During the later half of the nineteenth century, the spirit of social reform was evident in almost all the provinces of India. Assam was no exception to it. Newspapers played a significant role in reflecting this spirit of reform.

"There were at the beginning of the nineteenth century, numerous social evils of such a character as would rudely shock our sensibility at the present day. They were tolerated, partly out of veneration for the old customs and partly out of sheer inertia. But the urge of a rational spirit which declared war against religious superstitions could ill brook the social evils which were eating into the vitals of the society."

Society in India had passed through numerous phases of change. In her long and chequered history, there have been periods of progress, regeneration and reform, as well as periods of decay, dissolution and degeneration. The eighteenth century and the early part of nineteenth century witnessed the latter tendencies. While in Europe, it

was the age of enlightenment, in India it was a period of stagnation. Social institution, customs and practices began to assume a rigid and petrified form. Irrational social practices became conspicuous features of the period. Religion, the pivot of Indian life, had always exercised great influence on the people in their social ways and habits. With religions attaching more importance to the external form rather than to inner realisation, religious superstitions began to pervade all aspects of social life. The priestly class became dominant in the society, majority of whom seldom understood the scriptures and cared little for spiritual values. But the society obeyed them faithfully. They could explain any and every social evil as holy, with the apparent sanction of the scriptures behind it. Infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, sati and other social evils were all interpreted as scripturally and religiously valid.

However, from the thirties of the nineteenth century, there was in India a wave of reforming activities, which influenced the minds of her people through the wholesome activities of different Samaj, Societies, and other organisations. Throughout the nineteenth century, contact with the progressive and the enlightened thoughts of the West resulted in phase after phase of various reform movements in India to reform the society and rationalize thoughts.

With the establishment of the British rule, Assam along with the rest of the country experienced the impact of western education. Western education brought humanistic outlook and rational spirit in its train. The influence, which brought revolutionary changes in the life and thought of the Indian people, gradually and eventually grew into an irresistible motivating force in Assam also.

Towards the second half of the nineteenth century, under the influence of Bengal renaissance, a strong wave in favour of widow remarriage grew in Assam as well.
initiative was taken by Jaduram Barua, Gunaniram Barua and Hem Chandra Barua. This was soon followed by a movement against polygamy and child marriage.2

The reformative ideals of the Bengali intelligentsia became a model for the educated section of the Assamese society. Assamese students in fairly large numbers went to Calcutta, for higher studies, during the later half of the nineteenth century. There they came under the influence of new ideas and a new outlook which they brought back with them to Assam. This was the beginning of the modernization of thought and culture in Assam.3 The newly educated Assamese were deeply influenced by the reformist ideas and activities of the Bengali intelligentsia. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, for instance, who went to the Hindu College in Calcutta for higher studies was attracted by the reformative activities of the Young Bengal Group.4

The Bengali periodicals in circulation in Assam also played a significant role. Hem Chandra Baruah, who had never been to Calcutta for higher studies, was an ardent admirer of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar.5 Great personalities like Holiram Dhekial Phukan, Jaduram Deka Barua, Jagyaram Khargharia Phukan and Maniram Dewan, had not only subscribed Bengali papers but also regularly contributed to Bengali journals like the Samachar Darpan, the Samachar Chandrika and the Bangadut. These papers acquainted them with the progressive aspects of the nineteenth century intellectual development in Bengal. They became increasingly aware of the reformative trends that had set in during the period and used the printed medium to express their opinion on important issues of social reform like Sati, education of women etc.6

5. J. N. Goswami, Asamiya Bhasar Oja Hem Chandra Barua, Guwahati, 1985, p.68
The Brahmo movement in Bengal also had its influence on the newly educated Assamese. Jagyaram Khargharia Phukan, uncle of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, was one of the first disciples of the Brahmo Samaj under Rammohan Roy in the 1830's. Gunaviram Barua was attracted to the Brahmo Samaj when he was in Calcutta during 1855-56. He was greatly influenced by the widow-remarriage movement launched by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar during this period.

The impact of western civilization brought radical changes in the society. It gave a new mental outlook to many and most importantly it put a question mark on some of the traditional values, and age-long customs of the society. The newly educated class had to choose between old orthodoxy and the new liberal culture. Some of them freely adopted the European style of living. On his return from Calcutta, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, for example, used trousers, hat and shoes, whenever he visited European friends or when he went out for a walk. Lakshminath Bezbarua adopted a new hair cut in English fashion and gave up the time-honoured custom of keeping a pig-tail. Jagyaram Khagharia Phukan freely dined with Europeans and enjoyed varieties of European delicacies and wine. His house at Guwahati was amply adorned with modern furniture like chairs, tables, carpets, art-glass lustres, and an organ. Govinda Bezbaruah was also among those who adopted western dress and food habits.

The impact of modern education, new scientific outlook, the doctrine of rationalism and humanism particularly impressed the English educated section of the society. Armed with a critical attitude this section of the society used the Press as a medium to rouse

10. Lakshminath Bezbarua, Mor Jivan Sowaran, Guwahati, 1999, pp. 12,18
social awareness against the evils prevailing in the Assamese society. The first and foremost social problem that attracted enlightened opinion was the need for a better position for women in society.

"... It was a long tale of suffering and humiliation almost from birth to death. Among several tribes, the birth of a girl was regarded as unfortunate, and they did not hesitate to kill them deliberately soon after they are born. The marriage of a girl at an early age, long before puberty, and even sometimes when they were five to ten years old, if not earlier still, was the prevalent custom amongst the Hindus, with rare exceptions. This deprived the girls of any opportunity of receiving any education worth the name and denied them altogether any say in the matter of selecting their partners in life. If the husband died, even when the wife was quite young or a baby, she was faced with the alternatives either burning herself along with his dead body, or living a desolate or miserable life, almost often as neglected, if not hated drudge in the family. For, beyond a bare maintenance, she had no right to the property of her husband, and could not marry again. But though the wife had no right to marry after the death of her husband he could and not often did, marry a number of wives, not only after her death, but even during her lifetime."13

Women in Assam enjoyed no better status than other places of India. Shihabuddin Talish, the seventeenth century Muslim historian who accompanied Mir Jumla to Assam in 1662, however, gave an impressive comment that in Assam "the wives of the Rajas and peasants alike never veil their faces before anybody, and they move about freely in the market places with bare heads."14 Ahom society till then was not much under the

grip of Hindu scriptures. Thus women during the period had a comparatively free and liberal movement than their counterparts in other parts of India, governed completely by Brahmanical laws. In the absence of major Aryan influences, the position of women in Assam was somewhat different from that in other parts of India. During the Ahom period, certain women belonging to the higher class enjoyed a high status in public. Phuleswari (1714 A.D.), Ambika (1721 A.D.) and Sarveswari (1739 A.D.) were great administrators during the Ahom period. The name of Mula Gabharu continues to be a source of inspiration for the women of Assam.15

Though examples can be cited of women having played significant roles in politics, administration and scholastic fields, the common women was denied the right place in society.

"Like most women of Indian, they are denied even the least portion of education, and are excluded from every social circle. They are even accounted unworthy to partake of religious rites, except in conjunction with their husbands, and hence that remarkable proof of barbarity - the wife held unworthy to eat with her husband, is also prevalent. Women, in fact are in all respects held in extreme degradation ..... Early marriages are common, though in the lower classes many young women do not succeed in getting husbands till the age of twenty. To these premature marriages, we are undoubtedly to attribute the general appearance of old age in the persons of the women, before they have reached even the meridian of life .... Females are not included within the pale of education, every ray of mental improvement is carefully kept from the sex. As they are always confined to domestic duties, and excluded from the society of the other sex, the

people see no necessity for their education. A women’s duties are comprised in ‘pleasing her husband, and cherishing her children’. To this there are a few exceptions. In the higher ranks of life, and among families of some importance, the females are frequently taught to read and write.”

