CHAPTER – III

WOMEN AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Gender issues have always remained a socially constructed view of age old tradition and irrespective of political, economic and social contexts, it has cut across all sections of society. Since expectations from women and men are largely shaped by social discourses of the public/private divide, expectedly the position and role of women in society is determined by such discourses. Historical narratives have by and large overlooked the importance of women. It was only in the 1970’s the United Nations focused world attention on the status of women. The year 1975 was declared as the International Women’s Year to focus attention on the need for improving the status of women all over the world. The Decade for Women was observed from 1975 – 1985 and though the decade ended in 1985, a visible sense of purpose and awakening marked the many concerted attempts to carry forward meaningfully the causes of women all over the world.

The nineteenth century is of great importance in the history of India. It was an age of contrary pulls in the realm of politics, economics, intellectual ideas, and attitudes towards women. The final defeat of the Marathas in the hands of the British in 1818, followed by the annexation of Sind, Punjab and Bengal led to the consolidation of British power in India. These political developments triggered off certain deep-rooted socio-economic changes in the country. The establishment of British rule in India set in motion certain progressive forces. The introduction of the railways and the improvement of the transport system, the introduction of a modern Western system of education and the adoption of the
British legal system in India, though understandably to facilitate the exploitative colonial machinery, had far reaching effects on the entire socio-cultural fabric of India. That these structural changes in India ushered in new and progressive ideas from the West has not been denied even by the Nationalist School of Indian Scholars.\textsuperscript{1} In the social sphere, the resultant inevitable clash between the two radically different structures of the East and the West led to a number of social reform movements in India in the nineteenth century which ultimately contributed to the development of a pan-India nationalism.\textsuperscript{2}

The nineteenth century was also of special significance to Assam because of the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826, signed between the East India Company and the Burmese. It put an end to the six hundred years old Ahom monarchy in Assam and paved the way for the establishment of British colonial rule. After the dreaded days of the Burmese invasion and the misrule of the decadent Ahom kings, the British rule ushered in a period of comparative stability in Assam. The railways and water routes established between Calcutta and Assam, primarily to serve British commercial interests also helped to forge the much needed links between Assam and the rest of India, thereby enabling the region to end its physical and cultural isolation into which it had lapsed during the long period of uninterrupted Ahom rule. Even as late as 1807, the East India Company appointed Francis Hamilton to prepare a report on Assam, without however granting him permission to cross the boundaries of the Company’s territory.\textsuperscript{3} The report that was submitted by Hamilton was therefore based on second hand reports furnished to him partly by Assamese fugitives in Bengal and partly by

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\textsuperscript{1} Tilottoma Misra, \textit{Literature and Society in Assam}, Gauhati, N. Delhi, 1987, p.2.
\textsuperscript{2} Ibid
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several natives of Bengal, who on different occasions had visited Assam. Hamilton’s account was an attempt on part of the Company to collect information about an area which was of strategic importance to the British as a buffer kingdom between the Company’s land and those of China and Burma.

Meanwhile, the growing contact with the progressive and enlightened thoughts of the West coming through Bengal and the emergence of a new class of Assamese intelligentsia, led to the growth of a new sense of awareness among the Assamese people. Within a short span of time, the Assamese society of the Brahmaputra valley found itself in a totally new situation. And in this new situation, a significant development occurred in the realm of changing attitudes towards women, though opinions differed. While one section of the Assamese intelligentsia stressed the need to redefine gender relations, another section firmly believed that gender relations were perfect and needed no modifications. Although women were an important factor in the emerging discourses, they themselves did not participate in it, nor were they asked to identify themselves. This again marginalized many aspects of the women’s lives. Yet, a remarkable aspect of the discourse was that it gave women a visibility which had been denied to them earlier. The reformers in their quest for a just social order, now brought issues like polygamy, marriage reforms and women’s education to the public sphere. The public sphere which was the platform for the rising middle class to represent itself was thus a gendered one, dominated virtually by men, who brought together the traditional and the modern in its project of ‘improvement’.

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4 Ibid

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Women's voice could only be distinctly heard from the 1920's onward, but they too more or less took a stance commensurate with public opinion.

The pre-colonial typical Assamese society possessed a couple of characteristic features. The caste prejudices were less rigid when compared to other parts of the country and the social norms for the upper caste women differed from those for the rest. The condition of the upper caste women, however, had similarities with those of their counterparts in the rest of the country. They were bound by age-old customs, setting dual standards of power, status and morality for the male and the female. The patriarchal set up which prevailed in the Assam Valley assigned women to an inferior status.

The practice of female child marriage long before she attained puberty was prevalent among the upper castes, especially the Brahmins. Although Kulinism, Sati or self-immolation of widow and infanticide was not practiced in Assam as elsewhere in the country, Assamese women had also to suffer from the evils of widowhood, child-marriage and polygamy. Widow-remarriage was disfavored and discouraged letting the widows to wallow in self-denial.

The social reform movement of the late eighteenth century in India, exercised little influence in Assam in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, when Assam was still nominally under the Ahom rule. But even after the British annexation of Assam, partly in 1828 and fully in 1838, the response to progressive Western ideas that permeated in through Bengal was not initially too encouraging. The causes for this belated response could be traced to the

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educational backwardness of the region and also to some deeply embedded features in the structure of the Assamese society.

Despite limited sources for reconstructing the structure of the society in the pre-Ahom days, it could be assessed from the general mode of cultivation practiced in the tribal areas of Assam that the Assamese society was predominantly a semi-tribal one before the establishment of Ahom rule in the region.\(^9\) Thus, with the exception of the lands gifted to the Brahmins and religious institutions by the Ahoms and the pre-Ahom rulers, the main mode of cultivation was shifting cultivation.\(^10\) A redeeming feature of the tribal culture of Assam was the position of importance occupied by women. By virtue of their vital role in procreation and in agricultural activities, women occupied a position of importance. Many suggest that the important social position occupied by women in the tribal culture of Assam had its roots in the worshipping of Mother Goddess in various forms.

The coming of the Ahoms, however, led to significant changes in the whole socio-economic structure of the Assamese society. The Ahoms practiced wet-rice cultivation instead of shifting cultivation in Assam. The new mode of cultivation had tremendous impact on the social life of the people for it required permanent places of residence and possession of cultivable land. The growing profitability of this mode of cultivation and the increasing royal patronage given to it must have led to the accumulation of some amount of wealth in the hands of the ‘Khels.’\(^11\) The increase of wealth inevitably led to the overthrow of female


\(^10\) Ibid, pp. 126-127.

\(^11\) Tilottama Misra, op.cit., p. 106. ‘Khels’ – Male Subjects rendering service to the state.
supremacy in the Assamese society and the establishment of patriarchy. Under the conditions, women were soon relegated to the position of private property especially during the period of decay of the Ahom rule. There were instances when Ahom rulers had gifted away women which also included royal princess to other rulers to forge an alliance with or as a part of tribute to a foreign ruler. For eg, Romoni Gabharu, an Ahom princess was gifted away to Aurangzeb to persuade Mir Jumla to leave Assam. Chandrakanta Singha in order to conclude alliance with the Burmese ruler also gave away an Ahom princess. Although the colonial state formally abolished slavery through Act V of the (Bengal) Regulation of 1843, and the Indian Penal Code of 1860 made it an offence to engage in trafficking or keeping slaves, yet, there were instances of its practice in early colonial Assam. The *Orunodoi* in Vol. I No. V, 1846, recorded the news of a sale of a woman by her opium addict husband to a Muslim man.

The elimination of Assamese women from positions of importance in the society was also effected by the great *Vaishnavite* Saint, Sri Sankardeva who made no distinction of people while accepting disciples, but in case of women, he displayed an attitude of strange intolerance. The same attitude of male chauvinism was also witnessed in the *Satras* established by the followers of Sankardev, where women were excluded from all aspects of the religious and cultural life. Even duties like wiping the floor of the prayer-hall were denied to

them. Even upto this day women are denied entrance to most of the important *Vaishnava* shrines of Assam. The example of the *Barpeta Kirtan Ghar* could be cited in this context.

Moreover, during the reign of Ahom king Rudra Singha, the influence of Bengali customs and prejudices began to be felt in Assam. The customs of child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, seclusion of women, which had become the bane of the Bengali Hindu society found easy acceptability amongst the Brahmans and upper castes of Assam who subjected their women to a secluded life and denied them modern education. Though the practice of *Kulunism* and *Sati* were absent in Assam, yet it cannot be overlooked that women were considered as private property in the *Khel system* and that education of women was considered to be dangerous to the society. If at all they were given any education, it was very limited and mostly related to household work and responsibilities.

The education system in Assam during the pre-British days was not much different from that in the rest of the country. The survival of a number of *Tols* until recent times is a pointer to the fact. The traditional system of learning flourished till the decline of the Ahom rule, when retrogression set in amidst the confusion of civil wars, insurrections and repeated invasions of the Burmese and the neighboring hill tribes. It could be mentioned that education during the Ahom rule was not considered essential even for the aristocracy in their respective spheres of work. The administrative system was fairly simple and involved little

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14 Maheswar Neog, *Sankardeva and his Times*, Gauhati, 1965, p. 338
15 Tilottoma Misra, *op.cit.*, p. 108
16 H.K. Barpujari, *op.cit.*, p. 307
paper work. Further, education and learning was generally confined to the higher classes. The Ahom rulers did not encourage or initiate a system of general instruction for the masses.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, lack of English knowing people for taking part in operating the new administration led the British to open an outlet for a flow of clerks and assistants from Bengal to the different parts of the province.

