Chapter VI

The Entry of Assamese literature into the Modern Age :

The Catalytic Role of the Missionaries

The growth of Assamese literature is associated with the political history of Assam. The state of peace and tranquillity effects and governs the progress of a literature. Assamese literature progressed at its own pace from the ancient period, passing through odd and favourable stages of socio-cultural and political life of Assamese. Assamese language and literature achieved its greatest height during the Vaishnava period which is described as golden period of Assamese literature. But this continuity was disrupted with the emergence of an unfortunate political situation in Assam.

The darkest period in the history of Assamese literature was during the period of the Burmese invasion and the early period of the British rule. Before the Yandaboo treaty (February 24, 1826) between the British and the Burmese, Assam was practically ruled by the Burmese, although Ahom kings were on the throne. In effect, Assam was ruled by the Burmese from 1819 to 1824. During the Burmese invasions, the Burmese oppression towards the Assamese was inhuman. How to stay alive was the question in the minds of all Assamese. So, from the time of the invasion of the Burmese until an extended period after the British annexation of Assam, Assamese did not even live in an atmosphere conducive to thinking about Assamese language, literature or culture. The introduction of the Bengali language in the schools and
courts of Assam by the British also helped to destroy any possibility of enhancement of Assamese literature.

The advent of the Missionaries in Assam was a blessing for the cause of Assamese language and literature. The Missionaries ushered the Assamese people towards a modern Assamese language. Before the American Baptist Missionaries in Assam, Rev. William Carey of Serampore mission deputed James Ray to Guwahati for the propagation of Christianity and education upon the request of British Commissioner David Scott. Mr. Ray established a Church at Guwahati and distributed Christian scriptures which were written in Assamese. Due to financial and administrative inconvenience, the British missionaries handed over their mission activities to the American Baptist Missionaries. How the American Baptist Missionaries arrived in Assam has been discussed in an earlier chapter.

The American Baptist Missionaries fully realized that the teachings of the Christian religion had to be made available to the Assamese in their native language for the mission to be a success. This is the reason why they worked so hard to re-establish the Assamese language in Assam. The Missionaries wrote books on Christianity, arithmetic, and grammar. They also wrote a dictionary in Assamese. The *Orunodoi*, a monthly magazine cum newsletter was a popular media to reach out the Assamese. The Missionaries were joined by the educated Assamese in the effort to re-establish the Assamese language. Educated Assamese also started writing on their own or in the *Orunodoi*, trying to elevate Assamese literature and education among the Assamese.
Assamese literature faced a crisis and suffered setbacks in its progress at the juncture of the British intrusion. Finally, the British reintroduced the Assamese language in the schools and courts of Assam in 1873. The literary works which had been created after the British annexation and continued to the time of re-establishment of Assamese language, became the foundation of the modern Assamese literature. The contribution to Assamese literature was a joint effort of the Baptist Missionaries and the educated intellectual people of Assam. There is no doubt that the Missionarie’s act had a catalytic effect in bringing out Assamese language and literature to a modern age. Let us start with a historical short survey of Assamese literature till the beginning of the modern era of the Assamese literature.

To discuss the matter of modern trends in Assamese writing it will be helpful to trace the history of the different phases of the Assamese language and literature. Like many other languages, it is difficult to establish the early phase of the Assamese language and literature. The earliest Assamese (Kamrupi) literature was unwritten and it passed through generations in the oral form. The bulk of the material was made up of songs such as nursery rhymes, pastoral ballads sung by cowherds, songs of boatmen, songs describing the twelve months, songs of propitiation of the goddess of small-pox (Sitala), Bihu songs and wedding songs and so forth (Barua 1988: 212). In addition to these riddles, proverbs and Mantras (incantations, spells, formulas) were also forms of oral Assamese literature which flowed from generation to generation, with perhaps some modifications with the progress of time. Dakar Bachan or phorisms of Dak, was also originally current orally. Later, around 800 AD, the Dakar
Bachan were reduced to a written form. For all these oral languages it is difficult to assign a particular time period.

The various phases of Assamese language and literature have been broadly categorized in terms of five eras as follows:

1. The Ancient Era
2. The Pre-Vaishnava Era
3. The Vaishnava Era
4. The Post-Vaishnava Era
5. The Modern Era

**The Ancient Era:**

**Language:**

The earliest inhabitants of Assam were the speakers of an Indo-Chinese language of the *Mon-Khmer* family, that is from Austic family of languages. In a later wave, these elements of language spread to the Tibeto-Burman family. The Bodos are the most important people of this family. ‘Thus the earliest inhabitants of Assam were non-Aryans and their language belonged to extra-Aryan families of language’ (Barpujari 1990 : 263). In the course of time, the Assamese language was formed into a distinct shape around 10th - 11th century due to gradual change (Sarma 1981 : 2). If it is so, one will perhaps wonder what was the language of Assam prior to 10th - 11th century? To determine this, the materials which we can rely on with some degree of confidence are meager. We can get a glimpse on the various available Copper Plates or Stone Inscriptions prior to the 10th century. The account left by the Chinese
pilgrim Hiuen Tsang (628 - 645 AD) sheds some light on the early period of Assam. Hiuen Tsang visited Kamarupa (ancient Assam) during the reign of Kumar Bhaskaravarman. Some hints about the Assamese language are found in his travelogues, along with religion and socio-cultural aspects of Assam during the early period. Hiuen Tsang mentioned in his travelogues '----their language differs a little from that of mid India ----'(Barua 1956 : 18).

Charyapadas:

Although no specimen of literature in the earliest form of Assamese is to be found, at least one class of literature connected with a particular religious cult has been identified by scholars as being the oldest available specimen of Assamese literature. This class is made up of mystic and spiritually didactic songs composed of esoteric lyrics of Buddhism of the Vajrayana sect which is popularly called the Sahajia cult.

