DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE EDUCATION IN ASSAM

The history of Assam in the nineteenth century witnessed great socio-political and economic transformations. It saw the collapse of the six hundred year old Ahom monarchy and the imposition of British colonial rule which brought about considerable changes in the socio-political fabric of the province. Within a short period of time, the Assamese society found itself in the midst of a totally new environment. In short, aided by three major simultaneous influences in the province, viz., the spread of British administration and its associated infrastructure, the activities of the American Baptist Missionaries and the impact of the Bengal Renaissance, a new awakening emerged in the Brahmaputra Valley in the second half of the nineteenth century. ¹ It brought about essential changes in the mindset of a small but powerful group in Assamese society. A wide variety of issues began to be discussed and debated upon by the emerging intelligentsia and in the process, ideas and attitudes underwent a profound change. A significant development occurred in the realm of changing attitudes towards women, though opinions differed and there was much debate. A remarkable significance of this debate was that it gave women a visibility which had been denied to them earlier, given the patriarchal set up of the society. For centuries, they had remained in the periphery of society and their problems had always been relegated to the background. In their justification for the creation of a just social

¹ Sheila Bora, 'Presidential Address', NEIHA proceedings, Shillong, 2005, p-8
order for women, the reformers now brought issues like polygamy, marriage reforms and women's education to the public space.\(^2\)

During the period under review, the status of the Assamese women varied according to caste, class and religion. The existence of several social problems like polygamy, early marriage, and the denial of widow re-marriage especially among the upper-caste Hindus, had greatly lowered the position of the women. The impact of the Bengal Renaissance had made the educated Assamese men to emulate many of its ideals, many of which tried to strengthen the patriarchal institutions. It is important to note that "Assam came under British rule nearly a century after East-India Company's contact with Bengal. Naturally Assam lagged behind Bengal in receiving modern education which was mainly responsible for the new awakening in Bengal. The renaissance in Assam was however different from that of Bengal\(^3\). While in Bengal, it was a multi-dimensional movement, in Assam it was predominantly literary, though from the middle of the nineteenth century, individual efforts were made to eradicate some of the social evils and superstitious beliefs conforming Assamese society.\(^4\)

It was colonial Assam that sought for changes largely within the Assamese society. The messengers of change were a handful of Assamese men belonging to the upper strata of society with close association with Bengal. These men were the first to cherish a new social outlook in the province which also included women in their agenda of social reform. But as most of the agenda of reform were male engineered and mainly concerned with the caste Hindu social

\(^4\) Ibid
norms, it had very vague visions about the nature of the problems of the lower caste and lower class women. In fact, many of the educated middle class men like Ratneswar Mahanta, Lombodar Bora and others openly accepted the views of ancient Hindu law givers like Manu whose views upon women were biased. Manu's injunctions had witnessed the beginnings of a systematic deprivation of Indian women in matters of education which led to narrowing of their mental and intellectual horizon.

Ratneswar Mahanta in his article, 'Ghainir Kartabya Aru Stree Shiksha' (duties of a women) published in the Assamese news magazine Assam Bandhu, 1885 expected the Assamese women to initiate the ideals of the Dharmashastras and to ignore most of the new western learning. The prevailing environ did not permit the propagation of progressive views on women and the failure in working out an alternative ideology of reform inevitably led the Assamese women to appropriate the ideals of the Aryan women, many of which were inventions of the late nineteenth century. Commenting on the status of women in Assam in the nineteenth century, William Robinson in his book observed:

A state of dependence more humiliating than that to which the weaker sex is here subject, cannot easily be conceived. Like most women of India, they are denied even the least portion of education and are excluded from every social circle. They are even accounted unworthy to partake of religious rites, except in conjunction with their husbands ................. Females are not included within the pale of education; every ray of mental improvement is kept away from the sex. As they are always confined to domestic duties, and excluded from the society of the other sex, the people see no necessity for their in education. A

5 'Ghainir Kartabya Aru Stree Shiksha' Assam Bandhu 1885, Asara, Saka 1807.
6 William Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, Delhi, 1975, p.274.
woman’s duties are comprised ‘pleasing her husband’ and cherishing her children.”

Though, one of the potent instruments of social change is the promotion of education, yet it is self contradictory, as education is also used to strengthen the prevalent societal norms which include ideals of a chaste woman who is an expert in domestic work and devoted to her husband and family alone. It further includes the denying of women opportunities to learn new roles. In this context, the nineteenth century in particular and the early twentieth century is important in the history of India as it witnessed the entry of girls into the formal system of education.

Formal educational institutions for girls were practically non-existent in Assam, prior to the coming of the British. The British Government was the first to advocate female education and emancipation as an essential step, towards progress. By the end of the eighteenth century, William Adam made an enquiry into the state of education in India and noted the existence of some educational institutions which also had some girls in it. These included family centres of learning. During the pre colonial period in Assam, the tols, Satras and the like were responsible for imparting education in the state which was mainly religious in nature. The tols imparted instructions in Sanskrit and the Satras founded by Sri Sankaradeva (Vaishnavite saint) also imparted some instructions. In Sylhet, there was another type of indigenous institution known as the Maktabs meant for the Muslims. But all these institutions were meant only for boys. Education of girls was limited to the requirements of household life.

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8 ‘Tols’, Sanskrit teaching schools, ‘Satras’, Vaishnavite centres of learning which were mostly religious.
9 Bina Lahkar, Development in Women Education, Guwahati, N. Delhi, 1987, p.1
During the prosperity of the Ahom monarchy, the spread of Sanskrit literature was patronized. Among the entire population of Assam, comprising of the nobility, priestly class, official aristocracy and the labour class, education was confined only to the priestly class and to the scribes (Kakotis). The latter belonged to the official aristocracy. The rest were condemned to perpetual ignorance and dependence. Education began to be neglected by the royalty since the end of the eighteenth century owing to internal anarchy, civil wars, repeated ravages of the neighbouring hill tribes and recurring invasions of the Burmese.

Assam came within the ambit of the British Colonial Empire after the conclusion of the first Burmese War in 1826. Along with the varied activities of the government which had its impact on the social life of the people, another force contributed to the amelioration of the society. It was the Christian missionaries. From the beginning of the British rule in Assam, missionary activities were favoured by the attitude of the Home Government. The indifference of the British Parliament towards them was also broken by the Charter Act of 1813. The Charter contained a provision that persons desirous to go and settle in India for the purpose of introducing religious and moral improvement should apply for permission to the Court of Directors, and if refused by this authority, the application could be transmitted to the Board of Control which was also empowered to grant permission to the missionaries.  

The same Charter guaranteed government protection to each person that arrived in India.

At the beginning of British rule in Assam, when the policy of the East India Company was one of strict non-interference with the religion and

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10 M.S. Barkataki, *British Administration in North East India*, Delhi, 1985, p. 84
11 *Ibid*
institutions of the people, the missionaries ceaselessly engaged themselves in a
programme of female education. They started schools for girls and were the first
to do so in Assam. “The establishment of a girls school was one of the first steps
taken by the missionaries while establishing a new station” It is pertinent to
note here that in 1836, the American Baptist missionaries had begun their
evangelical work in Assam and an important area of their work was with regard
to women in the region. They were pained to see the disabilities faced by women
and considered it as their solemn duty to lift womanhood to a higher social level
through female education and through the process of women working for women.

Meanwhile, responding to the government assurance of protection, two
American missionaries, Rev. Messrs. Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter,
proceeded to Sadiya in September 1835, and reached Calcutta with their
families. On their arrival, they were provided with a printing Press and other
related materials. On 23rd March, 1836, the two missionaries finally reached
Sadiya in Assam. They became the first American missionaries to set foot in
Assam and Captain Jenkins welcomed them to this Country. Within three
months of their arrival, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cutter were teaching boys and girls
and by 1837 Mrs. Cutter had a girls school in operation at Sadiya. This was
followed by another school at Sibsagar in 1840 by Mrs. Brown. Miles Bronson,
a pioneering American Baptist missionary to Assam, while starting the Nowgong
Orphan Institute in 1843, the first co-educational institute in the North East,

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12 Ibid, p. 20
13 Sheila Bora, op. cit, p.8
14 M.S. Barkataki, op. cit., p.89
15 Ibid.
16 Francis Jenkins was the British Commissioner of Assam, who was much interested in
evangelical activities.
17 Miles Bronson (1812-1883) was a missionary of the Assam Mission of the American Baptist
Missionaries.
stated that the purpose for starting the school was to introduce education to women who are wholly neglected in this country. The description of Rev. Thomas of the boat journey to Sadiya, or the sufferings of other missionaries due to disease in an unhealthy climate and natural discomfort in a foreign land, however, did not dampen the spirit of the missionaries. Gradually more attempts were made to establish girls' schools in Assam. As work by the missions for female education progressed, single lady missionaries were appointed to impart and supervise the education of girls.

