3

Educating Women; Shaping the Nation

This chapter examines various ideas associated with women’s liberation generated during the colonial period especially as part of the reformist and nationalist agenda. The focus is, as is evident, on education as an indispensable part of the formation of nationalist discourse and the contribution of women to this discourse through their writings. To be the self-conscious arbiters of their own destiny it became imperative for women to rethink her role in family, marriage, and politics, which in turn required the development of their rational faculties through learning. In the chapter, a body of literature will be dealt with, which were written on the issue of women’s education, addressing various aspects of it, by women for whom writing became a strong medium of expression during the colonial era. Education, indeed, was seen as important for improving the condition of women and this in turn was related to the other important project that of the progress of the nation and national culture. Education had the dual aim of reinforcing the conventional home-oriented stereotype of girls and training them to keep up with the changing needs of the times. In fact, the woman thus created was modeled on the Victorian genteel middle class woman.

The chapter is divided into three sections: the first section gives a general overview on education and its relation to colonialism, focusing on various aspects, which defined the education policy adopted by the colonizers and the response it generated among the colonized. The second section gives an overview of the very
early stages of women’s education in Assam and discusses a body of texts by Assamese male writers which raises the issue of women’s education and prescribes the kind of education Assamese women should be given. Their stress was on making women a part of the rising nationalist consciousness as symbols of culture and the ‘private’ as against the ‘public, thereby leading to the emergence of a discourse on modern domesticity at the point of the rise of a civil society from where nationalist goals could be achieved. The third section examines the ‘woman’s text’ for women’s responses to the crucial issue of education as another stance adopted by patriarchy to restrict her movements.

I

The colonial encounter made it imperative for the natives of the colonized lands to review their own culture and religion for at least two reasons: 1.) in order to reform certain social practices which might hinder the advent of modernity; 2.) in order to facilitate the quest for freedom accompanied by a process of self-definition, which may be regarded as laying the foundation stone for future participation in the public life of the nation (which had already come into existence as an imagined space). Both these points look at two different views that define the two very distinct phases of the Indian freedom movement – one being the reformist view of the first half of the nineteenth century and the other being the revivalist nationalist view of the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The initial honeymoon with the ‘west’ and the ‘western’ was over by the end of the nineteenth century and the wind of realization and revolt was blowing all over India, resulting in a nationalist discourse, which revolved around a notion of
selfhood and identity. While examining women’s role in the colonial encounter and the emergence of the nationalist discourse, Firdous Azim notes that

Women played a central role in this process, as both colonizer and colonized took recourse to notions of captured and debased womanhood as justifications of their position or struggles. Thus, the colonialist justified his ‘civilizing’ mission as one that would ‘liberate’ women from the oppressions arising out of superstition and barbarity, and the colonized mounted their liberation struggles with an appeal to the mother nation, and saw their task as liberating the conquered motherland” (Azim 2002: 396).

The part that women played in this whole process has already been discussed in the first chapter, and it is interesting to see whether the discourse of freedom initiated by the colonized is different when women enter the world as active agents and actors. “Women’s voices are important in this context, as women are situated at the crossroads, as it were, between struggles for freedom and the definition of self” (Azim 2002: 396).

In The Duties of Man Giuseppe Mazzini points out that the task of the country was ‘to educate men’, the task of the family was ‘to educate citizens’. ‘Woman was to be a man’s equal in civil and political life, but her role in the education of the nation’s progeny was distinct:

The mother’s first kiss teaches the child love; the first holy kiss of the woman he loves teaches man hope and faith in life….Through her, the Family, with its divine mystery of reproduction, points to Eternity (in Sluga 1998: 1553).
Women’s education therefore was limited to raising her children instilling them with values of being a future citizen of the nation. Her role and activities were limited to the home and family.

Women played a central role in Rousseau’s political project. He had also advocated the necessity of the creation of social sentiments in a man while he is a child through his mother’s nursing and care. Such a “domestically administered education” according to Rousseau, was very important for forming good citizens (Fermon 1994: 434). Rousseau in *Emile* attempts to describe the way in which Sophie or woman should be brought up and educated in order to be the perfect companion for a man, particularly Emile. Regarding her education he writes:

They should learn many things, but only such things as are suitable. Then I consider the special purpose of woman, when I observe her inclinations or reckon up her duties, everything combines to indicate the mode of education she requires…. The children's health depends in the first place on the mother's, and the early education of man is also in a woman's hands; his morals, his passions, his tastes, his pleasures, his happiness itself, depend on her. ….A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young (Rousseau).

It is evident that the writer’s aim is to domesticate her further and not to emancipate her by educating her. “Rousseau respected and feared women: believed them capable of reforming political life by participating in the reform of men and
women in their earliest socialization, and feared that women were capable of causing the destruction of states” (Fermon 1994: 433-34). That is why her containment within the home was necessary according to him. For the benefit of the state she should be employed in “engendering sociality in earliest childhood” and be a subordinate companion to her husband (Fermon 1994: 435).

Women’s education has always been a matter of concern and contestation for educationists and political thinkers who have participated in forwarding discourses of nationalism trying to locate women’s role therein. Discussions on education in colonial India were common with many thinkers elaborating on the need to widen one’s horizon, to move beyond one’s immediate surrounding, to climb out of one’s narrow and secluded space to view the larger world, to open one’s mind to newer ideas and be a part of the flow of ideas that mark the progress of the human kind. Briefly speaking ‘education’ was one of the areas, which was affected by colonial modernity and reshaped by it. This whole preoccupation with the need to acquire more and more knowledge begins with the age of Enlightenment, which marked a new era not only for the Western world but also for countries like India, which had to confront and experience the ‘west’ and the ‘western’ in the nature of colonialism. The Enlightenment was less a body of doctrine than a general outlook, which derived its basic view from the premise that the human mind is capable of knowing and understanding the natural order. Alexander Pope’s famous couplet on Newton points at this very premise of the Enlightenment:

Nature and Nature’s Laws lay hid in Night,
God said: *Let Newton be, and All was Light.*

(Pope 1964: 317)

Everywhere there is the possibility of human advancement of knowledge. In this context, the search for happiness and a higher standard of morality is a major preoccupation. Education lies at the heart of this way of thinking, since, humankind is a species that is susceptible of modification and therefore of improvement. The Age of Enlightenment perceived itself as a time in which human reason was shedding its great light upon nature and humanity, banishing the darkness of the middle ages with its scholastic philosophy, religious dogmatism and political absolutism. Eighteenth century thinkers like David Hume pronounced the distinctions among human races through their writings assuming the inferiority of non-European races. He made use of the Black race as an example insisting that nations existing in the polar region and between the tropics were incapable of the higher attainments of the human races (Waugh 2006: 367). A closer postcolonial look at the eighteenth century Enlightenment’s philosophical and historical discourse presents a picture where a paternalistic view of English nationhood becomes evident. Enlightenment philosophy not only established the natural rational grounds for the advancement of knowledge and progress towards moral perfection (countering religious superstition) but also provided a cover up of the violence accompanying the appropriation of lands from indigenous inhabitants and the institutionalization of chattel slavery. This dual imperative fractures Enlightenment discourse making it Eurocentric and allowing a kind of justification for being the white, enlightened, superior civilization to the non-West, non-European world.
In his message for National Education Week in 1918, Aurobindo Ghosh tried to argue for the need of what he calls ‘national education’ in order to define and organize India as a free ‘nation’ He says:

National Education is, next to Self-Government and along with it, the deepest and most immediate need of the country, and it is a matter of rejoicing for one to whom an earlier effort in that direction gave the first opportunity for identifying himself with the larger life and hope of the Nation, to see the idea, for a time submerged, moving so soon towards self-fulfillment. Home Rule and National Education are two inseparable ideals, and none who follows the one, can fail the other, unless he is entirely wanting either in sincerity or in vision. We want not only a free India, but also a great India, India taking worthily her place among the Nations and giving to the life of humanity what she alone can give….The effort to discover and organize a system of national education is part of this general effort of self-liberation, of self-finding, but perhaps the most central movement of all, in the end even the most important; for it is this which will give shape to the spirit of the nation at present in a state of rather formless flux. It is, in fact, no more than a chaotic press of tendencies; a national culture alone can give it form and consistency; and national education is the attempt to create and organize that culture (Ghosh 2003: 411- 414)

