CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The period from 1826 to 1900 might be called as the prelude of a new era in the social history of Assam. The archaic society of Assam got a concussion which completely reversed the very structure of the society. It marched ahead with bold steps by shaking off the prejudices and restrictions of mediaval idealism towards modernisation.

Change is the law of nature. The society is not an exception to this. But behind this there must be some contributive factors and in Assam the new administration under the British authority and its concomitant elements, as discussed in chapter II produced sufficient ground for the people of Assam to accept the new ideas and way of life.
The period 1826 to 1900 may be called as the age of evolution of the modern society in this north-eastern region of India. This era which began with the coming of the British following the first Anglo-Burmese war, continued throughout the country and within this period Assam and her society took its modern shape. The Assamese people both tribes and plains, Hindus and non-Hindus were acquainted with new ideas, new administration, western education, and culture which left a great impact on them and they gradually adopted all these in their life.

The changes that took place in the society in Assam during the period of our study from 1826 to 1900 was broad and extensive and was not confined to any particular area or group of people. They touched every nook and corner of the region, both in the hills and the valleys.
In Assam the tribes and non-Hindu population were more liberal in their views and so were free from many of the abuses and evils of the Hindu society such as bar on the widow remarriage, child marriage, polygamy, which existed among the higher castes. So the movement that took place during this period were confined mainly to the Upper caste Hindu population. As such all the early pioneers of social reform movement in Assam also belonged to that group of the people. Mention may be made of the well-known Dhekial Phukan's family, who from the thirties of the nineteenth century devoted themselves for the development of the society by spreading modern education among the people and thus by enlightening with them new ideas and spirits. The opposition that came from the authoritarians and conservatives could not resist this trend of social changes and finally they surrendered themselves to this new tide of modernisation.
One of the important changes that took place during this period was the complete break down of the age-old social distinction in the society according to the status and position in administration and society. The society in Assam under the Ahom regime was mainly divided into two classes - the royal aristocracy and the common people who constituted the majority of the paiks. The Ahoms who were the ruling people since the beginning of the thirteenth century and although they did not enjoy the highest position as a caste among the Hindus, they retained their status by putting certain restrictions in dress and ornaments, the type of house, the use of the means of transport and other paraphernalia. With the establishment of the British rule such restrictions had vanished. Now if the means permitted any body could put on any kind of dress and ornaments. The development of transport system and the introduction of steamer and later on railways connecting different parts of the country not simply
made journey easy, comfortable and less costly but also helped in waning away the restrictions that existed under the previous regime. Under the British Government all appointments were made on the basis of educational qualifications and ability, and had little to do on birth and family tradition. As a result, the educated youths from all sections of the society got the opportunity to be employed in the offices and courts. This brought to an end the system of the hereditary succession and the reservation of some high posts to some particular families. The abolition of the paiks, the emancipation of slaves and lagwas, the introduction of ryotwari system of land tenure and the imposition of tand tax brought the old nobilities of the Ahom age to the level of common people.

Similar changes also occurred in the caste ridden Hindu population. Like other parts of India, the Brahmins, being the superior caste, had great dominance over the lower castes. They were the religious preceptors, and
were entitled to get instruction and the right to read the religious scripts and so to utter the mantras and perform all religious functions. They were conscious of their position in the society and always tried to preserve their status by keeping themselves aloof from other castes by all means. Under the British administration, some such caste distinctions among the Hindu sections of society gradually melted away. The door of education was now opened to all. A number of educational institutions were started throughout the province in which, unlike that of the tol and pāthsālā, all pupils irrespective of their castes and creed who had the eagerness to acquire knowledge and the means, could get themselves admitted in those schools. Consequently, education no longer remained reserved for a particular caste and class. On the other hand, the children of different sections of the society got their instructions in the same school sitting side by side. At the initial stage, however, the more conservative guardians made their children take bath and
change all their dresses after returning from the schools before being allowed them to enter their house! Besides, the educated groups of the high castes being enlightened with the new spirit did not hesitate to eat with other people and even with the Europeans in the same table. They were now travelling not in their personal or hired boats but in public steamers and railways with other co-passengers of different castes and tribes and religious sects. All these gradually lessened the caste restrictions. The spread of education and western ideas made the people more realistic. The spread of education helped in liberating the mind of the people from the fetters of religious taboo. They no longer followed the advice and words of the Gossains and the Mahantas as eternal truth. As we know from the vaccination report that the Gossains of some of the satras opposed the inoculation and asked their disciples not to get themselves vaccinated. There cases of imposing fines and using the whip but

finally the Gossains had to surrender by revoking the order issued against the vaccination to his disciples.²

