

Chapter VII

Conclusion

The present work has attempted to examine various facets of life and society in Assam covering a period of more than hundred years beginning from the middle of nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth as found to be reflected in life writings of nine eminent social figures of Assam. They were, in a sense, connected to each other with an abiding concern for Assam and the Assamese society. The life writings of these personalities belonging to well-known families of Assam and having various matters in common with each other, tried to address issues which they considered to be of pertinent relevance to the social and cultural upliftment of Assam. These records of individual experiences and truths of their realization are transformed to universal ones. Compared with their earlier generation, they had a lot of opportunities; they saw social mobility under the colonial rule and had the exposure to English education and were influenced by the 'Indian awakening' in general and Bengal Renaissance in particular. There was a gap of only half a century between Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua, the first autobiographer and the youngest one in the list, Nalinibala Devi. The lives spanning across hundred and fifty years reflected a meaningful period in history of modern Assam. They witnessed unprecedented awakening and progress in different spheres of life. They devoted their lives, in different ways, to the enrichment of Assamese society.

The British rule in Assam, as elsewhere in India, as observed on a number of occasions in the preceding pages, brought about many changes. Perhaps, the most effective agent of change was education. Macaulay's report of 1835 was the starting point. The journey in Assam started with the foundation of the Gowhatti Seminary in 1835. The government effort was supplemented by the American Baptist Mission. The medium of instruction in the schools of Assam gave birth to spirited controversy. Besides, it created practical hurdles for the students and a demoralizing effect on the society at large. It was a calumny of sorts from 1836 to 1873. But the efforts of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and the American Baptist Mission bore fruits and Assamese regained its rightful place in the education system. Language being a major expression of culture, the result was obvious. The Assamese students reading in Calcutta were greatly inspired and influenced by the heights of human progress. Their extraordinary zeal left its indelible mark in the literary

and cultural history of Assam. The solid foundation of modern Assamese literature was laid by their multiple forms of effort. The best autobiography in Assamese was produced by Lakshminath Bezbaroa who was one among the literary doyens of the crucial years. Education was no more a privilege of the few. Though the old gentry received some concessions in matters of employment, education was the key to social ladder opening up avenues for talents to undertake different careers. It is interesting to note that the authors had elemental consciousness about the environment they lived in and the challenges ahead. They cherished the beauty of nature which was abundant in Assam amidst which they grew up.

On the wearing down of the earlier ruling class in Assam belonging to the Ahom monarchy following the British occupation, there was the rise of new professional, mercantile and intellectual classes in the Assamese society, which came to be known as the middle-class. Family and upbringing shaped their lives and made them what they were. They grew up in the togetherness of a joint family, where they shared their joys and sorrows with a great many people. They were all believers in values and discipline. They had an intense sense of loyalty to their family and community. There was poly-cultural influence on the Assamese society sometime later. No doubt, there were social stratification but those at the bottom of the social ladder did not suffer human indignities. Social issues of child marriage, widow remarriage, dowry and female education drew the attention of the Assamese students. A few of them braved emotional opposition within their family and questioned their ancestral social and religious practices. Whatever might be their scheme of reforms, they expressed their views for public response. From the late nineteenth century, public associations and press became an indispensable part of public life in Assam. Ideological transformation was accepted as development and modernisation. These narratives carrying different perspectives gave an idea of making of modernity in Assam and the emergence of the modern Assamese society.

The enlightened section of the society had their own views on social problems. It would be too simplistic and rather, insufficient a conclusion if we generalise the opinions either as conservative or radical, or even moderate. The same person may be conservative on a certain social issue but on some other issues he can have moderate or radical views. A single individual could have different approaches to different social questions. Still some of them certainly had some distinct qualities. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan belonged to a

family, the first in Assam to have accepted the European way of life which Anandaram had simply to continue with. Not to misplace his business relations, Haribilash Agarwala was a flexible person of his time adopting himself to various conditions. Anundoram Boroah combined in his personality the traditional Sanskritist and a full-blooded civilian. He pursued his research in ancient geography and Sanskrit with devotion. Both Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Padmanath Gohain Barooah were members of the energetic and ambitious middle-class emerging during the period. They fully adapted themselves to the new urban society created by education, press, trade, communication and national consciousness. Benudhar Rajkhowa almost did not let others know about his non-conformist attitude just not to allow any chance to question his loyalty to the British government. Nalinibala Devi and Rajabala Das contributed to the awakening of the women of Assam, inspired them to march ahead yet their methods were different. Both of them inspired by the spirit of Indian nationalism were the products of the age of modernity ushered by their predecessors. There was no contradiction or conflict between them and their idealism, spirit of sacrifice and the commitment to the cause of womanhood were great source of inspiration for the women coming from different background. Nalinibala Devi, the spiritualist and Rajabala Das, the educationist played complementary role to each other.