The excerpt from Ghosh’s speech allows an insight into the various ideas of nation, home-rule, or, in other words, freedom. Home-rule will ensure freedom and this can be attained by first attaining the status of nation-state. In this nationalist discourse when we include women’s voices in the form of texts written by women on various aspects including the all important aspect of education what are the
changes that take place in the grand narrative of the discourse generated by the male intellectuals of the time? Are these voices different or are they conditioned to repeat the same things? In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, generations of elite Indian nationalists found their subject positions, as nationalists within this transition narrative, that at various times and depending on one’s ideology, hung the tapestry of ‘Indian history’ between the poles of the homologous sets of oppositions, despotic/constitutional, medieval/modern, feudal/capitalist (Chakrabarty 1996: 228). Dipesh Chakrabarty defines in very clear terms this narrative, which was shared by the imperialist, Indian reformist, and later nationalist imaginations. He identifies an interesting and contesting story that develops from this narrative. On the one hand, there was an attempt on the part of the imperialists to ‘reform’ the natives who lacked ‘a spirit of freedom’ and to further ‘bind them’ to British interests and make them their ‘subject’. The other side of the story, and a different one which wanted reforms to happen, yet which denied the notion of subjecthood for the natives desiring ‘citizenship’ and ‘nation-state’ was told by reformists like Raja Rammohun Roy and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya. It was believed that British rule would, in general, help India’s ‘regeneration’. With this belief, the British were able to exercise the sort of dominance that Macaulay, one of their most articulate personnel, enunciated as early as the 1830’s. This was a dominance that was expected to survive colonialism itself, bringing the highest glory to the nation (Chandra 1992). However, in doing so, an entire generation of Indians, knowingly or unknowingly, was caught up in the web of tradition and modernity; at times, we could find them moving away from the Indian past and seeking relief in the ‘modern’ Western
culture. This sort of response was difficult to sustain and gradually the need to reappropriate an Indian past from the British was felt. This gave shape to yet another story narrated by the reformist nationalists of the early half of the twentieth century that focused on identifying an ‘inner core’ of the Indian tradition that needed to be kept pure and untouched by imperialist intervention. “There were differences about what constituted tradition and about ways of reclaiming it, but there were virtually none with regard to the idea of tradition as the most effective counterpoint to the cultural aggression of colonialism” (Chandra 1992: 71).

It is evident from the discussion that this narrative had different phases and it was in a state of continuous flux. Nevertheless, the modernity-tradition polarity existed and different meanings came to be gradually attached to the oppositional categories that at times attempted to discard the opposition itself. The case of education can also be analyzed in these terms. In a verse composed for Assam Bandhu (1885-86), Gunabhiram Barua writes:

O [the] people of Asam! It is my humble request,

Open your eyes and see around you,

Forever to be in slumber is not right

Open your eyes and look around once.

There is no other jati⁶ like yours where laziness alone rules

Which other people have you seen?

Sleeping on their beds laid for eternity

Raise your heads and look...

(Assam Bandhu: 12-15)
Anandaram Dhekial Phukan in “Englandar Bibaran” praises the British race for their desire to learn, and to know which have made them civilized and wise. He writes: “My beloved friends if you desire to be civilized, learned, and happy then awake from your slumber” (Orunodoi: 130). The initial encounter with a race seemingly superior to one’s own resulted in understanding the reasons for their ‘superiority’ trying, at the same time, to inculcate similar qualities in one’s own race. For Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua the solution lay in acquiring proper education, which will allow one’s knowledge to increase manifolds. Later Indian nationalists, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, abandoned such abject desire to be ‘Europeans’ themselves thereby rejecting the claim made by modernists and liberals that imperialism was really the messianic harbinger of civilization to the uncivilized world. The project of introducing English literary studies from the mid 1820’s to the mid 1850’s in the Indian curriculum served a predominantly religious and moral function, which Gauri Vishwanathan sees as ‘mask’ by means of which the colonial government ensured ‘conquest’ over the minds of people (Vishwanathan 1989). Macaulay’s Minute paved the way for the transition from religious to secular motives in English education, at the same time, achieving through education, a comparable system of stratification in India on the theory that division of labor was the key to England’s economic prosperity. However, modern studies promised an upward mobility, which was denied to a majority of Indians and this paradox exposed the motives of British colonialism among the Indians. As Vishwanathan rightly notes:
At one level, education as part of the state is complicit with the reproduction of an economic and cultural order. But because education is also expected to provide opportunities for advancement, it becomes an arena of social conflict, and this tension ultimately reduced the British administration to a position of acute vulnerability and paralysis (Vishwanathan 1989: 164).

In this tension was hidden the beginnings of resistance to a dependency role. The inherent contradiction in the educational policies of the colonial government needs to be analyzed. On the one hand, modern education is responsible for the creation of the modern individual - one who can actively participate as good citizens in the affairs of the state, and on the other hand, the individual’s movements needed to be restricted for the sake of the colonial government’s success. The tables, however, were turned in order to display ‘the loss and recovery of selves under colonialism’ in the words of Ashis Nandy. The resistance itself speaks volumes of the ordinary Indian’s psychology of colonialism refusing to be mere “gullible, hopeless victim of colonialism caught in the hinges of history” (Nandy 1983: xv)

Gauri Vishwanathan examines the ways in which the British rule used literary education as a definite ‘mask’ of ‘conquest’ by evoking the humanistic ideals of enlightenment that were adapted to their administrative and political imperatives. Throughout her study, an interesting relationship between the institutionalization of English in India and the impulse to ‘dominate’ and ‘control’ develops (Vishwanathan 1989: 3). The issues that need to be addressed the moment one thinks of the history of education in India, specifically colonial India, are related to its nature and purpose. The British carrying their torch of
enlightenment wanted, as Macaulay claimed, to rescue the “ignorant and barbarous” Indians by introducing them to a language they have been “craving” to learn (Macaulay 1835: 7-9). He said that “we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay 1835: 13). Even though Macaulay makes such claims, it needs to be clarified that more than preparing Indians for a future government of their own, the British administration wanted to impress on their minds the concept of a Western style government which would facilitate the business of state (Vishwanathan 1989: 35). On the one hand, the educated Indian mind was impressed by the wider horizons that the Western contact provided them with and on the other, wanted to cross the limitations that were imposed on them as part of the education package.

The Filtration Theory of Macaulay and John Stuart Mill, promoting a small elite group through education in English, contributed to the linguistic stratification of Indian society. The little civil society that education helped to form consisted of the higher castes, particularly the Brahmins, of the major towns of British controlled India. The better-off families of Brahmin and other higher castes quickly exploited facilities for English education in order to equip their children with the new skills, knowledge, and certificates required for employment in colonial administration. However, the British had other things in mind; for them the idea was that the guiding light of rationality, emanating from puritan Christianity and scientific reasoning (no conflict had yet developed between the
two) was essential to purge the ‘passionate’ Indian mind, which would otherwise lead to certain ruin, both material and spiritual. In this regard, Krishan Kumar writes:

This light was precisely what Indians lacked from the English point of view. The great fear of the English bourgeois, that he would ruin his fortunes by giving in to ‘passions’ and his sense of conquest over the fear in his own life were both transposed on the Indian society. This is where the metaphorical darkness of India and the Indian mind, representing its 'ignorance', acquired its emotive force. For the early nineteenth century planner of education in India, the path was clear: to pierce India's ignorance with the light of western science to enable Indians to lead a life of reason, with their passions under control. Knowledge was what the new education was supposed to give, but its inner agenda was to improve conduct. Opportunity to receive knowledge at an English school became an excuse to become disciplined, to have one's morality improved. Education in the sense of learning became less important than the moral influence it was supposed to exercise (Kumar 1989: 48).