During the extended period from the eighth century to the fourteenth century, a considerable number of books were written on the subject of Tantrik Buddhism. These books were collected from Kamrup (ancient Assam), Nepal, Nalanda, Vikramseelah and other places in India. Most of the books were translated to the Tibetan language. Among this collection the research scholars on the Charyapadas found a book containing fifty Charyas, which were composed by Siddha Acharyas. Most research scholars agree that the name of the main Charyapada book was Charyagtitikosh. Charyapadas are also known as Baudha Dohas or Charyageetas.

The literary value of the Charyapadas is related to the ancient Assamese
literature. Scholars are of the opinion that the *Charyapadas* are the oldest specimen of Assamese literature. The language of the *Charyapadas* are two fold - Symbolic and General. The devotion to Guru and deep thoughts create a philosophical beauty. On the other hand, descriptions of day to day life of the common people, their social matters, along with literary melody of verses, reflect the literary beauty of the *Charyapadas*. Dr. B. Kakati states:

> Certain phonological and morphological peculiarities registered in the *Baudha Dohas* have come down in an unbroken continuity through early to modern Assamese. Modern Assamese in certain respects shows a closer approximation to the forms and idioms preserved in the Dohas (Kakati 1962: 11).

Dimbeswar Neog discusses and clearly states the language of the *Dohas* is of Assamese origin with specific grammatical uses which are only available in the Assamese language (Neog 1982: 58-60).

The scholars of Bengali literature and other eastern literatures - Maithili and Oriya also claim these *Charyapadas* as their ancient literature. Dr. H. K. Barpujari, the noted historian of Assam justifies for the commonness as follows:

> It was not unlikely that for making these songs intelligible to the entire region the *Siddhas* chose the *Apabhramsa* dialect as the medium of expression. To this *Apabhramsa* also a number of words and expressions must have crept in form of the dialects confined to the respective native localities of the composure as it happened in case of inscriptions.

Upon evaluation of the *Charyapadas*, scholars have found that Luipa, who contributed two *Charyas*, has also been known as Minanath, Matsyendranath or Macchandavibhu. In establishing the origin of *Siddha Acharyas*, K. L. Barua writes:

> It is found from Tibetan records that some of the eminent Buddhist professors in Tibet, of the tenth or eleventh centuries, hailed from Kamarupa.
noted Buddhist Siddha Minanath, who was looked upon in Tibet as an *Avtar of Avalokiteswara*, was a fisherman from Kamrupa. It is also found from the same Tibetan records that Rahula, another Buddhist teacher in Nepal, was a *Sudra* from Kamarupa. Besides Minanatha and Rahula, two other Buddhist teachers mentioned in Tibetan records, viz. Mohidhar and Darik also very probably belonged to Kamrup.

The foundation of the *Brajavali* language was evolved during the same period of the *Charyapadas* and we see the use of *Brajavali* words in *Charyapadas*. In the period from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, Sankaradeva and Madhabadeva composed *Bargeets*, and gained immense popularity. It is to be noted that the words of *Charyapadas* are used in *Bargeets*. This shows a connection of the *Bargeets* to the ancient *Charyapadas*.

The Nath cult was prevalent in India, and could be considered a bridge between Saibaism and Hinduism. From the above discussion, undoubtedly it could be concluded that the *Charyapada* was a distinct phase of Assamese literature.

**The Pre-Vaishnava Era**

If we consider the period of *Charyapadas* as the tenth to twelfth century, and follow the trends of Assamese literature, we see a gap until the fourteenth century. Probably Assamese literature followed a gradual change in pattern during this period. However we do not have any proof to justify the literary works of this period. In the fourteenth century we again see some notable literary work in narrative genre of poetry. Some of the notable poets of this period were: Hema Saraswati, Rudra Kandali, Harivara Vipra, Kaviratna Saraswati and Madhava Kandali. During this period Assamese literature attained the credibility of self identity and earned the capability of refined expression. All the poets of this period received patronage from
the kings of Assam. The frequent change of kings of the various kingdoms was cause for an unstable society and as a result, the progress of literary work was hampered.

The poets of this period were well versed and knowledgeable in the Sanskrit language and literature. The contribution of these poets was remarkable for creating a future field of Vaishnava literary work in the sixteenth century.

**Hema Saraswati**: The poet Hema Saraswati was in the Kamata Kingdom and king Durlavanarayan patronized his literary work. He composed two pieces of poetic literature - the *Prahlad Charitra* and the *Haragauri Samvad*. *Prahlad Charitra* is a descriptive poem and he was able to narrate the subject in a simple form for the common Assamese people. *Haragauri Samvad* is also of the narrative genre. His poetic qualities are best reflected in this book and he probably composed these verses when he was fully matured.

**Rudra Kandali**: Rudra Kandali was contemporary to Hema Saraswati, and he received support and inspiration from king Tamradhaja. Rudra Kandali translated some episodes from *Mahabharata's Drona Parva*. He described the war activities clearly and tried to follow idiomatic use in his poetry.

**Harivara Vipra**: The poet Harihar Vipra was in the court of king Durlavanarayana in Kamatapur kingdom. Harivar Vipra wrote two books in poetry form - the *Babrubahanar Yudha* and the *Lava-Kushar Yudha*. Both books narrate the fight between father and son, and how the father was defeated by the hands of son. Harihar Vipra translated both books and embroidered the values and culture of Assamese people of the fourteenth century with success in both books. He tried to give vivid
picture of the prevalent architectural styles of the temples and of the society in his translation, without deviating from the original subject.

