CHAPTER - II

RENAISSANCE IN ASSAM

In the first part of the 19th century the people of Assam suffered untold misery and suffering under the weak and inefficient Ahom kings. In the book "A Glimpses of Assam" by Upendra Nath Barua we get a vivid and true description of the contemporary times. He wrote,

"The ease-loving, effeminate Raja surrounded by court-fools and puffed up to seventh heaven by mean sycophants and parasites and largely swayed by the intriguing Ranees and courtesans, gradually found it hard to govern so small a territory".¹

He has truly portrayed the crippled and lawless social condition of the then Assam. Taking advantage of the weakness of the administration some officials of the court and some people belonging to upper class of the society, began to roll in a life of extreme luxury. But they had little land of their own to speak of. The "pyke" given to them by the king and the labour exacted from the bondmen kept them going and also helped them preserve their respectful image in the society. To keep bondmen was a status symbol in those days and enough of them were available with but little

effort. In this critical and chaotic situation, the Mans of Burma attacked Assam and practically snatched away whatever little power the Ahom kings had, and they also inflicted cruel and inhuman tortures upon the Assamese people.

At about this time, in 1825, the English army under Mr. Scott and Col. Richard, after fierce battle at Gaurisagar and Rangpur defeated Man army. Assam came under British rule.\(^2\)

But,

"Before the English could do anything, Feudalism in Assam became powerless and quite decayed by internal conflicts".\(^3\)

For this reason the English faced no difficulty or any problem to extend their dominion, and firmly establish their rule in Assam.

\(^2\)"Mr. Scott aru Karnel Richardar netritwat ingrāj saina tār Nānak khedi ni Gaurisāgar āru Rangpurat tamāmayā ran dile. Man sainya juddhat Asom eri palal (1825)."


\(^3\)"Ingrāj eko karar āgata tār nijar ābhyantarān dwandate Assamar sāmantabād hatabal aru kshayprāpta haichil".

Dr. Hiren Gohain : Sāhitya āru Chetanā, p. 13.
"Under the British rule the Assamese people heaved a sigh of relief having been freed from internal conflicts and the inhuman tortures of the Mands. But though the rank and file accepted the British rule quietly, there were some high dignitaries and highly placed bureaucrats who could not bow down to the British rule wholeheartedly. In and around 1830 the rebellion of Piali Phukan, Gamadhar Konwar are proofs of this". 4

The chief causes of these rebellions were in the first place, their desire for independence and get back their old kingdom and the vanishing glory and the privileges which they enjoyed previously. In addition to these when the English emancipated the bondmen, their resentment increased. Finding the English to be the absolute ruler of the country a few patriotic and important men of Assam became a little confused.

Since the English did not face any opposition to administer the country from the Assamese people as they did in other parts of India, they tried to retain the status quo of the old administrative system. We find this in "Politica History of Assam" by H.K. Barpujari where it is stated,

"David Scott, the agent of the Governor-General, North East Frontier, was convinced of the utmost importance of adopting the new administrative measures as closely as possible to the actual wants, prejudices, and conditions of the people and specially of continuing to employ the leading men of the country in the discharge of duties of the hereditary offices subject to the supervision of European officers".  

In Upper Assam the old "Khel" custom was retained. To meet the expenses of running the administration labour of the individual was demanded and tax, to be paid in cash, was imposed on agricultural products. Janardan Barbaruah, a leading citizen, was appointed Head of revenue department, and Kheldars - Saikias, Hazarikas and Boras were appointed to assist him. After sometime land-tax was imposed. In Lower Assam the Chowdhury's came to an understanding with the English. Lands which yielded no revenue were distributed among the Chowdhury's after enacting laws to this effect. Besides this everyone was given "Pyke" for their work. Naogaon and Raha were joined together and they were brought under two revenue officers, Aradhan Roy and Pani Phukan. Bijaynarayan, the king of Darrang, agreed to pay the English

Rs. 42,000.00 per year without a murmur. Encouraged by this the English arranged to distribute land among and collect revenues from, other kings.