There is no denying the fact that education indeed was the chief driving force behind the Renaissance, which brought with it a changed social and intellectual climate. Indians were left to deal with the situation emerging from the rhetoric of the modern. The dispute over this word was thus central to the discursive strategies through which a subject position was created enabling the ‘Indian’ to speak (Chakrabarty 1996: 233). The themes of ‘discipline’ and ‘order’ were related to ‘education’, which together contributed to the shaping of the nationalist imaginings of aesthetics and power.
The promotion of women’s liberation by the reformists were much criticized in the Rakhmabai case. This was a case where “a young woman inspired with ‘fine’ notions of independence and freedom which Western education had instilled in her” (Chakravarti 2000: 168). Rakhmabai was a young English-educated woman who frequented the lectures and meetings of reformers like Sakharam Arjun who was also her step-father. She was married to Dadaji Bhikaji, a distant relative of the family. Chakravarty opposes the manner in which individual cases were brought under the singular category of the ‘Hindu’ law. It came to be accepted that Rakhmabai had a right to deny consummation of a marriage, which took place as a contract signed by her parents. This new woman (the image of Rakhmabai and others like her) were compared to the Hindu mythical figure of wifely devotion, Savitri. Education in the Western manner came to be criticized because of its failure to realize the importance of eternal values of Hindu culture embodied in the figure of Savitri. The movement for women’s education is generally described as having been formed by the need of a rising middle class to adapt its women to a Western milieu. With the growth of British education and new employment opportunities for men, the public-private dichotomy grew into an opposition between the world and the home. That is to say in this phase of the social reform movement the home came to represent traditions which were disregarded as bigoted or barbaric and it was in contrast to this space of ‘home’ that the ‘new world’ outside was viewed and hence liked more and more. There was also the need to reform the domestic sphere, which could be done only by allowing women a particular kind of education. This ‘new world’ being
full of possibilities, opportunities attracted the women who could now dare to venture out into the unknown territories of reading, writing, and publishing.

II

A survey of the situation in Assam at such a critical juncture requires a brief understanding of the social factors at work at various phases of its history. The Ahom rulers never encouraged education among the common people; learning and scholarship remained the monopoly of the higher castes. Tillotama Misra notes that the education system prevalent in Assam was similar to that of the traditional Hindu system existing in the rest of the country (Misra 1987: 35). Because of this, Assamese literature never flourished during the pre-British period. Even after the coming of the British, introduction of Bengali as the official language and the medium of instruction in the vernacular schools of Assam acted as a major deterrent to any development that could have taken place.

In colonial Assam, the policy adopted by the British towards their multicultural subjects was, as elsewhere in the colonial world, to introduce competition between the communities by persistently playing off one colonized community against the other. While the English-educated Bengali Hindus from Bengal and Assam’s Bengali dominant districts of Cachar and Sylhet were given preferential treatment in government appointments, the Assamese were overtly recognized as the indigenes with a right to the native land. However, as educated workforce could be recruited from Bengal, the provincial administration was not prepared to
build up appropriate educational infrastructure. As a result, the annual output of educated personnel was very small. In fact, the administration could be accused of ignoring the pathetic condition of the few high schools that existed in the state (Bora 2003: 56-57). The slow progress of English education at the Gauhati school and the one at Upper Assam created a notion in the minds of the local authorities that the “Assamese would never improve in European knowledge” (Mills 1984: 107). This was strongly refuted by Dhekial Phukan in his “Observation on the Administration of the Province of Assam”, which he submitted to A.J. Moffat Mills in 1853. He made it clear to Mills that the people, particularly the upper classes, were anxious to educate their sons in Western science and literature. Several families had already sent their sons to the Presidency for higher education. Mills accepts Phukan’s plea and he further writes in his report, “We are inclined to believe that the slow progress made by English schools in Assam must be imputed more to defects in the system of instruction pursued in them, than to the want of zeal and promptitude on the part of the students” (Mills 1984: 106). Moffat Mills regrets the abominable state of education in Assam and suggests the following ways to improve it:

In our humble opinion, the following arrangements appear to be best calculated to promote the cause of education – viz., the substitution, in the schools, of the Vernacular language in lieu of Bengalee, the publication of a series of popular works on the different branches of Nature and European knowledge in the Assamese language, the establishment of a Normal school to train up a body of teachers, and the creation of a separate department for the study of Sanskrit in the several Vernacular schools (Mills 1984: 106).
Miles Bronson (1812-83) a linguist who came to Assam after Nathan Brown and Oliver T. Cutter, met Assamese intellectual Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and involved himself in fruitful discussions with him on similar issues. Dhekial Phukan also found an ally in the American Baptist Missionaries to carry forward his fight against the threat to Assamese cultural identity. When in 1853 Judge Moffatt Mills was sent from Calcutta to investigate the administration of Assam, Bronson and Phukan discussed matters and the latter submitted a long memorandum to the judge while the missionaries also sent their opinions, supporting Assamese. The memorial espoused the cause of the persecuted Assamese language. In his report, Mills cited the opinion of Nathan Brown acknowledging him as the best scholar in the province and expressed his judgement in the following words:

I think we made a great mistake in directing that all business should be transacted in Bengali, and that Assamese must acquire it (Neog 2003: 63).

He recommended the changes suggested by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan regarding the matter. Even the council of education decided on the switch over to Assamese (Neog 2003: 63). However, the administration did not pay heed to this counsel. Phukan and his allies had to work out alternative means to carry forward their message. Their efforts took the shape of Orunodoi (‘Dawn of Light’) a monthly magazine in Assamese that was first published from the Sibsagar Mission Press in January 1846, with Rev. Nathan Brown (1807-1886) as its first editor. At first, it was published in the newspaper form, later on enlarged, and published as a
magazine. However, it is also equally true that the missionaries took up the cause of the Assamese language not just out of affection for the language. It was primarily because they very soon realized that people of all sections did not read books written in Bengali widely. Their mission of spreading the Gospel of Christ would not be fully realized until they made the effort to work out the language of the people. In this regard, Tillotama Misra argues that the missionaries wanted to reach out to the people of the remote region but books in Bengali remained unintelligible to them (Misra 1987: 84). Yet, the people here were ever grateful that the Baptist leaders initiated a struggle for the revival of language. On 25 July 1873, the Lieutenant Governor issued orders under Act XXIX of 1873 (which gives powers to the Governor General in Council to order the use of any other language and script than Persian in lieu of the latter and Section 337 of the Criminal Procedure Code) for the use of Assamese in Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, and Lakhimpur.

The coming of the American Baptist Missionaries to Assam in 1836 opens an interesting chapter in the history of Assamese language and literature, as well as in introducing a large section of the Assamese population (not being restricted to the elite section of the Assamese society represented by stalwarts such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua) to the benefits of education. Their contribution towards giving a proper shape and institutionalizing female education is noteworthy. The wives of these missionaries, Mrs. Eliza Whitney Brown and Mrs. Harriet B.L. Cutter, also involved themselves in the cause by starting a school for teaching Assamese to children in Sadiya. After some time the
missionaries moved to Sibsagar (presently a district in Upper Assam) and started their activities there. On the one hand, the British administration made Bengali compulsory in vernacular schools, while, on the other, these two women established six Assamese medium schools in Sibsagar. Maheshwar Neog praising the works of the missionaries, records the enthusiasm of the local people thus:

There was a demand for more schools [in Sibsagar] and the village people offered to build schoolhouses and to maintain them as well as teachers. By 1846, the number of such Assamese schools became fourteen. This proved to the missionaries that the government was following a wrong policy in thrusting Bengali upon the Assamese pupils as they hardly acquired that language in spite of the Government vernacular schools (Neog 2003: 61).

In order to facilitate learning, the Baptist Mission started the first Assamese newspaper titled *Orunodoi* (The Dawn of Light). *Orunodoi* became a widely read magazine containing news items of general interest, religious information, moral fables, stories of other lands, history, geography, information about scientific discoveries, etc. The articles in *Orunodoi* carried news from different parts of the civilized world with the hope that the people of Assam would adopt superior values and habits.