Gunaviram wrote in Orunodoi, that the position of women in Indian society was low. As such, the reformer stressed that men should try to raise the status of women. The early reformers realised that unless the women-folk were educated, their position would not be improved in the society. In October 1856, Orunodoi published an article by Gunaviram Barua on ideal relationship between husband and wife - *Puruse Tirotak Ji Rupe Samadar Kariba lage* (The manner in which men should respect women). The writer opined that, God has created both men and women with same physical attributes. Both are equal in the eyes of God. They are inter-dependent. One cannot survive without the other. However, in our male dominated society, women were treated not better than slaves. He commented that, although the 'kind authorities' had abolished slavery, the condition of the womenfolk reminds us of the evil system. He regretted that while women in countries like Germany were enjoying equal status with men in society, their counterparts in India were leading an undignified life. In all the civilized nations of the world women were treated with due honour and respect, but in India, a status of equality for women is a far cry. On the other hand, they were being regarded as the personal properties of men. In this regard, Gunaviram Barua referred to the *Manusamhita* (III Chapter, 55-58 sloka) where Manu had directed the men to show respect to and honour women. To this, the editor of Orunodoi added a special note that the article carries a message for the society which is of immense benefit for all.

A writer under the pen-name of 'Patriot' from Guwahati sent a letter dated 4 April 1876, to the Assam-Bilasinee castigating the then prevailing custom of selling of girls among certain communities in Assam. He urged the Chief Commissioner of Assam to ban such practices in the larger interest of the society. This evil custom prevailed among some sections of the Assamese society according to which the groom had to buy their brides from their fathers by paying sums which varied, according to the caste of the girl, from Rs. 200/- to Rs. 1200/-. The writer compares this to the selling of cattle and strikes at the base of such illogical customs. The writer praised the British government for declaring Sati and infanticide illegal. The sender of the letter was perhaps Hem Chandra Baruah.18

Assam-Bandhu, edited by Gunaviram Barua could not do much for the progress of women in Assam. In a series of articles published in Assam-Bandhu, titled 'Swadhinata ne Swechchacharita' (whether independence or wilfulness) and Ghainir Karttabya O Stir Siksha' (duties of wives and women's education) the conservative attitude of the male-dominated society was shown as 'archaic' as the era of Manu.

As has already been mentioned in the previous chapter, the matter of education of women was an important issue of discussion in Assam-Bandhu. But the paper did not draw a positive picture of educated women. In a satire, 'Sadanandar Natun Abhidhan' (New Dictionary of Sadananda), Lambodar Bora described that such women 'ride on an elephant placing their feet on the back of men'.19 In another article "Ghoinir Karttabya O Stir Siksha" (duties of wives and women's education), the author, Ratneswar Mahanta expressed the view that education of women deprive them of their traditional duties —

"Many did not allow their wives to cook depriving them of discharging household duties not because of their love and respect to their wives or to women, but for imitation of alien customs. The result is the introduction of male Brahmin cook in the society. The husband would not allow the wife to work in the loom. As a result the practice of spinning had become obsolete. Even the daughters-in-law of villages had to weave cloth with foreign threads. However, many Brahmin spouces had maintained the habit of spinning for the lagun (sacred thread), thus not allowing the system to disappear. The consequence of giving up the trade of spinning was a decrease in production of eri (endi-silk) and muga, increase in price of eri and muga: rupees 10 for one ser of eri, rupees 12 for one ser of muga. In place of spinning and weaving cloth, weaving of wool had entered the list of duties of Assamese women. The price of wool ranged from Rs. 12 to Rs. 16 per ser. The lady teacher who taught the works of wool had to be paid from Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 per month."20

It can be said in this context that in the year 1872, an exhibition was held in London, where some locally produced articles by Assamese women were sent. Among these, five items were highly appreciated. These were two Laguns (sacred thread), one Bachowal (a band of loose trousers), two Chelengs (Wrappers), two Bar-Kapors (Wrappers) and two Gamochas (towels). After only one decade of this incident, as was published in Assam Bandhu, the change that entered the Assamese women's society was certainly noticeable.21

Ratneswar Mahanta in a poem 'Gaolia Boari', in Assam Bandhu said that the

daughters-in-law without school education are much more qualified for worldly life than the daughters-in-law, who have school education. Further, he said, the doctrines of Manu are superior to the opinions of present scholars and are more acceptable and admirable. These arguments testify the tendency of male domination over female in society. Such assumptions had been, no doubt, a great obstacle in the improvement of the status of women in society.

In another article in the Assam Bandhu, 'Narir Muktabastha' (Freedom of women), the author, Purnakanta Sarma, had even objected to women going out of their houses alone without being accompanied by either their husband or father. According to him women’s education would pollute this beautiful world. He even stated that it is God’s wish that women should never be free and always be dependant on men. However, Gunaviram Barua in a special note at the end of Purnakanta Sarma’s article, commented that the author was standing against the course of time, and was patronizing a handicapped life for the community. Such weak and unjustified views, the editor observed, are short sighted and unlikely to be sustained. Assam Bandhu, occasionally published articles of Padmavati Devi Phukanani and Swarnalata Barua. But most of the articles published in the paper represented male chauvinistic views. Ironically, Gunaviram Barua’s own ideas on women emancipation failed to find expression in his own paper. As such, the Assam-Bandhu contributed little towards raising public awareness on the condition of Assamese women.

The first article in the inaugural issue of Bolinarayan Bora’s Mau the Bee was Tirotar Ban Ki? (what are the duties of women?) The subsequent issue published another article on the liberty of man, Purush Swadhinata. Both the question of women’s

22. 'Gaalia-Boari' (Poem) Assam Bandhu, Vol. 1, Saka - 1807, English 1885, VII issue
education and their liberty were interlinked and the subject was raised as a major social question in the later half of the nineteenth century. *Mau*, however, laid more importance on the economic freedom of men than on the social freedom of women.\(^{25}\)

In a thought provoking essay - *Amar Tirotar Obosta* (Position of our women) in *Jonaki* by Chandradhar Barua, the author asserted that women are an indispensable part of the society and men cannot survive without women. Both are equal in the eyes of God, hence they should be treated equally. If women are considered weaker and less capable than men, he argued, then they (women) are also incapable of bearing all sorts of sufferings, and therefore, their share of miseries should also be less than that of the men. In all the civilized nations of the world, women are given due honour and respect. In ancient Hindu society, the women were not treated as slaves, they were also not kept in seclusion. Progress of women, he stressed, is essential for the progress of the society.\(^{26}\)

It is remarkable that the women in Bengal had used the newspaper press to ventilate their grievances, even much earlier. A few women from Chinsura had expressed their complaints in the form of questions in the *Samachar Darpan* in 1835 —

1. Oh : father and brother! why should you deprive us of the scope of education which the women of other countries avail of? Do you think that education would make us unfit for domestic duties?

2. Why do not you allow us to live and move freely as women of other countries do?

3. Why are we transferred like cattle at the tender age of 4, 5, 10 and 12 to unknown men who have no education, wealth or beauty? Why do you treat us so cruelly?\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) "Tirotar Ban Ki?, Mau or The Bee, Saka 1808, 1886, December issue, 'Purush Swachhinta', Mau or The Bee, Saka 1808, 1887, January issue.

\(^{26}\) 'Amar Tirotar Obosta', Jonaki, Vol. 6, Saka 1818, Jeth, V-VI issue

\(^{27}\) Samachar Darpan, 21 March, 1835.
Assam did not lack women writers; mention may be made of Bishnupriya Devi, Swarnalata Barua, Padmavati Devi Phukanani and Tejaswari Barua. Gunaviram Barua's wife Bishnupriya Devi knew both Assamese and Bangla and a little bit of English too.28 Swarnalata studied in Bethune School, Kolkata. She rendered some trendsetting articles in Assam-Bandhu and Jonaki.29 Tejaswari Barua's article Jiyari Jivan in Bijuli encouraged upcoming women writers, at a time when there were only a handful of women literates.30 Bishnupriya Devi and Padmavati Devi wrote in the Assam-Bandhu and Orunodoi. In an article 'Bharja-Swamir Korttabya Karam' (duties of Husband and wife), Bishnupriya Devi emphasised the importance of education among women.31 In another article 'Stri Sakalar Karttabya Karma' (duties of women) Padmavati Devi laid stress on the spread of education among women.32 Significantly, they did not advocate the freedom of women to the extent, advocated by a section of their male counterparts. Perhaps it was too revolutionary an idea for them.

It has already been discussed in the previous chapter that in spite of the introduction of a modern system of education by the British, the education of women in Assam was sadly neglected; in fact there was hardly any demand for it. Some concrete steps were taken by the American missionaries who had set up a few elementary schools for girls and carried on a propaganda for female education through their mouthpiece Orunodoi. The greatest evil from which the women suffered, was the denial of education, due partly to early marriage, and partly to a superstition that an educated woman was fated to become a widow or that no one would marry a girl if she could read or write.