The entry of the British into Assam in 1826 initiated far reaching changes in the socio-political life of the province. Following the expulsion of the Burmese from Assam, the British tried to instill confidence among the natives by introducing several reform measures. Even Maniram Dewan in his memorandum to A.J.M. Mills, speaks approvingly of the steps taken by the British.\textsuperscript{19} Gunabhiram Barua also refers to the new and liberal form of justice established by the British in place of the crude and primitive modes of the Ahom rule.\textsuperscript{20}

Against the changing background of Assam after the opening up of the country by the British, efforts to lift womanhood to a higher social level among people began with the advent of the missionaries into Assam.

The Charter Act of 1813, which was renewed in 1833 for another twenty years, opened India to the missionaries of other nations and the non-English missionary societies were allowed officially to start their activities in India. Political and security reasons, and not so much of evangelism had actuated the local British authorities to welcome the missionaries into the north-east frontiers.\textsuperscript{21} Their presence in the region was considered necessary by the

\textsuperscript{19} Benudhar Sarma, *Maniram Dewan*, Gauhati, p. 225
\textsuperscript{20} Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Bandhu*, op.cit., p. 160
\textsuperscript{21} H.K. Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India* (1836-1900), Gauhati, 1986, p.XIII.
Company for consolidating its commercial empire in the East. In the initial phase of the Company’s rule, Assam was not considered commercially viable. But with the discovery of the tea-plant in the region, it was already showing signs of becoming a lucrative trade centre in the near future. Captain Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam, who was also much interested in evangelical activities, wrote a letter to E.C. Trevelyan, the secretary to the Government at Calcutta, requesting him to invite the American Baptist Mission to establish a mission in Assam.22 The request was accompanied by an offer that on their arrival Jenkins would contribute one thousand rupees and one thousand more for the establishment of a printing Press. He further assured that government protection would be given to the missionaries if they worked in the frontier regions of Assam.23 The selection of this frontier was accompanied by two reasons of strategic importance, firstly, its proximity to Burma, where much missionary work had already been done, and secondly, it would be easier to step into the ‘Celestial Empire,’ China.

Responding to the government enthusiasm and assurance of protection, two American missionaries, Nathan Brown, O.T. Cutter along with their families set sail for Sadiya which they finally reached on March, 1836.24 They were the first American missionaries in Assam. Infact, the American Baptist Mission was the first to set up permanent mission centers in different parts of North-East, though initially they never actually came to work for the people of the North-East India.25 Their realization of the absurdity of reaching Upper Burma (their original choice of field for missionary activity) from Upper Assam, that they decided to

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22 Tilottoma Misra, op. cit, p. 666
23 Victor Hugo Sword, Baptists in Assam, Guwahati, Delhi, 1992, p.66.
make Assam as their field. Thus, it was only in 1841, almost five years after their arrival in Assam, that the American Baptists settled down in Sibsagar and began to concentrate on missionary work among the people in the Brahmaputra Valley.

The arrival of the missionaries cut an outlet for the flow of certain Christian ideas into the socio-cultural life of the Assamese society. The belief that women needed to be brought into the fold for making conversions permanent appealed to the Christian community in America who supported the missionary enterprise.26 Even American women organizations sent missionaries to heathen lands for fighting against evils concerning women. However, it was no secret that charity, philanthropy and humanitarian works were methods of influencing people and attracting converts.27 Working for the education of the natives was therefore a part of the proselytisation job of the missionary and hence women’s education was a special task. Both the upper class Hindus and Muslim women of the plains were under purdah and it proved difficult for the men to gain access to the interior of their homes to influence them spiritually. It was here that the gender of the women missionaries were utilized by the church to gain access to the interiors of the elite and influence the girls of the lower echelons to come to school meant for educating them. The need for zenana education was rationalised on the following arguments, “From the time women plucked the apple from the forbidden tree and gave to her husband to eat, the curse has rested heavily upon her. She has gone down, down into the depths of sin and ignorance, until she has been despised and counted a degraded being. Nowhere is this more clearly seen

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and felt then in heathen lands.'28 Some of those missionary women who came and pursued women’s work with great vigour were Marca Bronson, Orell Keeler, Miss Pursnell and a few-others at Nowgong; Miss Sweet, Mrs. Barker and Mrs. Scott etc. at Gauhati. Apart from these women, missionary men like Miles Bronson, Mr. Cutter, Mr. Brown were known for their work amongst women.29

During the period of the present study, the status of women in Assam varied with class, caste and religion. Like all patriarchal societies, there was sharp division of space with the identification of the outside world with men and the home with women, although even in household affairs, the patriarch’s wish ultimately prevailed. Closely linked to the social status of women in Assam was the issue relating to education. Education was perhaps the entry point into the women’s public sphere. With devotion and sacrifice, the missionaries pioneered women’s education and co-education. They began work among women in Assam with the setting up of schools. Initially, a few ‘bazaar girls’ or street girls were persuaded to come to mission bungalows, where they were taught by the missionary wives, Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Cutter in Sibsagar; Mrs. Barker in Gauhati and Mrs. Bronson in Nowgong. Gradually, the number of women participants increased until it was dignified by the name of school. In course of time, the missionaries even adopted the boarding school system in order to cut off the participants from heathen influence. But as parents were reluctant to commit their children to the care of a Christian teacher, the missionaries picked up even street children or abandoned and destitute girls for initiation to learning. A missionary

29 Missionaries were in most cases husbands and wives. There were also some women missionaries who were generally the daughters of the missionaries serving in the region. Sometimes these women missionaries came directly from America to work in Assam.
wife, Mrs. Brown in a letter written in 1851 had expressed, "The women are so stupid after having grown up in their ignorance, that they are fully impressed with the belief that they cannot learn, besides the ridicule to which they are subjected makes it very difficult to induce them to continue. Our old Brahmin pundit often comes along by the little room and laugh at the idea of my spending my time teaching women to read. I have had a few very promising little girls given to me by their parents and guardians, whom I hope to keep in good degree separate from heathen influence."30 In Nowgong, both boys and girls were enrolled and the school called the 'Nowgong Orphan Institution' (1843), was set up with contribution from the English residents in Assam.31 Later, similar institutions were set up at Guwahati and Sibsagar. When A.J.M. Mills came to Assam in 1853, there were two schools in the Nowgong Sadar station established by the American Baptist Missionaries, one for boys with fifty students and the other for girls with an enrollment of eighteen students.32

It was colonial Assam that sought for changes largely within the Assamese society due to the work of certain forces which articulated such changes. The population that came under the British with the occupation of Assam, comprised of individuals who were incapable to man the new administrative structure. This administrative lacuna was filled up by the clerical immigration from Bengal to Assam which in turn cut an outlet for the flow of some new elements of culture to the Assamese society. The British administration had already introduced western education in Bengal to groom up a

section of the population as ‘collaborators’ of the British regime. The enthusiastic response to Western education in Bengal saw the emergence of a middle class among the native elite who became the forerunners of a new social awakening. The seeds of ‘Renaissance’ was thus sown in Bengal. The Renaissance had its repercussions on the province of Assam through a handful of enlightened Assamese men who had been exposed to the influence of Calcutta either directly or indirectly. It made these educated Assamese men, mostly from the upper strata of the society to emulate many of its ideals of establishing a new-social outlook, though many of which tried to strengthen the patriarchal norms in society. Till the establishment of the Cotton College in 1901 at Gauhati, Calcutta was the centre for higher education for the students of Assam. The contribution of the Assam Mess in Calcutta in moulding the mindset of the Assamese educated class was immense. Though influenced by western ideas, the reformers were strongly tied to their tradition. Thus, social reforms which also included women’s education in its agenda was to combine in itself the western and the Indian ideal of modernity and tradition. The educated Assamese in general had no sneering contempt for indigenous customs and usages. Even men like Dhekial Phukan wanted not a revolution but reform in gradual doses. Social mixing for girls was disapproved. Some schools were still Bengali medium. For instance, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Nalinibala Devi’s father, the progressive Nabin Chandra Bordoloi did not send his two daughters to the girls’ school in Gauhati.

34 Ibid.
because it was a Bengali School and was moreover located in a bazaar area. He preferred to educate them at home with home tutors.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Assamese middle class' had begun to establish its hegemony over the society. The norms, values and preference of that class became important to all other sections of the society. Their perception regarding gender relations as can be reviewed from the literary culture of the period, does not seem to give any place to the woman as an individual entity. To cite only a couple of examples in this context, in an article in Jonaki, Phanindranath Gogoi elaborated how Assamese women had forgotten their values under the influence of English culture. From hardworking housewives they had become idle and expected to be served by the men.

Further, Ratneswar Mahanta had remarked that daughters-in-law without formal education were much more suited to family life than those with education. Her identity was therefore submerged in the identity of the man. The observations clearly reflected the narrow conservative outlook of their social circle. Moreover, as most of the agendas of reform were male engineered and based on caste Hindu social norms, the problems of the women could not be properly addressed. So by and large, the identity of the women was neither acknowledged nor given expression to. Yet, a modest beginning had been made which saw the slow but gradual emergence of an independent consciousness amongst the women, which gathered further strength during the nationalist

struggle for independence. There is enough evidence that can be unearthed from various types of literary sources as well as state papers of the period which reveal that before the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, women were striving to establish their identities, only, that history has gone into the hidden pages of the written records.\textsuperscript{40}

As already noted, the patriarchal set up of the society had led to sharp division of spaces, into masculine and feminine, the space of the home being identified with the women and that of the outside world with man. In this context, the education of women is of immense ‘importance’ because education was perhaps the only entry point into women’s public sphere. However, as girls schools were being set up, there was hardly any demand for them. The missionaries initiated women’s education with little success. Even the influential educated Assamese middle class had through the print media primarily reflected a very gender biased view regarding women’s education. Even the Jonaki (1889-1895) group of young writers, who set a new trend in Assamese literature in the late nineteenth century, had strong reservations on the question of women’s emancipation. The writings which appeared in the magazines presented women as being completely submerged in the identity of the men. Further, the monthly magazine, \textit{Assam Bandhu}, 1885-1886, also reflected a similar attitude towards women. In an article, \textit{Tirutar Kartavya} (Duties of women), published serially in three issues of the magazine (1885),\textsuperscript{41} the writer Ratneswar Mahanta raises the question of the propriety of educating the women because among other things it


\textsuperscript{41} ‘Ghainir Kartavya Aru Stree Shiksha’, \textit{Assam Bandhu}, Asara, Saka,1807, (Dr. Nagen Saikia, Publication Board, Assam, Gauhati, 1984.)
might divert a woman’s interest from her two main duties in life, which are — taking care of her husband’s needs and taking full charge of the household.