The information on the last page of every issue of *Orunodoi* stated that it was a “monthly paper devoted to Religion, Science and General Intelligence”. Religion in *Orunodoi* meant the Protestant faith the missionaries professed. However, an in-depth analysis of the articles published tells a somewhat different story. Under the caption “Religious Intelligence”, we get articles on Church
schools, English Baptist Mission, details regarding conversions in various parts of India and so on:

…in Sittoura village near Agra city nine men embraced the Christian faith and became a part of the community on 13th October (Orunodoi: 104).

Actual statistics regarding the number of Christians in various parts of the country and various European countries were also to be found. It is for us to analyze what impact these articles were meant to have on the minds of the local people reading them. Innocent minds were given a direction showing them that the Protestant faith was the only means of salvation.

This perhaps was the aim of the Missionaries in publishing Orunodoi in Assam. Science referred to the kind of enlightened knowledge of new discoveries and ‘rational’ thinking that the West always felt it their duty to carry to the rest of the world. The ignorant natives here needed general intelligence regarding the advanced civilizations of the West. All these were implicitly part of the entire project of Orunodoi or the ‘Dawn of Light’. However seeing things in a more positive light, we find that the ‘quest’ for learning and knowledge that is so much related to the Bengal Renaissance also finds a place in the pages of Orunodoi. This was an excellent attempt made to bring the people into direct contact with a variety of subjects including description of the various parts of the globe. It went a long way to extend the intellectual horizon of its readers. It is here that we find the mention of the necessity of female education in Assam. In one such article referring to nearby Bengal where women were taught to read and write by their progressive husbands and the zeal shown by women in this new enterprise, the
writer expresses the desire that similar tendencies will develop even among Assamese women in the near future (Orunodoi:160). Victor Hugo Sword while assessing the role of the missionaries in this regard writes thus:

To the missionaries education was essential for girls as well as for boys. They raised the position of womanhood and thus they elevated the home from a mere stopping place to a sanctuary of affection. Their educational program stands as a monument to their wisdom (Sword 1992: 146).

In fact, women’s education in Assam owed its beginnings to the missionaries and their wives.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan⁶ and later on Gunabhiram Barua among others were actively involved in carrying the impact of the New Awakening in Bengal to Assam. The stress was on education and thereby an awakening to a wider world. In Dhekial Phukan’s 2nd and 3rd volumes of Asomiya Lorar Mitra (Assamese Boys’ Companion), there is an extensive discussion of the various civilizations of the world. Geography, cartography, life sciences, religion, history, virtues, and vices among human beings are some of the subjects discussed. He laid stress on acquiring knowledge. For him being civilized was associated with the desire to acquire more and more knowledge. In an article titled “Description of Gyan Sabha and Schools” in Orunodoi (Orunodoi: 66) the writer compared the then state of education in Assam to that of Bengal and stressed on the need for more schools. Education for girls was also a matter of concern for men like Dhekial Phukan, Hem Chandra Barua, and Gunabhiram Barua. In his article titled “Regarding Immoral Conduct” Dhekial Phukan writes:
Assamese people do not educate their girl child. A girl’s mind is equally capable of acquiring knowledge just as a boy’s mind is. That is why it is necessary to educate both girls and boys for prosperity (Orunodoi: 28-32).

The role of the American Baptist Missionaries and their wives in establishing schools for girls’ was an important step taken towards female education in Assam. Haliram Dhekial Phukan (1802-32) author of Assam Buranji supported female education. Juggaram Khargharia Phukan (1805-38) supported the ban on sati and recommended the reforms undertaken for the welfare of women (Guha 1991: 208). In a letter from an Assamese in Calcutta, carried by the Orunodoi the writer says, “The primary duty of parents is to provide equal educational opportunities to both boys and girls” (Orunodoi: 949). In this article, he expresses his worries regarding the state of education in Assam and the lack of concern among the people of Assam in general. Stating the case of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan the writer of Asomiya Lorar Mitra whose book was not received with enthusiasm by people, he writes that the attitude towards acquiring knowledge by reading good books needs to be inculcated. “Without the desire to learn a nation and its people cannot progress” (Orunodoi: 950).

Even though there were local and indigenous features in the Renaissance in Assam, yet it cannot be dismissed that its chief strands were influenced by the climate in Calcutta. The re-awakening that was experienced by Bengalis there influenced the young Assamese minds who were residing there for reasons of education, trade, etc. Hiren Gohain in an essay titled “Adi Unabingsha Satabdir Assamar Nabajugar Uparat Bangalir Prabhab” (Influence of Bengali upon
Nineteenth Century Assam) provides numerous instances of the connection between the great Bengali minds and the Assamese intelligentsia both in Calcutta and Assam. Hemchandra Barua never set foot in Calcutta but letters written by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan from Calcutta kept him informed of the changes that were taking place there because of what later critics call the Bengal Renaissance. Gohain concludes his essay on the note that influence was there; there is no doubt about that (Gohain 1993: 125-134). However, Assamese people had the ability to avoid exact imitation of Bengali thinking and manners; they knew where to draw the line. Whatever they gained they used for spread of education among their own people. Debates over women's education in nearby Bengal in the 1860s were broadly divided chiefly along two lines. Radical Brahmos felt that there was no justification for instituting a separate curriculum for girls or limiting the level to which girls should be educated. Mainstream Brahmos and the more enlightened sections of the Hindus advocated a limited education for girls, which would serve the major purpose of making women intelligent companions for the emergent bhadralok and better mothers for the next generation. The education of women, it was argued, involved a very different set of values from the rationale, for instance, behind agitating for home rule and, later, legislative representation. If women were excessively liberated, there was no guarantee that they would accept either the moral straitjacket imposed on them or the sexual double standards allowed for men. Blind aping of Western manners continued to be a major irritant in the eyes of a section of the Assamese intelligentsia. A satirical poem published in Mou refers to Asamiya babu as one who wears trouser and hat to office and carries an umbrella instead of the traditional Asamiya japi (Bora 2003: 93).
The entire notion of women’s education has been the subject of much debate and concern, which we find in the pages of *Assam Bandhu*. Different strands of opinion on why women should be educated and what their education should consist of could be distinguished in various articles. On the one hand, we have the orthodox men who were uncomfortable with the notion of ‘stree shikkha’ and directed their attention to create models of social roles for women, and the activity of school going for girls. On the other, we have the reformists who advocated education but at the same time limited the kind of education, she should receive. This makes one realize that women were doubly burdened – she now had to be a domesticated, chaste, good wife and at the same time, acquire education and run an ‘orderly’ home and be an efficient mother. Ratneswar Mahanta in the first part of his series titled, “Ghainir Kartabya Aru Stree Shikkha” (Wife’s Duties and Woman’s Education) writes thus:

> Why do we marry?….The chief reason for marriage is the need of a partner to perform family duties well. The man will protect the family from external hassles and the woman will take care of the home and hearth and bring up the children. She will be a provider of food and water to the members of the family, keep an eye on the servants; in a word, she will look to all small and big details of the family (*Assam Bandhu*: 192).

The new woman needed to be a devoted wife, running an ‘orderly home’ for her husband, being a nurturer and an efficient mother. Reforms were directed at making women better wives, mothers, and better housekeepers. Mahanta, in the same article, stressed the fact that education for women was necessary to make
them better homemakers and not make them learned. The writer does not consider learning only to read and write as an integral part of women’s education. Rather, to perform the household chores, and to be a dutiful wife, are the most important subjects for a woman’s education. Learning to read and write should follow this goal. A woman need not learn reading and writing to perform the duties of her household well. She has to be happy and satisfied in this selfless service of her family – her life seems to be a process of continual self-sacrifice. Once a woman has learned this art of self-sacrifice for the welfare of her family, according to Mahanta, she has acquired ‘education’ in the real sense of the term.