"For the administration of civil justice, in Upper Assam Lambodar Barphakun, a brother-in-law of erstwhile Raja Chandra Kanta Singha, was appointed co-adjutor with Janardan Barbaruah of the revenue department". 6

The responsibility of the revenue department of Lower Assam was given to a local record-keeper (Seristadar) by Scott. The Duoriya Baruahs, who were terribly oppressed during the Ahom reign, helped Scott in all possible ways when he came to attack Assam. As a mark of gratitude for this help Scott appointed one Haliram of them, who got the title of "Dhekial Phukan" from the kings, the 'Seristadar' of Lower Assam. Scott extended his helping hand to all those who suffered during the days of the political turmoil. Many aristocratic families members of the royal family, whoever asked for help, were given lumpsum money as one-time-grant, monthly pension and small estates. Many members of the Ahom royal family were given employment in the offices of the Company. When the English were engaged in their war with the Mans then many heads of different "Satras" like, Aaoniati

6 Ibid. p. 12.
Dakshinpat, Garmur etc. helped the English soldiers by supplying them food and drink. As a mark of gratitude for this help and also to win their hearts, Scott gifted them thousands of acres of fallow land. Since Scott desired to retain the old administrative system he appointed many leading citizens of Assam in the offices of the Company and in other administrative jobs.

But unfortunately most of these leading citizens were unfit for administrative employment. We get elaborate description of this in "Political History of Assam".

"In the actual working of the new measures, revenue and judicial, Scott was disillusioned. He was greatly disappointed to find that the commutation of services of the "Pykes" failed to produce either an adequate pecuniary collection to the government or satisfaction to the people". 7

It has also been said in that book, "To his utter disappointment Scott found before long that the men of rank proved themselves wholly in-competent to discharge the duties of the revenue and judicial department entrusted to them. They

7 Ibid - p. 13.
were placed under a novel system of administration to which they had been quite strangers".

Thus,

"Scott policy of conciliating the former official aristocracy thus proved a dismal failure".  

The misery of the people and their discontent began to increase. The people were disgusted and harrassed by theft, robbery and many other criminal activities. In different parts of the country small scale uprising against the English rule began to take place. The mention of this we find in "Planter Rāj to Swarāj" by Amalendu Guha.

"The old aristocracy that had lost its offices of profit was the first to react violently to the alien rule. The rebellions of Gamdhar Konwar and Rupchand Konwar in 1828 and 1829 respectively, were but attempts at a palace revolution by pretenders to the throne. These were quickly suppressed. For his role in the 1829 rebellion Peoli Barphukan was executed".  

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8 Ibid - p. 18-19.
This has been mentioned in "Asamiyā Sahityār Samikshatmak Itibritta" by Satyendra Nath Sarma -

"The English put Purandar Singha on the throne in 1833 with limited powers in Upper Assam in exchange of ₹.50,000.00 per year. But with his limited powers Purandar Singha could not do any good to the people, on the contrary, he rolled a machine of oppression and torture upon the people to collect revenue. In 1838, on charges of inefficiency, Purandar Singha was dethroned with a monthly pension of ₹.1,000.00. The whole of Assam came under the British rule".  

To bring law and order in the country men became the chief objective of the English. The men on the street heaved a sigh of relief an they welcomed the British rule with open arms. The English rule saved the people of Assam from the inefficient rule of the native kings and also from the terror of the Mans. For about fifty years the people had but little opportunity to put their mind into the development of their education, language and literature. But when peace was established in the country, people gradually turned their minds to create literature and a new culture which is the natural desire of all people. Those who tried to develop...
their language and culture at this critical juncture of the country were all noble and claim our respect and reverence.

It is really a matter of great regret that history does not remember these pioneers. They get lost in the passage of time. The men who raised themselves from a middle class status to an aristocratic one in this period of social and political transition were - Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Jaganram Phukan, Jaduram Deka Baruah, Kashi Nath Tamuli Phukan, Hara Kanta sadar Amin etc. This aristocratic class was able to endear themselves to the British by their knowledge in economic and revenue matters, their skill in handling legal problems and running the administration smoothly.

