CHAPTER TWO

THE YEAR 1846: DAWNING OF A NEW ERA

The treaty of Yandâbu (1826) gave the domination of Assam to the Britishers. The Britishers found this country completely ransacked, plundered and destroyed by the Burmese. With the breakdown of the administration and economy, the useful arts and letters too declined. Prior to the Burmese invasion internal feuds and civil wars weakened the country as a whole, and the whole atmosphere became uncongenial to a healthy propagation of arts and letters. As a result of the serious social and political disasters, it was a period of complete inactivity. To the countless disasters of civil-war, foreign rule and sporadic revolutions was added a new and serious blow by introducing Bengali to replace Assamese in all spheres of education and administration in Assam. This was the greatest obstacle that the Assamese language had to face ever since its birth. Since 1837, Assamese language had to fight for long 36 years to free itself from the fetters of Bengali. Through these long years the progress of the literature was retarded and the attention of all was pinpointed at the restoration of the language. The pathetic impotence of Assamese literature in the beginning decade of
The introduction of Bengali could not be cured. Fortunately enough, the efforts of the Christian missionaries resulted in some distinctive changes. The chief motive of the Christian missionaries was to spread religion and empire. In doing so, they had to seek popular support; and hence to derive support, they sympathised with the needs of the local people.

The missionaries found that to preach religion among the Assamese people, their local language was a better medium. They, therefore, began their work in Assamese. In January 1846, the first Assamese Journal Orunodai was published from Hissagar under the editorship of Rev. C. T. Gutter. The Orunodai was a "monthly paper devoted to religion, science and general intelligence." With the publication of Orunodai, a new vista was open for the Assamese language and literature.

The Assamese people were much encouraged by the publication of Orunodai. In an age of suppression of the language, it was surely a great delight to see their own language emerge through the press. To the Assamese patriots, who thought seriously about the restoration of the Assamese language, it mattered much. The fight for restoration was pioneered by Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan. He waged through
a memorandum to the then government to re-introduce Assamese, in place of Bengali, in the schools and courts of Assam and suggested the publication of a series of books in Assamese on popular subjects. Moreover, Ananda Ram successfully refuted by the publication of a pamphlet *A Few Remarks On The Assamese Language* the claims of the Bengalis, that Assamese was only a dialect of Bengali. Thanks to the bold endeavours of Bheklal Phookan, the re-introduction of Assamese was approved by the historical Mills' Report. J. Nafat Mills submitted a report on the administration of the province in 1854, wherein he admitted:

"I think we made a great mistake in directing that all business should be transacted in Bengali and the Assamese must acquire it ......". The Government could no longer ignore the genuine claim of Assamese language, and in the year 1873, it was re-introduced in the schools and the courts.

The usefulness and popularity of Orunodai was beyond imagination. Though it failed to evoke a Christian awakening, as expected by the initiators, it gave rise to a national awakening in the country. The paper was a standard one, and the organisers spared no pains to make it a beautiful journal; even the pictures of the *Illustrated London News* were reproduced. The *Orunodai* continued up to 1882. It successfully
collected a reading public and caused a number of writers to begin their trade. The Orunodai was followed by a series of new magazines, namely The Assam Milāsini (1871-1883), The Assam Mihîr (1872-73), The Assam Barpan (1874-75), The Assam Newe (1882-85). The life of these magazines was short, but within that short period they helped the spread and development of literature.

In 1889, the Jonāki appeared. It was the most glorious journal of the time as it gave a final mould to the Assamese literature in general and to poetry in particular. Jonāki welcomed the Romantic tradition and established a new school of writers, which goes by the very name of the magazine.

Apart from its success in creating a reading and writing public, the distinctive merit of Orunodai was seen in shaping the Assamese style of writing, both in prose and verse. In the wake of the efforts of the pioneers some Assamese Grammars and Dictionaries were also compiled and published. The language, the missionaries used, was supported by Assamese diction; they inherited the style of the prose chronicles and in the sentence formation the influence of English Grammar was undeniably persistent. Above all,
Orunodai simplified the style and mode of spelling. In the pre-Orunodai days Assamese literature dealt only with religion and history. Literature grew either in the form of Vaisnavite classics or in the form of historical chronicles. The Orunodai brought variety. Raising the religious discourses, purely Christian, Orunodai introduced valuable thought-provoking articles on History, Geography, Geology, Mining, Astronomy, Popular Sciences, Useful Arts, Nature-Study, Linguistics, Travelogues, Biographies, Stories and moral teachings.

Life in the Orunodai era grew more liberal and intellectual. The orthodoxy and the spirituality of the pre-British Assamese society gave way and the western impact slowly crept in. The western impact came to Assam only indirectly. It came through Bengali. Maliram Dhekial Phookan, Ananda Ram Dhekial Phookan and Gunabhiram Barua were the persons, who could see the merit of British rule and thought the British ideal worthy of acceptance, to their own lives, or life of the country as a whole. For education or other aims they were at constant touch with Calcutta and were influenced by the liberal educational and social values of that time. The orthodoxy in the Calcutta society was then gone, and a new and liberal attitude towards life and arts came into prominence. This
liberal outlook was a gift from the Britishers. The Assamese youths were very much influenced by the new approach of life and culture as existed in Calcutta, and greatly appreciated the British way of life. They could see the usefulness and the want of schools, educational gatherings, dispensaries, hospitals, destitute-homes, ships and buildings, in their own province and were keen on driving out bribery, prostitution, opium and wine. With new and liberal attitudes to life and society, newer values sprang up. The new values and ideas of this period may be summarised as follows:

(a) A broader outlook on man; viewing man as free from social or religious bindings.
(b) Urge for the spread of education.
(c) Education and emancipation of women.
(d) Widow re-marriage.
(e) Ridicule against the pretensions of the priestly classes.
(f) Protest against the import of opium.
(g) Attachment to useful sciences.
(h) A seculous love for the country's past and hence a patriotic application.
(i) Re-discovery of the talents of old Assamese literature and publication of old Assamese manuscripts.
These new values and ideas accompanied by the untiring zeal of a host of patriotic Assamese and missionary writers welcomed the dawn to our literature. They prepared the ground and sowed the seeds which germinated and grew, bloomed and bore fruit in the last part of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century. And as for poetry, the distinctive approach of the Orunodai was noticed, in form and content. In and around the year 1846, the Vaishnavite tradition in poetry was pushed to the background. The attention of the poets was shifted from god and salvation to man and his environment. Instead of heavenly bliss, the worldly life of man grew more favourite with the poets. The old metres and figures of speech were bade farewell, gradually. The environmental problem of man became the subject of poetry; in the very first issue of Orunodai, a little poem describing the evils of opium appeared. Thus the mid-nineteenth century paved the way for the quest of a new formula, new form and content in poetry. The strict formal purity of Vaishnavite poetry was set aside, and poetry came much closer to flesh and blood.

2. Ibid., p 141

3. The first appearance of the Christian missionaries in Assam occurred in the year 1836, when Oliver T. Cutter and Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Brown arrived with a printing press at Sadiya (of Dist. Dibrugarh). It is interesting to note, how devotedly they worked for the spread of education and religion in Assam. In 1840, Mr. Miles Bronson started a school among the Hootes in Namsang. Cutter started six schools in Sibsagar villages. Another missionary Cyrus Barker started a school at Gauhati. In 1842, Bronson started the Nowgong Orphan Institute. The printing press was later shifted from Sadiya to Sibsagar, which became the centre of Baptist activities. Churches were established at Sibsagar, Nowgong and Gauhati. In 1848, two new missionary families, the Denferths and the Stoddards came to Assam. With the publication of Orundal in 1846 from their Sibsagar press the missionary-sponsored literary
and religious culture came to a firm footing. The formation of a Baptist Association was, however, late. It was possible only in 1851.


5. The Government meant the government by the East India Company.


   A copy of the report is available in the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar, Jorhat.

7. See chapter V of the present work.

8. The Grammatical and lexical works of the period are:
   
   (a) N. Robinson: *Grammar of the Assamese Language*, 1839
   
   (b) Jaduram Barooah: *Dictionary compiled in 1839*
   
   (c) Dr. M. Brown: *Grammatical Notes on the Assamese Language*, 1848
   
   (d) Mrs. Osipov: *Vocabulary and Phrases*, 1840
   
   (e) A.R.D. Phukan: *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language*, 1856
   
   (f) Miles Bremison: *Assamese English Dictionary*, 1867

For detailed information, see:

Dr. M. Neog: "Assamit Videsi banik: Vaiyakaranik, Abhidhanik aru Katha Lekhak, Akashi*, vol.10, 4, pp. 74-76

10. Orunodai, vol. iii, nos. 7, 8, 11 and 12

11. Orunodai stressed the need of education, in the articles like, 'Lara Kālat Sikṣā' (Education in boyhood) vol. ii, no. 5; 'Lara vīlaṇak parbhāloki sikōvā māk bāpekar ucit,' (Parents ought to teach their children reading) vol. 4, no. 12. Satya Nath Bora in his Kendra-Sabhā justifies the pursuit of education through a satire.

12. Satyanath Bora: Kendra-Sabhā, Calcutta, 1929

13. Gunabhiram Barua advocated the need of widow re-marriage through his drama Bām-Navami (1887). The widow-re-marriage was a big bold step, in the annals of Hindu religious reforms, in the nineteenth century. While in North-Eastern India, the cause of widow re-marriage was advocated highly by the Brahma Samāj and more particularly by Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar; in the South the Widow-Marriage Association of Bombay (founded in the year 1866) fought vigorously for the cause. Under the auspices of this association the first public widow-re-marriage was performed between Vann Bai and P. V. Karmakar, in the evening of 15th June, 1869, near Gwalia tank. It was conducted by priest Vishnu Shastri,
a liberal minded Brahmin. See, Dr. K.P. Karunakaran: Religion And Political Awakening In India, 1966; pp. 208-214


Hem Chandra Barua : Balidra Nâi Câh Bhitare Kevâbhâtârvî (All that glitters is not gold), Sibsagar, 1866


H. C. Barua : Kâniyâr Kiirtan (the Bible of the Opium-Eater), Sibsagar, 1861

16. Articles on popular sciences appeared frequently in the Orunodai, mention may be made of the following issues:

vol. i, no. 2, 3; vol. ii, no. 1; vol. iii, no. 12; vol. iv, nos. 2 and 3

17. This zealous love for the country resulted in the first struggle of Independence in 1857, headed by Manirâm Dewan. For a detailed discussion of the struggle, see:

Banudhar Sharma : Manirâm Dewân, Gauhati, 1960
18. Bakul Kayastha's Kitābat Mañjari was printed in 1845 and Śaṅkaradeva's Kirtan Ghosa in 1876. During this period Haribilas Agarwalla printed Śaṅkaradeva's Bhāgavata, Ram Vijay, Gunamālā, Bhakti Ratnāvalī and some of the Bagīts. He also published a Guru Carita. Madhav Bardaloi published the Rāmāyaṇa and the Dīpikā Canda.

For a detailed discussion, see:


The chapter on "Discoveries Of Modern Asamiya Literature."