The tribes those who accepted Christianity now did not depend on the priests, sorcery and sacrifices to cure their diseases, but visited the nearby dispensary or called for a doctor and took the advantage of the modern medical treatment. In this way, regards and beliefs on the priestly classes in the society was gradually melting away more particularly among the educated and the converted people.

Another new development was that during this period a new class in the society, i.e. the middle class intellectual people emerged. The youths getting the light of western education formed themselves a separate group in the society who were more spirited, bold, and imbibed

with modern ideas and thought. They took the appointments in the offices and courts under the British Government. Some of them did not hesitate to point out the defects of the new system and if necessary offered suggestions for the eradication of those defects. Some of them, mention may be made of Amandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua. Besides, a new literary groups also furnished during this period who not only enriched literature of Assam by introducing new theme, style, subjects but also enlightened the people with new ideas and spirit. Gunabhiram Barua, Hem Chandra Barua, Lakshminath Bezbarua focussed modern views and ideas of a liberal society in their books, Ram Navami Natak, Kaniar Kirtan and Bengal Bengaliiana. They also criticised the social abuses like child marriage, ban of widow remarriage, polygamy etc.

During this period another new class of people, quite unknown earlier, appeared in Assam. This was the
labourer class, who constituted the main working force in the tea plantation. They were imported from other parts of India to feed the newly developed tea industry. The condition and sufferings of this section, however, soon drew the attention of the leaders of Bengal who raised the question in the Parliament and sent their representatives in Assam to investigate the matter. Consequently, the government passed certain laws for the welfare of this class in 1865, 1868, 1875, 1893 etc.

In Assam, before the coming of the British, an exclusively trading class did not exist. The establishment of the British rule opened the veil of its isolation. Consequently, the land and its people, who were unknown to others, were exposed to the outsiders as a beautiful land having enormous unutilised natural resources. A group of traders, from other parts of India entered the land who gradually captured the whole trade of the province.
Before 1826 the people of superior castes did not take their meal cooked by others and to avoid the touch of other classes and lower castes, carried all their requirements, from utensils to food grains and accompanied a Brahmin cook and their own lagem - and their family dhoty with them while they made journey. Even Anandaram Dhokia Phukan, the apostle of the new age also had to take with him all those while he proceeded to Calcutta for higher studies. But gradually this strictness on eating and drinking was melting away with the spread of education. Some of them did not hesitate to their meal, in the same table, with the Europeans and ate every thing that was given in the table.

The greatest change that occurred during the period was in the spread of western education. In this respect the efforts of Christian Missionaries and the policy of the new regime provided the scope of getting the instruction by all, irrespective of caste and creed.
In the pre-British Assamese society, learning of foreign languages like Arabic and Persian was not encouraged among the high castes because they would make unfit to offer *pinda* to his ancestors. On this ground Haliram Dhekial Phukan was not allowed to learn English language by his father. Even Hem Chandra Barua had to learn English without the knowledge of his guardians as they were not in favour of English education and to lose their caste. In 1846 when the American Baptist Mission published *Arunodai*, the first periodical in Assam, the people of orthodox families were not only refused to read it but also discouraged others not to read this paper which was published by the Christians. The new generation of the educated

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3 A.D.P.J.C., p.13.