In another article titled “Swadhinata Ne Sheshasarita” (Freedom or Waywardness) Ratneswar Mahanta critiques the terms ‘freedom’ and ‘dependence’. Taking the example of Savitri, Sita, and Sakuntala, he says that devotion to one’s husband, respect for elders, performing household chores make the lives of these women sacred (Assam Bandhu: 162). He finds fault in the reform movement, which has allowed women to step into the world outside leaving the confinement of the home. Differentiating between vernacular and new education, the writer says that the latter has made Assamese girls wayward and self-willed. This he says is not the freedom that a woman should get. He urges his readers to recognize the blunder they are committing by letting foreign education ruin the integrity of their culture (Assam Bandhu: 164). This again was the problem with the entire ‘woman’s question’ of the nineteenth century, when the reformers perceived what a woman should be like. The reformers of the nineteenth century, as Sujata Patel argue, believed in the doctrine of the ‘separate spheres’ whose roots
were in biology (Patel 2000: 294). The differences between the sexes were explained in terms of ‘natural differences’ which legitimized different social and cultural roles for men and women in society and on whose basis, moral prescriptions underlying their behaviors and interaction with each other were built.

In his article, Mahanta differentiates between men and women’s education thus:

There are many differences between men’s education and women’s education. Man acquires education primarily to earn a livelihood and maintain his family. Hence, it can be said that capital is the chief reason for a man’s education. However, the root cause of a woman’s education is not this. Woman’s education is primarily meant for the betterment of domestic life…. The most important part of woman’s education is learning the performance of a wife’s duty; this should be the subject matter of a woman’s education (Assam Bandhu: 192-194).

The obvious question that may be raised at this point is regarding the aim of women’s education. There are different opinions regarding what women’s education should comprise of but there is ambivalence about its aim. Was it to make women independent or the equal of men in the family and to register a space for them in the public life or was it to make them better equipped as mothers/wives to lend their men-folk social support in the colonial setting? The ‘woman’s question’, it may be argued did not see education for women as a self absorbed, self centered activity engaged in creating individuals with minds to think, perceive, and, create. It was meant to be, in some cases, the basis of a companionate marriage, and in some others, to train the woman into a family oriented piety. Later on with the emergence of the nationalist discourse, it was meant to create good
housewives and mothers and thereby strengthen the domestic sphere – a space which was to remain untouched by the colonial power, a space which revivalist nationalists of the late nineteenth century valorized as the domain of residual freedom. This inner space needed to be reconstructed and woman as wife and mother held the key to this reconstruction.

For men like Ratneswar Mahanta who tried to conceptualize the aspect of modernity that had touched the Assamese genteel class, it became necessary to contextualize their concerns within it. New governance, politics, and, the entry of English education created a new awareness among a section of the society who became deeply involved with Western knowledge and ideas. This resulted in the creation of an Assamese intelligentsia who contributed towards the emergence of a ‘new woman’, whose roles would be specified by the new patriarchy. Purnakanta Sarma in the article “Stree Shikkha” (Women’s Education) describes the role played by divine power, which has given a woman the responsibility of child bearing. The writer argues that this means that woman should remain within the four walls of her home, rear her child, and take care of other domestic responsibilities. He states in very clear terms that it is not necessary for women to go out of their homes and earn money. This relates to what was considered a woman’s most distinct and precious quality – that is her ‘purity’, which needed to be preserved to protect the race, and indulging in economic work outside the domestic sphere would lead to domestic unhappiness. The problem which this writer states echoes similar tendencies in Bengal – the problem with the educated woman who might pose a threat to her male counterpart. The writer agrees that a
girl’s mind is far better equipped to grasp knowledge than a boy’s; that she can learn texts quicker than a boy can. However, disregarding his own proposition he goes on to encourage young women to regard their husbands as ‘debota’ (god) and to satisfy them in all possible ways (*Assam Bandhu*: 476-481).

In articles such as this, there arises a fear about a new category of the evil woman: the educated woman as potential husband-killer and in the case of Purnakanta Sarma as a potential destroyer of a happy conjugal life. Tanika Sarkar’s essay “Strishiksha and Its Terrors: Re-reading Nineteenth century Debates on Reform” takes note of fears regarding *strishiksha* (women’s education).

1. A literate woman could make secret assignations of an illicit nature.

2. Fear about the impending threat of widowhood for the educated woman.

To quote Tanika Sarkar here:

> There are two separate dyads at work here – First, the educated woman and the immoral one. Second, the educated woman, and the widow. They can be run into each other to make up a single, triangulated structure (Sarkar 2002: 157).

The structure that Sarkar introduces is that of the educated woman, the immoral one, and the widow. The desire for learning makes an educated woman immoral as it is an extra marital desire – traditionally she is not supposed to desire for anything that is not related to her husband. Therefore, by this act of desiring she terminates her need for the husband and destroys conjugal life. In this very article, quoting the shastras he also says that woman are inherently weak as they are the ‘bamanga’ or
'the left limb of man’ which is known to be weaker than the right. Was this the general opinion of select Assamese literati or was it the general opinion of the entire Assamese society as well? In response to this particular essay by Purnakanta Sarma we find an editorial note by ‘Sampadak’ or editor (Gunabhiram Barua) where he writes:

The human race comprises of both man and woman. If woman is the weak left limb and man, the strong right one then there will be a human being that will be blind in one eye, deaf in one ear, short and weak on one side, tall and strong on the other. It is clear from the above article that according to the writer the way this human being will live its life is the best way to live on this earth….Such attempts will not be fruitful. Arguments that go without reason and justice are weak and therefore they cannot hold for long (Assam Bandhu: 481).

It is clear from the editorial note that Gunabhiram Barua was in favor of creating a public space where debates and discussion regarding crucial issues could be generated. Jogendranath Bhuyan in “Assam Bandhu aru Assamar Samasamoyikata” writes that even though Gunabhiram himself was a strong advocate of education for women, yet he could not contribute greatly towards the development of this in Assam. Bhuyan says this in reference to articles published in Assam Bandhu, which show disregard for women’s education.

III

The Papers and discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong of the Baptist Mission in December 1886 published as The Assam Mission of the
American Baptist Missionaries has brief descriptions of educational measures adopted by the Missionaries in various parts of Assam. One such paper ‘History of the Gauhati Field’ by Rev. C.E. Burdette describes the establishment of a girl’s school in 1850 in Gauhati (Burdette 1992:49). In the year 1886, another school for girls was established with a few Garo girls who came with Mrs. Burdette from Tura and a few local Assamese girls. It is thus evident that Baptist Missionaries as well as a few educated literati were taking steps towards primary education for girls. They contributed immensely towards the development of overall education in Assam. H. K Barpujari notes that women from reputed families usually restricted their movements to the threshold of their homes and even if they went out, they were never ‘seen’ by outsiders. There is an obvious indication that a form of ‘purdah’ was prevalent even in this part of the country. Barpujari notes that Mrs. Barker who was taking the lead in opening a girls’ school, relied on the ‘bazar’ girls as her students. Though there is no indication as to who these ‘bazar’ girls were and why Mrs. Barker used the term ‘bazar’ at all, yet it may be understood that these girls were not from reputed, upper class families. Towards the end of 1867, a school was started in Guwahati with a total number of 15 students all from the upper strata of society (Barpujari 1983: 67).

