Chapter IX

The Assamese Cultural Resurgence:

The Seeds Sown by the Missionaries

Every educated Assamese knows about the role played by the American Baptist Missionaries in Assamese literature. The involvement of the Baptist Missionaries in the restoration of the Assamese language in Assam is an important event in the history of Assamese literature. The American Baptist Missionaries were not the only missionaries who came to Assam to spread Christianity among the people of Assam. The three most important Christian missions were - the American Baptist Mission, the Welsh Presbyterian Mission and the Salesian Order of the Roman Catholic Church. Why are not the Assamese concerned with the others, but only with the American Baptist Missionaries? The only reason for this is due to the emotional attachment formed with the Baptist Missionaries during their fight against the British administration to re-establish the Assamese language in its own place.

The objective of the Baptist Missionaries was to propagate Christianity among the people of Assam. The philanthropic works that they did were not their foremost objective. The Missionaries realized that the Assamese had a language of their own, and understood clearly that in order for their Christian mission to succeed, the medium of their Christian teachings could only be in the language that the people spoke.

The Missionaries played a critical role in their dealings with the British administration. The Baptist Missionaries from America were invited to Assam by the British administration. It was an unwritten understanding of the British administration
that the Missionaries would work in their field and educate people. This would help the British administration to carry out their administration. The Missionaries also got protection and support as expected from the British administration. Actually, both the British administration and the Missionaries worked hand in hand even though their objectives were different.

Most Assamese people have the feeling that the Baptist Missionaries were great and open hearted people, especially because of their leadership in the re-establishment of Assamese language. Yes, it is so, but only on the issue of language. The Missionaries could have lead the Assamese in a right direction by creating a feeling of citizenship in their minds. However, they did not initiate any plan to develop a nationalistic feeling in the Assamese. On the other hand, they supported the British administration for their own interest. All activities undertaken by the Missionaries were connected with their interest in propagating Christianity.

The Baptist Missionaries criticized the Hindu religion and the rituals of local people. They looked down the beliefs of Hinduism. The Missionaries openly made derogatory comments against Hinduism. At the same time the Missionaries, tried to show their neutrality with respect to all other religions.

The Missionaries also had discussions against the social and traditional customs of Assamese people. They even criticized the performing arts of the Assamese people which has already been discussed in a previous chapter.

With consideration to the above discussions, the Missionaries knowingly or indirectly did perform some good works for the Assamese people. Let us go back to
the socio-cultural milieu and the Missionary activities in the nineteenth century Assam, to make a neutral judgement and assessment.

In comparison to the other states of India, the trend of modernization in Assam was late and slow. This was due to the stagnant atmosphere where the Assamese lived, without any morals or aspirations for a progressive life after the disaster of the Burmese war. When the Assamese came in contact with the British and the American Baptist Missionaries, they gradually saw the modern technological advancement of the world. Modernization attracted the Assamese. Both the British and the Missionaries had their own separate objectives for Assam. But they sowed seeds of modernization in Assam in their own interest which helped the Assamese people to get acquainted with other parts of India as well as the world. Western renaissance gave birth to a new life style and culture for the Missionaries and the British. The new ideas from western renaissance were carried by the British and the Missionaries to India, and they introduced the new ideas in Assam upon their arrival.

Entering Assam, the Missionaries found that the Assamese language was not given proper recognition by the British administration, the society was completely broken down and the cultural life of the Assamese people was at the lowest level. The painstaking job undertaken by the American Baptist Missionaries was to establish the Assamese language as the *lingua franca* of the state. The Missionaries were joined in their efforts by Assamese intellectuals of the age, particularly Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, who not only fought for the cause of the Assamese language as an independent language but worked relentlessly to instill the urge for modernization and
progress among the Assamese people.

During the emergence of the Jonaki era, Assamese intellectuals furthered the cause of the Assamese language. A resurgence took place on the cultural side - in music, in theatre, and in other spheres of fine art. Assamese students studying in Calcutta received stimuli from the Bengal renaissance. The educated youth adopted western dress, manners and ways of dealings. The students came back to Assam with widened mental horizons and a modern outlook. The educated youths followed the model of western literature. They wanted to awaken the consciousness of Assamese society to religious hypocrisy, evil practices and superstitions through the medium of literature. These developments laid the foundation for the emergence of the modern Assamese society.

Although during the Ahom rule, a nationalistic feeling arose, it did not bond with the minds of the Assamese people, and the patriotic feeling dissipated. The political, economical and cultural atmosphere was shattered in the middle of the eighteenth century in Assam. The activities of foreign nationals indirectly helped the Assamese people to construct a new nest of their own with a feeling of patriotism and self identity.