29. She wrote articles like 'Karmeti Bai' (Vol 1, 1885, IInd Issue), 'Prakrita laj ki' (Vol 2, 1886, III-IV issue) in Assam Bandhu, 'Jatodharmostatojaya' (Vol. 3, 1812, Fagun, IInd Issue) in Jonaki
32. 'Stri Sakalar Karttabya Karma' Orunodoi, October 1867 issue.
Women belonging to some enlightened families received education but education of women, in general, was considered "dangerous". Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunaviram Barua, Hem Chandra Barua and a few handful persons were advocates of education for women but the common public lacked enthusiasm in this regard. This is evident from the fact that when Gangagobinda Phukan established a girl's school at Sibsagar in 1870, the response of the local people to the school was very poor.33

In the article 'Tirotar Ban Ki' (Duties of women) published in Mou, the education of women was said to be more dangerous than the Burmese atrocities. The author was of the opinion that the girls must be taught to read and write only at home by her own brothers or by women tutors. She should be given a little knowledge of arithmetic so as to enable her to carry on the domestic duties.34 The writer held the view that a woman's job was to cook, weave, spin, pick lice, give birth and rear children. Education for women should be confined to feminine handicrafts such as knitting, embroidery, and painting.35 The idea of girls becoming professional doctors and lawyers was deplorable. At the most, they were to have access only to the rudiments of reading and writing and a little knowledge of history and geography. "..... Who will accept a woman as his wife if she sits besides a male patient, feels his pulse, examines his tongue, touches lower part of his body, and makes queries which doesn't suit the modesty of women"? he asked.36

In an interesting discussion in Jonaki, Sri Panindranath Gogoi asserted that only that type of education should be given to women which could help them in becoming ideal wives. According to him, the system of education that is best suited for women, was one in which greater emphasis was laid on teachings of household activities. He

34. 'Tirotar Ban Ki?' op.cit.
35. ibid.
36. ibid.
opposed the desire in women for getting B.A. or M.A. degrees for he believed that women do not require the kind of education that men do. The harmful effects from such education is more than its beneficial effects. In this regard the writer quoted an 'important personality' from the Assam-News who had written that women in countries like France and America are highly educated but they are deprived of marital bliss. Women with University degrees are more interested in economics, sociology, and politics rather than household domestic activities. They are more happy in the company of 'Bentham' and 'Mill' than in family. Actually women do not require English education, it is more important for them to gain expertise in feminine pursuits.

Thus we see that women's education, in general, was not encouraged in the early nineteenth century. And the exposure of women to formal western education was totally discouraged. Women's education was considered a threat to society and most of the articles in the Assam Bandhu pointed out that with education, women would become more masculine in their nature and behaviour, detrimental to the social order.

Gradually, however, attitudes changed. By the later half of the nineteenth century, the cause of the widows was taken up by the press in Assam. The Orunodoi, through its columns debated the question of widow remarriage and tried to popularise it among the Assamese. The ideas of Gunaviram Baruah who had been attracted towards Brahma religion and social reformation during his stay at Calcutta, found expression in a series of articles that he wrote in the Orunodoi. Under Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar the issue of widow-remarriage had become a movement in Bengal during that time and Gunaviram made special mention of the fact that Vidyasagar, had quoted old Sanskrit references to prove that religious scriptures actually sanctioned widow-re-marriage.

40. 'Works on the Marriage of Hindu Widows', Orunodoi, July 1855.
The widows, in Bengal, had themselves expressed their miseries through newspapers. A letter from a woman from Shantipur described their predicament and narrated how widows were denied even good food and clothes. In her letter, she complained that while widowers were free to enjoy the company of concubines and prostitutes and could still hold high positions in society, the widows were deprived of even the basic needs. She appealed to the government to give justice to the women of Bengal.41

The *Tattvabodhini Patrika* started a reform movement for ameliorating the lot of widows in Bengal. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar published an article in the paper highlighting the scriptural sanction of widow-remarriage.42 While papers like *Tattvabodhini Patrika, Samvad Bhaskar, Sarvashuvakari, Bamabodhini,* and *Somprakash* supported widow-remarriage, protests against widow-remarriage soon filled the pages of many new-papers like *Samachar Chandrika.*43

For the first time in Assam, the *Orunodoi* openly published ideas related to marriage reforms and remarriage of widows. In an article on marriage reforms, Gunaviram Barua suggested certain reforms which were much ahead of time. He proposed that a period of courtship should precede marriage so that the couples could be better acquainted with each other, before they finally decide on marriage. Another point that he made was that at the time of marriage, a man should be at least 23 and a woman at least 18 years of age, so that the age-difference between the husband and wife is minimum and they could be more like friends rather than like a grandfather and a grand-daughter. He also approved the ancient Hindu custom of giving the women

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42. P. Chattopadhya, *Bangla Sagnbadpatria O Bangalir Nabajagaran,* Calcutta, 1977, pp. 133-34
43. *ibid.,* pp. 127

(105)
liberty to choose their own marriage partners. He lamented that all good practices of the ancient Hindus had degenerated into corrupt practices in later times. He quoted from the 'Manu Samhita' to establish that widow-remarriage was permitted in the Hindu laws. He stressed that widow remarriage was practiced among the lower castes in Assam and also in some parts of Orrisa.44

The custom of widow-marriage had prevailed in Assam among the non-Brahmin people.45 These marriages were conducted without following the Vedic rituals. However, remarried widows did not enjoy equal status and respect like the other women. They were referred to as dhemani, batalu etc. Gradually, the practice of widow-remarriage went into disrepute.46

In March 1854, Orunodoi had published a news-item on widow-remarriage taken from Harachandra Bandhyopadhyay's Sangbad Pumachandrodoi. The article stated that the Deputy Magistrate of Krishnagar, Babu Ishwar Chandra Ghosal, had organised a discussion with the Pundits of Nabadwip on the issue of the widows. Some of the Pundits had given their opinion in favour of widow-remarriage and this had created great disturbance in the area.47

In January 1856, Orunodoi published an article in favour of marriage of widows. All the Shashtras, including the Parashar Samhita, from where Vidyasagar found his support for the cause, were invoked to promote the cause. The article, written by Gunaviram Barua, appealed to the people in general to go through the book written by Vidyasagar on widow-remarriage. He added that the ban on widow-marriage had led to the increase in corruption, prostitution and foeticide in the society. The condition of

44. 'An Assamese from Calcutta On Marriages', Orunodoi, December 1853.
46. Census Report of India, Assam, 1891
47. 'Remarriage of widows', Orunodoi, March, 1854

(106)
women in the Assamese society, he said, was no better than domestic animals and slaves. People believed that to defy the dictates of the scriptures would be transgression against the divine authority. He lamented the degeneration of Indian society from a position of influence among the countries of the world.48

In May 1857, Orunodoi published another article of Gunaviram Barua on 'Marriage of Widows'. He wrote, that widow-remarriages were common in many countries of the world. In ancient Assam also, instances of widow-marriages were found, though it was distinctly rare among the higher castes of the society. In this regard, he cited examples of widow-marriages from the *Ramayana and Mahabharata* — the marriage of Arjuna with the widow-daughter of Naga Dhritarastra, marriage of Shugriv and Tara, and Mandodari and Bibhisana. These and many more references of widow-marriage found in the ancient texts suggested that such marriages were not uncommon in India. The writer commented that since, the tradition of writing history of the common people was rare in our country, references to such cases are found only among the royalty and the nobility. We can assume that the custom also prevailed among the common people. He questioned why there was so much of hue and cry about the widow-remarriage movement in Calcutta, in modern times, if widow-remarriages were permitted in ancient times, which was 'considered to be the most sacred period in history'.49

In response to the above mentioned articles of Gunaviram Barua in Orunodoi, Rudraram Bardoloi raised some controversial points. In a letter to the editor of Orunodoi, which was published in the paper in August 1857, he commented, that a girl's relation with her husband's family does not end after the death of her husband. The girl, is still a member of that family, and as such her own parents do not have the right of *Sampradan*

48. 'Bidhava Bibah', Orunodoi, January 1856
49. 'Bidhava Bibah', Orunodoi, May, 1857