Mahanta expected Assamese women, to imitate the ideals of the Dharmashastra and ignore most of the fashionable or new western learning. Another periodical, ‘Mau’ edited by Bolinarayan Bora, an Assamese engineer, though short lived (December, 1886 to March, 1887) had great intellectual impact at that time. Bora had gone to England for higher education and had married into the family of a Bengali intellectual elite, his wife being the daughter of civilian and writer Romesh Chandra Dutta. While in Nowgong, Mrs. Bora had provided young Jnandabhiram Baruah with his first glimpse of an ‘educated woman’ moving freely and playing tennis at the public courts. Hence, it was surprising that such an individual like Bora would use patriarchal arguments in his article, entitled, Tirutar Bon ki (Duties of a woman) where he stated that education for women could be even more dangerous for Assam than the Burmese invasions. He expresses his apprehension on women B.A.’s and M.A.s who were likely to neglect their feminine duties and compete with men for occupational opportunities. He was of the view that women who aspire for higher education would be stretching their mental and physical capacities, which in turn would harm their future offsprings.

In fact, the periodicals of the last decades of the nineteenth century by and large expressed the dominant male views on women. Their writings reflect their strong belief that education imparted to men and women must be different. The primary goal of women education was the domestic well-being of the family.

42 Aparna Mahanta, op.cit., p-27
43 Ibid.
44 ‘Tirutar Bon Ki’, Mau, Aghun, Saka 1808, (December 1886)
Women's literacy was perceived to be contrary to feminine virtues inviting wickedness, aversion to domestic duties and disrespect to traditional cultures. It was feared that literate women would compete with men in all walks of life. In short, the general feeling was that educated girls would cease to be tolerant and abiding to the father or husband and would not be willing to uphold traditions. A common superstition was that educated women were destined to become widows and a general belief prevailed that too much intellectual work would shrivel up women's ovaries and renders her both unfeminine and consequently irrelevant.

Even as late as the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi was of the opinion that women should acquire a good education. By this he did not mean that they should compete with men in all vocations. Women's proper place according to him, was the 'home'. Man is supreme in activities outside the home.

It was evident from their attacks on women education that the writers contributing in the periodicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were deeply tied to the patriarchal notions of the society. The concept of an independent identity of the women as an individual entity was not subscribed then, but, however, running as an undercurrent we do see an independent consciousness beginning to emerge from amongst the women, which the dominant culture was unwilling to give expression to.

In the words of Keeler, a woman missionary, who worked for women's education in Assam, "The indifference we find among them to any personal responsibility concerning their souls' welfare, is but the result of their false teachings, for being taught that man is an incarnation of deity, that he is their.

45 Priyam Goswami, *op.cit.*, p.128.
46 Kotukkal Sreedhar, *Gandhian Concept of Family System*, Delhi, p. 47
spiritual guide, adoration and obedience to their husbands and ‘gohains’ (priests) is all that is required of them to fit them for this life or the life to come. This idea is more deeply instilled into minds of those of the higher castes. Thus, owing to the prejudice of the higher classes and the degradation of the female sex, the difficulties of promoting their education were great.

It is a generally acknowledged phenomenon that leadership of social reform movements is usually provided by a handful of people who dare to defy the exiting societal norms in order to establish a new social outlook. The nineteenth century saw a handful of Assamese intellectuals who were also social rebels on individual planes. These men tried to reform the orthodox Hindu society of Assam. Here, the leadership was provided by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hem Chandra Barua. But unfortunately, their efforts remained isolated and were unable to create a support group in their fight for emancipation of women. Their appeals to the enlightened sections, by and large evoked little response. Even among the majority who advocated reform, the aim was not to make women independent or equal partners of men in the family, leave alone public life. According to them, some education was necessary, but it should not be such that would instill in a woman a desire or ambition to compete with men. Even women advocates of social reform like Padmavati Devi Phukanani (1853-1927), the daughter of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Bishnupriya Devi, wife of Gunabhiram Barua also by and large conformed to the traditional nations of womanhood. These women, who were the recipients of

48 Tilottam Misra, *op.cit.*, p.110
male patronage, it seems most likely that they were wary of public criticism or social ostracism and hence, preferred to take a stance commensurate with public opinion. It was also possible that they themselves were unable to fully perceive the egalitarian concept relating to the two sexes.

Despite the continued expression of apprehensions regarding women’s education, in some enlightened and affluent families, girls were given the lessons of the alphabet and numeration at home. Gradually with the progress of western education and consequent widening of the mental outlook, education of women began to receive approval of the public at large though with certain reservations. An early exponent of female education in Assam was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan who made arrangements at home to make the women in his family literate, initiated his daughter, Padmavati Devi Phukanani to formal education at the age of five.\(^{50}\) In fact, Dhekial Phukan during his stay at Calcutta (1850-52), became a member of the Bethune society at Calcutta, which devoted itself to the cause of female education. On his return to Assam, he played a prominent role in establishing the *Jnan-Pradayani Sabha* at Nowgong in 1857-59. It met weekly to discuss and strive for the development of the society. He was the true representative of the spirit of Bengal. After Anandaram, Gunabhiram Barua emerged as the most important personality in the arena of social reforms in Assam. He was an associate of Anandaram in the establishment of the *Jnan Pradayini Sabha*. He saw in uneducated womenhood one of the principal obstacles to progress. An ardent admirer of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar’s ideals, he was a strong advocate of women education and was the first Assamese to send

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his daughter, Swamalata to Calcutta for higher studies. It was a daring step for a man of his time to send his nine year old daughter to a boarding school in Calcutta, which took about ten or twelve days' journey by boat from Nowgong where he was staying.\textsuperscript{51} He was a kind of social rebel who himself married a widow and gave his daughter in marriage for a second time after she became a widow.

Meanwhile, the American Baptist missionaries who had already begun their evangelical work in Assam and an important thrust of their activities was with regard to the women of the region, had observed that the earlier stubbornness with regard to age old customs was being slowly and gradually replaced. “The stone is in motion” remarked Mrs. Bronson in 1867, while speaking of the impact of Christianity among the Assamese. Doubtless, the ice was beginning to thaw. The impact of the west and no less Christianity, though slowly, replaced the blind faith of age old customs and conventions by a spirit of enquiry and rationalism. Orthodoxy continued to be the order of the day, but its rigidity had gradually relaxed.\textsuperscript{52} Social taboos, like learning English or going abroad began to gradually lose ground. The reluctance of the earlier gentry to send their daughters to Christian schools had compelled Mrs. Barker to depend on ' Bazar girls', but since the sixties of the nineteenth century there was a growing desire among the educated Assamese that their daughters and wives should be taught too. The influence of missionaries on the education of women was not small and they devised suitable forms of education for women of all classes. For example, the

\textsuperscript{52} H.K. Barpujari, \textit{The American Missionaries and North – East India. (1836-1900 A.D)}, Guwahati, Delhi, 1986, p 131
'Zenana' system of education was started to impart instruction to females of the higher castes since 'ladies of rank seldom left their home'. Miss Orrel Keeler, a missionary woman, in 1886 remarks, “As we go about among the women, we sometimes meet a welcome, sometimes indifference and sometimes a humble hearer. Formerly we could only gain access to many of the higher castes by teaching some kind of needle work. Now, although but little of this kind of instruction is given, we are usually made welcome, and can get a hearing when we point them to the. 'Lamb of God' who taken away the sins of the world, we find the most opposition from the high castes, Brahmos and the Mahomedans; though in each of the above named classes occasionally we find exceptions.”53

Although educated men often taught women in their family, zenana education or group teaching within a suitable home was soon recognised as a feasible alternative to education in schools. Apart from the advantages of limiting women’s exposure to external influences, this method allowed learning over a number of years which could often be continued or even started after marriage.54 Among the perceivable changes that had taken place in Assam, was a desire among women themselves for education, and a willingness on the part of the menfolk to trust them with knowledge.55 The sentiment was however by any means not universal. Native gentlemen were keen that their wives be taught reading, sewing and other useful employment. Though, the change was far behind than what was in Calcutta, a beginning had been made. Mrs. F.H. Bronson had also remarked in a same manner in ‘Assam After Fourteen Years Absence’, that “even with the disadvantage of a foreign language, I am surprised to see the

55 H.K. Barpujari, op.cit p. 118
number of educated young men in Assam, and the desire for knowledge among the common people. But even greater and more radical than this is the advance of the Hindu mind on the subject of the education of women. This strikes at the foundation of Hindu society, entirely overturning ancient custom, and establishing an order of things as for removed as possible from the old life."56

Gunabhiram Barua's daughter, Swarnalata, though only fifteen and still a student in Bethune school, was one of the few Assamese women to speak on behalf of educated women. In an article, which appeared in the Assam Bandhu, entitled 'Prakrita Laj Ki?' (What is true shame?), she does not directly deal with the issue of women's education, but indicates the role of education in freeing women from unjust and irrational social constraints like purdah.57 Further, an interesting observation of the period was that the Jonaki readers began to include women. Their names appeared in its pages as solvers of riddles and also as contributors.