Madhava Kandali : Among all the Assamese poets of the pre-Vaishnava era, Madhava Kandali was the outstanding poet of the fourteenth century. His major work was the translation of the Ramayana in free-flowing and idiomatic Assamese. He was a great Sanskrit scholar. His translation of Ramayana was done first, considering all other languages of northern India. Madhava Kandali did not deviate in content from the original Ramayana, which was written by Valmiki. He was bold in expression, and used his poetic imagination correctly and suitably (Sarma, S. N. 1981 : 56-74).

Madhava Kandali, the greatest pre-Vaishnava poet, was in the court of king Mahamanikya of Baraha kingdom. D. Neog writes: 'Madhaw Kandali's metres and descriptions, poetic diction and vocabulary, appear to be a splendid specimen to his successors. ----- the style of the poet is consistently forceful and beautiful, and one cannot miss the exquisite literary beauty of Madhaw Kandali's style for which we are tempted to call him an Assamese Chaucer, comparing the brilliant literary merit of this writer with that of his great contemporary in English literature' (Neog 1982 : 117).

Assamese literature was also enriched by other poets during the pre-Vaishnava phase of Assamese literature.

The Vaishnava Era :

Assamese language and literature achieved great heights during the Vaishnava period, which was dominated by the towering figures of Sankaradeva and Madhabadeva (15th and 16th centuries). They spearheaded the neo-Vaishnava
movement in Assam, and were responsible for a vital socio-cultural resurgence. They greatly enriched Assamese literature with their brilliant compositions which included a vast body of poetry, lyrics and dramas - all soaked in the intense spirit of Bhakti.

Vaishnav literature mainly consists of translations from the Puranas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and other Sastras of this level. The purpose of Vaishnava literature was to give ample knowledge of Bhakti to the common people, and to spread the spirit of Bhakti and convince people to lead a peaceful life worshipping only one God - Vishnu. To propagate the theme of Bhakti, the writers of the Vaishnava era did not cross the boundaries of spiritual and religious motive. The great poets felt it their duty and put their sincere efforts to create Assamese literature, drama and music to uplift the mental horizon of the people.

In terms of form, the Vaishnava literature can be grouped as poetry, drama, lyrics, hagiographies (charit puthis) and various prose works etc.

Sankaradeva was the greatest leader of the Vaishnava era. We cannot put a boundary on his widespread contribution to religion, society, art and culture and the language of Assam.

Sankaradeva's literary contribution includes the following:

Harichandra Upakhyan, Rukmini Harana Kavya, Kirttana Ghosha, Bhagavata - first, second, tenth (Aadi), eleventh and twelfth scondha, Ajamila Upakhyan, Uddhawa Sambad, Balichalan, Nimi Nava Siddha Sambad, Anadi Patan, Bhakti Pradip, Bhakti Ratnakar, Gunamala, Utrarakanda Ramayana, Amrit Mathan, Gojendra Mokhyan, Kurukhetra, Orhesa Varnan, Cihna Yatra - an opera of one act,

Sankaradeva's poetic expressions gave a sublime beauty to the Assamese literature. The dialogue used in Sankaradeva's dramas is one of the oldest forms of Assamese prose.

Madhabadeva, (1849-1596) another great saint-poet of the Vaishnava era, was the dearest disciple of Sankaradeva. In contributions to Vaishnava literature, Madhavdeva is equally prominent to Sankaradeva. Madhabadeva helped Sankaradeva in translating the Aadi and Uttarakanda of the Ramayana. He composed a substantial amount of devotional Bargeets. The greatest contribution of Madhabadeva to Assamese literature is the Nama Ghosa. His scholastic, poetic and philosophical ideals are reflected to the highest extent in the Nama Ghosa. Other notable books of Madhabadeva are: Chor Dhora, Pimpora Guchuwa, Bhajan Vihar, Bhumi Latowa, and Dodhi Mathan. According to Charit puthi, Madhabadeva wrote three dramas - Nri Sinha Yatra, Gobodhawn Yatra and Rama Yatra. In addition there are quite a few books with colophon stating that the books were written by him. From their style and content, it is doubtful that those books were written by him, but it is definitely proof of his popularity that others used his name (Sarma, S. N. 1981: 149).

The poets Ananta Kandali and Rama Saraswati contributed to Assamese literature after the demise of Sankaradeva and Madhabadeva. The significant works of Ananta Kandali are: Ramayana, Kumar Haran, Bhagavat (Britasur Badh of 6th scandha), Mahiravana Badh, Sitar Patal Probesh etc. Rama Saraswati added to
Assamese literature through his poetic contributions. He also contributed a popular piece of literature - *Badha Kavya*. Sridhar Kandali also contributed to vaishnava literature. His important books are *Kankhowa* and *Ghumusha Kirttan*.

The literary trends established in the Vaishnava era was the foundation of Assamese literature which expanded in later periods and changed to modern Assamese literature.

**The Post-Vaishnava Era:**

The post-Vaishnava era is basically an extension of the Vaishnava era. The Ahom entered Assam in early thirteen century and started the Ahom kingdom. They used their own Tai language. Gradually, in later period the Ahom kings became interested in the Hindu religion and they finally embraced the Hindu religion. Some of the Ahom kings even patronized the Hindu religion by constructing temples and giving grants to the *Satras* of the Hindu religion. As a result, the *Satras* were flourishing as a center for religion, culture, education and the Vaishnava scholars could devote their time to creative literature.

The most valuable literary achievement of this era was the writing of *Buranjis* (Chronicles) and *Charit Puthis* (Life sketches).