It is to be noted that missionary activities in India started as early as 1820, when conditions for women's education were extremely detrimental. It elicited lukewarm response among Indian social reformers. Advocating a more prominent and dignified role for women, the missions also identified women as one of the most prominent tools in the process of evangelization. They became aware that conversions often caused connections to be broken and though the people were ready to hear and applaud the missionaries, they were not ready to sever their links. Miles Bronson was of the belief that women being primarily responsible for moulding the formative years of the young were potential factors in removing the obstacles created by the impact of early socializations, on the inculcation of religion and caste. By tackling the women, the missionaries tried to counteract the forces at home and social influences that surrounded the pupils while out of school. Hence, education for women could not be avoided if Christian ideas and a new social outlook were to be instilled. The subject matter of education was, however, to be modified by the customs of the people among whom they preached.
Thus, women were to be taught to submit to their husbands in love, and seek in education a means of becoming not men, but better women.\(^{18}\)

The most important feature of missionary activity in the field of education was their emphasis on education through the mother-tongue. \(^{19}\) Missionary schools prescribed a minimum schooling for girls where they were taught general subjects like reading and writing the vernacular of the district, geography, history and simple arithmetic, besides lessons on sewing, knitting, crochet, embroidery and handicrafts were also given. Further, the girls devoted their time to Bible lessons, cooking, cleaning and recreation. They were also taught tailoring and to mend not only their own clothes, but also to help in stitching and keeping the boys’ clothes in order. The curriculum for girls was confined strictly to the vernacular, though with a few exceptions, the more advanced among them were allowed to study Bengali. \(^{20}\) The missionaries soon realized that for a large section of girls the custom of early marriage was a formidable obstacle to formal education in schools. To counteract this, attempts had also been made by mission ladies to impart instruction to females of higher castes in *Zenana* or private apartments as was done by Women’s Missionary Society in Calcutta; for ladies of rank seldom left their home, if they did, they travelled in such a way that none but their household should see them. \(^{21}\) These private efforts were socially more acceptable than formal school education. They were progressive yet at the same time traditional, providing women with basic education while restricting them within the parameters of their homes.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{18}\) Dimbeswar Neog, *Natun Poharat Asamiya Sahityar Buranji*, Guwahati, 1964, p. 280

\(^{19}\) Renu Debi, *Progress of Education in Assam*, Guwahati, N. Delhi, 1987, p. 13

\(^{20}\) In 1836, Bengali was introduced as the court language and medium of instruction in schools.


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Many were, however, critical of missionary activities and the impact of western influence, which they argued, resulted in the erosion of traditional values. The spirit of hostility against women's education was strong among large sections. Even advocates of female education abhorred the very idea of girls becoming doctors and lawyers after taking higher degrees in the university. The utmost they desired was that they should have knowledge of the three R's and a little knowledge of history and geography. Despite endeavors made by the officials and non-officials alike, the number of primary schools in Assam Valley for girls was 44 in 1880-81. The Education Commission of 1882 never failed to lay emphasis on the education of women, yet the number of primary schools for girls at the close of the nineteenth century stood at 202 with 3,159 students on the rolls. In 1874, the Deputy Inspector of Schools, Nagaon, reports, 'skill in weaving, cooking and paddy husking is considered a greater accomplishment in a girl than all her knowledge in reading, writing and arithmetic Besides a girl is a great help to her mother in attending to little babies, including other domestic works ,...... but if she attends school, a servant is necessary to accompany her to and from the school.' Given the conventional notions of impropriety and even danger with regard to female education, a superstitious belief also existed that a girl who can read and write will become a widow soon after marriage. Being a patriarchal society, women were totally dependent on males, be it father, husbands or sons for support. Further, the female child spent her youth preparing for marriage. Thus, in such a social environment, the pursuing of knowledge was almost equal to suicide. Another obstacle to female education was that unlike

23 Ibid, p. 202
24 ASA, R.P.I.A., 1899-1900, Shillong, 1901, p.49
25 ASA, R.P.I.A. 1874-75, Chapter on Female Education, Shillong 1876.
male education, female education did not yield in any economic benefit as it was unlikely that they would engage in any remunerative occupation.

As men of social standing were reluctant to send their daughters to missionary schools, the missionaries picked up even the street-walkers for initiation to learning. By the end of the nineteenth century, female education became a major issue in the public sphere. The periodicals of the last decades of the nineteenth century along with the fictional narratives were occupied with the question of the proper sphere of women. The print media provided the Assamese literati with the powerful medium to express their views on women. Those women who were encouraged by their husbands and fathers to write, hardly went beyond the contemporary male view, which was dominated by Brahmanical virtues like *patnidharma*. Padmavati Devi Phukani (1853-1927) a leading *bhadramahila* and daughter of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, 1829-59, 27 who had championed the cause of Assamese language and female education, published *Sudhamar Upakhyam* (1884), the first Assamese fictional narrative in prose. There she puts forward three arguments in support of the notion that women have three dharmas - *Bhakti* towards God, *patibrata* (the devoted wife) and ‘*Satidharma*’. In Padmavati Devi’s writing, there is a total submission of wife to the husband and she defines women’s proper sphere as the home. But even within this framework of ‘proper spheres’ Padmavati Devi advocated women’s right to education, pointing out that the most precious duty of a women was to develop her mind by learning to read and write.

27 Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan was a true representative of the spirit of the Bengal Renaissance in Assam. Son of Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Anandaram during his stay at Calcutta (1850-52) became a member of the Bethune Society at Calcutta, which was devoted to the cause of female education. On his return to Assam, he was instrumental in establishing the ‘*Jnan-Prodayini Sabha*’ at Nowgong in 1857-59, which worked for the development of the society. He believed that women could be liberated only through education and thereby took up the task of female education in his own Province, which began by imparting education to his wife and daughter.
That a women’s proper sphere was the ‘home’, was an attitude which was commensurate with the conservative opinion on female education. Such an attitude was also reflected in the public debates carried out in periodical writings of the time. The middle class literati justified women’s education so as to create suitable companions for educated men and to triumph over a supposed moral degeneracy of women. In the issues of the *Jonaki*, 28 one of the leading journals, the education for both boys and girls was considered as crucial for the progress of the country and society. But the education of girls was role orientated. The education for women should be such, which could teach them to be better wives, to live happily within the strict discipline of in-laws and to be better mothers as on them would depend the character of the future generation. Thus, though education was to confine women within the home, yet, paradoxically, the progress of the nation was linked to their education. An article published in the *Jonaki* observed ‘If we look at the history of civilizations, we will find that only those civilizations, are moving towards progress, which have female education............. as only the children of educated mothers can be expected to become great in the future , but it would be difficult to educate the children of uneducated mothers.” 29 The civilizing discourse thus made the ‘uneducated mother’ an obstacle in the project of nation building.

Nevertheless, the response to women’s education was not too encouraging. Yet, a determined section did not give up hope and their sustained efforts eventually yielded results. The progress of female education in Assam was slow, but still by 1895-96, there were 261 Primary Girls’ schools with an

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28 *The Jonaki* (magazine) became so famous that the entire period came to be known in Assamese literary culture as the *Jonaki era* (1889-1895)
enrollment of 4388.30 While acknowledging the rather slow progress of female
education in Assam, it is nevertheless pertinent to point out that figures are
somewhat misleading as many girls received elementary education informally at
home and were able to read and write.31

Social reforms in the nineteenth century was mainly directed towards the
sufferings and disabilities of women as the society’s ills could in fact be traced to
the oppressed condition of women. Female education and emancipation were
seen as the first steps towards progress. Western education with its liberal and
rationalist ideas created an attitude of enquiry in the minds of Indian social
reformers regarding the functioning and practices of the society. It led reformers
like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasaar to support the
establishment of schools for girls. But though influenced by Western ideas, the
reformers were also tied to their tradition and the caste-Hindu social norms.
Infact, women’s education became a tussle between the western model and the
Indian ideal. Indian reformers desired women to be educated and modernized, but
at the same time combine in themselves the womanly qualities and bear all the
responsibilities of a respectable home. The nature of education was such that on
one hand it needed to fulfill the demands of the status conscious middle class
sensibilities and on the other hand be able to inculcate the notion that they
dedicate their lives in service of their husbands and that they also needed to
preserve tradition. The efforts were more in the nature of improving the status of
women within the household but not beyond. It sought to ‘reform’ women rather

30 Priyam Goswami, ‘Keynote address’, Proceeding Volume of UGC & ICHR sponsored
National Seminar on Status of women in Colonial Assam, Pandu College, Guwahati, 2010, p.7
31 Ibid.
than to reform the society as a whole. The status quo was to remain even in terms of gender relationship.

Colonial domination of Assam led to the percolation of western thoughts and ideas in the province. It witnessed the growth of an emerging intelligentsia who were under the influence of the intellectual stimulation ushered in by the social reform movement in Bengal of the late nineteenth century. They were instrumental in bringing about a new social outlook in Assam which also included issues relating to the status of women and their improvement through education. Yet, like their counterparts in Bengal, the intelligentsia in Assam were staunch supporters of traditional values and stood for the patriarchal notions of society. The leadership of the social reform movement in Assam was provided by men like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua. The trio represents the character and views of the intelligentsia of Assam. The writings of educated men in periodicals like the Orunodai, the Jonaki, the Banhi and the Assam Bandhu reflect the middle class views regarding gender relations, ideas on social reforms and that women should be educated so as to create suitable companions for educated men. The writings overwhelmingly bring forth the male viewpoint and even the few women writers who were encouraged by their fathers or husbands to write did not venture to go beyond the prevailing patriarchal notions. Phanindranath Gogoi, wrote in the Jonaki, “While I am in favour of women’s education, I do not support the present system. I am totally against a type of education for women that would enable them to pass their B.A. or M.A. examinations and encourage them to compete with their husbands. I do not see the woman to be educated like a man, since such education causes more
harm than good." 32 Some education was indeed needed, but it should not be such
that would instill in a women a desire or ambition to compete with men. This
view is evident even in the writings of Lakshminath Bezbaruah, 33 one of the
brightest luminaries of Assamese literature. In Rus Deshat Tini Rati, Bezbarua
has stated that the aim of women’s education should be to produce good wives
and mothers rather than rivals of men in the sphere of employment. There is
absolutely no doubt about the contribution of Bezbarua towards the development
of Assamese literary culture, yet his views on women’s education and gender
equations which get reflected through his writings more or less echoes explicitly
the Assamese intelligentsias conservatism vis- a-vis women and women’s
education.