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(the ritual of giving away the daughter in marriage), in consequence of their having done so on the occasion of her first marriage. In such circumstances, in a widow-marriage, who would observe the ritual of Sampradan. While citing the examples of the marriages of Arjuna with the Naga princess, and Shugriva with Tara, he asserted that these were inter-caste marriages. The same rules may not be applicable in case of marriages within the same caste. It is undeniable, he accepted, that some ancient scriptures sanction widow remarriage, but in the absence of any written text in hand in support of widow-marriage, he appealed to Gunaviram Barua for an exaplanation of his queries. This, he added, would remove the apprehensions of many people regarding the marriage of the widows.60 Gunaviram Barua clarified all the points raised by Rudraram Bordoloi, giving in details, in support of his arguments, the justifications offered by Vidyasagar. The editor of Orunodoi published all the those arguments in the paper for better understanding and appreciation for all.51 Interestingly, the same question had been raised in the Bangla Newspaper Sangbad Prabhakar of 26 April 1842. In response to an article on widow remarriage, published in the Bengal Spectator of April 1842, the 'writer' in Sangbad Prabhakar had also raised the question of Sampradan in marriage during a widow-marriage.52

The unwearied efforts of Vidyasagar ultimately materialised in the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act (Act XV of 1856) passed on July 26, 1856. It legalised the marriages of the widows notwithstanding any custom or interpretation of the Hindu Law to the contrary, and declared the children of such marriages legitimate.53

Orunodoi published the news of the legalization of the marriage of Hindu widows.

Gunaviram Barua wrote,

50. 'Bidhava Bibah', Orunodoi, August, 1857
51. 'Bidhava Bibah', Orunodoi, November, 1857
52. Sangbad Prabhakar, 26 April, 1842
53. M. Basu, Hindu Women and Marriage Law, New Delhi, 2001, pp. 69-70

(108)
"Oh! this is indeed an auspicious day. It is beyond our dreams that God would show such a great day. Great is Vidyasagar, glory to him! The women of India will ever remain indebted to him. Widows were not only going through mental sufferings but physical sufferings as well. The society is polluted with foeticide."

The writer expected that widow marriage would find wider acceptance in Assam. He fervently appealed to the people of Assam to save the young widows from the clutches of the cruel social customs. He asked every woman to shower her blessings on Vidyasagar.54

The widow-Remarriage Act elicited mixed reactions in Bengali society. Some supported it while others denounced it. But widows themselves were very happy about it and conveyed their gratitude to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Papers like Bengal Spectator, Samvad Bhaskar came up with great support.55 Notwithstanding the fact that some widow marriages were celebrated, the Act was not a big success. In spite of legislation, remarriage among Hindu widows did not make any substantial progress. The number of widows remarried under the new act was negligible. A Widow Remarriage Association was started by Vishnu Shastri in Bombay in 1866. A Widows' Home was founded by D.K. Karve in Poona in 1896 and a similar one founded by Veerasalingom in Madras.56

Gunaviram, then a young boy of 22, was present in the historic widow-remarriage ceremony in Calcutta on 7th December, 1856, where Srishchandra Vidyaranta married Kalimati Devi. The marriage was organised by Vidyasagar. The second widow remarriage took place after two days, on 9th December. Gunaviram was present in that

54. 'Bidhava Bibah— Marriage of Hindu Widows Legalised', Orunodoi, September 1856
55. M. Basu, op.cit, pp. 70-71
56. R. C. Majumdar ed. op.cit., p. 278

(109)
marriage as well. He was so moved emotionally that he wrote an article—*Dujani Bidhava Sowalir Bibahar Kotha*, describing the whole event, which was published in *Orunodoi*.\(^{57}\) He observed that these two marriages had inaugurated a new-era and that it was a turning point in India's social history.\(^{58}\)

The article, of *Orunodoi* succeeded in creating considerable awareness among the people about the injustice meted out to the widows. An anonymous writer, through a letter to the editor of *Orunodoi*, lamented that the innumerable widows in the country were passing their days in agony and that their conditions were beyond description. Though some people realised the gravity of the situation, they did not dare to defy the existing system. The writer appealed to Gunaviram that if he was unmarried he should set and example by marrying a widow. This, he said, would be of immense benefit to the Assamese society as a whole.\(^{59}\)

Considering example as better than precept, Gunaviram, after the death of his first wife, Brajasundari in 1867, married. Bishnupriya, then a widow. The marriage was registered in 1872 after the Native Marriage Act (Act III of 1872) came into force.\(^{60}\) His daughter, Swarnalata also remarried after the death of her first husband.\(^{61}\) Like Gunaviram, Jaduram Barua not only advocated widow-remarriage but himself married a widow.\(^{62}\)

Gunaviram Barua continued with his endeavour to motivate the common people towards the cause of widow-remarriage. In another article on widow-remarriage in *Orunodoi*, he stressed the point that those who vehemently oppose widow remarriage

\(^{57}\) *'Dujoni Bidhava Sowalir Bibahar Kotha', Orunodoi*, January 1857
\(^{58}\) ibid.
\(^{59}\) *'Bidhava Bibah', Orunodoi*, April, 1858
\(^{60}\) G. Baruah, *Jivan Charita*, op-cit, p. 177
\(^{62}\) B. Sarma, *Arghyawali*, op-cit, p. 110
actually misinterpreted Hindu scriptures. He counteracted that Vedic hymns are applicable to both regular and widow-marriages. The great sages of ancient India — Manu, Jagnyabalka, Vishnu, Parasar, Narad and Katyana, all actually permitted widow-remarriage. According to Manusamhita if a woman once deserted by her husband again returns to him with chastity, she may be married again (chapter 9, sloka 176). Vishnu-samhita and Bashishta Samhita too support remarriage of widows or chastised women. These marriages were called Punavu marriage and Sanskar marriage. He also wrote, that the great epics, Mahabharata, Ramayana and various Puranas also justify widow-remarriage. The reformer appealed for a change in the attitude of people towards the cause.63

The controversy regarding widow-remarriage found reflection in the newspapers of the period. The February 1877 issue of the Assam Bilasinee carried an article on the issue of widow-remarriage. The editor of the paper, Sri Duttadev Goswami, Sattradhikar of Auniati Satra condemned widow-remarriage on the basis of 'dictates' of the ancient rishis (sages), and condemned the theories put forward by the supporters of such a system. The same issue of the paper published the news of remarriage of a widow in Dhaka.64

The first Assamese social drama Ram-Navami which appeared serially from March 1858 in the Orunodoi was significantly based on the theme of widow-remarriage.65 The theme of Ram-Navami was built round the tragic love story between a young Brahmin widow, Navami, and Ram, an educated Brahmin youth. Navami, a child-widow, became pregnant as a result of the secret affair with Ram. Being helpless, the mother of Navami

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63. ‘Bidhava Bibah’, Orunodoi, March, 1858.
64. Assam Bilasinee, February, 1877; C. P. Saikia ed op-cit p- 139; also G. P. Sarma ed 150 years op-cit, p. 83.
65. ‘Ram Navami Natak’, Orunodoi, July 1858; Assam Bandhu, op-cit, p. 19

(111)
arranged for a secret abortion. But unfortunately, the news reached the village-head, Mahajan, who imposed a heavy fine on Navami's father in lieu of social ostracism. Soon the entire family falls into the trap of this exploitative machinery. Ultimately, Navami commits suicide. Ram; too, ends his life to get rid of his guilty conscience as circumstances had made him so week that he failed to declare his love for Navami and could not support her during her time of distress. Vidyasagar and sage Parasar also made appearances in the Drama.

The Drama expressed the rationalistic views on marriage put forward by Vidyasagar that a marriage is a conscious physical and spiritual union of a man and a woman which is never fulfilled in child marriages. Gunaviram argued that society must change with time. He was convinced that its adoption would definitely prevent social evils like abortion and prostitution. Sukumar Sen in his History of Bengali Literature has written that Gunaviram Barua's Ram Navami was influenced by U. C. Mitra's drama 'Bidhava Bibaha'. Apparently Gunaviram was influenced by the writings of U. C. Mitra, R. M. Mitra, and U. C. Chattopadhyay.66

Gunaviram's respect and admiration for Vidyasagar prompted him to write an obituary under the pseudonym 'Gurudatta', which was published in Bijuli.67 Ananda Chandra Gupta had also written an illustrious article on Vidyasagar in 'Jonaki'.68

Hem Chandra Barua advocated widow-remarriage with rational arguments. Hem Chandra never received any formal school education, nor did he have a chance to go to Calcutta for higher studies. But he was a firm believer in the western education. He was convinced that only liberal thoughts could bring about radical reforms in the Assamese

68. ‘Ishwar Chandra Bidyasagar’, Jonaki, Vol III, Saka 1813, Aahar, IV issue
society. This he confirmed in a note to the British Government in 1857, where he expressed that educated Indians would inevitably free themselves from the fetters of the orthodox society and would advocate widow-remarriage and other social reforms.  