In the first period of his life (1802) Haliram Dhekial Phukan was a customs officer. In 1825 he took up the responsibility of Record-keeper at Guwahati and later, in 1832, he was promoted to the position of an assistant magistrate. He knew Bengali, Persian, Hindi and Sanskrit. This linguistic knowledge helped him to become an efficient administrator. He was the first Assamese who was acquainted with the contemporary thoughts and opinions of Bengal. He wrote a good number of essays in Bengali which were published in the Bengali magazines of those days. His modern way of thinking, his eagerness to uplift the condition of the people
and the country, his desire to spread women’s education, were something quite rare among the backward people of Assam of those days. Even in those days he realised the importance of bringing Assam in contact with Bengal where the people had already got western education and were inspired by modern western thoughts. He wrote several essays stressing the need of this contact which were published in the contemporary Bengali magazines and also in his "Asom Buranji" (1829), a history of Assam written in Bengali. The brother of Haliram Phukan, Jaganram Phukan, was the first Assamese educated in English. He also mastered, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Bengali, quite well. He learnt English from a European tutor whom he brought to Assam. From this we can realise how eager he was to get English education. He joined the Brahma Samaj being inspired by the thoughts and ideals of Ram Mohon. He translated and published many English poems into Bengali which were highly acclaimed in those days.

Jaduram Deka Baruah (1801-1867) was a highly educated person. He was a Munsif in the British administration. He worked at different places in Assam and everywhere he showed his administrative skill and then he was superannuated. He wrote several essays and published them in the Bengali magazines, "Sambād Darpan" and "Sambād Chandrikā". He was dead against the cult of "Suttee" and supported the widow-marriage movement initiated by Vidyāsāgara.
and he himself married a widow ignoring all the inhibitions of the orthodox Hindu Society and the vehement criticisms of his friends and relatives. He wrote one Assamese dictionary also. This young generation of Assam whose activities have been discussed here, brought the Bengal Renaissance in Assam.

The American Baptist Mission published one Assamese monthly magazine, "Arunodoi" (1846-1882) from Sibsagar in 1846. For the convenience of their work they also established a printing press. This was the first magazine in Assam published in Assamese. First Rev. Mr. O.T. Cutter, and later Dr. Nathan Brown, A.H. Denforth, S.M. Whiting and Miles Bronson etc. edited the magazine and published it. Though the magazine was chiefly published for the spread of Christianity, yet it published the news of many other countries, important historical events of other countries, translations of the stories from the Bible, religious news, essays on nature, stories with moral teachings descriptive narrations of the country, biography contemporary news, essays on geography, inventions and discoveries of science, hymns, etc. "Arunodoi", being the first magazine published in Assamese, occupies a very distinctive place in the history of the Assamese language. This can be said unequivocally that, (1) This magazine brought Assamese society in contact with the greater outside world by opening the doors of the vast realm of knowledge of other countries, (2) sowed the seeds of
Western thoughts and ideas and thus helped the modernisation of literature, (3) helped the Assamese language to find its due place by opposing the spread of Bengali language, (4) initiated the writers like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Nidhiram Farwel, Hemchandra Barua, Gunaviram Baruah, etc., in Assamese language and literature, and (5) it first paved the way for ideal journalism by being the first magazine published in Assam in Assamese. Following the steps of "Arunodoi" other magazines like, "Asām Bilāsini" (1871-1883), "Asām Mihir" (1872-1873), "Asām Darpan" (1874-1875) etc. were published which helped the progress and development of Assamese language and literature. Apart from this "Arunodoi" founded the corner stone of Assamese literature by publishing, dictionary, Grammar, and also text books. Without dictionary and grammar no language can properly develop which hinders the creation of good literature. There is not a speak of doubt that all these efforts greatly helped the Assamese language and literature. The missionaries connected with "Arunodoi", Dr. Nathan Brown, Dr. Miles Bronson, A.K. Garni, Nidhiram Farwel added new words to the Assamese vocabulary taking them from English and rediscovered Assamese words lost and forgotten. These men gave an artistic shape and character to the colloquial language used in the educated Assamese society, the same character which is the life and soul of a language. We do not get this melody in the Assamese literature published before this. The few young Assamese
writers who launched themselves in a literary career in the age of "Arunodoi" were, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Baruah and Gunaviram Baruah, who are worth mentioning. These three writers of the age of "Aronodoi" mainly laid the foundation of modern Assamese literature. Though by literary standards they can hardly be given a high place of honour yet their prose compositions resurrected the Assamese language through a great radical change. Besides this the greatest contribution of this magazine (Arunodoi) was that it made it possible for the Assamese language to find its own distinguished identity.