The eagerness of the women towards education and the corresponding willingness on the part of the menfolk to allow them formal education was a significant departure from the accepted norms of society. In this context, Mrs. P.H. Moore, a missionary wife, gave the picture of the growth of the Nowgong Girls, School. While recording the admission of some new girls in the school in 1880, making a class of twenty girls, she commented that the "natives are just beginning to see the advantages of educating girls."58 In 1883, one of the mission girls (out of only two) sat for the Lower Primary Government Examination held at the Government English School along with 250 boys from the whole district. It

56 Ibid, p.119
57 'Prakrita Laj Ki', Assam Bandhu, Sot-Bohag, Saka 1807-08.
58 Mrs. P.H. Moore, Twenty Years in Assam, Gauhati, 1982, p.33.
was probably the first time girls were allowed to sit for the examination. In a paper on 'Women's Work among the Assamese', presented in the Jubilee Conference of the American Baptists Missionary Union (ABMU) in December, 1886, Miss Keeler mentioned that one of their students Sushila, daughter of Bogi, one of the Bible women, had been sent to Calcutta to study in Bethune College under Lady Dufferin Fund. Sushila secured a diploma in medicine and was appointed in the Dhubri Hospital at Rs.60/- per month. Thus, the Nowgong Mission girls' School could be credited for producing the first Assamese woman with medical qualification.

However, the prevalence of certain customs like child-marriage acted as obstacles in the progress of women's education. Missionaries like Bronson endeavored to retain the pupils' upto age fourteen and fifteen and made efforts to make the curriculum as interesting as possible. The curriculum for girls was strictly confined to the vernacular. Apart from the general subjects like geography, mathematics and history, the girls were also trained in household labor, cleanliness, hygiene and taught ways to make their home pleasant. The example of a Garo girl named Dobaki was often touted as that of an ideal educated girl for 'She and her husband kept their house almost in European style. They had a bathroom, numerous books on shelves, boxes for clothing and all kept in good order.' The missionaries moreover made use of the native dress compulsory in the schools as it earned considerable goodwill form the public.

59 Ibid. p. 48
60 N. Imchen, Remembering our Foremothers, Jorhat, 2003, p.218.
61 The Lady Dufferin Fund which was started in 1885 provided medical scholarship for women.
62 Sheila Bora, ' Presidential Address', NEIHA Proceedings, 26th Session, 2005, p. 8
The girls, dressed in native style, did not find themselves out of place in their traditional surroundings.

With the gradual multiplication of schools, it became obvious that the school was much more than a mere place for learning to read and write. It gave shelter to orphans, especially girls, who otherwise would probably have landed in a prostitute's house. Here many girls found an escape from early marriage and in several cases, girls from these schools got married to educated native Christians and had set much better homes than they could otherwise dream of without education. Further, education helped these girls to be confident and develop a new personality.

Earlier, the parents who sent girls to school, ran the risk of not finding husbands for their educated and overage daughters. But the spread of education created a new breed of young men who expected something more from their prospective brides. The earlier wife needed to be skilled in housework, hardworking and docile, qualities which were seen as incompatible with women's education. On the contrary, the modern housewife needed to be strong-willed and intelligent, qualities developed by education. Hence, much of the earlier negative idea regarding female education had given way to positive attitudes and it became apparent that it would be difficult to get grooms for girls of Upper and middle class Hindu families unless their girls were given some education. The appearance of the first modern Assamese novels at the turn of the last century having romantic heroines like Lahori, Padum Kunwari, and Monomoti roused expectations of a new role of Assamese women to fit the dreams and fancies of

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64 S.Ram. Sharma, op.cit., p. 134
the educated young men of the time. The general belief gained ground that a marriage between an educated man and an illiterate girl was unlikely to be a happy one.

The votaries of women’s education pointed out the tangible benefits to be had from giving girls some basic learning, skillfully interwoven with fables, tales related to moral education which taught the value of obedience, patience, chastity and of course the joy of motherhood. By and large, the aim of education was to create not only competent wives and mothers, but also intelligent companions for the new generation of young educated Assamese men. In the early part of the twentieth century, Padmadhar Chaliha published an article ‘Stree Siksha-Upai aru Upakarita’ (women’s education means and usefulness) in the Assamese periodical Usha, in 1910. Here Chaliha, then a B.A. student refers to modern pedagogical theories to show the importance of early childhood education on the physical, mental and spiritual development of the child. He emphasized the role of the mother as the child’s earliest and most effective teacher and the social benefits to be derived from educating women. Chaliha urged the few educated Assamese girls to contribute poems and compositions to the handful of Assamese journals then being published. He also pointed to the English ladies who gave public lectures, not much as examples of emulation, but for appreciation of the capabilities of women. However, one must not lose sight that though Chaliha laid emphasis on women’s education, it was not to prepare them for work outside the home but to equip them to be better wives and mothers. He therefore insisted that formal education of women must also include training in cooking, weaving,

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65 ‘Usha’, an Assamese literary monthly, first published and edited by Padmanath Gohain Barua from Tezpur, Saka 1828 for 5 years and then published and edited by Madhabchandra Bezbarua from Calcutta for one year in Saka 1826, later compiled and published by Publication Board, Assam, March 2005.
knitting, singing and other feminine accomplishments. Thus, the liberational role of education was made subordinate to the wider social goal which stressed on willing acquiescence, and not a questioning and enquiring mind. Infact, even those women who were encouraged by their husbands and fathers to write in the print media hardly went beyond the contemporary male mind-set of the period which was dominated by brahmanical values like ‘patnidharma’. Padmavati Devi Phukanani (1853-1927), a leading women advocate of social reform and daughter of Anadaram Dhekial Phukan, who championed the cause of women’s education in Assam, published _Sudharmar Upakhyan_ (1884). She argued that women have three dharmas, viz, _bhakti_ towards God, the _dharma_ of ‘Patibrata’ and _Satidharma_.’ The wife who can satisfy her husband through love and service, who in the absences of her husband, never thinks of other men, who, however bad her husband might be, always tries to bring him to the right path with patience and who maintains her relations with both her in-laws and parents, is the most ideal woman.65 There is a total submission of the wife to the husband in her writings and it defines the home as the women’s proper sphere.’ It is a classic example of the views of someone within the framework of a dominantly patriarchal society. Yet, within this ‘proper sphere’ and though more or less conforming to the traditional notions of womanhood, Padmavati Devi pointed out that the most precious duty of women was to develop her mind by learning to read and write. This can be viewed as a change in the thought process of a woman, however moderate the change might be.

“Women interacted primarily with women and it was women who enforced the prohibition against female education. Many of the women who

learned to read before the 1870’s have reported hiding their accomplishments from other women. Even if mothers were lenient with daughters, mothers-in-law and other women in the fathers-in-law home were seldom as kind.67 Hence, if women desired to pursue education, they had no recourse but to depend on men who controlled their lives.

During the period when girls’ schools were being set up in Assam, another factor worth mentioning was that there existed prejudice against co-education even in the primary school stages. People preferred separate schools for their girls and the existing social norms and customs of the people made the British model of schooling difficult, if not possible. 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 separate institutions. However, trained women teacher in sufficient numbers was often not available,68 and this factor alone discouraged many parents from sending their girls to any school at all.

Prejudice, cultural imperative and somewhat few or absence of relevant role models for women at the higher stages of academic life discouraged women from making use of their intellectual talents. As a result in Assam, the percentage of women declined at successive rungs on the academic ladder. Educational expectation for men and women remained unequal largely because marriage was considered as the ideal career for women, whereas the necessity of earning a living was drummed into males from an early stage. Clearly, in Assam as in the rest of India, education took place within a system that was developed for men

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and was only partially adapted to accommodate the entry of women. Curricula, textbooks were all on the basis of sex and an unwritten code of conduct all worked against women. A little arithmetic for girls, but science and mathematics for boys placed girls and boys on an unequal footing at least as far as educational attainments were concerned. Even, when girls from a few families like Hemoprova Bora and Gauriprova Chaliha of Dibrugarh, Lakhiprobha Bora of Goalpara and Rajani Prova Dutta of Bajali ventured into higher education, they were trained to be teachers, nurses and perhaps doctors, as there was a growing demand for female doctors to attend to women. Science, engineering and other male dominated areas were regarded as being too taxing as well as time consuming for girls whose chief goal was to be a successful wife and mother. Even advocates of female education abhorred the very idea of girl becoming doctors and lawyers.\(^69\)