**The Buranjis:**

The Ahom brought with them the habit of recording important events and they continued to write their important events in their own Tai language after they entered Assam. The Ahom gradually adopted the Assamese language as their own and wrote their chronicles of the successive kings in Assamese until the British occupied the
Ahom kingdom. The first Ahom who performed the compilation of chronicles in Assamese language was the king’s counselor Aaton Buragohain (Gogoı 1996 : 32). The art of writing chronicles gradually spread to the non-Ahom officers and nobles. Following the example of Ahom, the Koch kings also adopted the writing of dynastic chronicles which they named Rajavamsavalis. They were also written in Assamese. These chronicles are considered early prose literature of Assamese language. The noted linguist Dr. Grierson remarked on this literature of chronicles as follows:

The Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study in which, India, as a rule, is curiously deficient ------- the historical works or the Brandies, as they are styled in Assumes, are numerous and voluminous. According to the custom of the country, a knowledge of the Brandies was an indispensable qualification to an Assumes gentleman (Sarma 1991 : 142).

The American Baptist Missionaries collected as many of the Buranjis as possible. This valuable endeavour was initiated by Rev. Nathan Brown.

Charit Puthis and Vaishnavite Literature:

The Charit-Puthis were written both in poetry and prose. The Charit Puthis are hagiographies dealing with the lives and activities of Vaishnavite preachers. Although we cannot call the Charit Puthis a complete life sketch of a person, these Charit puthis bear some literary values in their expressions. The Charit Puthis emerged around the first quarter of seventeenth century. Although we notice prose style dialogues in Sankaradeva’s Ankia Nat, these cannot be considered a true form of Assamese prose since the sentences do not conform to grammatical rules. For the first time we see a distinct prose style of literary expression in the writings of Vaikunthanatha Bhagavata-Bhattacharya, popularly known as Bhattadeva. Scholars
of Assamese literature also agree that Bhattadeva was the pioneer of prose style writing in the Assamese language (Barua 1988 : 209).

Bhattadeva was the main disciple of Damodaradeva. He intimately helped Damodaradeva in propagating the Damodaria sub-sect of Assamese Vaishnavism. As requested by guru Damodaradeva, Bhattadeva composed in simple Assamese prose - *Geeta, Bhagavata* and *Rantawali*. In addition to these valuable works, Bhattadeva wrote *Caranmallika, Guruvamsavali* and *Prasangamala* in Assamese and *Bhaktisar* and *Bhaktivivek* in Sanskrit language. Instead of using the day to day colloquial Assamese words in his writing, Bhattadeva used appropriate literary words, making the sentences short with an application of correct grammar. In some situations he could not completely avoid the Sanskrit influence in his writing.

Gopal Ata was a disciple of Madhabadeva who founded the Kal-Samhati sect of the neo-Vaishnava religion. He also contributed to Assamese literature with three *Ankiya Nats* - *Udhavajana, Janmayatra* and *Nondotsava*, along with substantial number of devotional songs and *Ghosas*.

The other established writers of this era who contributed to Assamese literature were: Ramcharan Thakur, Gopal Misra, Bhagavata Acharya, Govinda Misra, Gopinath Pathak, Damodor Das, Damodor Dvija, Vidya Panchanan, Ramamisra, Srinath Dvija, Kavishekhar, Kalapchandra Dvija, Anirudha Kayastha, Anirudhadev, Vishnu Bharati, Gopalcharan Dvija, Keshav Kayastha, Chandrasur Aaditya, Ratnakar Misra and Ananta Kayastha (Sarma, S. N. 1981 : 185-200).

Notable writers of *Charit Puthis* are: Ramacharan Thakur, Bhushan Dvija,
Daityari Thakur, Krishna Bharati, Krishnacharya, Ramananda Dvija, Ramaray, Baikunthanath Dvija and Ramananda. Some of the writers composed devotional songs during the seventeenth century. Notable composers of devotional songs are: Ramcharan Thakur, Daityari Thakur, Gopal Ata, Sriram Ata, Ramananda Dvija, Barjadumani, Sanatondonva, Moyamoria Aniruddha, Chaturbhuj Thakur and Purushatam Thakur.

Secular Literature:

During the post-Vaishnava era we also see some secular literature written in Assamese, but there was only a small quantity of this type of literature. Bokul Kayastha wrote a book on Arithmetic, *Kitavat Manjari*, in the sixteenth century. A book on Astrology - *Jyotish Cudamani*, was published under the authorship of Cudamani, and was written in Assamese verse. Bokul Kayastha also translated the famous Sanskrit Arithmetic book - *Leelavati*, into Assamese. During the eighteen century, we see some secular prose literature of a utilitarian nature. The style of writing used in this literature was somewhat similar to that used in the chronicles. The *Hasti-Vidyarnava* (a treatise on elephants), *Ghoranidan* (a work on the treatment of horse diseases), *Tirtha-Kaumudi* (a book along the line of a tourists’ guide which gave a description of the holy places of India), and the Assamese rendering of *Niti-Latankura* are fine specimens of early Assamese prose. In addition we can speculate that books on other subjects like *Mantras* and *Bejali Puthis* were written in the post-Vaishnava era (Sarma, S. N. 1981 : 200-208).

In the beginning of eighteenth century we notice a change in theme of
Assamese literature. The central theme of Bhakti of Vaishnava literature became diluted and the writers became more inclined to put some erotic essence in their writings. This was probably due to the aristocratic affluent influence of the king family who fully supported the writers.