One of the common objections raised against women’s education was that
an educated woman would be devoid of character. The monthly Mau or the Bee
(1886-8) edited by Harinarayan Bora held advanced and progressive views on
burning questions of the day. Yet, in an article entitled, Tirotar Bon Ki (the duties
of a woman) published in the Mau, it expressed the fear that western culture,
higher education of women in particular, would produce a greater disaster than
the invasion of the Burmese in Assam. 34 The reformers were strongly opposed to
women being admitted to formal Western educational institutions. This attitude
was natural as they were under the ideological influence of Bengal. The
Brahmos, who along with other progressive individuals and associations were
responsible in ushering a new social awakening in Bengal, held radical views on

32 Nagen Saikia, ed, Jonaki, AXOM XAHITYA XOBHA, Phanindranath Gogoi, ‘Tentenor Amaar Upai
33 Lakshminath Bezbarua was one amongst the small group of Assamese students in Calcutta
who on August 25, 1888, established the Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha for the
development and preservation of Assamese language and literature.
34 ‘Tirotar Bon Ki’, Mau, aaghun, Saka 1808, December, 1886.
social reforms. Change was essential, but not through reliance on western
guidance. Phanindranath Gogoi puts forward an argument through his article
which appeared in the Jonaki, that the main role of a woman was the smooth
running of the household by becoming a good mother and a loyal companion to
the husband. He viewed that too much of education would make women adverse
to domestic chores. 35

Misconceptions continued to persist, but with the gradual widening of the
mental outlook, the education of women began to receive positive response.
However, as the people were unaccustomed to sending their daughters to schools,
the Zenana system of education given in the home was taken resource to. But as
this system turned out to be expensive, cumbersome and largely ineffective, the
necessity of sending girls to schools was soon realized. But unfortunately,
establishing institutions for female education was beset with problems. There was
much debate on the nature of schools or on what would be the most suitable type
of education for women, on who would teach the students, or whether girls
married prior to puberty could continue their education or not. These and similar
questions loomed large in the second half of the nineteenth century. Further, the
existing social norms and customs of the people made the British model of
schooling difficult, if not impossible. Notions of sex-segregation or seclusion of
women especially among the higher classes and castes in Assam implied that
girls had to have female teachers and study in separate institutions.

The Assamese intelligentsia with strong patriarchal leanings believed that
since the roles of the male and the female were biologically conditioned, the
nature of education imparted to men and women must also necessarily be

35 Nagen Saikia, ed, Jonaki, op. cit. p. 277
different. The nature of education should be such that it creates suitable companions for educated men and that she needs to preserve tradition. Apart from reading, writing and arithmetic, women needed to acquaint themselves with the new norms of middle class cleanliness, management of budget and to maintain a healthy diet for the family. It is important to refer in this context the success of the book on culinary written by Parjyasundari Devi and published in 1913. Added to this list of accomplishments, knowledge of spinning and weaving were also considered as essential elements of 'women's education'. An article in Jonaki, expressed the view that since the men after much labour brings money to the home, it is the duty of women to use the money in a proper way.36 As elsewhere in India the education system in Assam was meant for men, which was now to be partially adapted to make possible the entry of women. It was a compromise between the new demands of the emerging urban households and the traditional notions of female subordination.37

In Assam, despite the courageous efforts of the missionaries to start the first girls’ school, there was no real advance in female education until the second half of the nineteenth century when the government came forward to offer financial support. Further, the urban middle class intelligentsia joined in supporting formal education for girls. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, girls schools rose in rapid succession, by the turn of the century the number of schools for girls and school enrollment increased significantly; and by the end of the first half of the twentieth century, apart from the Primary Schools and Secondary Schools, Colleges also had a sizeable number of women in their rolls.

36 Jonaki, new edition, Vol 2, No-5, 1904
The demand for female education grew steadily. Before the century was over, a few women like Padmavati Devi Phukanani came forward to articulate their ideas about female education and by the twentieth century, women like Hemoprova Das assumed charge as the Headmistress of Girls’ Model High School at Dibrugarh.

Progress of Education:

With the expansion of British rule in India, knowledge of English became a necessity both for reasons of administration and increasing commercial needs. In Assam, prior to the coming of the British, apathy of the rulers and the ruled for education resulted in the deterioration of the socio-economic condition of the country. Hence, the British could not hope for much assistance in running the administration. Education was limited only to the priestly class and the scribes, but they too were only versed in the Shastras and the simplest rules of arithmetic. Thus, neither of them was qualified to get employment in the Company’s Courts. Lack of educated people conversant in English for taking part in operating the administrative machinery led the new rulers to open an outlet for a flow of clerks and assistants from Bengal to the different parts of the province.38

At the beginning of the British rule in Assam, the Company followed a policy of strict non-interference in the religions and institutions of the people. In order to improve the general condition of education “which was deplorable to the extreme”,39 the British Parliament in 1813, through the Charter Act decided to spend a yearly sum of one lakh for education in India. It made the subject of

38 M. Barkataki, op.cit, p.20
39 William Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, Delhi, 1975, p. 274.
education in the country a state responsibility. But differences arose over the utilisation of the money which led to the controversy between the Orientalists and the Anglicists. As far as Assam was concerned, David Scott, Agent to the Governor General, obtained a sanction of the Government of India to promote indigenous system of education by assignment of lands,\(^{40}\) in October 1826.\(^{41}\) But it must be noted that the Act of 1813, restricted its activities to the men alone and did not take any responsibility for the education of women.

The introduction of British administration was followed by the establishment of civil and criminal courts in different parts of Assam. The functioning of these courts needed people knowing reading and writing, and as mentioned earlier owing to the uneducated state of the local people, these courts were filled up with the natives of Sylhet and Rangpur.\(^{42}\) To their advantage, in 1836, Bengali was made the language of the Court and the schools. The Assamese language came to be neglected and consequently education in general and girls education in particular did not make progress. There was deep resentment of the people over the denial of the rightful status to Assamese in the scheme of education. The masses received unstinted support of the Christian missionaries and the Assamese intelligentsia of the period. To cite a few examples, Bronson, in his preface to the *Anglo-Assamese Dictionary* \(^{43}\) wrote about the beauty of the Assamese language which had distinct characteristics.

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\(^{42}\) F.P. , P.C. , 10 July, 1834, No-211, Jenkins to Deputy Secy. To Govt 21 June 1834, para 9 (cited in M. Barkataki, *op.cit*, p.25.
The *Orunodoi* was ever insistent in its advocacy of Assamese. The harbinger of the new age in Assam, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-58) gave powerful expression to the popular demand. In one of his articles in the *Orunadoi*, entitled ‘A few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on the Vernacular Education (1855), which he wrote in the pseudonym ‘Native’, he established the separate identity of the Assamese language. His *Asamiya Lorar Mitru* in two parts (1859) dispelled the belief that Assamese people were incapable of writing reading materials for schools. In 1853, Andrew John Moffat Mills, a judge of the Sadar Court in Calcutta, came to Assam to report on the administration of the province. In his report, he too laid stress on the introduction of Assamese as a medium of instruction in schools. Towards the end of 1872, the entire collection of opinions, including that of Mills, Dhekial Phukan and the missionaries was reviewed by the government. Atlast in 1873, Assamese was declared as the medium of instruction in schools and as the language of the courts.

But prior to the language issue, Captain Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam (1834-61), had expressed the need for government schools to provide instructions to Assamese youths. In his despatch on the state of education in the province, his proposal for the establishment of English schools at all Sadar stations, i.e. Gauhati, Darrang, Nowgong and Biswanath was accepted by the government. As English was accepted as the medium of instruction in the schools of India, the success of its implementation was doubtful in Assam, as the people...
had just started to read and write. Thus, Bengali was retained as the medium and English was to be introduced in the future.\textsuperscript{47}

The Government of India referred the proposal for consideration by the general Committee of Public Instruction \textsuperscript{48} and it approved the establishment of an English school at Gauhati. The Gauhati English School was opened in June, 1835, with a European Headmaster, A. Singer, at a monthly salary of Rs.150. \textsuperscript{49} The School made a slow but steady progress. Indeed, it would not be wrong to state that the Gauhati School may rightly be regarded as the harbinger of modern educational advancement in Assam.

However, until the Wood's Despatch of 1854, the British Government was not disposed to undertake any responsibility for the education of the women on account of the social and religious prejudices of the age. It was the tenure of Lord Dalhousie as the Governor-General of India (1848-56) which saw the first signs of the Government showing genuine interest towards women's education. Sir Charles Woods Educational Despatch in 1854 saw the first shift in Government policy when it proclaimed the importance of female education. Dalhousie, in fact decided to lend his 'frank and cordial support to the education of Indian women' by stating that no single change was to produce more important and beneficial result than the introduction of education for female children. The Wood's Despatch of 1854 proclaimed:

\textsuperscript{47} M Barkataki, \textit{op.cit}, pp. 36-37.

\textsuperscript{48} The government appointed a general Committee of Public Instruction on 31 July, 1823 which was entrusted with the duties of ascertaining the state of education in the Bengal Presidency. The control of education remained under the Political Department till 27 August, 1830,- guide to the Records in the National Archives of India, Part II, Home Department, Ministry of Home Affairs, 1748-1957. P.P. 104-105. (Cited from M.S. Barkatoki, \textit{op.cit}, p.36.

"The importance of female education in India cannot be overrated; and we have observed with pleasure the evidence which is now afforded of an increased desire on the part of many of the natives to give a good education to their daughters. By this means a far greater proportional impulse is imparted to the educational and moral tone of the people than by the education of men."  

The moral and financial support of the colonial Government was of utmost necessity for the spread of female education, but the Despatch of 1854 did not guarantee schools for girls. Nevertheless, nothing much tangible could have been gained as the enthusiasm it generated quickly waned away owing to the uprising of 1857. Further, unlike education for males, female education did not enhance the prestige and financial standing of the family as women's education was not associated with remunerative occupation. Thus little progress had been made with female education in India. After the Revolt of 1857, the colonial Government was seen to be less keenly disposed towards promoting female education as serious political tumults began to gain attention.

The provision of grant-in-aid as formulated by the Despatch of 1854 was applicable to both boy's and girl's schools. In Assam, despite recommendations for financial assistance on a liberal basis especially for girls education, funds were not created by the provincial Government. The conservativeness of the society as well as the absence of initiative on the part of the government made way for the slow progress of girls' education.