In his autobiography, Hem Chandra Barua pointed out that the ancient Hindu texts justify the cause of widow re-marriage. He asserted that the social taboo attached with the remarriage of widows should be removed. He appealed to the educated Assamese youths to follow the footsteps of Vidyasagar. Hem chandra, himself, refused to remarry after the death of his wife in protest against the prevalent social injustice to women. He argued, if a man has the liberty to marry thrice or more, why is the same right denied to women? "How unjust and irrational the system is! Therefore, I shall not marry again."

Hem Chandra Barua wrote 

Asamiya-Bibaha Paddhati (Assamese Marriage System) where he strongly advocated remarriage of widows. He argued that if women were debarred from remarriage, the same should be applicable for men as well.

He wrote:

"One can see that there is no harm in widow marriage even when one comes to reason. ... The revered Vidyasagar did not keep quiet by simply proving that widow marriage is sanctioned by religious scriptures, but he got his son married to a widow. He had drifted away in the current of age, but the foot-prints which he has left on the sands of time will remain for-ever and never be lost."

Hem Chandra justified that since widow-remarriage was already prevalent in the Assamese society, it would not be very difficult to defy this evil custom, as it would otherwise have been.

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70. 'Atmajiban Charit', Jonaki, Vol. 4, Saka 1813, Fagun, 2nd issue.
72. H.G. Goswami, Assamiya Sahityar Chaneki, III, Part - I, Calcutta, 1928-9, p. 177, Barpujari ed Comprehensive op-cit, p. 204
73 S. Kakoti, op.cit. p. 90

(113)
The movement against child marriage had gathered momentum throughout the sixties and the seventies of the nineteenth century. The *Bamabodhini Patrika* published an article denouncing the evils of child marriage, pointing out many abuses caused by it, such as early death, ill-health, lack of education, poverty etc. It burdened growing young men, hampered their studies and led them to the horrors of poverty.74

The weekly paper, *Somprakash*, was also very critical of child marriage and polygamy, and expressed strong opinion against it. Early marriage, it observed, was the root of numerous evils and the main cause of the gradual decay of the human race. Just as strong trees cannot grow from weak seeds, so also a prosperous mankind could never grow from physically weak and mentally undeveloped boys and girls.75

In August 1850 the *Sarvashubhakari Patrika* published an article written by Pt Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar pointing out the evils of child marriage. Early marriages lead to premature childbearing, often damaged the health of young parents, who as a consequence, rarely had strong and healthy children. Moreover, young boys and girls developed little understanding of each other because, as a custom they were never allowed to see or know each other before marriage. Therefore, real conjugal love seldom grew between them.76

In July 1847, the *Sangvad Pravakar* pointed out that early marriage was detrimental to the education of young boys. Early marriage was likely to distract their attention, hamper their studies and spoil their future.77

In September 1846, *Orunodoi*, published an interesting news that a literary society in Gujrat had invited from their people literary essays with prize money of Rs. 150/-, on the ill effects of child marriage. In response, two persons had submitted

74. *Bamabodhini Patrika*, November 1864
75. *Somprakash*, June 1868
77. *Samvad Pravakar*, July, 1847

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their writings. One of them was of the opinion that child marriage was against the tenets of the Hindu scriptures. Both the essays elaborated on the ill effects of early marriage. The editor of Orunodoi added that early marriage not only led to physical and mental deterioration but was also responsible for weak progeny. The article was widely appreciated among the intelligentsia in Assam.

Child marriage did not exist in India during the early vedic age but during the post-vedic period, the age of marriage was gradually lowered. There were certain reasons for child marriage. The fundamental reason was that undue emphasis was laid on the the bride being absolutely chaste. It was laid down in the Smritis that a girl should marry within three months following her attainment of the age of puberty. The girl was required to be married within the same caste or sub-caste. Unfortunately sometimes during the childhood, the husband died and as such the girl had no option to marry again. These child widows had to undergo the rigours of life with much discomfort. Sadar Amin in his autobiography mentioned that for the sake of recovering a girl from being polluted by post-puberty marriage, he married her when he was 55 and the girl was of pre-puberty age. It would have been certainly better had the girl been married to his son who married the next year.

Ratneswar Mahanta wrote in the article bibah (Marriage) in Jonaki that the age of the bride should be roughly one-third of the age of the groom. As far as possible girls should be married off before the attainment of puberty. Moreover, girls should be sent to the house of the groom immediately after the marriage function is over. These views of Ratneswar Mahanta were, however, criticised by Kamal Chandra Sarma. In

78. 'Alop Bayasat Biya Karowa Anucit', Orunodoi, September 1856
81. 'Bibah' Jonaki, vol. 1, Saka 1811, IV (Achar), VIII (Bhada), IX (Aahin), issue
82. ibid.
response to the views of Mahanta, Sarma opined that it is not always practical to follow the verdict of *Manu, Jagneyabalka* and other sages. In real terms, he added, one cannot justify the relevance of all these age-old beliefs and ideas in present-day context. It is, therefore, natural that in changed circumstances, the rules and regulations of the society must also change. Social change is, in any case, inevitable. Further, he continued, the objectives of marriage in earlier times was totally different from present times. Hence, in order to avoid the bitter consequences of early marriage, the age of marriage should be raised and he suggested that girls should be sent to their husband’s house only after the attainment of 16 or 17 years of age.83

In an essay *Bibah aru Samaj* (Marriage and Society) in *Jonaki*, Sri Krishna Kumar Baruah, observed that the custom of child marriage was not practiced in ancient Assam, but unfortunately this heinous system gradually permeated into the Assamese society. He pointed out that in none of the civilized countries of the world, except India, was the custom of child marriage prevalent. In India too, it was mainly prevalent in Bengal and Marwar regions only. The good news was that, the educated section of the society in Bengal was trying to do away with this evil practice and had also been successful to a great extent. The author condemned that at a time when educated sections in other parts of the country were trying to remove this harmful practice, the same practice had creeped into Assam. He believed that if this custom was not broken, soon, there was no hope of progress for the Assamese society. He appealed to the progressive sections to reform society. He asserted that, there was no harm in changing ancient rules and regulations for the good of the society.84

Polygamy among the upper classes was common in Assam.85 Shihabuddin Talish

83. *ibid.*
84. *'Bibah' (Pratibad), Jonaki, Vol. 1, Saka 1811, Aaghon - Puh, XI-XII issue.*
85. M.L. Bose, *op. cit.* p. 44

(116)
wrote, "... few of the men have two wives only; most have four or five, and they mutually exchange their wives, or buy and sell them."^88

To carry on the household life with a number of co-wives was bad enough. One Sonar Chand wrote in Orunodoi an article, Anek-Bia Kara Ajugut (It is wrong to marry many), highlighting the evils of polygamy. He wrote that from time immemorial polygamy had been prevalent in Assam. Polygamy has continued due to illiteracy, ignorance and irrationality of the society. The writer, with a heavy heart, asked, why women could not marry several times if men could. He also cited the example of the English, considered as the most civilized nation in the world, who were forbidden by law to marry more than once. The writer expressed his unhappiness over the prevailing social evils of this country. He also stressed the importance of education for a happy and prosperous conjugal life.\textsuperscript{87} The writer of the article \textit{Sri Sonarchand} was no other than Hem chandra Barua.\textsuperscript{88}

In a letter in the \textit{Orunodoi}, addressed to the Muslim population of Assam, a missionary pointed out that although Islam permitted polygamy, the modern man should not take more than one wife. The author further appealed that since God has created men and women alike, women should be treated with respect.\textsuperscript{89}

Some of the evil practices of the Hindu society like Sati, infanticide, Kulinism and the dowry system could never strike deep roots in Assam. In an article in \textit{Jonaki-Asamat Kaulinya Pratha Nai Kiya} (why Kulinism is not prevalent in Assam), Gunaviram Barua pointed out that Assam was never under Bengal at any period of time and hence the Assamese Brahmans were consequently free from the rigid classifications that existed in Bengal.\textsuperscript{90}

Though the evil practices of Sati and infanticide were fortunately rare in Assam,

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{86} E. Gait, \textit{op.cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{87} 'Anek Bia Kara Ajugut', \textit{Orunodoi}, April, 1856
\item \textsuperscript{88} P. N. Gohain Barua, \textit{Jivani Sangraha}, Calcutta, 1948, p. 49; J. N. Goswami, \textit{Assamiya Bhasar Oja} \textit{op.cit.} p. 86
\item \textsuperscript{89} "Letter to Mussalmans", \textit{Orunodoi}, March, 1854.
\item \textsuperscript{90} 'Asamat Kaulinya Pratha Nai Kiya,' \textit{Jonaki}, Vol. 4, Saka 1840, Jeth, V issue.
\end{footnotes}
yet references to them were made in several places in the Orunodoi.