"Apart from establishing the Assamese language firmly in Assamese literature "Arunodoi" laid a strong foundation for modern Assamese literature. At the same time it indirectly aroused a national consciousness among the new generation of writers through that literature".11

"Englandar Bibaran" and "Asamiyā larār Mitra" by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, were published in "Arunodoi" in 1849 in two parts. In 1853 Anandaram presented a ver

impressive report on the economic problems of Assam to an English gentleman named Maffat Mills. In this report or memorandum he discussed the political and administrative problems of Assam, analysed the problems of language and education of Assam, tried to find out the cause of economic hardship of the Assamese people and suggested how to alleviate them, discussed the ways and means to develop agriculture and better revenue collection. He wrote this report in clear and lucid English and also with courage and determination. A book, "A Few Remarks on Assamese Language" was also published in English.

In this book the distinctive quality and identity of the Assamese language has been discussed. Besides this Phukan planned to bring out Assamese - English, and English - Assamese dictionaries and some parts of these dictionaries were published in "Arunodoi".

Moreover it was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan who could convince the linguist and lexicographer like William Cary that Assam was ruled by the Britishers with certain undesirable motives which needed rectification and ultimately that was done and the language of the soil, i.e., Assamese, was given due place both in administration and in academic matters.12

This was the greatest achievement of the missionaries for which the people welcomed them and tried utmost to co-operate with them in establishing schools and colleges in the line of the missionaries. People had an impression that the missionaries had introduced everything for the benefit of the local people. Thus the people came forward to accept all the systems of the British rulers along with the missionaries and all those had been reflected in literature. Tilottama Misra has rightly stated -

"There was an increasing awareness among intellectuals to come out of their age-old shell and to reach out to the rest of the world through the medium of the printed word".  

The auspicious beginning of the literary career of Hemchandra Barua started in the pages of "Arunodoi". He wrote an essay in "Arunodoi" suggesting a correction of the Assamese alphabet for an orderly arrangement related to Sanskrit. The reason was that he believed that this will make the Assamese spelling rules more scientific and relate the words to their roots. In 1859 he published "Asamiya Bhasar Byākaraṇ", in 1873 "Ādipāth", in 1886, "Asamiya Sarār Byākaraṇ" and in 1892 "Parāścālia Abhidhān". Two years later he wrote "Sangkshipta Hem-Koṣṭ". In 1890, after his death his

13 Tilottama Misra : "Literature and Society in Assam", p.70.
magnum opus "Hem Koş" was published. To produce creative literature, guarding the purity of the language and using the words correctly, grammar and dictionary are absolute necessities. Thus Hemchandra Barua met a long-felt need of the students and opened up a new and bright future for Assamese literature. His "Hem Koş" is indispensable not only for students but also for all lovers of literature. In his books "Kaniār Kirtan" and "Bāhire Rong Chang Bhitar Koabhāṭuri" exposed the degradation of the contemporary Assamese society with scathing sarcasm. He also showed his competence as the editor of "Assam News". Hemchandra Barua claims a distinguished place among the writers of those days as the writer of the first dictionary written according scientific principles, as he gave a definite shape to Assamese words, being the first satirical writer in Assamese and an ideal writer of prose literature.