In 1874, Assam was separated from Bengal and made a Chief Commissioners province with the districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong,
Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Cachar, Naga Hills, Goalpara and Sylhet as its constituents. A separate Directorate of Public Instruction was also created.

The government of Assam, in its efforts to bring more girls to schools announced the system of giving rewards to teachers or gurus. With the revision of the grant-in-aid rules in 1873, "Gurus were also encouraged to bring more girls to schools by offering rewards in cash. The reward ranged from Rs.5 to Rs.25, and was given to five to ten Gurus who could bring the largest number of girls to their schools. They had also to show that the girls in their schools could read with fluency from a vernacular text book, and could write from dictation. Besides this they should be able to do sums of multiplication also."

It was not until 1860-61, the first elementary school for girls was started in Upper Assam by Utsabananda Goswami, Deputy Inspector of Schools, Sibsagar. This was followed by a few more schools in the next two years at Sibsagar, Nowgong and Guwahati (Dharapur). Within fifteen years, forty-four schools were opened throughout the province with an enrollment of 552. "However, the Government efforts remained half-hearted and the result was far from satisfactory. Even after a lapse of twenty years the total enrollment in girls' schools did not reach 900, largely due to the Government’s reluctance to spend more than a token amount. (Annexure-A, for Government investment in Assam). While commenting on the condition of female education the Hunter Commission in 1882 reported, ‘The proportion of girls attending schools to the entire female population is, for all India, 1 in 843. In Madras it is 1 in 403, but in Assam it is as

53 Bina, Lahkar, op.cit, p.186
54 H.K. Barpujani, ed., op.cit., Guwahati, 2007, p.201
Even though the girls' schools were very few and the total number of girls receiving education was minuscule in relation to the total population, yet a shift in attitude towards female education was discernable.

The Indian Education Commission of 1882 or the Hunter Commission dwelt on the problems of female education and made elaborate recommendation for removing the same. The Commission found that the demand for girls education was not encouraging as the girls were married off very-early. The withdrawal of girls from schools also had its affect on the supply of female teachers. The presence of male teachers in the schools acted as a deterrent for many parents from sending their daughters to schools. Further, the whole education system was framed to suit the interests of the boys.

In line with the recommendations of the Hunter Commission of 1882, female education was provided with liberal funds. Local, Municipal and Provincial funds were to be earmarked in equitable proportion for support of boys as well as girls schools. Within ten years, the number of school rose to 138 with 1,808 girls as against only 71 with 1,209 girls in 1881-82 (Annexure B&C). Although Assam was separated from Bengal in 1874, it followed the same system of education that was being followed in Bengal. Like Bengal, separate courses were prescribed for girls in Assam. According to the recommendations, the payment of fees in girls school was made optional.

But as most of the schools were located in the urban areas, it became practically difficult for parents in rural areas to send their daughters to school. Further, upper class families seldom sent their daughters to schools especially

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57 *Ibid*, p. 19
after they attained puberty. Hence, the Commission of 1882 recommended the 
Zenana method of teaching.58 There was also a provision to provide aid to the 
Zenana schools so as to help them in their activities.

Subject to the conditions as laid down by the Education Department, the local bodies could appoint teachers. Though male teachers could not be entirely avoided, it was suggested that the trend should be towards gradual replacement by female teachers. Non-official cooperation from ladies and gentleman should be secured in the management of girls schools.59

The revised grant-in-aid rules of 1882 had helped in the progress of women’s education in Assam. Provision was made to reward those Gurus whose pupils were successful in the Primary Scholarship Examination, those who could show the largest number of girls in their schools, and who could read, write and do simple arithmetic. 60 The Education Commission of 1882 did not encourage mixed schools, other than infants’ schools (schools for children under seven years of age). 61 But in Assam it was found that mixed schools were doing well and the number of girls in mixed schools were gradually increasing. It was because the Assamese society was predominantly semi-tribal one62 and was therefore comparatively free. The process of Hinduisation or Aryanisation of the Mongoloid people was also a gradual one. 63 On the other hand, Hindu culture and religion underwent significant changes under the impact of the Indo-

58 Syed Nurullah, J.P. Naik, op.cit. p.395
60 ASA, G.R.P.I., Assam, 1883-84, Shillong, 1885, pp 61-63.
63 Ibid
Mongoloid influence in Assam. J.R. Cunningham, D.P.I, Assam, in an official correspondence with the Second Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, stated that “The greater part of the girls at present in schools are reading in mixed schools. This is not unsatisfactory so far as education goes. But in the village Pathsalas girls are prevented by social usage from reading in mixed schools after they have reached a certain age.” The following table may be referred here:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Scholars</th>
<th>No of Girls in Boys Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1874-75</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>852</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879-80</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1,072</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884-85</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>2,427</td>
<td>989</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The girls’ admitted to boys’ schools had to follow the boys’ curriculum, though later on some modifications were made to practically equip the girls in the smooth conduct of their day to day life. For instance, weaving, needle-work etc. were taught to the girls. But as most of the girls did not go beyond the primary stage due to the parent’s reluctance to send their daughters after puberty, the differentiation in course of studies hardly mattered.

In 1885, the system of payment by result was introduced in the province for the boys and mixed schools only. The girls’ schools were to be supported by the fixed monthly system. The Gurus or the teachers were given rewards in form of payment on the basis of results. The Gurus would further be given double the

64 Ibid
65 Extract from proceeding No. 1-2, Education A, Assam Secretariat, September, 1913.
66 Bina, Lahkar, Development in Women Education, Guwahati, N.Delhi, 1987, p. 22
reward for girls than for boys. Moreover in 1885-86, a scheme was introduced by which each teacher in Lower Primary (L.P.) School was given additional four annas monthly for each girl who could read a little. "This plan introduced in 1885-86, had the effect of doubling the number of girls in boys’ schools and by 1904 there were twenty one Hindu girls and, one Muslim girl studying in boys’ Secondary School.”

Infact, after the Report of the Indian Education Commission, the provincial government came forward with somewhat larger grants for girls schools’ managed by religious or private bodies. In 1889, there were 187 girls schools with 3,144 pupils. Two of the schools were Middle Vernacular (M.V.) schools. It is clear that most of the schools were Primary Schools and that the local and municipal boards managed them. The Report of the Government of India for the Progress of Education in India during 1887-88 to 1891-92 stated, -

".......................... In Assam the education of girls has not advanced beyond the primary stage, the return show two middle vernacular schools, but they have no pupils in the middle stage. All the rest of the schools are classed as lower primary, but a few of them contain one or two pupils who belong to higher classes. Taking all the schools together, and including girls in boy’s schools, which form more than half the total number of girls under instruction, there are only 5 in the middle and 30 in upper primary stage out of a total of 5,100 in primary and secondary schools."

Steps were being initiated by the Government of Assam to promote female education, but they were inadequate and fell much short of the actual

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68 Bina Lahkar, op. cit., p.22
69 ASA, G.R.P.I. Assam, 1885-86, Shillong, 1887, p.34
71 ASA, G.R.P.I. Assam, 1889-90, Shillong, 1891, p. 28.
72 Ibid
73 ASA, G.R.P.I. Assam, 1888, also Shiela Bora, op.cit. p. 20.
requirement. To cite at least one instance, out of the grant of one lakh rupees by the Government of India for the improvement of Primary Education, only Rs. 480 was spent on the education of girls. The recommendation of the D.P.I. to appoint an Inspectress of Schools was turned down by the government on the ground that women would not be able to undertake tours. The inspection was carried by male Inspectors who were unable to comprehend fully the difficulties in women education.

During 1889-90, there was a fall in the number of schools and in the number of scholars in girls' schools as compared to the year 1884-85. In 1884-85, there were 154 girls' schools. But in 1889-90, the number came down to 142. It was because many girls schools which had been established in 1884-85, were abolished by 1889-90 for want of pupils. Infact, the General Report for Public Instruction in Assam, 1889-90, describes the closure of certain aided schools in Darrang and Sibsagar in 1888, due to the general apathy of the people towards education of girls. Reacting to the closure of some schools in Nowgong, the Chief Commissioner remarked that the Chairman of the local boards ought to be careful in future so that well attended girls schools were not closed down.

The closing down of schools acted as a damper on the progress of female education. Apart from the closing down of schools, many girls left schools without completing their course due to several factors, social and economic. The dismal situation was clearly reflected in the Government Report which stated that, of the total female population at the end of the nineteenth century which

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74 ASA, Extract from Proceeding No. 9-18, Education A, June 1904.
75 Bina Lahkar, op.cit, p.24.
76 ASA, Proceedings of the Chief Commissioners of Assam in the General Department NO.7107G, August 27, 1890.
stood at more than 26 lakhs, only 4,034 received education, the average number of educated women for every thousand of the school going age being 2.20. 77

In the Quinquennial Review of the progress of Education in India, 1899-1904, it was officially recorded that the relatively backward state of the girls worked as the most conspicuous blot on the educational system of India. Lord Curzon, though agreeing with the view, was more concerned with the appointment of teachers, organization of model schools and funds. 78 These measures were necessary, but certainly not enough to wipe out the 'blot' on India.'s educational system.

On 16 October, 1905, the districts of East Bengal were included in the province of Assam and constituted the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. The education of girls in the districts of East Bengal was more advanced than in Assam, but the problem of wastage i.e. girls leaving schools before the completion of the course, was present even in Eastern Bengal as wastage was a universal problem throughout India, though in different degrees. The extent of wastage due to dropping out of girls from class A to III during a given period is indicated in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1931-32</td>
<td>13,408</td>
<td>4,900</td>
<td>4,153</td>
<td>2,981</td>
<td>2,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936-37</td>
<td>16,242</td>
<td>7,075</td>
<td>5,412</td>
<td>4,135</td>
<td>3,482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>2,834</td>
<td>2,175</td>
<td>1,259</td>
<td>1,154</td>
<td>1,316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


77 ASA, GRPEA, 1892-93 to 1896-97, Calcutta, 1897, p.6.
78 Renu Debi, op. cit, p. 154
79 Renu Debi, op. cit, p. 14
The amalgamation of Assam with Eastern Bengal in 1905 did not prove to be fruitful for Assam as far as the progress of education was concerned. In Eastern Bengal, the schools were under private management, whereas the majority of them in Assam were under local boards. In matters of payment of grant-in-aid also, differences aroused which caused problems in evolving common administrative rules and regulations. Further, the Department of Education was situated in Dacca by virtue of which Eastern Bengal secured more attention than Assam.