After coming in contact with the British and the Baptist Missionaries, the Assamese people achieved specific identification as a distinct race, and the wave of distinct Assamese language and cultural characteristics spread to the outer boundary of Assam. Like the people of any other state in India, Assamese people also became self conscious about their own identity and language. It is really the American Baptist
Missionaries who enhanced the attraction of the Assamese language among the Assamese. The most useful seed sown by the Baptist Missionaries in Assam, was the Orunodoi, the first Assamese magazine cum news paper, which was started by the Missionaries in January 1846. The Orunodoi can be considered as a frame work for preserving seeds for future cultivation. Now we can see that those seeds germinated, were cultivated, nourished all spheres of Assamese life with its fruits. It should be remembered that the Orunodoi came into light as a result of the self consciousness of both the Assamese and the Baptist Missionaries.

The Assamese were used to live in their own social atmosphere. After invading Assam, the British introduced new methods of administration. They introduced an administration with documentary papers in courts, new objectives for work, a new concept of value, new styles of dresses, new innovations using modern technologies, etc. Whether the Assamese liked these changes or not, there were no educated, competent persons among the Assamese able to deal with the foreigners. The lack of education and financial incompetence were hindrances to the Assamese people, and consequently there was no close association with the foreigners. At this juncture, the past kings, nobles, and religious leaders from the Satras were so frustrated that they did not join with the foreigners in doing any meaningful constructive work. However, a few Assamese inspired by the Missionaries and the British, joined in the new wave of modernization of Assam. Perhaps only due to the contact and leadership of the Missionaries and British, the Assamese people stepped forward to lead a modern life. The influence of Christianity as a whole helped
Assamese to adapt to the British rule and to compete with the Bengalees.

The contributions of the American Baptist Missionaries in the socio-cultural resurgence are manifold. They brought the horizon of western education to the people of Assam. The British administrators also deserve credit for exposing Assam to English education by opening English medium schools. However, there was a fundamental difference in the British approach in comparison to the American Missionaries. The British did not do anything to uplift the Assamese language. They did not learn Assamese properly and most of them could not speak it fluently. They even tried their best to impose the Bengali language in place of Assamese. The language used in the British schools were English and Bengali. On the other hand, the Missionaries took time to learn the Assamese language thoroughly, and studied the old Assamese Sastras for their knowledge. The Missionaries inspired the Assamese to learn their own language and literature well. The Missionaries even encouraged the Assamese, after mastering the Assamese language, to learn English as well as other languages so that they could know the modern world and acquire broader knowledge. The Missionaries introduced Assamese as medium of instruction in their schools. For the invaluable contributions of the first dictionary in Assamese, the first grammar and the magazine the *Orunodoi* made by the Baptist Missionaries, they will be always remembered in the history of Assamese literature.

The establishment of the the Baptist Missionary Printing Press at Sibsagar, was a milestone in the history of printing books in Assam. The Missionaries published a lot of secular and non secular books from this press, including text books on simple
Arithmetics, Geography and books for beginners for schools. The press also helped enormously in the publicity of Assamese literature. The *Orunodoi* provided ample opportunity to the new Assamese writers, and as the writers gained self confidence and boldness, they became eager to express their views against the social evils that prevailed at that time in Assamese society. The *Orunodoi* served as a platform to voice the opinions of the readers. It also stimulated the nationalistic feeling of young Assamese reformers like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan to fight for the Assamese against the injustice of the British administrators.

The *Orunodoi* focused on the science and technology of the modern world. The Assamese people got acquainted with modern inventions and a modern way of life through the *Orunodoi*. The Baptist Missionaries published ethnological and cultural information on all kinds of hills tribes of North East India, and thereby helped the readers to understand each other in terms of social and traditional cultures.

One of the greatest efforts made by the Baptist Missionaries was the fight to eradicate the opium eating habit of the Assamese people. The evil effects of opium eating was often discussed in the *Orunodoi*. They even advised the readers how the habit could be overcome by the use of natural herbs that were readily available in Assam. This shows their concern for the people of Assam (Barua 1965: 125-126). The extensive primary education plan also had an impact on the opium eating habit. The report from Additional School Inspector of Nagaon was published in ‘The Assam Gazette’, 1878 p.41, and stated, “Primary education in that district is bringing about the gradual discontinuance of opium eating” (Bhuyan 1986: 13). In this context the
distinguished American Baptist Missionary, Rev. Miles Bronson, wrote a letter as a community member to Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Magistrate of Nowgong Court on April 18, 1857. Rev. Bronson urged Phukan to exercise his power to aid in the eradication of the opium eating habit of Assamese people (Bhuyan 1990 : 26-27).

Assam was mainly an agricultural state. After the British took over Assam, the precarious condition of peasants were improved a little. But, due to abolition of the paik system, the elite members of Ahom kingdom were placed in the position of not having any honourable occupation. As an alternative, this group of people looked for employment under the British administration, and turned out to be the middle class people in Assam. This was the beginning of middle class society of Assam. The Baptist Missionaries published substantial articles in the Orunodoi, depicting moral values for the formation of a new educated middle class society in Assam.