During the Vaishnava period, all literary works evolved considering Bhagavata as their nucleus. The Vaishnava Satras were the centers for learning and development of Assamese literature. Since the influence of the Bhagavata was at its fullest extent, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana were only considered partially important. Perhaps due to this situation significant literary works of the Mahabharata were not available in the eighteenth century. However, a few writers contributed their literary works based on the Mahabharata during the period of Ahom kings. The notable poets were: Laksminath Dvija, Subhanath Dvija, Vidyachandra Kavisekhar, Sista Bhattacharjee, Prithuram Dvija, Vishnuram Dvija and Sagarkhari Daivagya. In addition, under the patronage of Koch king Harendranarayan, a few poets translated some works from the Mahabharata. Raghunath Mahanta’s contribution for Ramayana literature in Assamese is noteworthy. He wrote the Katha-Ramayana, the Adbhuta-Ramayana and Shatrunjaya.

The Modern Era:

The ushering of the modern age: The role of missionaries and its cumulative effect:

The modern era of Assamese literature can be established from the beginning of British rule in Assam. In the beginning, the British were primarily interested in restoring law and order. Although the Assamese people felt secure under the British,
the British did not pay attention to the cause of Assamese language and literature. The combined effect of internal conflicts of Ahom kings, Burmese attacks, natural calamities and the British annexation brought the atmosphere of Assamese literature, education, art and culture to a complete halt. In March, 1836, the American Baptist Missionaries arrived Sadiya for their Christian mission with goal to enter south west China. The Missionaries conception of the prevailing language around Sadiya proved to be wrong. The Missionaries learned the Assamese language in their own interest to become successful in their mission. They wrote books in Assamese language. For the first time the Missionaries introduced the concept of indexing and contents in writing. The Missionaries took the leadership to re-establish the Assamese language in Assam in which educated Assamese also joined their hands. The Missionaries were successful in re-establishing the Assamese language but they could not reconnect to the past of Assamese literature. The Missionaries started the use of modern Assamese like a new language and a new era.

The modern era may be discussed considering the following time frame:

1. The Period of Missionary Literature 1836 - 1870
2. The Period of Hemchandra and Gunabhiram 1870 - 1890
3. Romantic Period or Jonaki Yug 1890 - 1940
4. The Present Period since 1940

The Period of Missionary Literature (1836 - 1870): The Missionaries understood clearly that although the British tried to promote education in the Bengali language, Bengali was not the native language of the Assamese. The Missionaries, particularly
Dr. Brown and Dr. Bronson, tried their best to learn the Assamese language from the people. Since they started their activities in Upper Assam, the language that they learned conformed with the speaking language of Upper Assam, and in turn became the written language of Assam.

The Missionaries started opening schools at their mission centers and devoted their time to prepare text books for the schools. The first printed literary work in Assamese was the translation of the New Testament, published from Serampore Press in 1813. Rev. Carey published the book with the help of Atmaram Sarma, who was from Nagaon, Assam. The language of the book was mixed, with words not common to the Assamese language and as such people could not understand the book. However, Mr. Brown translated the same book in Assamese and published it in 1848.

The Orunodoi, the first Assamese journal, was published in January, 1846 from the Sibsagor Mission Press. This is considered a milestone in the history of Assamese literature. In the Orunodoi, literary expression was more of a straight forward nature. The mental horizon of the writers was limited. The imaginative and creative power of the writers was not blooming since the writers had never been exposed to a creative style of expression. Prior to the publication of the Orunodoi, only a few literary works were published by the Baptist Missionaries. The important works of this period are:

1. *Grammar of the Assamese Language* (1839) by William Robinson. This book was in English;
2. *Ahom Buranji* (1844) by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan;
3. *Asamiya Shabdavali Aru Khandavakya* (1840) by Mrs. O. T. Cutter;
4. *Belimar Buranji* (1833-38) by Biseswar Vidyadhip;
5. *Assamese Dictionary* by Jaduram Deka Baruah
(this was the first dictionary written in Assamese but it was not published). The dictionary was given to Colonel Jenkins and he gave it to the American Baptist Missionaries who used it during the early period of the Orunodoi. Dr. Bronson based his dictionary in Assamese and English which was published in 1867 on this writing;

(6) Buranji Vivekaratna (1838) by Maniram Barbhandar Barua.

Dr. Nathan Brown was the first editor of the Orunodoi. Some Assamese scholars are of the opinion that Mr. O. T. Cutter was the first editor of the Orunodoi, based on the statement in the first issue of the Orunodoi that the Orunodoi was 'printed and published at the Sibsagar Mission Press, by O. T. Cutter, for the American Baptist Mission in Assam.' George Gillespie has pointed out in his paper 'The Orunodoi' published in Indian Church History Review, Vol. XII, No. I, 1978 thus:

----- The fact that Cutter was the printer and publisher is no indication that he was the editor. He was, in fact, in charge of the press, and thus the printer and publisher of all the mission publications. The editor's name is not given on the periodical. In the biography of Nathan Brown, The whole world kin, the author (E. W. Brown) writes, 'In January, 1846, Mr. Brown prepared the first number of the Orunodoi ---- which he edited in the Assamese language during most of his remaining years at Sibsagar (Brown E. W. 1890 : 416).

From the beginning, the Orunodoi was published in two forms - magazine and newspaper. Until 1850, the only difference was in size, after which the magazine had twice the content of the newspaper. Both forms had one publication each month. Both forms were published for the first eight years. For the first five years (1846 - 1850), the contents of both forms were the same but the news paper had four large
pages and the magazine had eight smaller pages (Gillespie 1978: 20).

The *Orunodoi* played an important role as a step towards the modern era of Assamese literature. It created a renaissance in Assamese literature. The subject matters of the *Orunodoi* were varied and the style of the writing was of a more colloquial nature. The *Orunodoi* covered local and foreign news, and described the ethnography of the area. It included science, geography, machines, animals of the world, the stars, mythology of Hindu and other religions, old Assamese manuscripts and Christian teaching. It also included both original poetry and translations. It published Christian hymns.