During 1904-05, there was a decrease both in the number of scholars and schools. The decrease was found to be more prominent in the case of girls, both in boys' schools as well as in girls' schools. Schools were closed due to lack of students or were maintained with only a few pupils. The government too was unable to undertake any special programme for the upliftment of women's education due to financial stringency. The following table gives a vivid testimony to the referred point.

**NUMBER OF GIRLS' SCHOOL AND ENROLLMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Schools</th>
<th>No. of Scholars in girls' schools</th>
<th>No. girls in boys school</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1899-1900</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>4,034</td>
<td>4,823</td>
<td>8,857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904-05</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>2,841</td>
<td>3,586</td>
<td>6,427</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


On 11 March, 1904, Lord Curzon announced his educational policy in the form of a Government Resolution. It suggested that the Government should spend more on women's education by establishing more training schools for
women teachers and model schools for girls. The effective supervision of these schools by Inspectors was also stressed.

As female education had no economic functions, its scope was limited to one of social development. In fact, in a resolution on Government policy in 1913, the government recognized that the existing customs and ideas opposed to the education of girls would require different handling in different parts of India. The Governor-General in Council laid down the following principles for general consideration:

a. The education of girls should be practical with reference to the position which they will fill in social life.

b. It should not seek to imitate the education suitable for boys nor should it be dominated by examinations.

c. Special attention should be paid to hygiene and the surroundings of school life.

d. The services of women should be more freely enlisted for instruction and inspection.

e. Continuity in inspection and control should be specially aimed at.  

The Government of India further appointed a Committee to investigate and report on the state of female education. The Committee found that the Girls Primary Schools were usually small in size and classes were conducted by a single teacher. The average nominal strength of these schools was eighteen, and it was believed that the actual attendance was even smaller for the returns were not always reliable as little children who do not read in the schools were sometimes produced for the purpose of inspection. The salary of the teacher was also not

79 ASA, Government of India's Resolution on Indian Educational Policy, 1913, Calcutta, 1913, para 17, also Renu Debi, op. cit, p. 155.
adequate to maintain himself and his family. As a consequence teaching did not receive the attention it required.80

The Government after considering the report came to the conclusion that slow progress in women's education was due to the absence of effective inspection of girls' schools. Consequently, in 1908-09, the new post of Inspectress of Schools in the Indian Education Service was created and on November 17, 1908, in Assam, the first Inspectress joined her post.81 She was to be assisted by two Assistant Inspectress of Schools. In 1910-11, another post of Inspectress was sanctioned, increasing the strength of Inspectress to two. One of the Inspectress was placed in-charge of Dacca, Rajshahi, Assam Valley divisions, and Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The other was in charge of Chittagong and Surma Valley divisions.82 This increase in the inspecting agency for girls education was due to the increase in the number of girl's schools. In 1909-10, there were 95,726 girls in different schools in the province.83 However, in 1910, the Inspectress reported that the increase was confined to the Primary Schools only as very few went beyond that stage. She suggested that some means should be devised to keep girls at schools atleast upto a certain age.84 A proposal was also moved by Miss Garret, the Inspectress for the attachment of hostels for girls to Mistresses' quarters adjacent to girls' schools and sought opinions from the concerned persons. Some subscribed to the proposal but there were many who were doubtful about its success. For instance, Golap Chandra Barua, Deputy Inspector of Schools, Sibsagar, commented on the proposal by stating on 2 March, 1911, that

80 ASA, Extract from proceedings of the meetings of the Female Education Committee, Eastern Bengal and Assam, Dacca, 1908.
81 ASA, GRPI, Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1908-09, Shillong, 1910, p.41
82 ASA, QRPEEB, 1906-07 to 1911-12, Shillong, 1913, p.20.
83 ASA, GRPI, Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1909-10, Shillong, 1911, p.4.
84 ASA, Resolution on Public Instruction for the year 1909-10, Shillong, 1911, No. 1416E.
"The System of early marriage prevalent amongst the Hindus stands in the way of keeping girls at schools to a later age than they now remain. A girl is generally to be wedded at an age before she obtains puberty. No sooner she is wedded her parent or guardians can no way send her even to school, not to speak of keeping her in a hostel, without the consent of her husband which can hardly be obtained. Practically the parents are mere custodians of the girl till she attains maturity. Although in Assam proper the above system is strictly adhered to by the Brahmans alone and the people of other classes dispose of their daughters at an advanced age, they dislike the idea of keeping their daughters at school as soon as they attain the age of 11 or 12 years. It seems, therefore, that the time has not yet come for attaching hostels to girls' schools in Assam proper at least."\textsuperscript{85} On the other hand, Deveswar Barua, Deputy Inspector of Schools, Jorhat, was of the opinion that a covered cart or an omnibus for the conveyance of girls form their respective houses may prove more effective in the direction of continuance of their studies in school.\textsuperscript{86}

It is to be noted that the large number of girls' schools and scholars in 1909-10, as had just been referred to was however due to the inclusion of the districts of East Bengal in Assam, because, when Assam was again separated from the districts of East Bengal and made a Chief Commissioners province through a Royal Proclamation at the Delhi Durbar on December 12, 1911,\textsuperscript{87} the number of schools and scholars came down. The following Table may be referred to in this context.

\textsuperscript{85} ASA, Extract of Proceedings of Edu. Dept. Eastern Bengal and Assam, Sibsagar, 1911,m No.1105.
\textsuperscript{86} ASA, Extract of Proceedings of Edu. Dept- Jorhat, 1911, No. 856G
\textsuperscript{87} H.K, Barpujari, ed, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 264
Number of Girls’ schools and Enrolment therein

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>SCHOOLS</th>
<th>GIRLS IN GIRLS SCHOOLS</th>
<th>GIRLS IN BOYS SCHOOL</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1909-10</td>
<td>4,231</td>
<td>92,404</td>
<td>29,769</td>
<td>1,22,173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914-15</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>13,026</td>
<td>13,687</td>
<td>26,713</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Lakhar, *Development in Women Education*, Guwahati, N.Delhi, 1987, p.3

When Assam again became a Chief Commissioners province, M.C. Samerville was appointed as the first Inspectress of Schools in Assam. Sarajini Das, of the Provincial Education Service in Bengal was appointed the Assistant Inspectress of Schools in 1913.88

The Inspectress was placed in charge of Women’s education and she was to advise the Department in all matters relating to the education of female. She could inspect all girls’ schools including *Zenana* classes for women. The Assistant Inspectress was entitled to inspect Middle and Primary girls’ Schools including *Zenana* classes. However, she could not visit Girls’ High Schools except under special directions. She was expected to give necessary instruction to the staff in teaching methods for the prescribed subjects, especially needle-work, handiwork and domestic science.89

But despite the growing attention given by the government towards women’s education, Assam recorded a decrease in enrolment, especially during 1917-18. On comparison to the total enrolment of girls in 1916-17 which stood at 27,665, the total number in 1917-18 was 26,857.90 The poverty of the parents was one of the main reasons for the slow growth of women’s education. As Assam

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88 ASA, Notification No. 5697F, Edu. A, Nov. 1913
89 ASA *QRPEEA* for 1906-07 to 1911-12, Vol.12, Shillong, 1913, p.20
90 *G.R.P.I.*, Assam, 1917-18, Shillong, 1919, p.16
had a predominant agricultural society, the men who were mostly agriculturists wanted wives who were experts in domestic work. Further, from the economic point of view, the education of girls did not prove to be beneficial. Moreover, adverse economic effects of the First World War aided by other natural calamities like earthquakes, floods, disease etc brought untold suffering on the people of the province. Infact, the earthquake of 1918 destroyed many school buildings.

The Government also had to undergo serious economic hardships. The call came for retrenchment of expenditure wherever possible. And thus, on grounds of economy, the post of the Inspectress was abolished in 1924. Therefore the whole burden of exercising control over women's education fell on the Assistant Inspectress with obvious results. This lack of effective supervision further led to the deterioration of the progress of women's education. The deterioration caused the Director of Public Instruction of Assam to comment, "it is a disgrace to Assam that its government for thirteen years have not considered the education of women of sufficient importance to warrant the appointment of more than one lady to deal with the girl students and pupils of the colleges and schools of the province."

It has already been mentioned that in line with the recommendations of the Hunter Commission of 1882, female education was provided with liberal funds in Assam. But the scheme to promote higher education for girls in the province by giving them scholarship to read in the Bethune School at Calcutta did not bear much fruit, and till 1888 only one girl, having passed the Upper Primary

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91 ibid, pp.16-17
92 ASA, G.R.P.I., Assam, 1918-19, Shillong,1920 p.1
93 Renu Debi, op. cit, p.184
94 ASA, QRPEA, 1932-37, Shillong 1938, p.19
Scholarship at Nowgong, was reading in the Bethune school with a Scholarship of rupees twenty per month. Though four aided Middle Vernacular Schools had been established by 1886-87 for diffusion of higher education to girls, the teachers of these schools were inferior in quality and insufficient in quantity. Mr. W. Booth, Director of Public Instruction, Assam, in his report on female education in the province stated that, “The great majority of the Indian girls that receive education in institutions attend lower Primary Schools only, few are reading in upper Primary Schools, a smaller number in Middle Schools, and absolutely none in high Schools.