"Already many Hindu women have burnt themselves in the funeral pyre of their husbands for the sake of becoming Sati. Some did voluntarily while some were forced to become Sati by their relatives. The reason for becoming Sati was perhaps the horror of the miserable life which a widow had to lead. Widow-remarriage was not allowed among the Hindu Brahmins and noble families. Thus death was considered better than widowhood. The Hindu scriptures also carry divergent views on the question of the remarriage of the widows. However, in 1829, Sati was declared illegal by Lord William Bentinck. Now it is heard that some pundits have assembled in Calcutta to decide on the question of Hindu widow-remarriage. The widows among the Christians are allowed to remarry."

In a news item published in the same issue, it was reported that at Kalugaon in Sibsagar, Lambordar Mauzadar's sister-in-law, prepared to become Sati on the death of her husband. The Mauzadar, however, informed the magistrate in time and with the help of a Daroga, rescued her from becoming a Sati. In another news item under Anek Desor Sambad, the news of an instance of Sati in Hyderabad was reported. The 'Anti-infanticide meeting at Amritsar' was reported in another issue.

The light of rationalism, however, enlightened only a small section of the Assamese society during the period of our study. This section criticised the superstitious beliefs of the common people. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan pointed out that superstitious beliefs had resulted in an increasing number of deaths in Assam. He wrote:

"In most parts of the country, incantations, charms, and amulets are substituted..."
in place of medicines, and the number of deaths caused by ignorant and opposite
treatments is prodigiously great.\textsuperscript{96}

\textit{Orunodoi}, from time to time, published news and views regarding the socio-
cultural progress of Bengal during that time. In a letter published in \textit{Orunodoi}, a radical
reformist commented, that the young generation of Bengal were very civilized and well-
educated, and have been able to free themselves from superstitious or unfounded
beliefs.\textsuperscript{96} Similar other articles and comments were regularly published in \textit{Orunodoi}.
Excerpts from such articles are given below.

In an article titled 'News from Some Countries', in April 1852, it reported that-

"Villagers do not thatch their roofs during the month of 'Magh' and 'Chout' (Jan
- Feb, April - May) due to a superstition among them that if it is so done the house
might catch fire. But the 'Sahebs' get their houses built and thatched during this
period as workers are more easily available. But there is no evidence that a
house catches fire because of this."\textsuperscript{97}

"It is believed that crows should not see a rat-trap being placed. Having heard
this, the editor of the \textit{Orunodoi} got two traps made, of which one was put outside
in full view of the crows and the other was placed inside. But a big rat was caught
in the trap which was seen by the crows in the very first night whereas the other
trap could catch a rat only after three days."\textsuperscript{98}

While reporting an outbreak of epidemic-

"Many of the people died while even after regularly worshipping 'Bura Dangoria'
(a kind of demi-god). A few are still dying. So we feel that no good has come out

\textsuperscript{95} M. Neog. \textit{Anandaram Dhekial Phukan : Plea for Assam and Assamese}, Jorhat, 1977, p. 89
\textsuperscript{96} B K. Barua, compiled. \textit{Arunodoir Dhalphat}, Jorhat, 1965, p. 128
\textsuperscript{97} 'Thatching Houses in Magh and Sot', \textit{Orunodoi}, April 1852
\textsuperscript{98} 'Rat-Trap', ibid.
of showing respect to demi-god. There are some who put rice, pulses, molasses, ghee etc. on rafts made of the trunks of banana trees and float them in rivers. Others even offer goats, while still others put these articles on land only to be eaten by crows and thieves. Good money is lost in all these rituals, and in spite of these, epidemics are on the rise instead of declining. Some people light lamps in the evening in front of images placed on river banks, while some others move from place to place beating drums. But so far as we can see, all these rituals, done in the hope of eradicating epidemics, are in vain.

In an article on locust-invasion in Sibsagar, the writer in Orunodoi, refuted the prevailing superstition among the people that locusts were a sign of evil days ahead. The rationalistic approach by the American Baptist Missionaries was, to some extent, a part of their endeavour to bring the local people closer to Christianity. They went one step further by sometimes imparting new superstitions. For instance Orunodoi reported: "Like other diseases this also comes on the orders of God. This is only under his control. And know it for certain that this is due to sins. So give up the rituals and sinful activities. Only then will God be pleased." In another instance, towards the end of a description of epidemic outbreak in Nagoan, the Orunodoi asked: "Who will deliver us from hell? We would be able to escape from hell and live in heaven only when we seek refuge in Lord Jesus Christ." 

Orunodoi, which generally rejected common superstitions, published articles like 'smoke coming out from the dome of the Sibsagar temple' and the 'waters of the Sibasgar tank turning milky white for three days'; the birth of a wonderful child at

98. 'Superstitious Fears of the Assamese', Orunodoi, May, 1847
100. 'Account of the Locusts in 1844', Orunodoi, June, 1946
101. 'Superstitious Fears of the Assamese', Orunodoi, May, 1847
102. 'Mortality at Nowgong', Orunodoi, June, 1853

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Joikhamdang village who asked for rice and water to eat, immediately after birth. Readers from different parts of Assam accused the editor of Orunodoi, for publishing irrational matters. The editor, however, admitted that most of these 'extraordinary tales' were provided by people from distant places and he had no scope of verifying the authenticity of these reports.  

The purpose of printing such fictious stories could have been to increase the circulation of the paper. However, the response made by the readers explained the influence of rational thinking on their mind.

Assam Bandhu had always given space for writers of all shades. An interesting article — Ghoinir Duti Prashna, which defended the existence of ghosts appeared in Assam Bandhu. At the end of the article, Gunaviram Barua added his editorial comment: "When the cause is unknown, we are in the habit of attributing the phenomenon to ghosts. When the cause is known, ghosts disappear."

Kanak Chandra Sarma wrote in Orunodoi 'Bhootalo Bhoi Kara Misa' (The fear of Ghosts is unreasonable) The article stated that almost all people in our country are superstitious. People believe in ghosts. Their belief is that ghostly creatures live in deserted lands and tanks and they attack people at night. People fear to go out at night by the side of burial places or deserted lands for fear of ghosts. Sometimes the sight of 'Jack O' Lantern', a type of gas producing light as a result of the combination of phosphorous and oxygen in swampy or marshy land, scare them. Since people are mostly uneducated, they fail to understand these scientific explanations.

The press also dealt with other social issues. Orunodoi condemned the liberal sexual practices prevalent among the lower classes in society. This had become a matter of concern for the educated Assamese. In a letter to Orunodoi an Assamese

103. 'Veracity of the Orunodoi', Orunodoi, August, 1854
105. 'Bhootalo Bhoi Kara Misa', Orunodoi, April 1857
gentleman condemned the practice of cohabiting before marriage and marrying the
woman only after several number of children were born. In another article in Orunodoi,
the author, probably a Christian missionary, raised concern over the evil effects of adultery
on the Assamese society. He suggested that only proper education was the remedy of
this evil. Furthur, the author lamented the loose sexual morals of the Assamese people
during Bihu festival. He considered all these an abuse of sacred marriage vows.

Nidhi Levi Farwell, the first Assamese convert to Christianity, wrote a review in
Orunodoi on 'Bahire Rang Song Bitare Kowa-bhaturi' (Colourful outside but rotten
inside), the first social satire written by Hem Chandra Baruah. The satire tried to
expose the hypocrisy and superstitious beliefs of the socio-religious leaders of the
society. The Character of Bhadrakanta (Character with a modern outlook) in the drama
reflected the rationalistic criticism of Hem Chandra Barua when he said: "They (religious
leaders) have only rituals, no judgement. They get away even after doing all sorts of evil
things, but if they take medicines from a doctor they lose their caste." Haliram Barua
from sibsagar sent a letter to the editor of Orunodoi to convey that the book of H. C.
Barua was of great benefit for the Assamese society in general, and the youth in
particular.