4 Ibid.

section breaking the age-old prejudices and restrictions marched ahead with great enthusiasm. They began to learn English language and in 1901, 21,511 persons returned themselves as being literate in English. 7 Out of every 1,000 men English was known by 8 Hindus, 3 Muhammadans and 1 Animists and 116 Christians. Among the Hindus in between the age of 15 to 20 the number of literate was 8 per mile and above 20 their number was 6 per mile in 1901. 8

In 1841 not more than 34 people were found to know how to read and write. But Assam gradually came out from this deplorable condition, and in 1881 4,444 persons out of 7,02,792 population of the province returned themselves as learning and 81,430 as literate. 9 In 1891 the number of the students getting instruction

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 1881, p.126.
was increased to 52,548, and in 1901 the number of the people who knew how to read and write rose to 2,22,368.10

The people became interested to higher and technical education. The demand for a college in Assam and the strong arguments that were made by the local intelligensia of the land, in favour of the establishment of the college, had compelled the government finally to start the college in 1901. In 1899-1900, 123 students passed in the Entrance Examination, 44 pupils passed the First Arts Examination and 18 students passed the B.A. examination.11 In 1894-95, 6 students of Assam obtained the M.A. Degree.12 In 1872 the first Assamese boy who passed the I.C.S. Examination with brilliant result acquiring 7th position was Anandaram Barua.13


12 *Ass.* 1894-95, p. 198.

Gradually the students of Assam even of the most orthodox family began to study the medical science at Calcutta and Dacca. Dimanath Bezbaruah of an orthodox Brahmin family got the news of his son's admission in the Calcutta Medical College to come back and purified him by the system of Prayaschitta. In 1901, 5 students from Assam with the medical scholarships were studying in the Dacca Medical College and a Khasi girl was studying the medical science in the Campbell Medical School Calcutta.

With the spread of education and western ideas the people of Assam gradually became more realistic in their outlook. Blind faith and dependence of the people on the priestly classes was waning from among the new generation. Another new change also took place in the

15 Progress of Higher Education in India, 1897-98 to 1901-02, p. 244.
outlook of the people, specifically of the educated groups. The people who thought that education spoiled a girl and so a educated girl was not selected as bride by the general people, were now sending their girls for the instruction in the educational institutions. At the beginning, when the Missionaries took the initiative to introduce female education the people refused to send their girls in the schools under the care of the Missionaries. But with lapse of time people realised the necessity of the education of the girls and in 1901, 13,134 girls were returned as literate. Of the educated women the Christian were in the top of the list and their number was 217 out of every 1000, among the Hindus the number was 4, the Muhammadans 2 and the Animists 1.\textsuperscript{16}

The old prejudices and social abuses like child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage which prevailed among the higher castes gradually been

\textsuperscript{16} Census Report 1901, p. 99.
discarded under the influence of reformers of Bengal like Raja Rammahon Roy, Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar, and others.

In Assam, unlike the other parts of India, not so strong opposition came from the orthodox section of the society in this social upheaval. However, a few cases of burning the school house, killing of the Missionaries, opposing the introduction of vaccination system were found. The tribal society of Assam who were animist in their faith were free from all the abuses of the Hindu dominated society. So, as they had no religious bigotry, the Christian Missionaries could achieve a grand success in their attempt of spreading the Gospel of Christ among them. With the conversion they also adopted the western culture and consequently, changes took place in their dress, hair style and also in material world,

The policy of the new government, spread of western education, withdrawal of all the restrictions
and opening of the offices to all having due educational qualifications, and the granting of landed property to all by giving patta and the emancipation of lagna and paika made common people conscious of their right and power. There was also a desire to raise their social status by claiming equality. The Census Report 4901 reported that the Kayasthas and Kalitas were putting forward claims to take precedence of the Gamakas. The Kalitas called themselves ud Kayasthas, the Dom claims themselves to be recognised as Jalowa Kaiyarta, the Hari claimed themselves as Brittle Bamiya and denied all connection with the sweeper caste. 17

Among the tribes the greatest change to be marked was that they turned from head-hunting and fighting to the more useful task of agriculture. 18 The tribes of Assam who had been accustomed to a life of isolation

17 Census Report, 1901, p. 117.

constituting separate groups in one hill to others, were now brought within the banner of one rule. They now considered themselves as the member of one house and used to live peacefully.

Another important change was found in the religion of the tribal people. These people, specially the Khasis and Jayantias and the Garos in large numbers, had embraced Christianity, that was brought to them by the Christian Missionaries. These converted Christians were highly influenced by the western culture and a great change took place in their material life.