Around the early twentieth century, conservatism and prejudice against girls education no longer operated with the same force as it did earlier. In the beginning female education centered only around primary education. But soon girls began to look beyond the primary stage. Infact, with the increase in the number of educated women, a noticeable change of perception in women towards education could be felt. Formerly, a large number of girls came to school either to be supported or to find a husband and it was difficult to retain them in school. Marriage was the all engrossing thought. Now, a great change has come into their outlook and they looked forward to finishing their course at school. In institutions of the province, girls were reported to be crowding into existing schools, both

girls schools and boys schools.\textsuperscript{70} In this context, it is important to note that with the passage of time and the influence of several factors including that of the government, a gradual change in outlook took place among the people. In Assam, the attitude towards mixed schools started changing with parents releasing the importance of imparting education in formal schools, started sending their girls to school irrespective of mixed pattern or not. Infact, mixed schools were becoming popular.\textsuperscript{71} and the system of rewards as announced by the government to ‘gurus’ of boy’s schools who could admit girls’ in their schools also acted as an incentive in breaking away man made barriers of segregation of students in educational institutions on the basis of their sex.\textsuperscript{72} 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 ‘request 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.’\textsuperscript{73} But as girls were beginning to look beyond the primary stage, and as there were no suitable higher educational institutions for girls in the province till 1910, they either had to discontinue their studies or proceed to Calcutta for continuation of the same. By 1915, however, three Girls High Schools came to be established and by 1936-37, there were thirteen Girls’ High Schools with an enrollment of 3,664 students.\textsuperscript{74} Private enterprises also contributed to the expansion of female education at the

\textsuperscript{70} A.S.A., \textit{GRPI}, Assam, 1883-84, Shillong, 1885, p.p. 61-63.
\textsuperscript{72} A.S.A., Extract from proceeding No. 1-2, Education A, Assam Secretariat, September, 1913
\textsuperscript{73} A.S.A., \textit{G.R.P.I.A.}, 1883-84, Shillong, 1885, pp. 61-63
\textsuperscript{74} A.S.A., \textit{Q.R.P.E.A}, 1932-37, IIB
High School level and during that period both aided and unaided schools flourished.\textsuperscript{75}

Assam, however, did not have any exclusive college for girls until 1936, when the Lady Keane Girls' College was set up in Shillong. By the end of 1940-41, three more Girls' Colleges, namely, the St. Mary's College at Shillong, Handique Girls' College at Gauhati and the Sylhet Women's College were established in Assam. Besides these Colleges meant exclusively for girls, there were quite a handful of girls pursuing both general and professional courses in other colleges within and outside the State. Higher education, confined mostly to elite women, gradually began to encompass women from the other social strata as well. To cite a few examples in this context, Hemoprova Das passed her F.A. examination from Calcutta University, so did Rajabala Das and quite a few others. Again Dr. Durgabasini Das had her medical education in Campbell Medical College while Amalprova Das completed her M.Sc degree from Calcutta University. It is worth mentioning that St. Mary's College in Shillong had a training class for the B.T. (Bachelor of Teaching) and L.T. (Language Teaching) degree.

Initially, the Cotton College at Gauhati did not admit girl students. But later, due to the initiatives of the \textit{Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti} and other like-minded organizations and individuals, women were finally admitted to Cotton College. The practice of admitting women students in men's college in Assam caused some anxious moments for the authorities as some members of Cotton College staff represented that it would be most embarrassing, if not impossible

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid.}
for them to lecture to women.\textsuperscript{76} It is worth mentioning here that when Leela Devi ventured to take admission in Cotton College in 1930, being the first female student of Cotton College, it caused quite a stir. Ultimately, she was transferred to a Calcutta College with the solace of a stipend.\textsuperscript{77} In striking contrast to the situation, it was found that in the session, 1931-32, apart from the increasing enrolment of women students in Cotton College, female students also took part in the annual sports of the College.\textsuperscript{78} Thus, as a corollary to changes in the outlook of the public in regard to position of women, objections against co-education were gradually diminishing.\textsuperscript{79} Further, in view of the growing number of girls passing the Matriculation examination and the absence of a separate college for women, co-education was the only practical course. Thus in spite of the difficulties felt by a section of the advocates and promoters of female education, co-education in colleges came to be accepted in principle without much reservation. The Director of Public Instruction, Mr. Small, in his General Report of 1935-36, had in fact remarked, “Co-education has been quite a success in Government Colleges not marred by any ill effect of which there was at the beginning an apprehension in many minds.” Usha Bhattacharya and Lilawati Devi were among the first Assamese women to study in Cotton College and the first Lady Professor was appointed in 1940.\textsuperscript{80} As the number of girl students increased, the responsibilities have also increased in the same proportion.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{76} A.S.A., \textit{G.R.P.I.A}, 1932-33, Shillong, 1934, p.27
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ibid}
During the quinquennium, 1937-42 in Assam, the question of co-education in all stages of instruction, primary, secondary and collegiate, received special attention. The government decided to ascertain public opinion in the matter and issued a questionnaire prepared by Mr. Small, Director of Public Instruction, Assam.82 With regard to co-education in the colleges, it was found that the majority were in favour under certain conditions, eg. with lady wardens. The D.P.I. Assam, wrote, "It must be said to the credit of the staff and students of the colleges, where boys and girls are reading together that there has been no unhappy incident worth mentioning during the period under review and that the presence of the fair sisters makes the brothers feel that they are in a purer and nobler atmosphere and in a sweeter and more graceful surrounding."83

The changing social environment also enabled many women to continue their education even after marriage. For instance, Usha Borthakur completed her M.Sc. and B.Ed. after marriage. Rajabala Das completed her M.A. and became Principal of Handique Girls' College at Gauhati after marriage. The achievements and efforts of these women, and also lesser known women activists like Kunti Phukanani, a school teacher of Dibrugarh, popularly known as ‘Bar-Baidew’, greatly helped in the cause of women’s education in Assam and ushered in far-reaching changes in the social life of the state.

Educated women playing socially useful roles during colonial rule included among others, Rajabala Das, Indira Miri, Gauriprova Chaliha, Lakhipriya Chaliha, Usha Borthakur, Puspalata Das and the daughters of Jonaki age writer, Ratnakanta Barkakati, namely - Sudhalata, Sukhalata and Santilota.

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83 Ibid.
Incidently, Sukhalata became the first woman B.A and M.A degree holder of Assam. The leader of the Sarbodaya movement in Assam, Amalprava Das, daughter of Hemoprova Das of Dibrugarh (first Assamese woman to obtain F.A. degree in Calcutta and was Head mistress of Girls’ Model High School, established at Dibrugarh in 1893) amidst much obstacles completed her M.Sc. in applied chemistry from Calcutta University and became the first women master-degree holder in science from Assam. Further, Rajaniprava Dutta of Bajali in Lower Assam became the first woman M.B.B.S. doctor of Assam. She was followed by Dr. Tillotoma Roychoudhury, elder sister of Amalprava Das. Leela Devi, the first women student of Cotton College went to study in Calcutta University from where she obtained her Master’s degree as well as a degree in teaching. At a time, when few women ventured beyond the shores of their country, she left for Columbia University, U.S.A., from where she received her Master’s Degree in Education and a diploma in Professional Education. She went on to become the first Assamese female teacher of Gauhati University in the Department of Education.84 Gauriprova Chaliha became the Headmistress of Dibrugarh Girls’ English High school. Two Assamese young women, living in Calcutta, Sudhalata and Sukhalata Dowerah, who incidentally were the first Assamese women post-graduates, became teachers in Crosswaithe College, Allahabad.85 Sudhalata went on to become the Principal of the college. The Assamese periodical, Banhi, lauded their achievements by terming them as the

85 Aparna Mahanta, op.cit, p.45
shining examples of the achievements of expatriate Assamese. Further, Usha Borthakur was the headmistress of Nowgong Girls' English High School, Rajabala Das was the headmistress of Panbazar Girls' High School and later went on to become the Principal of Handique Girls' College in Gauhati. Chandraprova Saikiani became the Headmistress of Tezpur Girls' School, Indira Miri went to London to pursue higher studies, worked in the Education Department at Arunachal Pradesh and later became Principal of Jorhat B.T. College. Usha Bhattacharya one of the first women students of Cotton College, became the Principal of Lady Keane College of Shillong. Apart from undertaking teaching responsibilities, educated women with professional qualification like medicine, also took up remunerative employments. To cite only a couple of example, Lakhiprobha Bora worked as a lady doctor in Dhubri, while Dr. Durgabasini Das worked in a government hospital. Further, in a clear breach of tradition, Sachibrata Roy Choudhury became the first Assamese woman to be recruited in the Civil Service.

Thus noticeable changes took place in the Assamese society. Despite the fact, that spaces were sharply divided between men and women, one could easily observe that as the women became educated, she began to combine in herself the dual responsibility of managing her domestic and professional responsibilities efficiently. There were a number of instances when women manned their homes and also assumed posts of responsibility and respect. Indeed, the women of Assam had come a long way since the time when girls' primary schools were first set up by the Christian missionaries upto the time around the first half of the

86 Banhi, 11:2, 1921, p.15.
twentieth century when women were pursuing higher education and often at co­educational institutions. Such changes were no doubt the censure of the patriarchal public life and any deviation from the prescribed norms or limits set for women no doubt caused considerable stir in contemporary Assamese society. Yet, it was certainly remarkable that one section of women had become assertive and played a crucial role in fashioning their lives. Infact, before the end of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century, women were striving to establish their identities, only that history has gone into the hidden pages of the unwritten records.  

Women's education during colonial Assam also created a new breed of women writers whose writing brought forth a new genre of literature. In 1883, Bishnupriya Devi, a Brahmin widow, who was married to Gunabhiram Barua in 1870, authored 'Nitikatha', a book of morals for children. Padmavati Devi Phukanani published. 'Sudhamar Upakhyam' (1884), the first fictional narrative in prose. Here Padmavati Devi shows in a realistic way the problems of women in society, specially widows or abandoned single women, and how determination and strength of character saves those who have courage and will to fight for themselves. The character of Sudhama, the heroine, is contrasted with women characters in order to highlight her strength of mind and her leadership qualities. Sudhama insisted on accompanying her merchant husband on his business trip and also encouraged the wife of his business associate to accompany them. In the trip, when they were encircled with trouble. She did not lose heart but took the right decisions, to escape the tormentors and ultimately succeeded in regaining her husband and his friend, thereby illustrating the qualities of a modern Savitri,

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87 Monorama Sharma, op.cit., p.15.
the traditional Hindu chaste wife. Padmavati Devi, thus, through her writing was apparently conforming to the male ideal of the concept of the chaste wife, but introducing simultaneously in a subline form a female sensibility by giving her women characters freedom to act in unconventional ways. Apart from *Sudhamar Upakhyam*, she also contributed in Assamese periodicals like *Banhi* and *Alochani* with articles like ‘*Bidhaba*, Ghaini’, *Rukmini’s Bibah* among others. Her writings conformed more or less to the patriarchal notions of society.