The Baptist Missionaries who came to Assam from America were Protestant. Ideologically, the Protestants were less orthodox than the Catholics and thus the Baptist Missionaries carried open hearted morality in their minds. But implementing this open hearted morality was not so simple. Upon arrival in Assam, the Missionaries realized that they had to create an atmosphere of Puritanism to lead the changes in Assamese social life. They understood that in order to transform the Assamese people to a modern sphere, they had to institute a modern group of middle class people who had to be properly educated, disciplined, self-controlled and competent. They also understood that an educational occupation based on a modern scientific approach would have to be their life-style. The Puritanism which was practiced by the Baptist
Missionaries had enormous value and will be recognized in the history of Assam. In most issues of the *Orunodoi*, the Missionaries published articles that had beneficial advice which aimed to create a good, disciplined, and temperate Assamese society. In the *Orunodoi*, the Missionaries firmly criticized lies and other unholy and unfair devices. With their puritanical view, the Missionaries got some responses and a few energetic and reformative minded Assamese youths supported the Missionaries views. The youths appealed to their fellow Assamese, and they were successful to some extent. In this context, we can mention the name of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, the great reformer and educator of Assam.

From their arrival in Assam, the Baptist Missionaries tried to implement female education in Assam. In the earlier days of Assam, women were not given due importance in day-to-day life. It was considered a waste for girls to attend school. Education of women was considered dangerous, and most men would not marry a girl if she could read and write (Barpujari 1980 : 307). The Baptist Missionaries made great efforts to enroll girls in their schools and started co-education in schools. In the *Orunodoi*, the Missionaries criticized the ill treatment of females. Moreover, the Missionaries published articles against adultery and fornication (Neog 1983 : 224-228).

The American Baptist Missionaries introduced the concept of self support, whether for an individual or an organization. To give the Assamese a means of self support, the Missionaries introduced occupational training in Nowgong Orphan Institute. At the same time, the Missionaries educated the Assamese on the dignity of
labour in their institutions.

Discovery of the past was an objective of the Baptist Missionaries. Dr. Nathan Brown collected the old manuscripts which turned out to be a source of knowledge on old Assamese literature. The Missionaries discovered old obsolete Assamese words and reused them in Assamese literature. At the same time they created and used some sweet colloquial words in their writings. In some instances, they introduced some English words into Assamese. Mr. D. Neog states in this respect thus:

In regard to the merits of Christian-Assamese is their enriching the Assamese vocabulary by brightening and bringing into use a large number of Assamese words fast becoming obsolete and lost, and by coining others into elegant Assamese while in the early period of Assamese we find a large number of indigenous words and forms in use even in the Buddhist songs, Caryas and Dohas, there seems to have been an attempt at more Sanskritising the language in the Vaishnavite period. But the Baptist missionaries made a sincere attempt at making the spoken and written speech perfectly agree. Hence they often used the more colloquial forms of speech and always preferred the use of indigenous words, generally so simple and sweet (Neog 1982: 359).

Although it was the goal of the Christian Missionaries to spread Christianity in Assam, they tried to show religious neutrality in their magazine the Orunodoi. The Missionaries published controversial news regarding Hinduism and Muhammedanism. The Missionaries tried to provide a forum for intellectual people to have rationalistic discussion. However, the Missionary’s inert feeling could be understood from the observation of Rev. A. K. Gurney.

Assamese are apparently unimpressible; preaching and talking to them seem to have no effect on them ---- In fact they have an accommodating theory that all religions are true ‘for the European’s they say Christianity is good; for the Hindoo, Hindooism; for the Mussalman, Muhammedanism’ (Barpujari 1980: 305).
During the days of the Ahom rule in Assam, there were restrictions in the use of dresses and ornaments. Common people were not allowed to put on silk or costly ornaments. No one was allowed to choose his or her own profession. They could not use all types of conveyance. ‘Only the princes and nobles were privileged to enjoy things of luxury. The gable-roofed house was the monopoly of the royal families’ (Sarma 1991: 231). ‘The common people were not permitted to build houses of masonry, or with a rounded end, and no one but the king himself was allowed to have both ends of his house rounded’ (Gait 1992: 231). However, the British abolished these restrictions and the common people were allowed to enjoy privileges according to their desires. The Baptist Missionaries also constructed round ended buildings in their mission campus at Jorhat, perhaps to prove that all peoples should be allowed to do so.

The pictures engraved in the *Orunodoi* were very attractive and these helped readers to easily visualize the subject matter. The concept of statistical data was introduced by the Missionaries in the *Orunodoi*.

The Missionary’s *Orunodoi* was an important literary vehicle in nineteenth century Assam. There were other magazines such as the *Assam Bilasini* (1871), the *Assam Darpan* (1874), the *Assam Dipak* (1876), the *Assam News* (1882), the *Assam Bandhu* (1884), the *Mou* (1886) and the *Jonaki* (1889), etc. which were published towards the end of nineteenth century and gave a modern outlook to the people of Assam. Perhaps these other magazines came to light because of the *Orunodoi*, which will be recognized as a pioneer work of the American Baptist Missionaries.
The British and the American Missionaries came to Assam to fulfill their own interests. But it may be true that without the efforts of the British and the Missionaries, the Assamese people would have waited for a longer period of time in a stagnant atmosphere before they saw the new light of modern life.