Till 1912, there were no High Schools for girls in the whole of Assam, whereas there were three such schools in the districts of East Bengal. Though some girls did attend High Schools meant for boys, it was only in January 1913, that the first High School for Girls was opened at Silchar by the Welsh Mission. By 1915, three Girls’ High Schools came to be established with an enrolment of 680 students. In 1936-37, there were thirteen Girls’ High Schools, with an enrolment of 3,664 students. Of the Girls’ High Schools only two of them were either aided schools or unaided private schools. Private enterprise also contributed to the expansion of female education at the High School level. At Golaghat, about rupees three thousand was given by J. Barua to raise the Town Girls’ Middle School to the status of a High School to be named as Rai Bahadur Damudhar Barua Girls’ School. Further, Habibganj Government aided Girls’

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95 Sheila Bora, *op. cit.*, p.20
97 *ASA, GRPIA, 1900-1901, Shillong, 1902*, p.14
98 B. Lahkar, *op. cit.*, p.31
99 Renu Devi, *op. cit.*, p.158
High School received a donation of rupees eight thousand from Babu Gopal Chandra Das for naming the School after his wife.102

Meanwhile, the Government of India in 1919 spelt out its education policy in the form of a resolution. It noted that more financial assistance was required for girls’ education than that of boys. Girls’ education should be free with liberal scholarship, studentships and grant-in-aids and that the greater cost of secondary education should be recognized. Further, the Calcutta University Commission, though primarily constituted to inquire into the conditions and prospects of Calcutta University, did make certain recommendations regarding women’s education.103 It suggested the opening of Purdah Schools to encourage girls of conservative families to receive education.

As a result, there was a steady expansion in the education of women. In Sylhet, the experimental centre of Zenana instruction was started in 1912-13104 with five pupils. The Sylhet experiment turned out to be promising because in the following year the number rose to twenty eight and further increased to seventy in 1916-17.105 The success in Sylhet was largely due to the cooperation and guidance of Miss Williams of the Welsh Mission, who had intimate acquaintance with Zenana work for twenty years. The classes continued for a long time until 1933-34, when it was closed down.106 The impact of modernization and nationalism had a liberating effect on women as it brought about considerable changes in the social norms and conventions set for women. Women no longer remained confined within the periphery of the home alone, but had increasingly

103 Bina Lahkar, op. cit., p. 7.
105 ASA, QRPEA, 1912-13 to 1916-17, Shillong 1917, p.88
106 ASA, GRPIA, 1933-34, Shillong, 1935, p.27.
stepped into the public domain and took part in the nationalist struggle for freedom. The earlier held values of seclusion and segregation were turned around and redefined. Concurrently, the earlier necessity for *zenana* instruction had also progressively diminished.

The Government in its endeavor to promote female education reserved a number of scholarships for girls. The girls were also allowed to compete with boys for open scholarships. “Provision was also made for the training of junior and senior vernacular teachers at Silchar and Nowgong. The teachers deputed by the government were given stipends. But for High School teachers there was no provision for B.T. (Bachelor of Teaching) or L.T. (Language Teaching) and so women teachers of High Schools were deputed to Calcutta for B.T. and L.T.”

In 1929, Saroj Bala Hazarika and Lila Das Gupta were sent to Diocesan College in Calcutta for training in B.T. The following Table may be cited in this context:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of teachers trained at Nowgong and Silchar in :-</th>
<th>1937-42</th>
<th>1943-44</th>
<th>1945-46</th>
<th>1947</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>216</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of female teachers trained at Wardha.</th>
<th>1946</th>
<th>1947</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of teachers sent to Delhi for training in Domestic Sciences:-</th>
<th>1945</th>
<th>1946</th>
<th>1947</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It may be mentioned here that there was no teacher training school for women in Assam till 1874-75, when a training class for girls was opened in

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108 B. Lahkar, *op.cit.* p.16
Gradually, with the advancement of girls' education, training schools for women were opened by the Christian missionaries at Tura and Nowgong. As these schools were aided and inspected by the Inspector of schools, they were called departmental schools.

For the education of European and Anglo-Indian girls there were three schools – the Pinemount School and Loreto Convent at Shillong and St. Agnes Convent at Halflong. These schools also accepted Indian girls as boarders and day pupils.

In 1926, the Primary Education Act was passed in Assam. This was the first attempt to make Primary education compulsory. However, due to financial difficulties, the Act could not be enforced. In the Memorandum on the Growth of Education prepared by the Government of Assam for submission to The Statutory Commission in 1928, it was pointed out “that for every girl educated 15 are borne into illiteracy, that only one girl in one hundred goes to school, and that 70 percent of those who go, never get beyond the alphabet.” It was only after the country’s independence, that compulsory primary education came into effect.

With the importance of women's education being increasingly recognized, the Hartog Committee on Education, 1929, commented that the importance of girls' education needed no new emphasis. It suggested among others, that a full-time woman officer with caliber and experience be appointed to prepare a blue-
print of girls' education. Women should be represented in all Local Bodies and the strength of the inspecting agency for girls should be increased. For overcoming the shortage of women teachers, girls from rural areas should be trained for appointment as Primary School teachers.\textsuperscript{114}

The Freedom Movement in India generated a general awakening among women during the early twentieth century. Mahatma Gandhi undoubtedly played a pivotal role in this aspect. He believed that, "woman as the companion of man is gifted with equal mental capacities, ... and she has the same right of liberty and freedom as he."\textsuperscript{115} Gandhi was a staunch supporter of compulsory education for girls, but he too treated girls as a distinct biological category as he felt that education should fulfill the special needs for girls in order to prepare them to be mothers and homemakers. He, however, did support a larger role for women in public life.

The years 1930-31, were disheartening, especially with regard to the progress of education, because it saw a definite check in most directions and retrogression in some. The General Report of Public Instruction in Assam, 1930-31 (Shillong, 1932), stated that the Civil Disobedience Movement which was in full swing had a disastrous effect not only on the discipline of the students but also on their enrolment. The condition was further aggravated by the earthquake of July 1830, followed by repeated floods and the consequent destruction of crops, resulting in widespread distress and poverty. The necessity forced on the Government to render aid by grants, loans and remission, thereby putting a heavy strain on the finances of the State. New schemes and schemes already approved

\textsuperscript{114} Syed Nurullah and J.P. Naik, \textit{A History of Education in India}, Bombay, 1951, 715.

\textsuperscript{115} Sheila Bora, \textit{op. cit}, p. 24.
had to be cancelled or postponed and the call came for retrenchment of expenditure wherever possible.

In the midst of this prevailing gloom especially in the context of education, the newly constituted, The Women's Education Committee of the Central Advisory Board of Education viewed the question of girl's education as well as the curriculum of girls' schools. It recommended that there was no necessity for separate curricula for boys and girls at the Primary and Secondary level, though in Secondary schools some special subjects like music, needle-work, painting, domestic-science etc. were to be included. As such, the curriculum was revised in Assam as well.

The expenditure on girls' education increased steadily during the period between 1989-90 and 1936-37. The sources for expenditure on primary education were grants by provincial government, grants by local bodies, and 'other sources' like donation etc. However, it goes without saying that provincial grants constituted the biggest source for expenditure on different types of schools. The following Table shows the total amount spent on different types of schools devoted to girls' education in Assam.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lower Primary</th>
<th>M.V.</th>
<th>M.E.</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1889-90</td>
<td>9,580</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919-20</td>
<td>72,532</td>
<td>25,276</td>
<td>32,040</td>
<td>14,518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936-37</td>
<td>141,559</td>
<td>27,087</td>
<td>91,958</td>
<td>131,875</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[G.R.P.I. \text{ Assam for 1889-90, p. 28; G.R.P.I. Assam for 1919-20, General Table iv; QRPEA for 1932-37, Appendix G.}\]

\[116 \text{ Y.B.Mathur, op.cit, p.80}\]
\[117 \text{ Ibid, p.92}\]
The increasingly larger expenditure on girl's education over the years, however, did not lead to quantitative expansion. In 1936-37, out of an estimated total population of 8,622,251, the female population numbered 4,085,045; out of the latter 40,939 or 2.2 percent were literate.¹¹⁸ This meant that in spite of all the social upsurge and consciousness of the parents for female education, about 98 percent of the female population remained illiterate. It was indeed a very depressing state of affairs.

Further, the higher education of girls in Assam remained practically stagnant. There was no exclusive college for girls until 1936, when a women's college, The Lady Keane College was set up in Shillong. By the end of 1940-41, three more Girls' colleges, namely, the St. Mary's College at Shillong, the Handique Girls' College at Gauhati, and the Sylhet Women's College was established. Apart from these exclusive women colleges, there were many young women pursuing both general education etc. and professional education in institutes within and outside the province. It is interesting to note here that in 1929, when there was no women's college in the province, a girl student for the first time was admitted to Cotton College at Gauhati.¹¹⁹ In course of time the enrolment of girls in both Murarichand College at Sylhet and Cotton College at Gauhati increased. In Cotton College, enrolment of girls rose from six in session 1931-32 to eighteen in 1932-33.¹²⁰ In fact, the closing years of the quinquennium 1927-32 saw only twelve female students studying in the mens' colleges of the province while in the year 1936-37, the number rose to hundred. In addition there

¹¹⁸ Renu Debi, op. cit. p.223
¹²⁰ ASA, G.R.P.I.A., 1932-33, Shillong, 1933, p.9
were thirty four female students in the Lady Keane College for women and three in the I.A. classes of St. Agnes High School, Haflong. This indicates a genuine demand for higher education of the female population. In Murarichand College, there were ten women students of whom one was a Muhammedan during 1932-33. It is indeed noteworthy to mention here that one of the women graduates of Murarichand College during 1932 secured high second class honours in Philosophy and won two gold medals under Calcutta University, since Assam did not have a University and the colleges of the province were affiliated to the Calcutta University. Further, an Assam Valley girl headed the list of successful candidates for the I.Sc. examination and took admission to study medicine. She was Rajaniprova Dutta of Bajali in Lower Assam, the first lady M.B.B.S. from Assam.