The period of the *Orunodoi* was like the dawning of a modern life. The Assamese people tried to assimilate into the modern world with the knowledge gathered from the *Orunodoi*. The Assamese language needed new words to express the new, modern ideas. As far as possible the American Baptist Missionaries created new words from the original literature. Where they could not, they used an English word giving proper explanations. For example they used the words *Iswarar Namghar* or *Prabhur Dharam Mandali* for Church, *Paduri* for Padre, *Lata Paniyal* for grapes, *Man Palota* for conversion, *Bhabishyat Bakta* for prophet etc. The term 'Iswarar Namghar' is not commonly used now a days, but the term 'Mandali' is presently used.

Another attractive section of the *Orunodoi* were the fables and parables. Essay, as a type of literature, was first introduced in the *Orunodoi* by the Missionaries. This is another one of the major contributions of the Missionaries to Assamese
The Baptist missionaries used the word *Namghar* and *Mandali* for Church, in Assamese.
literature. They used new style and syntax, following English literature. Although the Assamese scholars acknowledge their creation of a new prose style, it was not a perfectly appealing form of literature. It took on its correct appealing form later when other educated Assamese writers started writing their free flowing thoughts with proper Assamese idiomatic use. The flow in poetic expression was not natural in all cases. In some poems, we see the influence of Vaishnava literature in style and form. The prose form of Assamese literature was also in the post-Vaishnava era. However, we see a new style in the prose writing by the Missionaries and other contemporary Assamese writers of their time.

The most prominent writers of the Orunodoi period are: Dr. Nathan Brown, Dr. Miles Bronson and Nidhi Levi Farwell.

Dr. Nathan Brown made a complete translation of the New Testament and published it in 1848. Another work by him - Khrishtar Vivaran Aru Subhavarta was published by the Sibsagor Mission Press in 1854. In his book - The Whole Walford Kin, he beautifully described his experience of preacher life and his sweet memories of Assam. Dr. Brown did a splendid job for Assamese literature by collecting about twenty old Assamese manuscripts. In addition to these, Dr. Brown translated about sixty Christian hymns into Assamese, and published substantial literature on Christian religion.

Dr. Miles Bronson will be remembered for his first Assamese dictionary, published in 1867 which contained about 14,000 pure Assamese words. It helped tremendously in restoring Assamese language in place of Bengali in Assam.
Dr. Bronson wrote a book - *Spelling book and Vocabulary in English, Assamese, Singpho and Naga* which was published from Jaipur in 1839. Dr. Bronson also translated a substantial number of Christian hymns into Assamese, along with other literary works of Christian religion.

**Nidhi Levi Farwell** was the prominent writer of the *Orunodoi* (1846 - 1854). Nidhi Levi was also a preacher, poet and translator. Nidhi Levi wrote books - *Bharatiya Dandavidhi Aain, Padartha Vidyar Sar - Arthat Isware Sarja Vastur Kathar Sikshak-Chatrar Kathopakathan, Hints for Children on Good Mannel-s*, *Female Education* and *Remarriage by widows*. Nidhi Levi's contribution to the translation of the Bible into Assamese by Dr. Nathan Brown is very significant. He wrote both prose and poetry in the *Orunodoi*. His children's essays with charming stories are remarkable. Nidhi Levi followed the style and syntax of Dr. Brown in his writing. He is one of the early writers of Assamese prose. Nidhi Levi was not only the first Assamese convert by Baptist Missionary, but was a pioneer writer in the Assamese language (*Neog, M:1985*).

**Mrs. Eliza Brown** dedicated her support to the literary work of Dr. Brown. Mrs. Brown also contributed to Assamese literature. She wrote *First Reading Book in Assamese* which was published from Jaipur in 1842. She was also co-author of the book *Gananar Kitap* with her husband Dr. Nathan Brown, which was published from Sibsagar in 1845. Two pages of this book are added in Appendix. The Sanskrit *stoka*, which is in the beginning of the book, is a definite proof that the American Baptist Missionaries emphasized the old traditional recorded values of any form of literature².
The first story books for juveniles in Assamese were written by Mrs. Brown and was published in 1840 (Neog, D. 1982: 344).

Mr. A. K. Gurney also contributed to Assamese literature. He edited the Orunodoi for several years. His important works in Assamese are - Pracin Niyam (Old Testament), Ruth Aru Josephor Kahini (1881), Kani Beheruar Katha (1878), Alokeshi Besyar Katha (1877) and Kamini Kantar Charitra (1877). His wife, Mrs. Gurney, also translated a book in Assamese - Phulmoni Aru Karuna (Sarma S. 1981: 280).

William Ward was a poet and he translated a considerable number of Christian hymns. Anglo-Assamese Vocabulary (1864) by Mrs. S. R. Ward and Anglo Assamese Phrases (1877) by H. B. L. Cutter were useful books in the development of Assamese literature.

There were other non-Christian Assamese writers who promoted Assamese literature by contributing to the Orunodoi. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the most prominent writer of the Orunodoi period. The contribution made by Phukan in his short life span is unique in Assamese literature. His essay on Englandor Vivaran was published in the Orunodoi in 1847. His book - Asomia Lorar Mitra was published in two parts in 1849. His most valuable work was A Few Remarks on Assamese Language, and on Vernacular Education in Assam. His consistent fight to reintroduce the Assamese language in Assam is described earlier. Although in the Orunodoi, we see the beginning of Assamese prose form initiated by the Baptist Missionaries, it flourished fully in the hands of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Phukan's
name is engraved as the pioneer of modern prose writer in Assamese literature (Talukdar 1992 : 2).

