in encouraging or inhibiting women's involvement in public activities. In Assam, a small group of urban, educated and elite nationalist women set the precedent for the masses to follow. These women were encouraged by their families to participate in the movement as their households were already politically active. Subsequently, women from elite households and ordinary households came to share the same public spaces but operated from two different social worlds.

\textsuperscript{15} Geraldine Forbes, \textit{Women in Modern India}, U.K., 2007, p.91
Women of the Valley most prominently participated in the public bonfire of foreign clothes, picketed shops selling foreign goods and popularised Khadi. These were acts which went a long way in restoring the pride and demand of indigenous industries. The Quit India Movement saw at least thirteen women of the Brahmaputra Valley becoming martyrs. The spirit of sacrifice was thus stretched beyond the boundaries of the domestic sphere. Women faced police atrocities, courted arrests and even sent to jails. A section of the women also got involved in daring aggressive activities.

Political activism of the colonial Assamese women, however, did not take place in the public sphere alone. There were countless women who did not step beyond the domestic space, but supported their men in their nationalist activities, facing domestic instability without complaint, donating and fasting for the cause of the nation. These women could create political spaces within the confines of the four walls. The period witnessed the progressive politicization of the domestic sphere and the domestication of the public sphere.

The link between women’s education and their inclination towards the nationalist movement was evident. Women, who were literate, educated in English or vernacular, provided the most active cadres of the Congress and other political organizations, although illiteracy did not stop the development of political consciousness among the common populace.

The participation of thousands of women of Assam in the movement, though, not effective in removing gender inequalities, did generate an enhanced sense of evaluation among women of their own strength. It enabled women to see their latent political potential, raising consciousness on wider structures of
inequalities between men and women, increased women’s public visibility and paved the way for the next generation. Women leaders like Chandraprova Saikiani and Puspalata Das did what they thought should do, without always conforming to what was expected of them.

The establishment of British rule in Assam, contributed directly and indirectly to the process of modernization. This, along with the emergence of nationalism altered the Assamese woman’s social positioning and provided the impetus for the evolution of the modern Assamese woman. Important issues like gender inequality and discriminations against women however continue to be debated. The pace of reform and change in Assam was indeed very slow and much remained to be achieved. But the very fact that the nineteenth century social reformers in Assam questioned the relevance of certain social conventions that had been in existence for centuries and their relentless struggle for the demolition of societal norms that had reduced women virtually into play things and commodities at the hands of men, is perhaps their greatest contribution to Assamese society. Thus, we may conclude that though diverse arguments were raised regarding the necessity and nature of education to be imparted to women, their position and role in Assamese society, there is unanimity in the arguments that women were seen as the touchstones of national progress and moral regeneration.

17. Priyam Goswami, op.cit., p-132.