The General Report on Public Instruction in Assam, 1932-33 (Shillong, 1934, Chapter VIII p.27), made the following observation:

"A great change has come into the outlook on education for girls and women throughout the province. Conservatism, tradition and prejudice are yielding ground everywhere in ever-increasing rapidity. The only brake in progress is lack of funds. In institutions of the province, girls are crowding into existing schools -- both girls' schools and boys' schools---schemes of expansion are under consideration by members of the public and local bodies in various parts of the province, but no advance is possible in the present scarcity of money.................the training of mistresses by

122 Ibid. p.11
123 Ibid, p.9
124 J.R. Cunningham, Report on Assam University Enquiry, Shillong, 1936, Chapter VIII.
Christian Missions in the province has been acknowledged with even greater appreciation. In Gauhati towards the end of the session, under pressure from the Principal and Governing body, the American Baptist Mission, despite its own financial difficulties, decided to convert the Lewis Memorial Hostel for men into a hostel for women students: and in the current session, the Cotton College, not only has a larger enrolment of women amongst its students but many of them reside in the Lewis Hostel under the care of Miss. Tuttle, B.A."

It would be worthwhile to mention here that when the first female student was admitted to Cotton College, many of the orthodox public vigorously protested, some members of the staff represented that it would be most embarrassing if not impossible for them to lecture to women and in the outcome the lady was transferred to a Calcutta College with the solace of a stipend. In striking contrast to the situation, it was found out that in the session 1931-32, apart from the increasing enrolment of women students in Cotton College, there was also an item for the female students in the annual sports of the College. Further, in the Murarichand College, women students almost as a matter of right decorated the stage for Union meetings and took part in its entertainments.

**Women enrolment at Cotton College and Murarichand College during 1936**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton College</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murarichand College</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

J.R. Cunningham, *Report on Assam University Enquiry*, Shillong, 1936, p. 46

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126 *ibid,*
The period between 1937-1942, was one of the most critical periods in the history of Assam and of India. The schools and colleges of a country cannot be treated as isolated units cut off from the family and social organisations or from the political, intellectual and cultural environment of its people. The inauguration of the new interim constitution in 1937 was followed by vigorous activities among the political parties with the result that one Ministry was succeeded by another. This happened in Assam and when the elements of certainty, security and continuity were lacking, it had adverse affect on the educational progress of the province, be it men or women. Further, the spread of the Second World War to the very doors of Assam, coupled with the floods of 1938-39, made it unfavorable for the launching of new schemes. Even the very existence of the Department of Education was threatened by military exigencies. Many schools and colleges of the province were requisitioned for military use.127

But in spite of the distressing situation, students from Assam showed brilliant results in the Calcutta University examinations. A girl student from Sylhet Government Girls’ High School stood first in the Matriculation Examination in 1940.128 This was the first time in the history of Calcutta University, that a girl secured the first place in the Matriculation examination. Moreover in 1941, the first three places in the University were secured by three boys of three different Assam High Schools. The one from Nalbari Government Aided High School being the first rank holder.129

128 Ibid., p.20
129 Ibid., p.2
The post of the Inspectress of Schools which was in abeyance since 1924 was revived in 1940. Miss S. Sen was appointed to this post, and Miss B. Thomas, an Assamese lady with British University Training was appointed Assistant Inspectress. In addition, two posts of Physical Inspectress were created. Physical exercise became a compulsory subject in the Girls’ High and Middle Schools for which time was allotted in the weekly time-table of the School.

For extra-curricular activities, recreation clubs were started in every High and Middle School under the orders of the Director of Public Instruction, Assam. Sewing, knitting, leather-work, painting, music, dancing, recitation, cooking and dramas formed some of the subjects of the girls activities in the Recreation Clubs. Further, 3,106 girls joined the Junior Red Cross groups in school; The girls of the Syhet Government Girls’ High School raised Rs. 1,000 for a swimming pool and the girls began to learn swimming too. The following Table - A shows the number of Institutions for Girls’ in Assam (recognized and unrecognized) during the quinquennia 1937-42. Table B gives the number of girl scholars in all institutions (recognized and unrecognized) in five quinquennia.

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130 ASA, QRPEA during 1937-42, Chapter XII, Shillong, 1943, p. 90.
131 Ibid
132 Ibid. p.90
133 Ibid. p.91
134 Ibid.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Arts College</th>
<th>High Schools</th>
<th>Middle Schools</th>
<th>Primary Schools</th>
<th>Special Schools</th>
<th>Total Recognised</th>
<th>Unrecognised Institutions</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937-38</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939-40</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>632</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940-41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>793</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941-42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1,158</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1,361</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>1,506</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Assam, 1937-42, Shillong, 1943 p. 91*
### TABLE - B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Art College</th>
<th>High College</th>
<th>Middle Schools</th>
<th>Primary Schools</th>
<th>Special Schools</th>
<th>Total Recognised Institutions</th>
<th>Unrecognised Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For Male</td>
<td>For Female</td>
<td>For Male</td>
<td>For Female</td>
<td>For Male</td>
<td>For Female</td>
<td>For Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>576</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>2,456</td>
<td>13,021</td>
<td>10,163</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926-27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,012</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>2,764</td>
<td>16,731</td>
<td>13,294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931-32</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1,860</td>
<td>1,187</td>
<td>5,051</td>
<td>27,230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936-37</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3,794</td>
<td>2,409</td>
<td>6,876</td>
<td>39,743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941-42</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>5,811</td>
<td>3,987</td>
<td>8,543</td>
<td>57,653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase during the Quinquennial</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>2,017</td>
<td>1,578</td>
<td>1,667</td>
<td>17,910</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Assam, 1937-42, Shillong 1943, p.92*
The All India Women Conference, Assam branch, helped the cause of girls' education in the province in various ways. It built a Hostel at a cost of Rs. 1,000 for the college girls at Gauhati and arranged a series of lectures for the education of adult women. The Conference also gave monetary help to a graduate girl of Shillong to enroll in the Lady Irwin Domestic Science College, Delhi. It was hoped that the girl after the completion of the course would start such a college in the province.

In order to see that girls' education received proper attention of the Government and of the public, the Assam Women's Education League was formed in May, 1940 with Lady Reid as its President. The objects of the League were:

(i) To invite all women in the province who were interested in education to join the League.

(ii) To further the cause of Women's education in the province— (a) by pressing for reforms in the legislature, (b) by helping to create an informed public opinion. Its membership was open to all women on payment of 8 annas annually. In the first year itself, 223 women joined the League. The Director of Public Instruction welcomed the League as he believed

(iii) that it had immense potentiality in furthering the cause of women's education in Assam.

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136 Ibid, p.97
137 Ibid, p. 98.
The period between 1942-47 was one of deepening horrors and of unsettled conditions all over the country. Hence, orderly progress of any nation-building activity, especially of education was not possible. The condition in Assam was by far the worst. The war brought the province into prominence as the strategic frontier of India, making it one of the busiest war zones in the Eastern Front. Defence activities almost totally eclipsed and suppressed all other national and cultural activities. Evacuation of population either under military exigencies or on account of people’s panic, requisition of school and college buildings for military purposes, scarcity of books and other educational accessories, the great political upheaval of August, 1942, and the deep impression of all these upon the students and teachers alike had greatly disorganized the educational structure of this already educationally backward province of India. Distracting war conditions disturbed the students academic spirit and the national struggle filled them with excitement.

But notwithstanding the grave difficulties, it was heartening to note that education survived. Progress was made though little when judged from the standpoint of normal and prosperous times. Apart from government effort, the various mission agencies continued their activities in the field of education. For instance, the American Baptist Mission continued to maintain the Chatribari Girls’ M.E. School at Gauhati, the Girls’ M.E.School with Women’s High School at Jorhat and the Mission Girls’ High School at Golaghat. The Roman Catholic Mission maintained the St. Mary’s convent, a M.E. School for Indian girls with kindergarten classes at Gauhati. The Inspectress of Schools, Assam, remarked

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138 ASA, QRPEA, 1942-47, Chapter I, Shillong, 1951, p. 43.
139 *ibid*
that despite the general depression, things took a brighter turn from 1945. Inspite of the war, parents began to send their children to school. In Assam Valley, the number of girls’ schools rose from 679 to 789.\footnote{ASA, Q.R.P.E.A. 1942-47, Shillong, 1951, p.45} However, the problem of dearth of qualified teachers continued, thereby posing obstacles in the way of expansion of girls’ education. More teacher training centres were urgently required.

In conclusion, it can be said that the establishment of British colonial rule in Assam saw for the first time the entry of girls into formal educational institutions. Prior to the coming of the British, female education was informal and largely limited to acquiring of practical household skills. It was a sex-segregated world, men and women did different work and occupied separate spaces.

The collective efforts of the Christian missionaries, the British Indian Government and the social reformers of the age led to the opening of educational facilities for women. Progress was most manifest in terms of increase in the number of all types of schools and colleges for girls and also an increase in the numbers of girls and women literates in the province. For instance, in 1911, only 20,753 women in the province were literate whereas in 1921, the number had risen to 46,002.\footnote{ASA, R.P.E.A., 1917-18 to 1921-22, Shillong, 1923, p.83} The number further multiplied manifold times with the passage of time. In one of the Government reports on the progress of education in Assam, it was stated that “Female Education is a need of all but a desire of few.”\footnote{ASA, G.R.P.I.A., 1937-38, Shillong, 1939, p.22} Things had changed so much since then, that the referred comment do not seem to hold good anymore. Miss Sen, the Assistant Inspectress of Schools, Assam, had in fact remarked “Female education is now certainly a desire of all though it is not
within the reach and means of all." The yearly increase in the number of venture girls' schools in villages started by enthusiastic villagers proves the fact. A general awakening among women themselves had further helped in the progress of education. In this context, the role played by the Assam Mahila Samiti is important. They campaigned endlessly on the importance of women's education and also worked tirelessly to remove the disabilities afflicting women's lives. They gradually but effectively began to use the pen and the platform alike. Social and economic changes have not left the orthodox sections of the country where they were. Political movements whatever their complexion, have increasingly sought the assistance of women. The net effect of all these was that women were no longer prepared to be regarded as 'goods and chattels'. They were no longer satisfied with the position of domestic drudges. The conservatism of the Hindus with regard to female education was being gradually broken and the Muhammadans were also slowly coming up. The old forces of Purdah and prejudice were losing their strength. The whole social fabric, as far as the 'submerged' sex was concerned, was visibly and rapidly dissolving.