All these took place in Assam when in the rest of the country important events were happening: in 1849 J.E.D Bethune founded the Calcutta Female School in 1849; Charles Wood’s Despatch on Education of 1854 suggested that the government should start to develop the area of women’s education; from 1857 Lt. Governor Halliday drew Vidyasagar into official schemes for girls’ education.
1857 was the year when Gunabhiram Barua’s *Ram Navami Natak* a play on the problem of early marriage and widowhood and its related sufferings was published. Prasenjit Chowdhury regards this text by Barua as an example of self-introspective criticism, which may be regarded as a particular kind of nationalism wherein the subject engages in redefining the self on Western models (Chowdhury 1991: 3). Navami’s sakhi Jayanti’s library consisting of Bengali books, which were easily available apart from *Orunodoi* and *Asomiya Lorar Mitra*, depicts how print culture had revolutionized the reading habits making books available for women enabling women to engage in reading while at home. In Navami’s desire to free herself from old traditions which deny a woman her right to live, in Jayanti’s attempt to fill her friend’s life with happiness and Navami’s mother continuously urging her to read more and more Assamese books, traces can be seen of the spirit of renaissance which was at its highest pitch in Calcutta when Gunabhiram was there between 1851 and 1857. Calcutta as the centre that controlled the political as well as economic affairs of British India was an ideal place for generation, reformulation, and exchange of newer ideas. This Calcutta connection was very crucial for the coming of a new order, a new way of thinking to Assam. Perhaps this influence led Gunabhiram Barua to send his daughter Swarnalata⁶ (1871-1932) to pursue her studies in Bethune School in Calcutta when she was just nine years old i.e. in 1880. Nineteenth century Calcutta abounded with great names of religious and social reformers, scholars, literary figures, and journalists who together formed an image of ‘renaissance’ that marked the transition from medieval to modern. However, restricting ourselves to merely this analysis would make it seem that female education in Assam was merely an offshoot of the
tremendous change that was happening in nearby Calcutta. Education and issues related to it need to be grounded in the context of what was happening in Assam; what were Assamese women thinking, reading etc. Proper analysis in this direction would provide interesting insight into the kind of modernity that was making its presence felt in the Assamese society.

Through the article titled “Asomiya Suwalik Bujani” (Advice to Girls of Assam) the writer, Kamalalaya Kakati creates awareness about ‘stree-shikkha’ in order to have good progeny, which will result in a better and healthier race. Language and health are a nation’s wealth, which needs to be preserved and nurtured. Uneducated mothers who remain unaware regarding basic health, hygiene, prevention/treatment of common ailments will bring up sickly children and the health of the ‘race’ will be affected in that way. However, she recommends only primary education for women, which will be sufficient for them to be good mothers and wives. An existence beyond these relations was not even imagined for women (Ghar Jeuti: 42-43). Such an education, no doubt, will make women literate but will not make them learned, wise, or even empowered. Kamalalaya Kakoti in her presidential address in Kunwarpur Mahila Sabha on 30 June 1929 points out that women have to be efficient to claim her due rights and register a space for herself even in the world outside her home. In order to do so women need to be educated. Education, according to the writer is not merely the ability to read Bengali or English novels. Along with reading and writing women need to be educated in child rearing, housekeeping, nursing the sick and elderly, among other tasks for the smooth running of the household. She points out that educated
housewives and mothers will be in a better position to perform their tasks
efficiently and with confidence (Ghar Jeuti: 746).

Alaka Patangia’s article “Tirotar Shikkha” (Woman’s Education) accepts
the basic difference that society imposes on different kinds of education for girls
and boys contextualizing female education and its consequences in those times.
The writer assumes that learning to be an excellent homemaker is the primary
requirement for a girl and when a girl is equipped with all knowledge related to
running of a household she may be regarded as ‘educated’ in the real sense of the
term. She further writes that to analyze the requirements of a household and to take
necessary steps to maintain happiness and keep the home intact constitutes the
perfect curriculum for women’s education (Ghar Jeuti: 823). The connection
between housekeeping and education that the writer draws reminds one of the
reformulation of the ‘home’ with an ‘educated’ woman equipped with tools and
means of perhaps imitating the disciplined Victorian homes of the colonized. On
similar lines, Alaka Patangia also insists on the need for women to know basic
arithmetic in order to run a household smoothly. She writes:

It is very important that young girls know the technique of measuring weights of
various commodities; to add up and calculate the grand total without making
mistakes so that when they grow up to be housewives they can avoid unnecessary
hassles in their future lives (Ghar Jeuti: 824).

The project of education is related to the project of becoming individuals and to the
project of building a civil society among the natives, which could facilitate the
enterprise of empire building. Education, thus, was perceived as the chief agency
for accomplishing the great moral agenda of colonialism. “Irrespective of the success of the colonial government in educating the masses, the rhetoric of education would provide the legitimate ground that the colonial enterprise always needed, especially in the moral climate of the Victorian age in England” (Kumar 1989: 47). Bourgeoisie domesticity and the role played by modern individualism which involved the exploration of the ‘interiorized private self’ depended as was justly identified on the successful implementation of modern education among the natives. Rousseau’s insistence that freedom is man’s birth right in the opening lines of his *The Social Contract* is the key to understanding the modern individual. Education was thereby perceived as the means by which the desire to be modern could be fulfilled by a section of the Indian society. However, women’s education as is evident from the texts discussed in this chapter was not aimed at merely creating ‘individuals’ out of these women but to make certain that equipped with the knowledge of ‘domestic science’ they contribute to the domestic transformation on European models.

In yet another article by Dibyalata Baruah “Stree Shiikkhar Bishoye Ekashar” (A Few Words on Women’s Education) the writer reproduces a chart originally prepared by Karuna Devi on the kind of education that a girl should receive during the age of nine to thirteen years after which she usually is married off according to the prevalent custom of the society. The chart is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>TIME SPAN (in months)</th>
<th>AREAS/BOOKS</th>
</tr>
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1. Housekeeping skills  2  Grihashri, Barendra Randhan etc.
2. Health education  2  Khadya katha; child rearing, motherhood, and nursing.
3. History of India  4  Stories of history, kings and emperors, Mughals and Indian scholars etc.
4. Description of India and other countries of the world  4  Travel writing
5. Arithmetic  6  Addition, substraction, division
6. Religion/Theology  4  Ramayana, Mahabharata, Chandi &Geeta (written in Bengali)
7. Bengali Literature  12  Domestic articles, Sishu Bholanath, Ektara (Kumud Mallick’s), one or two novels like Sansar, Anandamath, Krishnakanter Will etc.

The writer further adds:

Apart from these areas if anyone is interested in teaching or learning Sanskrit and/or music, it should be done after the marriage of girls at the appropriate age

(Ghar Jeuti: 842).

The course outline given above claims to prepare young girls for their life after marriage in their new homes. Karuna Devi in no way denies the necessity of marrying girls off at the age of fourteen or fifteen. Education is treated by her (and other writers like her) as a preparation for life after marriage when she needs to be a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother, and above all a good homemaker. Once again, the nationalist agenda of strengthening the domestic sphere and creating a perfect
home, which will breed the future citizens of Assam desh, is prioritized. Baruah, however, as a conclusion to her article mentions that a woman’s duty does not end with limiting oneself to household problems alone. She further writes:

Even in the world outside the home, there are a number of duties to be fulfilled. However, what are missing are our experience, urge to move ahead, and a good syllabus (for women’s education) which will be appropriate for our times (Ghar Jeuti: 843).

Instead of merely talking about women’s education Baruah seeks to give a proper shape to what women’s education should be like.

In doing so, however, she fails to consider Assam’s own peculiarities, its geographical differences, its socio-cultural differences, etc. Instead of merely translating, she should have designed a course meant specifically for girls of Assam. Books by Assamese writers, which could find a place in a curriculum for girls, could have been identified by the writer. By that time the print medium had allowed the publication of a number of good books by men and women. In order to resist the opposition that a section of Assamese intelligentsia promoted, it was necessary that women like her take the issue of girls’ education seriously and strive to establish a balanced curriculum.

Regarding similar issues Malavika Karlekar writes:

Debates over women’s education in Bengal in the 1860s were broadly divided along the following lines: radical Brahmos felt that there was no justification for instituting a separate curriculum for girls or limiting the level to which girls
should be educated; mainstream Brahmos and the more enlightened sections of the Hindus advocated a limited education for girls which would serve the major purpose of making women intelligent companions for the emergent bhadralok and better mothers for the next generation. The education of women, it was argued, involved a very different set of values from the rationale, for instance, behind agitating for home rule and, later, legislative representation. If women were excessively liberated, there was no guarantee that they would accept either the moral straitjacket imposed on them or the sexual double standards allowed for men. These subconscious insecurities took a hysterical form occasionally as in the response to the educational and later professional successes of Kadambini, the first Indian woman doctor (Karlekar 1986: 26).