Several long letters, under the pseudonym, "Your friend", an Assamese person
residing in Calcutta were published in the Orunodoi. According to Maheshwar Neog,
the person has been identified as Gunaviram Barua. In a letter to the Orunodoi published
in July 1853, a special issue was raised. The writer criticized the immigrants from 'Bangal
Desh' for the pathetic condition of the Assamese people.

106. 'Bibah Nohoakoi Sawali Ana', Orunodoi, December 1847
107. 'Against Adultery and Fornication', Orunodoi, April, 1848
108. 'Bahire Rong Sang Bhitare Kowabhaturi', Orunodoi, April 1867
110. Orunodoi, April, 1867
"We cannot expressed the extent of unholy activities that the Youth of our country have indulged in, giving up educational pursuits. Immigration from the 'Bangal Desh' into our country is perhaps one of the reasons of the pathetic condition of our country. When there were no Bengali people in our country, such bad habits were practically non-existent. But since these Bengalis have come here in large numbers, our youth have been adversely influenced by their company. Drinking wine, going to prostitutes, fraud, false charges, etc. were unheard of in this country before, but these have become very common now-a-days. Alas! the simple people of our land have committed so many sins under the influence of these people...”

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan corroborated this view when he wrote, 'false witness, bribery, prostitution, opium, and alcohol, are some of the social evils of Assam which should be strictly prohibited.'

Batiram Das Peck, an Assamese convert, in an article in Orunodoi - 'Evils of Ardent Spirit' wrote that he was surprised to learn from different quarters that alcohol like Rum and Brandy were consumed by the Assamese people also. Earlier, only the rice-bear was common among the Miri, Mishmis, Aka, Dafla and the Kacharis. Addiction to alcoholic drinks was increasing day by day.

Another major social evil was the consumption of opium. It was one of the major challenges for the nineteenth century reformers to fight this evil practice and revitalize the moribund Assamese society. The drug was derived from poppy, a plant, which was formerly extensively cultivated. Needless to say that opium had been in the nineteenth century a commodity of daily consumption for the vast majority of the people. There

111. 'Second Letter from an Assamese in Calcutta', Orunodoi, July 1853
112. 'Englandar Bibaran', Orunodoi, April, 1847
113. 'Evils of Ardent Spirit', Orunodoi, June 1846
were, initially, no restriction in its growth and consumption, and the people "being burdened by no Governmental restrictions" began to engage in a considerable extent of its cultivation. The enlightened Assamese class was alarmed by this state of affairs Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the first to raise a voice of protest. In a memorandum submitted to A. J. M. Mills, in 1853, he cited the example of China, while highlighting the evil effects of opium on the people, and called for a gradual eradication of opium.\(^{14}\)

Mills in his Report writes that, "three-fourths of the population (of Assam) were opium eaters, and men, women, and children alike used the drug."\(^{115}\) Although Mills was fully convinced of the most evil effect of the opium, yet he conceded that, "the use of opium has with many almost become a necessity of life and in a country like Assam it is perhaps beneficial if taken with moderation."\(^{116}\) He suggested that the cultivation of poppy should be suppressed and the Government should supply sufficient quantity of opium from outside for the consumption of the people.\(^{117}\) The American Baptist Missionaries, from the very beginning, were opposed to opium addiction. Rev. Miles Bronson wrote: 'Multitudes of persons, I daily see, going almost naked, and without any single comfort in life, who, if they get a pice or two, will immediately expend it in the noxious drug.'\(^{118}\)

The Press in Assam expressed its opinion against the use of opium right from the beginning. Orunodoi came down heavily upon opium addiction. At a time when the memory of the Burmese invasion was so fresh in Assamese mind, the Orunodoi termed opium as more dangerous than even the Burmese invasion. In the very inaugural issue of the Orunodoi, the evils of opium addiction were highlighted in a few Assamese verses.

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115. ibid., p. 19
116. ibid.
117. ibid. p.22
118. H. K. Barpujari, The American Missionaries and the North East India, Guwahati, 1986, p 180
A very evil thing is this opium
Very unwise is the one who takes it
He fritters away his savings
And uses unpleasant language
Everybody is in the know
That only the evil one takes opium
He can never be wise in life
His language is deceitful!

The article carried a report on the deliberation of the 'Sibsagar Gyan Sabha' held on 24 Dec. 1845, in which most of the members present expressed their opinions on the evil effects of opium on society.\textsuperscript{119}

The miseries brought upon the people by opium were illustrated with concrete examples from life.\textsuperscript{120} The tragic death of an opium-eater was related in another issue. The article concluded with the note that opium and alcohol were the biggest enemies of men. Opium made a man irreligious and impious. It not only lead to pre-mature death but made life itself hell.\textsuperscript{121}

In an essay 'China and Opium', the methods of opium cultivation in China and India were discussed in detail. It added a severe warning on the evil effects of the drug on the mind and body of the opium-smoker. The essay also carried an illustration of a Chinese smoking house.\textsuperscript{122} In addition to highlighting the evil effects of the drug, \textit{Orunodoi} also suggested cures from the addiction. Tea and coffee were prescribed as remedies.\textsuperscript{123}

\textbf{The Assam - Bilasinee} also wrote extensively against the use of the drug. G. D. Walker, Commissioner for Divisions, Assam, in a letter to the editor of the paper,

\begin{flushright}
119. 'Evils of Opium', \textit{Orunodoi}, January, 1846
120. 'Fruits of Opium', \textit{Orunodoi}, May, 1855
121. 'Death of an Opium Eater', \textit{Orunodoi}, May, 1846
122. 'China and Opium', \textit{The Orunodoi}, February, 1853
123. 'Kani Erabar Katha', \textit{The Orunodoi}, June 1861
\end{flushright}
Satradhikar Dattadev Goswami, wrote:

"... I congratulate His Holiness the Adhikar Goswami, on taking strong active measures against opium. If only people could be made to feel how wrong and sinful (i.e. harmful to both God and men) it is to start young people on this dangerous habit, prohibition would come in of itself, and there would be no need for legislation. This attitude of the most influential Satra in Assam would go a long way to hasten the coming of real prohibition."124

The inaugural issue of Assam-Deepak published an article which called for a stop in the consumption of opium. The aticle cited the evil effects of opium addition.125

The Company's Government, on demand from the people, subsequently banned cultivation of poppy in 1860; but at the same time introduced Government Abkari opium, which the opium-consumers had to buy from the Governement stores. Thus revenue consideration replaced their welfare motive, and imported Opium continued to find a ready market in Assam with the Government earning much profit. It is calculated that the number of Opium-eaters during the period 1874 to 1905 increased from 10% to 50%.126

The enlightened Assamese class was alarmed at the increasing consumption of opium. When the cultivation of poppy was banned, they had hoped that opium would be totally eradicated from the province.127 They now demanded that as a preliminary step the supply of excised opium should be discontinued forthwith. Gunaviram Barua demanded before the Royal Commission on Opium, the total prohibition of the drug.128

Radhanath Changakoty, editor, The Times of Assam, also urged the Commission to

125 C. P. Saikia, ed. opcit. p. 140
126 A. Guha. Planters Raj to Swaraj, Delhi, 1988, p. 56.
127. 'Kaniya Lokar Katha', Orunodoi, June, 1860
128. Report on the Royal Commission on Opium, 1892-93, Vol. II, pp 186-8; also Barpujari, op cit, p 208
prohibit the drug altogether making up the loss of revenue, if need be, 'by cutting civil and military expenditure.'

Hem Chandra Barua wrote a satire 'Kaniyar Kirtan', highlighting the evil effects of opium on the Assamese masses. He showed, how the drug had permeated into every section of Assamese society of that time, right from the priests and the aristocracy, down to poor villagers.

In an interesting discussion in 'Jonaki' - 'Tente Amar Upai Ki?' (Then what is our way out?) by Panidranath Gogoi, opium, hemp, and alcohol were shown to have done great damage to our society. Of all these, opium was shown to be the most harmful. "Day by day, opium is dominating the society ...The society is full of scoundrels who mislead young and innocent people and teach them to consume opium. opium has become a great hindrance in the progress of the society .... we propose to establish an Opium Prevention Society"... He stressed upon the urgency of getting rid of this cause of ruin of Assamese society.