In addition to Dhekial Phukan, Boloram Phukan, Jagyaram Daodhai Barua, Purnananda Dekabarua, and Kinaram Satria, contributed to the *Orunodoi*. Some of the writers of the *Orunodoi* period contributed to Assamese literature without being influenced by the modern style of writing in the *Orunodoi*. They followed the traditional style. Dutiram Hazarika (1806-1901), Dinanath Bezbarua (1813-1895), Harakanta Barua Sadar Amin (1813-1900), Gopinath Chakravarty, Raghudeva Goswami and Lalitchandra Goswami belong to this group of writers.

**Assamese Literature at the Hands of Local Luminaries:**

**The Period of Hemchandra and Gunabhiram: 1870 - 1890**

There is no doubt that the Baptist Missionaries opened the door to let Assamese literature into its modern form. The topics included in the *Orunodoi* were of a somewhat materialistic type. It was not a true creative literature. The topics did not reflect a true picture of the socio-cultural, religious or economic side of the Assamese people. The Missionaries maintained interest in Christianity through the *Orunodoi*. They did not try to become leaders or to encourage the Assamese people to unite or to create feelings for Assamese independence. It was quite natural for the Missionaries not to destroy the harmony with the British. Even the educated Assamese supported the British for their personal gain in those days. But a feeling of patriotism pushed them to write about the social evils of the Assamese people. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Hemchandra Barua considered it their duty to uplift
Assamese society in the field of education and social reform.

Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua were pioneers in writing creative literature whose themes were social problems of the Assamese people. In reality, they started a new era in Assamese literature by ending the *Orunodoi* period. During their time we see the beginning of Assamese literature with drama, travel literature etc. The creation of wit, humour and satire first entered into Assamese language in the writings of Hemchandra and Gunabhiram Barua (Sarma S. 1981 : 292).

Hemchandra Barua started his literary life in the *Orunodoi*. He contradicted the view of Dr. Nathan Brown who used colloquial Assamese words without paying attention to the roots of the original words. Eventually Barua was successful, and he shaped Assamese words using Sanskrit as the origin, which he thought was the scientific base for the Assamese words. His Assamese dictionary, *Hemkosh*, was published in 1900 after his death. It was the second Assamese dictionary and the greatest achievement of his literary life. Hemchandra Barua also wrote *Asomia Vyakaran* (1859), * Aadipath* (1873), *Asomiya Lorar Vyakaran* (1886) and *Porhashalia Abhidhan* (1892). He also wrote two books - *Kaniya Kirttan* (1861) and *Bahire Rong Chong Bhitore Kowabhaturi* in which he used a satiric style to describe the downgraded Assamese society. He was also the editor of the *Asam News*. In addition to his Assamese books he wrote a book in English, *The Assamese Marriage System*.

Gunabhiram Barua, like Hemchandra Barua, also started his literary life in the *Orunodoi*. He wrote his first book, *Ram Navami*, in 1857. He contributed to Assamese literature with his valuable books - *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jivan*.
Charit (1880) and Asom Buranji (1884). He edited the monthly magazine the Asam Bandhu in 1885. The life span of this magazine was only a year and a half. He attracted a group of writers, viz. Hemchandra Goswami, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Ratneswar Mahanta, Satyanath Bora, Lambodar Bora and Bholanath Das, who flourished in the next Jonaki era. During this period, quite a few writers attended college at Calcutta and they came in contact with English and Bengali literature. We see some influence of these languages in their writings.

A. K. Gurney's Kaminikantar Charitra was published within this period, and is considered the first novel in the Assamese language. Padmawati Devi Phukanani, wife of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, also wrote a book, Sudharmar Upakhyan, during this period.

Earlier, the Baptist Missionaries published the old Buranjis, which were of a secular nature. During this period, Assamese religious literature came into light. Haribilas Agarwalla took the initiative in this project. Duttadeva Goswami of Aauniati Satra, Majuli also published a few books on Vaishnava literature.

The other noted writers of this period are: Ramakanta Chowdhury, Bholanath Das, Lambodar Bora and Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya, who extensively wrote articles in the Assamese magazines in addition to their books. Among the women writers Padmawati Devi Phukanani, wife of Dhekial Phukan; Bishnupria Devi, wife of Gunabhiram and Swarnalata, daughter of Gunabhiram are prominent figures of this period.
The Romantic Period 1890 - 1940:

On the foundation of Assamese literature laid by Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua, came a group of educated young people who changed the trend of Assamese literature to another modern form. These young people pursued their studies at Calcutta during the later part of nineteenth century. They were well conversant in English and in Bengali, in addition to their own Assamese language. In 1889, with their initiative and strong determination, they started to publish a monthly magazine, the *Jonaki*, from Calcutta for the advancement of the Assamese literature. This is the beginning of the *Jonaki Yug* in Assamese literature.

Contributing to the *Jonaki* or through their own books, they brought a new wave of romanticism - a new form in the Assamese literature. The Bengal renaissance had already taken place in Bengal before the start of the *Jonaki* era. The romanticism of Assamese literature actually came through the renaissance of the Bengali language.

The magazine *Jonaki* continued only for a period of nine years. Another parallel Assamese magazine, the *Bijuli*, was published from Calcutta in 1890 and continued only for few years. But the value of these magazines to Assamese literature are immense.

The *Jonaki*’s contributions are more significant and gave birth to a new form of poetry, short stories, novels, prose literature and dramas. The flow of Assamese literature continued in later years in the Assamese magazines - *Bahi* (1910-29, 1934-36, 1938-40), *Usha* (1907-12), *Aolochani* (1910-17) and *Awahan* (1929). During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Assamese literature was governed by the wave
of fight for independence.

During this period, the subject matters of Assamese literature are vivid. Literature, in the form of poetry, prose, drama, short stories, specific articles, life history and research-criticism were contributed by many established poets and writers. They developed their own different styles and therefore each contributed to the various essence of modern Assamese literature.