The initial thrust of the Government was on Primary Education of the girls as is visible from the following Table which shows the remarkable concentration of numbers in the bottom Class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
<th>VIII</th>
<th>IX</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Total Enrolment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911-12</td>
<td>5,985</td>
<td>982</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8,083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916-17</td>
<td>9,458</td>
<td>1,640</td>
<td>1,111</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13,282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920-21</td>
<td>10,288</td>
<td>1,632</td>
<td>1,101</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14,338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-22</td>
<td>9,553</td>
<td>1,624</td>
<td>1,101</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13,655</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


143 Ibid.
144 Chattels, an article of personal property that is movable, such as furniture, livestock etc.
Girls Schools were established at all district headquarters, the Schools being either Middle English or Middle Vernacular. As far as the towns were concerned, there seemed to be a general desire on the part of the parents to give some education to girls. This desire was not confined to the elite class alone, but was also observed among other sections of the society. Gradually in villages too, the aversion to female education was being replaced by ‘requests of the people to raise the Primary School to a Middle School, where a Primary School exists, and to help start a Primary School where there is no school yet.' However, the masses were not certain as to how far they wished their girls to be educated. Circumstances determine that. If it was a Middle School; the girl would probably be allowed to go up for the examination if she remained unmarried. The practice of early marriage of girls was prevalent in Assam. Her marriage marked the end of her educational career. But with the passing of the Sarda Act of 1929, and increasing the age of marriage for girls to fourteen, a major obstacle of the continuance of education of women was thought to be removed.

With the prejudice against girls education slowly losing its force, girls began to proceed beyond the Primary School stage. And with the changing mental perception of the people, girls came to be admitted even in boys' schools. Mixed Schools had become quite popular as women began to climb up the higher steps of the academic ladder, Secondary Schools and College for women became necessary and which in turn established in various parts of the province. Apart from the exclusive women education centers, women pursued studies in other general or professional institutes both within and outside the province. The initiation of the Zenana System of instruction catered to those women who


71
seldom left their homes except in company of their families. Teacher training schools were also started though the number was far from adequate considering the rapid increase of students and institutions. Financial incentives were given to the teacher and students alike in the form of rewards and stipends. Expansion of female education in the province also necessitated the appointment of an inspecting staff consisting of an Inspectress of Schools in the Indian Education Service and an Assistant Inspectress in the provincial Education Service.

Considerable progress, no doubt, was made in the field of women's education in Assam during the colonial period, yet much remained to be achieved. With all the social upsurge, political movements and economic transformations, it cannot be denied that the pace of the progress was much slow. Though conservatism did not operate with the same force as it did earlier, it could not be totally dislodged. Reformers who upheld the cause of female education “were unwilling to relinquish the power of patriarchy or redistribute wealth. They dreamt of a world where women would be educated and free from some of the worst customs of society ........But at the same time, these new women would be devoted to home and family.” 146 This attitude has resulted in the educational stereotyping of girls, the influence of which continues to the present day.

Generally speaking, few parents took the education of their girls seriously. In a province, where even among the upper classes of the society, education of boys was little cared for unless it carried with it a certain money value; the education of the girls was bound to remain a matter of public indifference atleast upto a certain extent. It was found, though not always, that the establishment of a

146 Sheila Bora, op.cit., p.18
village girls' school was beyond the concern of the villagers. The want of regularity in attendance on the part of the pupils in a girl's school was one of the most stubborn obstacles in the way of progress. Girls as a rule attended school at their pleasure. Further, one of the common problems was that "it was difficult to keep the girls long enough to give them more than the merest rudiments of education, as they were already quite grown up when they came and either they or their parents soon began to be anxious that they were married".

There existed enormous disparity of the number of girls and boys under instruction, which was not conducive to the social well being of the community. So long as men looked upon the wives as instruments of domestic conveniences, society was not likely to progress. One of the most common arguments put forward against women's education was that an educated woman makes an unquiet home. The Indian Education Commission of 1882 had rightly remarked that the difficulties in the way of progress could not be solved except by the growth of public opinion. The changes in public opinion is reflected in the following table which shows the number of educational institutions and schools both male and female in Assam in 1882-83 and 1936-37.

147 J.R. Cunningham, op. cit. p.46
148 Sheila Bora, op. cit., p.22
150 ASA, (i)GRPIA in Assam, 1883-84, p1 (ii) QRPEA for 1927-28 to 1931-32, 1932-37, cited from Renu Debi, op. cit, p. 212
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOR MALES</th>
<th>INSTITUTIONS</th>
<th>SCHOLARS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882-83</td>
<td>1936-37</td>
<td>1882-83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARTS COLLEGE</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFESSIONAL COLLEGE</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOLS</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIDDLE SCHOOLS</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRIMARY SCHOOLS</td>
<td>1,303</td>
<td>6002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPECIAL SCHOOLS</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1,413</td>
<td>6,723</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOR FEMALES</th>
<th>INSTITUTIONS</th>
<th>SCHOLARS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882-83</td>
<td>1936-37</td>
<td>1882-83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARTS COLLEGE</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFESSIONAL COLLEGE</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOLS</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIDDLE SCHOOLS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRIMARY SCHOOLS</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPECIAL SCHOOLS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>868</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though girls' schools had been established at all district headquarters and the three subdivisional headquarters of Sibsagar, Golaghat and Goalpara, not all were of the same standard. The schools of Nowgong and the Victoria Girls' School at Dibrugarh were probably better than the others. The other schools could be described as fairly good and few of those may be classed as indifferent. The greatest defect in girls' schools was the dearth of female teachers. The social difficulties made it almost impossible for women teachers to live in places other than in their own villages and under the protection of their families. Moreover, female trained teachers were not adequately paid and no attempt whatsoever was made to secure their privacy and comfort. Respected families could not be expected to send their girls to a school where there was none but a male teacher,

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Male and Female students in Assam during 1882-83 and 1936-37

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882-83</td>
<td>1 ASA, (i)GRP in Assam, 1883-84, p1 (ii) QRPEA for 1927-28 to 1931-32, 1932-37.</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Institutions for Male and Female in Assam during 1882-83 and 1936-37

1 ASA, (i)GRP in Assam, 1883-84, p1 (ii) QRPEA for 1927-28 to 1931-32, 1932-37.
unless of course he was superannuated in which case he was usually ineffective and indifferent. Even if girls were sent to such schools, they were removed just at the age when they were beginning to be capable of learning something.

The cry for trained teachers was universal. The Mission School at Nowgong had the capacity to train only three or four students. And even if their number was multiplied by fifty, it would still not be enough. The necessity for more training schools was obvious, but on the other hand, from where would the trained Principals come from? The power to train teachers was not an everyday accomplishment and the training imparted by Christian missionaries did not attract as many non-Christian pupils to be trained as teachers as one would wish. Lack of adequate funds was an added constraint. Miss Garret, the Inspectress of Schools, Assam, made the following observation, “though the given is good, the facilities are nil. While the men have been provided with beautiful buildings and costly apparatus, and an adequate staff, and while arrangement have been made to defray the cost of training for males, little or nothing has been done for women.

Inadequate supervision was exercised over the girls’ schools. The post of Inspectress was abolished in 1924 on financial grounds. Even the D.P.I., Assam’s recommendation to revive the post was of no avail. It was not possible for an Assistant Inspectress to supervise all the girls’ schools. Moreover, her powers were limited and her function was mainly advisory. This lack of vigilance on the part of the Government implied the neglect of female education.

152 Ibid
The missionary schools were the pioneers in female education, as in the case of general education in the province. But gradually there arose suspicion and protests over the working of these schools and wherever possible, rival schools were established. For instance, a ‘Hindu Girls’ School was opened at Silchar. Leading residents who sent their girls to the Mission School were criticized in the columns of the Bengali newspaper, ‘Silchar’. However, the ‘Hindu Girls School’ soon lost its importance and died a premature death. Isolated efforts continued to set up schools on orthodox lines, somewhat similar to the well known “Mahakali Pathsala in Calcutta. This shows that the Mission Schools were losing their popularity among certain sections of the people probably because - (i) the public had no voice in the management of the schools. (ii) There was no committee wherein the Indian Community was represented and lastly (iii) there was a growing dissatisfaction about the teaching. It was realized that the English ladies who were teachers in the schools were not suitable for teaching the vernacular to the small girls – infact many students had to unlearn some of the things they were taught in school. These drawbacks of the Mission Schools from the Indian viewpoint, indirectly impeded the growth and development of female education in Assam.

As regards non-Mission Schools, questions were often raised on the suitability of subjects taught and the system of inspection. It was argued whether a highly trained English Inspectress of Schools was suitable to inspect schools teaching girls in their mother-tongue. She could hardly be expected to be in touch

156 Ibid
with the parents to talk freely with the mother, and successfully appeal to the people about the spread of female education by opening new schools and improving existing ones.

The prospect of higher education of girls brightened up only since the 1930's. But even then its progress was very restricted. Due to the social environment of the province, there appeared to be none or very limited scope of remunerative employment of University educated women. If such education was sought for, it was primarily for its own sake and not as a means to independent livelihood. However, opportunities awaited in the educational and welfare sector with lady doctors in much demand.

Drawbacks and difficulties, wastage and stagnations were galore, yet, women's education progressed in varying degrees, though much more remained to be achieved. A more careful, dedicated and systematic approach was required to expand girls' education. But a general awakening had begun and it could not be permanently suppressed.