Dibyalata Baruah in her essay also had commented that even though Bengal was far more developed than Assam in the matter of female education, doubts and suspicion regarding its consequences were still there which is an issue discussed in detail by Malavika Karlekar, Tanika Sarkar, Sumit Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee and Judith E. Walsh among others.

In fact, Kadambini Ganguly’s becoming a doctor and starting practice in the year 1886, created ripples throughout the country including Assam. In December 1886, Bolinarayan Bora in an article titled “Tirotar Ban Ki?” (What are the Chores of Women?) writes:

There is a new approach now of giving pen and paper to women. This approach has not yet been adopted in Assam but in nearby Bengal it has made its presence felt. It is not wrong to educate women but at the same time, it is not right that women should be allowed to sit for B.A and M.A examinations like men. It is also
improper that women become doctors and lawyers and start governing men (Bora 1886: 2).

Against such a predominant discourse women, addressing such delicate issues needed to formulate two levels of resistance – the first, towards their male counterparts who had very low opinion regarding educated women and second, towards colonization and its intention of assimilating western discourse and the specificity of local conditions in India which required women to behave in a certain manner.

Chandraprava Saikiani’s article “Assam Mahila Samitir Dwittiya Basarar Karjyabiboron” published in the second year of Ghar Jeuti addresses the gathering primarily of women as being an exhibition of the strength of womankind; the beginning point of a kind of awakening of women, which is the first of its kind in Assam. She describes Assam as the land that gave birth to and nurtured quite a few remarkable women who have excelled in various fields. For the speaker this woman’s gathering can contribute in a number of ways towards the progress of Asomiya jati (Assamese race). It is evident from this that women’s ‘liberation’ was not the only thing that was in the minds of these women. In the second article in this series, she gives a detailed account of the activities of women like Joymati, Mulagabharu who had participated in both public and national life in their own ways – Joymati by suffering, and Mulagabharu by fighting (Ghar Jeuti: 589). Strength, perseverance, and patriotism are qualities that were always there in the blood of Assamese women. The Ahom court, Saikiani states, abounds in various accounts of how women participated in courtly affairs and in taking important
decisions. Rajmau or the king’s mother played an important role whenever the king and his ministers were in a fix (Ghar Jeuti: 589). In spite of carrying the legacy of such activism, Saikiani fails to understand why women’s awakening taking the shape of a movement is regarded as merely a result of Western influence. She admits that there are still two opposing schools of thought regarding women’s education even though the school that is against it is actually dying out.

Saying this she turns her attention towards the running of the Samiti, which was formed in 1926 under the aegis of Benudhar Rajkhowa in Dhubri. She gives a detailed account of the number of members, which had increased on a yearly basis, as well as of the voluntary donations received for the smooth running of the organization. In her discussion of the various proposals undertaken in the Goalpara conference in 1927, interesting information emerges. First, we discover that Assamese girls were studying in Calcutta Medical College. The first proposal taken was to ensure that these girls get good treatment in those institutions and to demand for a university in Assam for the benefit of local girls and boys (Ghar Jeuti: 590). Second, women in Assam were traveling in rails and ships for various reasons. The proposal that was the fourth out of a total of ten was to make sure that women traveling in rails and ships could do so in comfort and necessary steps should be taken in this direction. The fifth and sixth proposals are important with regard to the discussion on the state of women’s education in Assam. The fifth proposal was to ensure first aid, primary medical facilities, and education on health and hygiene in girls’ schools and the sixth one was to increase the number of girls’ schools in Assam. The writer mentions that there were merely four schools
operating, opened with aid from public. However, the government representative who was present there announced that he did not have the necessary power to do anything in this regard, as primary education did not fall under his jurisdiction (Ghar Jeuti: 591).

The writer gives us a plethora of names of women who were involved with the working and running of this organization. She gives the readers a description of the work undertaken by the Samiti, which in one year’s time opened its branches in Guwahati, Shillong, Goalpara, Mornoi, Barnagar, Geruwa Gaon, and Tezpur. This rapid expansion is by itself enough to get the feel of women’s awakening that was taking place. In terms of the history of the women’s movement, the early decades of the twentieth century mark the acknowledged beginning of a fresh phase in women’s organizing as is evident from the individual case of Assam Mahila Samiti. “The educational experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” it is said, “produced a ‘new woman’ with new interests that went beyond the household” (Forbes: 1996: 64). The ‘social’ came to be defined as a space where not only men but also women could organize and work for community welfare. The “new demands of becoming modern” set a new criteria with promotion of female education, raising of the age of marriage, and the encouraging of scientific methods of child care including the introduction of health and hygiene as subjects in schools (John 2000: 3823).

Nurjahan Begum in her article titled “Stree Shikkhar Bixoye Duaxarman” (A Few Words on Women’s Education) regards education as the key to progress for every civilization. She too like some of the previous writers stresses on
motherhood as an important vocation for women. Women should be given quality education so that she can bring up her children well. She further writes:

> Even then, our Assamese society is negligent toward this. Women’s education has been introduced but the process itself is incomplete. Even now, our women’s education is of a substandard quality. No one should discourage his sisters and mothers from learning to read and write. I am not saying that only the act of reading and writing makes one educated. Along with it, a woman should learn to do all small and big household chores (Ghar Jeuti: 146-147).

In the article “Tirotar Kartabyar Bixoye Duaxar” (A Few Words on Women’s Duties), the writer Ratnaprava Duara dismisses the fear and suspicions surrounding girls’ education. She sees education as a necessary factor in the performance of women’s duties. She insists that even when a girl acquires the habit of reading novels or does embroidery and stitching after studying in schools or colleges, she will not necessarily neglect the duties towards her home. In fact, proper education will help her in performing her duties well (Ghar Jeuti: 935). Towards the end of the essay, she reminds her readers that behind every great man there is a “well educated and dutiful mother.” That is why she insists on “compulsory education for both girls and boys without which a nation cannot progress” (Ghar Jeuti: 936). Bidyavati Hazarika, in “Stree Shikkhar Aboshyokota” (Necessity of Women’s Education) accepts that education is necessary for progress. She differentiates among different kinds of education – dharma shikkha (religious education), neeti shikkha (moral education), silpa shikkha (aesthetics), banijya shikkha (business education). These will invariably help a woman to be a
good wife and homemaker, which, according to the writer, is the chief objective of women’s education. She further writes that in our society, “the man is considered the head of the family but actually, the woman has to be considered the head as the smooth running of a household depends on the capacity of the woman” (Ghar Jeuti: 1196).

Tanika Sarkar in her study on colonial Bengal writes thus:

It was the nature of the women’s commitment to the conjugal order that bound the system together. Moral initiative therefore passes on to the woman, uniquely privileging her activism. If the household was the embryonic nation, then the woman was the true patriotic subject (Sarkar 2001: 43).

The construction of a grihini (housewife) in this manner with clear instructions regarding her behavior, practices, and norms added to the formulation of a middle-class, which was strengthening its hold on the economy of the state. The grihini was to represent the outlook of a class, which was in a nascent state in Assam. The women writers discussed above have internalized such an image of the grihini and thereby tried to reinforce it through their articles in Ghar Jeuti whose readers were mostly women. Judith E Walsh in her conclusion to the question of education writes that “what women learned when men gave them advice was simply this: they learned to read” (Walsh 1997: 675). Women did everything in their capacity to claim the power of reading as their own and utilize it for their welfare. The “literate and learning” women of Assam were able to consider their options for the future. They had two options: one to work for their uplift and progress at the cost of the welfare of the nation; second to
shortly discard their movement for equal opportunities and participate wholeheartedly in the nation’s freedom struggle. Though education and learning remain the motifs of colonial modernity that sought to restructure both the domestic and the public-civil spaces, yet it urged the women of Assam to rethink their stance in the process of nationalism and state-formation and decide what their contributions ought to be.