A few other early women writers were Swarnalata Devi, Dharmeswari Devi Baruani, Toseshwari Devi and Chandraprova Saikiani. Jamuneshwari Khataniar, who died at the young age of twenty-five, was able to leave a mark as a romantic poet, publishing the first book by an Assamese woman poet, *Arun* (1919). It was however, characteristic of the then low estimation of women literary merit and lack of self-confidence among woman writers, that her book was projected and prepared as a text book for girls’ schools, and not as a first volume of poems by an upcoming poet. The book was published in her maiden name, Jamuneshwari Saikia. In 1926, Snehalata Bhattacharjee, a literary personality and freedom fighter, wrote two novels, *Bina* and *Bemajali*. In 1927, was published the first women’s magazine in Assamese language, *Ghar-Jeuti* (The Light of the House), the mouthpiece of the Assam Mahila Samiti from Sibsagar, under the joint-editorship of Kanaklata Chaliha and Kamalaya Kakati. The *Ghar-Jeuti* reflected the emerging intellectual milieu of the time, especially the aspirations of a section of Assamese women. Nalinibala Devi’s contribution to the literary life of Assam is immense. Her autobiography ‘*Eri Aha Dinbor*’ (The Bygone Days) reflects vividly the socio-cultural and political life of the

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88 Aparna Mahanta, *op.cit*, p.169
period. It was because of her literary enthusiasm, that she was elected as the President of the *Assam Sahitya Sabha* in 1954. Chandraprova Saikiani was another prolific writer of the period. Her works included *Aparajita, Kanthamala, Pitri-Bhitha* and several other articles written in the periodicals. She was also the editor of *Abhijatri*, the magazine of the *Assam Mahila Samiti* published from Gauhati. During the freedom struggle, she exhorted the women of Assam through her writings to come forward and fight for the independence of the country as well as to assert their own right and position in society. There were similar writings by Nurjahan Begum (1905-1973) and Padma Kumari Gohain (1913-1987).

Significantly, all these women functioned within the patriarchal framework. Through their writings, educated women, at the receiving end of male patronage, made appeals for their upliftment rather than demanding for their rights. The theme of the stories and novels of the period mainly centered around rural life with emphasis on community welfare rather than on individuals. Women were depicted mostly as an eternal source of affection, who were ready to discharge their responsibilities at the cost of their own happiness. It is most likely that the women were wary of social ostracism or were themselves unable to fully perceive the egalitarian concept relating to the two sexes.

The patriarchal society of Assam, as elsewhere, posed insurmountable hurdles for women while writing a book or any other creative quests as these were deviations from the prescribed limits set for the women. The education of women and the reading or writing of novels by them was considered by at least one section of the population to be a major cause of domestic destabilizations.
Michael Foucault observes that some people in France believed that the reading of novels by women was detrimental to their health. And a girl who at ten reads instead of running, will at twenty, become a woman who will not be a good nurse. Thus, in the context of the prevailing atmosphere, the very fact that they were able to express their views publicly, however moderate they might have been, can perhaps be considered a big leap forward. The writings enabled women to develop social networks needed to communicate with each other.

As the majority of the writings by women hardly went beyond the prevalent norms of society, which was dominated by Brahmanical virtues like Patnidharma, the question of women resisting patriarchy was a rare though not a missing phenomenon. It was only in the early twentieth century that the Assamese women began to raise their otherwise feeble voice. Chadraprova Saikiani (1901-1972), apart from taking active part in India’s Freedom Movement, championed the very cause of equal status and rights for women. *Pitri-Bhitha* (The Paternal Homestead), 1937, her only published novel, can truly be read from the stance of resisting patriarchy. *Pitri-Bhitta* tries to articulate a woman’s emotional and intellectual responses to patriarchal control and imposition. It throws light on the history of women’s struggle for space in society against hegemonic control and oppression, her ongoing questioning of the role models thrust upon her and her participation in the world that lies outside the appropriation of patriarchy. In fact, Chandraprova Saikiani tries to convey a social message of equality between men and women so essential for social progress. Her thinking was in tune with that of John Locke who also argued that

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subordination of one sex to the other is "now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement, and it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality." 91

Some of the contemptible Hindu practices like Sati, infanticide and the dowry system could not strike roots in Assam. It was the net-effect of the composition of the Assamese society, consisting of a predominantly tribal population along with a non-tribal one and the consequent intermixing of culture. As such it possessed certain characteristics which were peculiar to itself. While modern Assamese historians, taking note of the absence of inhuman practices as 'Kulinism' and 'Sati' in Assam, have also to take note of the fact that women in Assam had to suffer from the evils of widowhood, child-marriage and polygamy as elsewhere in the country.

The practice of early marriage of girls especially among the upper-caste Hindus of Assam as in other parts of India had become a subject of debate among the educated class during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Infact, since ancient times and across the globe, there had been debates regarding the proper age of marriage for girls. Parents seldom took into consideration the consent of their daughters for marriage. The common consideration was that the women had to be younger than men. Marriage was almost a compulsory proposition for the girls as well as the boys.

The early marriage of girls had also some associated problems. For instance, apart from weak progeny, early marriage was also a major cause of early widowhood as the age between the bride and the groom often happened to

be disproportionate. It also contributed to the practice of polygamy among the higher castes, especially among the Brahmins, as they were forbidden to marry off their girls to someone from the lower caste. The social reformers of the period had also expressed concern over the issue and urged the government to fix the age of women’s consent for marriage. The establishment of British rule in India had serious implications on women as they too came within the ambit of the new modern judicial system. The Indian Penal Code of 1860 had earlier fixed the age of consent for legitimate sexual intercourse with girls at age ten. This provision did not entirely satisfy the reformers and consequently the Age of Consent Act, 1891, was passed which raised the age of consent for girls to twelve. Debates over this Act, continued and unfortunately now, “the age of the female when the marriage was consummated could now be publicly questioned ..................” 92

After a brief lull, there was again a revival of interest in the age of marriage and the age of consent of girls. The British Government being keen not to antagonize the reformers and the nationalists with the charge that foreign rule inhibited social reform, gave credence to a bill, Hindu Child Marriage Bill introduced by Rai Sahib Haribilas Sarda in 1927. Thus, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 or the Sarda Act was passed which set the minimum age of marriage for females at fourteen and for males eighteen. The age of consent was not mentioned. 93 The Act was no doubt a compromise and it is another matter that these legislative measures were not as vigorously enforced as they should have been, but the fact that these were placed on the statute book was of great social value.

92 Geraldine Forbes, op.cit., p. 85
93 Ibid, p.88.
The first Assamese news magazine, *Orunodoi*, in its issue of December, 1853, carried an essay on marriage by an anonymous writer, where the writer warned the people about the harmful practice of early marriage as it leads to weak, dull offsprings which perhaps was a cause of early deaths. Early marriage was also said to have posed obstacles to one's further educational pursuits, thereby limiting the means to earn by themselves. The writer was silent on the proper age of mental maturity as the basic requirement for marriage. As the subject was of keen interest both for the people and the Government, the Editor of *Orunodoi* further in its issue of September, 1856, had put forward the opinion that early marriage apart from leading to physical and mental deterioration would also result for weak progeny.94

In Assam, the Brahmin girls were usually married off before attaining puberty. B.C. Allen in *Assam District Gazeteers*, Nowgong, 1905, writes that except in Goalpara, in all other district of the Brahmaputra Valley, the practice of early marriage was not so common other than among the Upper castes which also included some *Kalita’s* as well.95 The girls of other high caste also get married early, though the standard requirement was not always puberty.

The district wise variations of married, widowed and unmarried girls of Nowgong and Goalpara have been shown in the following table of 1905.96

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94 ‘Alap Bayasat Biya Karuwa Anucit’ *Orunodoi*, Sibsagar, September, 1856.
95 B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazeteers*, Nowgong, vol.VI, Govt of Assam, 1905, p.69
96 Ibid, p.69.
The early marriage of girls had a few supporters among the educated Assamese of the nineteenth century. Ratneswar Mahanta in his essay, *Bibah* (Marriage), published in the *Jonaki* in 1889, suggested that girls should be married away before the attainment of puberty.97 Further, the girls were to be sent to groom’s house immediately after the marriage ceremony.98 These views on women and early marriage, were, however, criticized by Kamla Chandra Sarma in the same magazine and in the same year. He was of the opinion that age-old beliefs and ideas should be flexible to fit in present or modern day context as social change was inevitable. Though silent on the proper age of marriage of

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*Jonaki*, an epoch making Assamese literary monthly, published from Calcutta (1889-1899) and Gauhati (1901-1903), collected, compiled and edited by Dr. Nagen Saikia on behalf of Assam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat, 2001

98 Ibid.
girls, he suggested that girls should be sent to their husband’s home only after attaining sixteen or seventeen years of age.\textsuperscript{99}

The voice of educated Assamese women concerning the serious issue of early marriage was mild and rare. However, in the Assamese periodical, \textit{Chetana}, Vol. II, No.1 and No.2, 1920, Chandraprova Saikiani wrote a long article on early marriage entitled, ‘\textit{Balya Bibahar Apakarita}’ (ills of Early Marriage). Here she puts forward the argument that early marriage was not compulsory for Hindu women even when looked from the viewpoint of Manu and other Hindu lawgivers. Saikiani wrote that in Assam, early marriage had come to be prevalent among the four high castes, namely, the Brahmins, \textit{Gossanis, Ganaks} and the \textit{Kayasthas}. Likewise, the \textit{Sudras} of Barpeta and Goalpara also followed suit. In her opinion, the practice had greatly harmed the interests of the girls and the parents of such girls can be said to have committed sins, though unknowingly. The author laid emphasis on the close relationship between women’s health and the practice of early marriage which in turn affected the health of the offspring’s. She viewed that the proper age of marriage for girls should be eighteen and twenty-five for boys.