If we look for Christian Assamese literature during the Jonaki era, we find some evidence that the Christian Assamese literature still existed in a low profile. After the Orunodoi, the Baptist Missionaries published a monthly magazine, the Dipti beginning in July, 1905, and the magazine was continued up to 1945. The Dipti was published with an aim to propagate Christianity, and the editor tried to include different topics as was done in the Orunodoi. But the Dipti did not receive appreciation from the Assamese readers as the Orunodoi had.

The first editor of the Dipti was Rev. A. K. Gurney. The other editors were Rev. S. A. D. Boggs, Keneith Goldsmith, Dr. Victor Hugo Sword and Miss Anandi Konwar. The Dipti was published by the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta; the Assam Printing Works, Jorhat; the Jayanti Art Press, Guwahati and the Surjya Press, Nagaon. The prominent writers of the Dipti were Tanuram Saikia Christian, Henry Goldsmith, Miss J. R. Scott and Navinchandra Barua. Minaram Gogoi, Golok Chandra Singha and R. T. May contributed religious poems. Although the Dipti was in circulation for about forty years, it did not gain popularity among the non Christian Assamese (Phukan 1996 : 198-202).
Haridasee is another book written in Assamese by Dr. and Mrs. William E. Witter with Hindu and Christian Assamese helpers. It was published by the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society in 1922 from Guwahati. Haridasee is a novel which described how a happy family ended up in a pathetic situation because of the husband's addiction to alcohol. This is a beautiful book, which was translated from Bengali.

Two other books which were published by the Missionaries during this period are Balya Bandhu (1932), and Balya Sahasar (1940). Both books are written for children literature, and also depict the stories in pictures. Balya Bandhu was written by M. J. Tait from Golaghat and Balya Sahasar was published from the Mission Girls' High School, Golaghat, Assam. This gives us evidence that the Missionaries continued to publish books in Assamese even in the latter part of the Jonaki era.

The Present Period: 1940 to Present:

During the early part of the present period, Assamese literature was in a dormant stage. One of the main characteristics of Assamese literature of this era was the opposition to the romanticism of earlier period. The other characteristics were seeing the old believes in a progressive way, expressing the life and the world with anew philosophy and including some other materials which were not considered as literary materials in earlier Assamese literature (Borgohain 1993 : 0.19).

The old style of the poetry literature practically ended during the middle of the 20th century and a modern trend in poetry is progressing in a new direction. The theme of poetry moved towards the day-to-day activities of present life compared to
the old theme governed by a belief in God.

The modern style of literature originally emerged in the magazine *Jayanti*, which was first published in 1936. Raghunath Chowdhury was the editor. The *Jayanti* was published until 1938. The *Jayanti* was again published during the years 1943 to 1949.

**The Present Period since 1940:**

Since the modern period of Assamese literature falls in present century, I am restricting myself and not going into details considering the boundaries of my research topic. However, I would like to mention that the Assamese Christian literature still continues from the nineteenth century in a consistent form. In reference to the literature of a religious and cultural nature, Lakhiram Baruah of Jorhat wrote a number of books. His *Muktinam*, a collection of Assamese hymns in different styles was published first time in 1951. The other books he wrote on poetry were *Uddipana* (1954), *Sristilila* (1954) and *Sanjiwani* (1955). Lakhiram Barua also wrote dramas *Avatar* (1953) and *Apavyayee Putra* (1954). Joseph Silly also wrote books on religious songs *Natun Prasangsa Gan* (1957), *Chiyan-Sangeet* (1966) and *Geetawali* (1971).

A groove of Christian literature is still continuing in the present era keeping a tie with nineteenth century Christian missionaries.
Chapter VI

Notes and References

1. The missionaries favoured the use of simple and colloquial words in translating hymns to Assamese. The following is an extract from a letter written by Rev. N. Ward on March 26, 1873 from Sibsagar to Rev. M. Bronson. (Source: Bronson Family Papers)

"I get one of these hymns in mind and it goes on grinding when I lie awake or when I wake in the morning, or at odd intervals of other work. ---- I think you might send me some of your notes on some of the hymns. ---- I do not like 'khyomma' for 'Khema' at all, but I shall leave spelling to others and do as they bid ! I shall speak and pronounce the simple way."

The Assamese Pundits also helped the missionaries in composition of the hymns. In a letter to Rev. Bronson, Rev. Ward on March 15, 1873 wrote - "In the Jubilee hymn - Mr. Pundit wants 'Mukti hoba, he papi nor' instead of "Mukoli hoba papi nor".

2. I tried to find the root of the sloka by contacting a few persons who are proficient in Sanskrit Language, but could not succeed. Further investigation is felt needed on this matter.

3. The history of Phulmoni and Koruna, translated from Bengali by Nidhi Levi Farwell was published in 1854 and was printed at the American Baptist Mission Press, Sibsagar, Assam. Copy of the cover page of the book is included in the Appendix) Dr. Satyandranath Sarma refers to a book titled Phulmoni Aru Korunar Kahini (1877) by Mrs. Gurney. The books may be two independent books.


The summary of the book is as follows:

Haridasee was married to her husband when both were children. The father- in -law took care of the young son-in-law, and gave him proper education and the son-in-law eventually became a lawyer. The doctor advised the son-in-law to take a little brandy to recover from an illness. It formed a habit for the son-in-law and the famous lawyer turned into a drunkard and started living with a prostitute. Haridasee was devoted to her husband until she passed away, leaving her three small children behind.

It is to be noted that in the entire book, the writer did not mention about Christianity. The book focuses only on the dark side of alcohol abuse.