In Assam, the first generation of public intellectuals felt the necessity to develop the Assamese language and rescue the language, literature and culture from the “dark” period when Bengali was Assam’s official language. The consciousness regarding national identity and growing pride in one’s culture accompanied by concern towards one’s mother tongue, interest to revive one’s past and social consciousness created an atmosphere for debate and criticism as is evident in the pages of Orunodoi and Assam Bandhu. Attempts were made to explore the history of Assam and bring out the texts of old chronicles in properly edited form. “Puroni Asam Buranji” (History of Medieval Assam), “Kamrupar Buranji” (History of Kamrup), and “Chutia Rojar Vamsavali” (The Genealogical Description of the Chutia Kings) in Orunodoi and “Agor Din Etiyar Din” (Past and Present Days) by Gunabhiram Barua in Assam Bandhu are few examples of articles exploring the magnificent past of Assam. Among reformists, there were men from well-to-do families who had problems in adjusting themselves to the idea of imparting education to women particularly English education. The pages of Assam Bandhu were full of criticisms of English education being a mere copy of the ‘sahib’ culture. In one such
The perplexities of an entire generation of men can be deciphered through this single article where we find an attempt on the part of the writer to create a new genre specifying the complexities of the age and its ideas. Sadananda sets himself the task of defining a few terms of considerable importance in his time like ‘education’ (‘shikkha’), ‘reform’ (‘sanskar’), ‘women’s education’ (‘stri shikkha’), ‘women’s freedom’ (‘stri swadhinata’). ‘Reform’ is a term carrying a considerable weight and in the definition given by the writer, he stresses that ‘reform’ is not a mere copy of Western thoughts, manners, and customs. Being educated does not license anyone to denigrate Assamese dress, behaviors, language etc. A need to hold on to one’s own tradition is evident in the articles discussed above. A fear that bideshis (foreigners)\(^6\) will once again pose a threat to Assamese cultural identity is implicitly an important theme in Sadananda’s
new dictionary where he redefines those terms from his own standpoint. A foreigner in the Assamese context refers to both the British and the Bengali.

All the articles discussed above can be regarded as responses to a changing world, but not necessarily an expression of a basic shift in notions about women's roles (Karlekar 1986: 26-31). In fact, if we take into account traditional feminist conceptions of ‘autonomy’ and ‘self’ we may have to accept that these women have not shaken the dust of patriarchal conditioning from their feet. These texts, need to be read as being instances of women assuming the role of active agents and striving towards a state of ‘modernity’ by completing the bourgeoisie transformation in India at that crucial juncture of its encounter with the ‘west’. This transformation becomes complete when women facilitate their movement and participate in the civil space outside the threshold of their homes. The next chapter deals with texts, which provide an insight into how women transformed the notions of the ‘domestic’ and the ‘public’ for their own benefit.

Notes

The translations of original Assamese texts, both primary and secondary, are mine.

6 Macaulay’s Minutes on Indian Education written in February 1835, which recommended that English be promoted as both a lingua franca and the medium of education in India. This Minute is reviled by nativists, who think it condemned India and Indians to centuries of mental servitude; but revered by modernists, who argue that it allowed Indians to take advantage of the modern economy and thus emancipate themselves from the burdens of a traditional and hierarchical society.

6 In the chapter titled “Crushed by English Poetry”, Sudhir Chandra mentions that Bankim Chandra in the course of a controversy with William Hastie (1842-1908) of the
Church of England sparked off in 1882 by an elaborate ‘shraddha’ i.e. the Hindu last-rite ceremony, he refused to go along with European scholars because no knowledge to them is true knowledge unless it has passed through the sieve of European criticism. This was the root of European supremacy. However, Bankim himself could not do without the European sieve when, despite being immersed in the Indian aesthetic theory of ‘rasa’, he sought to countenance it with Western poetics. There was no attempt made by Bankim and few others of his generation to claim precedence for the indigenous Indian past and the ideas and institutions generated in this past by finding analogues and thereby challenging the British pride (Chandra 1992: 69).

6 Gunabhiram Barua speaks of Jati, which in English translation literally means community. However, I found the literal translation inadequate to serve the purpose of the text. For want of a better term, I have retained the original.

6 Drawing on H.K. Barpujari’s “A Short History of the Higher Education in Assam, 1826-1900” she writes:

The Brahmin pundits who were patronized by the Ahom kings imparted Sanskrit education to students belonging to the upper castes and aristocracy. Higher education in the Sanskrit imparted by the pundits in their ‘tols’ was the monopoly of the Brahmins and the upper castes....This traditional system of learning flourished till the decline of the Ahom rule and the consequent period of uncertainty and chaos triggered off by the Moamaria Rebellion and the Burmese invasion of the province (Misra 1987: 32).

6 Tillotama Mishra mentions that Orunodoi ‘despite its religious bias introduced the seeds of secularism’ (Misra 1987: 91). However, given the present context it will be wrong on my part to dismiss the politics that implicitly lies behind the project of Orunodoi. Although it was portrayed as being secular in nature committed to popularize liberal thought in this remote region, yet the choice of articles selected for publication provides scope for questioning the entire project.

6 Dhekial Phukan was one of the first to take up the task of ‘reforming’ and ‘modernizing’ the traditional set up of society in Assam. He himself took initiative in imparting education at home to his wife Mahindri Debi and daughter Padmavati Debi Phukanani (1853-1927) at a time when women’s education was not in practice in Assam. Phukan assumed the pen name ‘A Native’ to write a booklet A Few Remarks on the Assamese language and on the Vernacular Education in Assam (1855). In this booklet,
Phukan showed clearly that Assamese was independent of and distinct from Bengali and the introduction of Bengali in Assamese vernacular schools was but an exercise in futility. The very fact that he wrote numerous articles describing the various countries all over the world and the various religions practiced by them indicates his desire to make his compatriots a part of the spirit of new learning and modernity that had already taken the country into its grips. In the address to the reader in Asomiya Lorar Mitra he writes thus:

The ships of the British Empire have sailed across the world enabling them to visit numerous places, meet people, and write about the descriptions of these faraway lands. Even if you come across passages that seem improbable do not consider them lies. It is only when you let reason substitute your mind’s ignorance will you be able to understand (Phukan 1993: 137).

In most of his writings, he stressed on acquiring knowledge (bidya) and being rational which again was the chief characteristic of Renaissance in various parts of India.

6 Bhadralok became a much-used term to refer to the emerging middle-class particularly in Bengal. Judith E. Walsh makes use of this term in her study of Bengali domestic science texts of the nineteenth century. She write thus: “the Bengali term bhadralok translates as ‘respectable’ people and is generally taken to refer to families with a tradition of family literacy, wealthy enough to do no manual labour, and possibly able to employ a servant.” (Walsh 1997: 643)

6 In trying to depict the sub-conscious insecurities faced by men in Bengal which took a hysterical form occasionally as in the response to the educational and later professional successes of women, Malavika Karlekar cites the example of Kadambini Ganguly, the first Indian woman doctor (Karlekar 1986).

6 Japi is the traditional headgear of Assam worn with traditional attire.

6 Tillotama Misra’s novel Swarnalata, presents an interesting picture of the efforts of the American Baptist Missionary women (Miss Keller and others) who were engaged in opening schools for girls and spreading female education. The writer commends their efforts at the same time pointing at the fact that behind all these efforts was also their evangelical mission, which cannot be denied or overlooked (Misra 1997).

6 For benefit of her readers Dibyalata Baruah reproduces, an article by Karuna Devi titled “Stree Shikshar Dhara Parivartan” (Changing Course of Female Education) published in Matri Mandir where the writer attempts to design a curriculum for girls’ education, which should be followed in girls’ schools in Bengal. The writer takes for
granted that in the first nine years of her life a girl has already been taught basics in language, its grammar, and, arithmsetic.

6 Girls’ schools specially perhaps because colonial modernity defined woman/mother as the primary source of inspiration for a future generation which would participate actively in the ‘political’ domain which was being defined and redefined and which will lead to the state of home-rule.

Works cited