Interestingly, Chandraprova Saikiani, herself, was a victim of child marriage and experienced the outcome of such practices. She, however, was able to break free from the bond and regarded that immature couples could not properly understand marital relationship and the duties and responsibilities associated with it. In her short story, ‘\textit{Swayam Bhara}’ published in the \textit{Chetana}, Vol. III, No. VI, 1921, she advocated for proper education of girls and proper

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
selection of groom by the parents. Further, she asserts that girls should be allowed some freedom in selecting their own husbands.

Thus, Assamese women, though aware of the evils associated with early marriage, only a few like Chandraprova Saikiani could go beyond the spaces permitted by the patriarchal society to publicly preach against such evils. However, such voices though few and feeble had profound impact upon the future socio-economic life of modern Assam.

**Proportion of Unmarried per mile of each sex in certain age-groups.**

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Among the many disabilities of women, the condition of the Hindu widow was pathetic. It had triggered much debate in Indian society in the nineteenth century. The passing of the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 (Act V of 1856) was a major intervention by the colonial Government in the social practices of the time. The Act, which sought to facilitate widow remarriage, however did not succeed. But the enthusiasm it generated resulted in new legislations like the Native Marriage Act III of 1872 and the Age of Consent...
Act, 1891, which awakened a large section of the people. The net result was that it benefited women.

The educated Assamese men soon got involved in the debates concerning the widows and their re-marriage. In March 1858, an anonymous writer, who could be none other than Gunabhiram Barua wrote an article in the Orunodoi supporting widow re-marriage. In his article, he quoted from the ‘Manu Samhita’ that widow-remarriage was permitted in the Hindu laws and that it was practiced among the lower castes of Assam and Orissa. An ardent admirer of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Gunabhiram embraced the Brahmo faith in 1869. And like Vidyasagar, he criticized the tortuous customs governing the lives of the Hindu widows. His drama, ‘Ram-Navami,’ the first Assamese social drama which appeared serially from March 1858 in the Orunodoi was based on the theme of widow-remarriage. The play was most likely inspired by ‘Vidhava Vivaha’ by Umesh Chandra Mitra. The play is about ‘Navami’, a child widow, who became pregnant as a result of her secret affair with Ram and had to commit suicide as she could not bear social stigma. She expressed the plight of widows as, ‘If somebody is born, it should not be as a girl and if she becomes a widow, she should not be as at the early stage of her life.’ In 1870, Gunabhiram did the heroics by marrying a Brahmin widow, Bishnupriya, which was the first registered marriage in Assam. For this he had to face ortracisation from his contemporary society.

Gunabhiram, was however not the sole crusader upholding the cause of widow re-marriage in Assam. Hem Chandra Barua made use of both reason and

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100 Mr. G.Ra, An Assamese form Calcutta, ‘On Marriage’, Orunodoi, December, 1853
ancient Hindu scriptures to sensitise the Assamese society and upheld the cause of widow remarriage. He tried to provide *shastric* justifications for the introduction of widow-remarriage in Assam. Hem Chandra Barua himself refused to marry a second time after the death of his wife in protest against the prevalent social injustice to women in the Hindu Society. His commitment to social reforms found expression primarily in two of his creative works, *Kaniyar Kirtan* and *Bahire Rongsong Bhitare Kowabhaturi*. There were also some lesser known writers like Neelkakanta Barua, who through his novel ‘*Mem*’, serially published in Assamese news magazine, *Bijuli* from Calcutta in Vol. II, 1891, depicted the plight of the Assamese widows, especially the higher caste Hindus. It was perhaps the first novel in Assamese which advocated widow remarriage. In keeping with the above view, Lakshminath Bezbarua, a new generation Assamese writer who was directly exposed to the literary and political influences of post 1857 Bengal, was strongly in favour of widow remarriage, but ridicules the whole idea of equality between the sexes as demanded by the supporters of the western form of women’s emancipation. His views on social reforms were those of a traditionalist rather than of the radical reformist.

The American Baptist Missionaries were also keen observers of the problems of Assamese widows. Their writings and sermons had some usual elements of exaggeration, yet there was hardly any doubt that the Assamese widows had also to lead a very miserable life. Miles Bronson writes about widowhood as, “The *Sastras* forbid their ever marrying a second time. On the death of a husband, the ornaments were stripped off and their head shaved. They became the drudge and servant of family where they dwell. How cheerless is life

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to such! It must however be noted here, that in Assam it is not the general practice that the widows had to shave their heads.

In the early twentieth century, Laksmidhar Sarma, another propagator for widow remarriage wrote 'Virodhini' in 1930. It is about 'Lalita', a widow who had the courage to become a mother outside wedlock when her paramour feared to confess that he fathered the baby. Lalita declined to identity the person but decided to live life with her baby without the father's name. Her courage made Hem, the baby's father, realise his mistake and confess in public that the baby was his. Lalita questioned, 'chastity, love, all are good. But what about the woman whose love has dried up and had no one to love her after her husband’s death? What was she to do? Life becomes meaningless for her. Let widows who want to abide by the rules follow them. But how can those who want to respond to the call of nature and start life afresh, be forced to follow falsehood? For her spirit of defiance of social norms, Lalita became a Virodhini (rebel). The portrayal of such a woman as the central character in a novel of the period was a message that the society was bound to change sooner or later.

The absence or very few writings on widow remarriage by women writers makes it difficult to comprehend the views of women on this important social issue. The women obviously could not be expected to raise the question of widow remarriage themselves as there was every possibility that such women would have been socially boycotted or condemned which no woman at that time could have asked for. Generally, women blamed themselves or their fate for their

104 Dr. Kunja Medhi, ed, Women and Social Change. Gauhati University, 1996, p. 75
misfortunes. In an article, *Vidhaba* (Widow) written by Padmavati Devi Phukanani, and published in the *Banhi* in 1913, the author indulges in glorifying the husband as God and the importance of his existence in a women’s life. She urged that women should be ideal companions to their husbands, faithful and compassionate. Being a widow is as bad as being dead, but if a woman unfortunately becomes one, she should spend the rest of her life in memory of her late husband. Thus, Padmavati Devi did not prescribe widow-remarriage inspite of being one of the earliest educated women in Assam. This is a very typical example of the socialization process of the women, when from early childhood they are groomed into the dominant patriarchal notions of the society and they speak like any other male chauvinist would until they are exposed to different ideas which would make them aware of the social realities and thus help in creating within them the sense of their own identity.

A poem with the same theme was published in the *Banhi* with the title, ‘*Banri Bamunir Bilap*’ or the cries of a Brahmin widow, written by a widow, Sri Krishnakant. Both the name of the poem and of the writer is curious as available literature did not provide any such terms or names for the women. Therefore, it is doubtful, whether the poem was composed by a widow. It seems possible that some reform minded men composed it, using the name of a woman to sensitise the people upon the plight of widows.

However, the discourses on widowhood and widow remarriage, as was apparent, cannot be termed as a movement, as the majority of the participants

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105 It was brilliantly portrayed by a man, Benudhar Barua, through his poem, ‘*Vidhaba Bilap*’ published in the *Assam Bandhu*, 1885.
107 Monorama Sharma, *op.cit.*, p. 14
were not prepared for any great upheavals by advocating widow remarriage as it would have questioned the dominant patriarchal ideology. The women generally sought solution of their problems from the Almighty. It was almost impossible for the women to dislodge the imposed cultural pressures and raise their independent voices at that time. But with the formation of the Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926, under the leadership of Chandraprova Saikiani, an educated social activist, a campaign was set afoot for the removal of disabilities afflicting women of Assam, which also included an agenda for propagating widow remarriage. The Assam Mahila Samiti soon became the medium for the expression of women’s opinions. Women in fact began to define their interest, propose solution, and take action only after they formed their own associations.