Padmanath Gohain Barooah, as editor, Bijuli, tried his best to make the people aware of the evils of opium-eating through his essays in the paper.

The main purpose of bringing out Orunodoi by the Missonaries was to preach christianity. Every issue of the paper contained religious discussions under the title 'Dharamar Katha Barta, Dharam Kathar Sambad which highlighted the merits, usefulness and superiority of Christianity. Conversions into christianity were published, Christian weddings were featured, Obituaries of missionaries were published. The articles on Hinduism published in the Orunodoi highlighted its negative aspects. The

129. ibid, p. 305-8
131. 'Tente Amar Upai Ki', Jonaki, opcit.
132. G. P Sarmah edited, op.cit, p. 145
paper published many derogatory comments about certain systems prevalent in the
Kamakya temple, the Hayagrib - Madhava temple of Hajo with its institution of
Devadasis. Some of the charges were, no doubt, true, but the articles found less
supporters and hardly any rejoinder was sent. People, in general, were satisfied with
their religion.\textsuperscript{133}

There was no great conflict between Hinduism and Christianity in Assam. The
attempt to evangelise among the Hindus was hardly successful. The first conversion in
Assam of Nidhiram to Nidhi Levi Farwell in 13 June 1841 scarcely created any stir or
sensation in the society. Both Nidhi Levi Farwell and Batiram Das Peck rose to eminence
within the narrow fold of Christianity in Assam but failed to earn the admiration of the
people in general.\textsuperscript{134} In Bengal, Christriarty and Hinduism had come into direct
confrontation. With the intelligentsia getting involved in the problems of conflict This
had led to the growth of a spirit of enquiry, the birth of the Brahma Dharma, and the
Bengal Renaissance. In Assam, this confrontation did not take place.\textsuperscript{135}

\textit{Orunodoi} rarely published anything on the spread of the Brahmo faith, perhaps
for fear of losing their own position. An article entitled - 'Kalikatat Brahmo Samajar
Katha' was indeed published but the article highlighted that the principles of Brahmo-
Samaj were borrowed from the tenets of Christianity.\textsuperscript{136}

Gunaviram Barua, editor \textit{Assam-Bandhu}, Hemchandra Barua, editor \textit{Assam
News}, Jadunath Charavorty, editor \textit{Assam-Mihir}, Chidananda Chowdhury, publisher
\textit{Assam-Mihir}, Lashminath Barkakoty, editor \textit{Assam Darpan}, publisher \textit{Chandrodoi}
Padma hash Goswami, publisher \textit{Gyanodoi}, Radhanath Changakoty, publisher \textit{Times}

\textsuperscript{133.} 'Wanderings of a Pilgrim', \textit{Orunodoi}, August-September, 1852
\textsuperscript{135.} ibid.
\textsuperscript{136.} 'Kalikatat Brahmo Samajar Katha', \textit{Orunodoi}, Feb, 1867

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of Assam, Basambad Mitra, editor, *Times of Assam*, Kamalakanta Bhattacharjya, Lakshminath Bezbaruah and most of the celebrated authors of the *Jonaki - Age* were ardent followers of Brahmo Dharma in Assam.¹³⁷

Both Gunaviram Barua and Padmashash Goswami, significantly prominent personalities of the Assamese society during the period and serious believers in the Brahmo faith, preferred to be silent regarding the patronization of their faith through their publications. While Gunaviram Barua was quite critical about the prevalent evil practices in the society, he hardly published anything on Brahmoism. Padmahash devoted his paper exclusively to 'scientific and literary subjects.'¹³⁸ No doubt, he wanted to spread the ideas of Brahmoism but perhaps he took lessons from the fate of *Assam Mihir* and *Assam - Darpan* that no newspaper or journal could thrive as a Brahmo organ. For that matter, Padmahash authored two tracts, viz., *Features of Brahmo-Dharma* and *What is Brahmo*, in Assamese for the spread of his faith.¹³⁹

The caste system in Assam was not rigidly observed as elsewhere in India. There were only a few castes that specialized in their particular art or craft.¹⁴⁰ The composition of the Assamese population was predominantly non- Aryan. This might have prevented the penetration of the rigid caste system into Assam.¹⁴¹ Another reason why caste system could not strike deep-roots in Assam was the *Vaishnavism* preached by Sankardeva. Sankardeva's *Nam-Dharma* never differentiated on caste lines. He welcomed disciples from among the lower castes.¹⁴²

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¹³⁹. ibid.
¹⁴⁰. G. Barua, *Assam Buranjil*, op.cit., p. 175
¹⁴¹. ibid, p. 8; also, M. L. Bose, *op.cit.*, p. 37
by the Bengali Hindus, and the Assamese Hindus. Those practices which would make a Bengali Hindu an outcaste, were freely accepted in the Assamese Hindu society. Similarly, the caste rules were not so rigidly followed in Assamese society and the people were free to take up any profession they chose. Orunodoi commented: -

"Although Assamese and the Bengalis profess the same religion, their customs and traditions are not the same. The Hindus are in a majority among the Assamese as well as Bengalis, but practices that call for ostracism in Bengali society are practiced little by the Assamese. Just as in this land it is a taboo for people other than the Kaivartas to sell fish - and they become outcaste - so also it is taboo among the Bengalis to leave one's own occupation and engage in jobs of other castes. A weaver must weave cloth, a barber must stick to his profession of haircutting, a washerman must wash clothes; this must continue among their successive generations also. But there are no such customs among the Assamese. Brahmans, Kalitas, Keots, Dooms all can choose the profession of their choice; there is no bar to it. This practice of better than that followed by the Bengalis."

Since most of the social reformers in the nineteenth century were themselves from the upper castes, it was not unnatural that they were deeply connected as well as concerned with the evils rampant in the Assamese upper caste society.

Lakshminath Bezbaruah created a comic character for himself - Kripabar Barua. The mask of Kripabar gave him the liberty to hit out at the corruption and hypocrisy of the Assamese orthodox society. He severely attacked the evils of the caste system and

143. 'Assamese and Bengali Customs', The Orunodoi, June 1847; G. P. Sarma, ed., op.cit. p. 49
144. T. Misra, Literature and Society in Assam, New Delhi, 1987, p. 110

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untouchability. The position of women in Assamese society was discussed by Bezbarua in his *Kripabar* articles. He also spoke in favour of widow-remarriage. But his views on social reform were those of a 'traditionalist' and not of a 'radical reformer'.

A fiery social-reformer of the nineteenth century Assam was Kamalakanta Bhattacharya. He hated the narrow caste system and hypocrisy. According to him, the sacred thread worn by illiterate and corrupt priests, are nothing more than a coarse rope. As a symbol of breaking caste orthodoxies, he tore-off his sacred thread and used the sacred 'salegram' stone as a paper-weight. He expressed his radical views against child marriage, ban on widow-remarriage, *Kulinism*, *Purdah* etc. which according to him, were not inherent in Assamese society, but were imported to Assam by the Bengali Brahmins who migrated to the region. His views continued to influence the Assamese mind during the later part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century.

Thus, Press in Assam, during the later half of nineteenth century, created public opinion in favour of various social reforms. In fact, it laid the foundation for the task that was carried furthur by the later periodicals. In the process, the outlook of Assamese society changed considerably bringing about a tremendous social transformation in many spheres. The twentieth century was of great importance, for example, in the history of women emancipation; their participation in the social and political activities was accelerated during this period.

Press in Assam in the later half of the nineteenth century created social awareness amongst the Assamese. The impact of western education and the reformist trend in the

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145. The writings of 'Kripabar' were serially published in 'Jonaki'.
146. T. Misra, *opcit.*, p. 128
148. *ibid*, preface, p. 8
149. *ibid.*, p. 264

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Indian Renaissance gave the Assamese intelligentsia a rational outlook and progressive mindset. The issues that they raised were extremely relevant ones and were hotly debated upon. But among the advocates for reform, there was division regarding the method and speed of reforms.

Rammohan Roy had once written to John Digby in 1829 "... It is, I think, necessary that some change should take place in their (Hindoos) religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort." Not unnaturally, the new spirit of social criticism infused by the press in Assam in the later half of the nineteenth century led to the gradual strengthening of political consciousness and brought Assam into the mainstream of Indian nationalism in the next century.

152. R. C. Majumdar ed, *op. cit.*, p. 89