Like Hemchandra Baruah, Gunaviram Baruah also entered the literary arena through "Arunodoi". His first literary effort was the play "Rām Nabami". In 1880 he published the biography, "Ānandarām Dhekiāl Phukanar Jiban Charit". This was the first ideal and undistorted biography in Assamese literature. In 1884 his famous work "Ascom Buranjī" was published, being written from a scientific point of view and also for its simply and lucid prose style this book occupies a distinguished place. The book "Kathin Shabdar
Rahasya" carries his sense of wit and humour. In 1885 the monthly magazine "Asom Bandhu" was published under his editorship. But only 14 issues of this magazine were published, yet this short-lived magazine had a historical role to play. In reality the study and cultivation of Assamese prose and poetry writing started in the pages of "Assam News" and "Asom Bandhu". "Asom Bandhu" laid stress on the use of a simple and easy style in modern literature, but "Assam News" turned its eyes to the correct use of words and guard the purity of the language. "Asom Bandhu" was also to attract the attention of many educated men also were drawn to the study of literature. 14 Hemchandra Goswami, Bezbaruah, Ratneswar Mahanta, Satyanath Bora, Lambodhar Bora, Bhola Nath Das and other writers made their appearance in "Asom Bandhu" who later achieved good success in the magazines, "Joraki" and "Bijuli" which came out in the later period. In 1886 the magazine "Mou" of Baliram Baruah was published. However, it died when only a few issues were published. Though it was short-lived yet, laying stress on Political and economic problems, it was able to give journalism a new direction.

When in Assam some educated men were trying to guard the purity of words and give a respectable standard to Assamese words and language, other men, educated in Calcutta.

colleges, established an organisation in Calcutta, "Asamiyā Bhāṣā Unnati Sādhini Sabhā" on 25th August, 1888, to make their people self-conscious through the study and spread of literature. The founding of this organisation has a especial importance in the history of Assamese literature. To develop Assamese literature from all sides was the objectives of this organisation such as, (1) to collect old manuscripts and publish them, (2) to introduce Assamese in every educational institution of Assam, (3) to bring the usage of correct words and grammar in place of the incorrect ones, (4) to translate good books from Sanskrit and other languages, (5) to collect information and accounts of social and religious customs and traditions of Assam, (6) to remove the difficulty of the non-availability of text books, etc. To publish their own literary efforts and to arouse national consciousness among the people, this organisation brought out a monthly magazine "Jonāki" next year on 13th January, 1889 which became its organ.

The first editor of this magazine was Chandra Kumar Agarwala and later Hemchandra Goswami, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Kanaklal Barua and Ramakanta Barkakati edited this magazine at different times with competence and skill. This magazine produce a group of powerful writers who brought a new consciousness in Assamese literature. Even in the first issue of Jonaki the darker sides of Assam were identified and
pointed out and where its objective to bring "Jonāki", i.e. "Moonlight", in the life and society of the Assamese people, was also proclaimed. This educated group of young Assamese writers realised that compared with the modern literature with a developed language of other parts of India the contemporary literature of Assam was sadly lagging behind much. So this group put their best efforts to inspire and to instil into the people a self-consciousness to develop their language, literature and culture. Getting the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions in the pages of "Jonaki" a new wave of hope and inspiration came in the life of these youngmen educated in Calcutta. They tried their best to develop their long-neglected mother tongue.

"Assamese literature of this period was the creation of that handful of Assamese intellectuals who were exposed to the influence from Bengal and the West. The visions and aspirations of those intellectuals for the future of their motherland and their efforts to raise her to the level of the more advanced provinces of India, became the subject matter of much of their writings."  

In this "Jonaki" they got the opportunity to bring out their literary talent and genius. "Jonaki" can claim

distinguished position in the growth and development of Assamese literature. Having come under the influence of the new renaissance "Jonāki" published many lyrical poems such as, on nature, on love, sonnets, mournful poems, satirical poems etc. and started a new genre of poetry in Assamese literature. It brought variety in Assamese literature by publishing short stories, novels, and essays on different topics. Only religious prose literature was in vogue in the old literature, but it was in "Jonāki" where short stories and novels were first published. Following the manner of tragedy, comedy and farce in English literature, efforts were made to write the same kind of plays in Assamese literature. "Jonāki" was able to create a feeling of love and respect for their language and literature among the Assamese people.

In the group of writers who created a new epoch in Assamese literature through Jonāki, Bezbaruah was the leading personality in modern Assamese literature. He was a very powerful and a staunch nationalist writer,

"All through the period Lakshmi Nath Bezbarua (1864-1938) with a towering personality and with command over all aspects of Assamese literature old and new, stood as an uncrowned king in the domain of Assamese language and literature". ¹⁶

Like an ambidexter Lakshminath opened all the possible doors for the development of the underdeveloped Assamese language and literature.