But a large section of the common population, comprising both the tribal and the non-tribal, remained unaffected by the discourses on widow remarriage. It was because, Assam had a multi-ethnic population, and hence strict Brahmanical rules and regulations were not adhered to by the majority of the common people. Further, the predominantly tribal composition of the Assamese society could not be totally altered by external religious and cultural forces alone. The non-tribal society of Assam was also considerably influenced by the tribal culture even as the process of Aryanisation of the tribal’s continued. Further, there existed various forms of widow remarriages among a large section of the people. But this, however, should not suggest that all the tribal or lower caste widows remarried after the death of their husbands. The remarried women were generally known as ‘Dhemnis’. B.C. Allen mentioned of another form of widow remarriage prevalent in Nowgong district. In this form, the widows from the Brahmin and Ganak community were sometimes married off to lower castes men.
The women lose their higher caste status and in course of time, this resulted in
the formation of a separate caste, called Boriya and Sut to accommodate them
and their children.\footnote{B.C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Nowgong, Vol VI, 1905.}

Compared to the discourses on widow remarriage and early marriage, the
Assamese educated class seemed to be oblivious of issues of \textit{purdah} or seclusion
of the women, imposed by the customs and practices of the society. Among the
upper class families, the women were shielded from public-view from other
males who were not relatives. The women of the lower class were relatively free
from such seclusion as elsewhere in the rest of India. Noted Assamese poet,
Nalinibala Devi (1898–1976), a woman from upper class family in her
autobiography, \textit{Eri Aha Dinbor} (The Bygone Days)\footnote{Nalinibala Devi, 'Eri Aha Dinbor', Gauhati, 1976.} mentions the practice of
\textit{purdah} among the higher class women and the restrictions imposed on their
movements. Ironically, inspite of the progressive ideas of her family, Nalinibala’s
home was also no exception. In an issue of the \textit{Chetana}, Vol I, No. V, December,
1919, Kusum Kumari Devi singled out \textit{purdah} as a major obstacle in the
women’s march to progress and asked the women themselves to play a leading
role in its eradication. With the spread of western education and the movement
for independence which required the participation of women, a handful of women
came to realize the need to erase the concept of \textit{purdah} first from their own self
as well as of the men.

Women organizations or \textit{Mahila Samities} like the \textit{Dibrugarh Mahila
Samiti} formed in 1915, the Nowgong \textit{Mahila Samiti} formed in 1917, and the
\textit{Assam Mahila Samiti} (A.M.S.) formed in 1926 under the Presidenship of
Chandraprova Saikiani, brought about a change in the thinking of at least a section of women in Assam. Till then, women were required to sit behind the bamboo curtains in public meetings. The concept of purdah was also deeply embedded among the majority of the educated men, and it found reflections in organisations like the Assam Sahitya Sabha, where there was a screen dividing the male and the female participators during the sessions. Chandraprova Saikiani attended a meeting of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1925 at Nowgong as the sole female representative. While sitting on the Dias along with male members, she noticed that the women participators were sitting behind a bamboo curtain, especially erected for the occasion. Considering it to be greatly humiliating, she stood up and exclaimed: “Why are the women in our society confined to a cage? Is it not a matter of shame and disgrace for the whole nation that women have to hide their faces in the presence of men .................. sisters why do you sit in cage like structures? Who dares to prevent you from sitting in the open space.” In no time she and her associates pulled down the screen. This radical action reveals the changing attitudes and roles of women in Assam.

Narayani Handique in her Presidential address at the Golaghat session of the Assam Mahila Samiti appealed to the women to discard purdah in whatever form it might exist. She expressed the opinion that seclusion of women was not a tradition in Assam. Infact, the purdah system entered Assamese society due to the migration of outsiders during the British rule.

While giving representation before the Hartog Committee (education commission) in 1928, Suniti Bala Gupta, a School Inspectress of Assam, argued

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111 Dr. Kunja Medhi, ed, Status of Women And social Change, Gauhati University, 1996, p.61.
112 Sadiniya Asamiya, Vol 12, Issue 18, 1929.
for the expansion of women's education in the province. She put forward her argument on the basis that with the exception of the Brahmins, the *purdah* in no form existed in Assam. Girls belonging to the non-Brahmin community could move about freely. \(^{113}\)

Gradually, a section of the Assamese men too became keen to end the practice of segregation between the two sexes in the public places. The women, especially the educated section, also began to voice their disapproval over the practice of seclusion. Further, with the rise and spread of nationalism and the national movement for independence, the participation of women became an integral part for success of the Congress movement because the nationalist project would be incomplete without the active support of its womenfolk. The emerging nationalist consciousness did structure national and sexual identities in ways that facilitated the nationalist project. Indeed, women's own lives were reshaped by nationalist needs. Women leaders like Chandraprova Saikiani and Puspalata Das in their meetings suggested that women should discard *purdah*, but that was to do more with the symbolic implication of women leaving their isolated and segregated lives at home and stepping out onto the streets. Domestic values like seclusion and segregation were re-invented and reoriented in order to become enabling ones. Their nationalist participation in the public sphere was perhaps the first occasion when women were exposed to a male dominated public space and the male gaze. However, public participation of women to a large extent was limited and dependent on family dynamics within the household.

Female education also had some impact on Hindu Caste prejudices. The Christian missionary, Miles Bronson in one of his sermons written on September,

\(^{113}\) *Ibid*, 9-12-1928
The Barpeta session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha was attended by two women representatives, namely, Rajabala Das and Chandraprova Saikiani. Here Chandraprova gave a speech on untouchability. It transpired that persons belonging to the lower castes were not allowed to enter the Barpeta Kirtan Ghar (a Vaishnavite Shrine). Chandraprova did not remain silent on the issue but through reason and forceful oration protested against the injustice. Women, individually or under the umbrella of the Assam Mahila Samiti and other social organizations worked for the upliftment of the Harijans. Infact, women’s role in social movements like Harijan upliftmment under Gandhi’s leadership was reflected in the novel, ‘Kalyani’ (1939) written by Atul Chandra Hazarika. Kalyani’s moral courage, her unsuccessful attempt to open the temple door for the untouchable and her subsequent sacrifices was an example of conservatism vis-a-vis liberalism and the exploiters vis-a-vis the symbol of the liberator of the oppressed.

Women’s education had also ushered in decisive changes in the thought process of women. The educational experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced a ‘new woman’ with interests that went beyond the household. Women began to experience increased opportunities for the expression of their individuality. For instance, in the cultural field, women like

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114 H.K.Barpujari, ed., op.cit., p-180
116 Geraldine Forbes, op.cit., p. 64
Aidew Handique and Mohini Rajkumari came out to act in films ignoring social norms. Aidew Handique became the first Assamese women to act in a feature film, *Joymati* in 1935, which incidently was also the first Assamese film and was directed by Rupkowar Jotiprased Agarwalla. In the same film, Leela Devi, who was the first female student of Cotton College,\(^{117}\) was chosen by Rupkowar to sing for his immortal song, 'Luitore Pani Jabi O Boi'. She was, therefore, the first playback singer of Assam. Her passionate and patriotic rendering of *Aji Bondoki Chondere Samagata* had immortalized Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury's memorable masterpiece at the 1926 Congress Session in Gauhati. Mohini Rajkumari, apart from being known for her acting skills, went on to become an honorable member of the jury. These 'new women' were infact part of a modernizing movement which sought to modify gender relations in the direction of greater equality between men and women.

Education had also made women conscious regarding the health and nutrition of their children and members of the family. Many persons of the Vaishnavite Sect did not approve of taking anti-pox vaccines.\(^{118}\) (pox was a common occurrence then). Educated mothers were able to understand the usefulness of such vaccines and tried to convince the people of the importance and benefits of the same. Further, in some interior villages of Assam, there was the custom of keeping pregnant women in solitary rooms which were unhygienic. This constituted one of the reasons for high mortality among both the woman and child. There was also reluctance on the part of the woman and family to consult male doctors. Gradually, with the spread of education and the growth of

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\(^{118}\) Conversation with Smti Pumima Borgohain, retired Govt. H.S. subject teacher, Guwahati.
scientific temper and awareness among the people, especially women, the unscientific and unhealthy practices and beliefs relating to healthcare were done away with.

The last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, witnessed a social awareness among the educated Assamese due to the impact of Western rationalism and the reformist trends in the Indian Renaissance. The period was also marked by a growing tendency to critically analyse the evils within the Assamese society and also of the evils introduced into the Assamese society by foreign rule. Thus, apparently the status of women and the question of evolving a meaningful change in them was an issue of great concern to the nineteenth century reformers in Assam as elsewhere in India. While lack of formal education, early marriage and prohibition of widow remarriage, segregation, seclusion and restrictions on movement were identified as the evils or problems to be overcome, lectures, social organisations and literature provided the attack. Women organizations like the Mahila Samities came to be formed in Assam which had much implication on the status, role and activities of the women. These societies were relatively free from male tutelage though not free from patriarchy. They sought to develop friendly cooperation among the womenfolk, interest them in the world outside their homes and arranged lectures and meetings on practical subjects. However, these apparently simple objectives had far reaching implications as they provided a forum for women’s demands and a place for education. The education offered was related to the role of women as a nurturer and focused on food and nutrition, child care etc. Women, as the educators of children, were also made to understand that they had a vital role to play in the future of the nation. While they had always been
taught to care for their families, they now needed to go beyond it and learn to help their fellowmen. The new role envisioned for women was not in conflict with the 'traditional' role. In fact, it encouraged and enlarged their social role which included activities outside the home, the activities though were not intended to introduce tension or conflict into the family life. Thus, the British colonial rule brought about considerable awareness and gradual reforms in the sphere of the Assamese women's social positioning and ultimately in the evolution of the modern Assamese women. However, it was never an unquestionable acceptance of western modernity. "The women were to emerge as 'equals' but not equal in the sense demanded by Western feminists, 'not of claiming aggressively an identical place with men in the world but claiming an equaling, though in a different place, not performing identical duties with men but performing different duties." The social changes brought about in the status and role of women were no doubt within the patriarchal social norms, but in the long run it produced unexpected and unanticipated consequences. For many women, the family no longer exercises total control over their destinies. Assamese women, however, still have a long way to go to attain gender justice. But the issues and unsolved problems of the moment must not be allowed to negate the victories of the past, where enormous sacrifices were made by women to bring about the change. The colonial experience and the reform zeal of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have led women, though gradually, to become participants in the redefinition of their futures.

120 ibid, p. 379