Perception of womanhood reflected in this study is perhaps a little partial because it is centred on two life writings only. Rajabala Das and Nalinibala Devi could make a separate category for them as elite not by birth or chance, but by their individual endeavors. It has to be noted that both of them addressed the larger question of women in considerable detail. The present study has taken into account the views of the other male authors, seven in all, towards women and their role in society. Their nuanced views on gender and men-women interactions within the family or in the community produced a mixed baggage. It is to be noted that leadership for women education came from men. Their success depended on the enthusiasm of the women. Women education was gaining ground. Women were no more caged birds. They entered public life through the national movement. They also built up their own platform to discuss issues and find solutions.

The Assamese middle-class was capable of adapting themselves to the changing situations and were confident of what they were doing regardless of criticisms. The new professional requirements and attitudes changed their life style. Their food, dress, housing

pattern and living standard everything began to change. They acquired a new taste of life which they never experienced before. The material changes were equally significant. Money economy replaced barter system, development of water transport and then railways quickened their spatial and social mobility. Colonial character of the state indulged in the maximum utilization of India's natural resources. Potentialities of tea, oil and coal of Assam were explored and exploited. There was penetration of commercial capitalism. The inevitable economic changes resulted in very little improvement of economic status of the common people. The overall fiscal condition of Assam was heading not better than towards colonial backwardness. The coming of different groups of people from other parts of the country to Assam for the purpose of livelihood changed the demography of the province once and for all. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, and Lakshminath Bezbaroa issued a clear message to the people of Assam that they are capable of shaping their own destiny, and creating a nobler Assamese life. Anandaram had a clear vision for economic recovery. That vision found favour with Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Padmanath Gohain Barooah and Benudhar Rajkhowa.

In Assam, ideals of renaissance and revivalism were associated with the search of identity. All these stalwarts taken up for this study, responded to every stimulus of self-assertion and social transition. They always held the view that they were inheritors of a distinct Assamese culture and heritage. They very much wanted that every Assamese should protect himself/herself from contamination coming from an alien culture. They were not against emulating higher cultural ideals and values, but were opposed to cultural domination coming from any quarter. Their approach to wealth and occupation, education, health, medicine, history and literature was based on practical wisdom. They had a competitive mind and in most cases, they compared things with that of Bengal and found it to be ideal. Colonialism acted as a catalyst to these changes. The middle-class loved to lead a rational way of life and they tried to copy the British in matters of material comfort and material culture.

The life writings chosen for the study present a blending of tradition and modernity in Assamese society. As tradition is not a static thing, modernity can enrich tradition and tradition gives strength to modernity. Tradition and modernity were mediated through the complex cultural interactions in the nineteenth century. Individual roots of tradition in Anandaram Dhekial Phukan as well as Lakshminath Bezbaroa were different but both of

them negotiated with modernity very successfully and in their own terms. Similar was the case with Anundoram Borooh. But none of them behaved like a self-centred individual. There was a new perception of collective social life with a little difference from what worked in rural social life of Assam.

These life writings showed, the Assamese middle-class came to share their nationalist aspirations. They were committed to the Indian nation in emergence; they had fellow feeling for their 'own people' and without delimiting their patriotism. They were influenced by their contact with the outer world. Still one would recognise that their intentions merged into one focal point of Assamese identity with a sense of pride in it. Without diluting their identity they introduced themselves as Indians. They wanted that their literature and culture should be recognised and recognised as a part of Indian literature and culture. They took interest in the politics of the country. Indian nationalism broadened their outlook. They learned to appreciate democratic values, social justice, communal harmony and tolerance. Both support and resistance with the colonial masters marked their behaviour. Harakanta *Sadar Amin* was a rational anglophile. He looked upon the British as the 'deliverer' of the people of Assam from the Burmese yolk. He loved his own people and his own country and believed that their best interest can be protected by the British rule. From Anandaram Dhekial Phukan to Nalinibala Devi, all the chosen characters were committed to the ideology of liberal nationalism of the pre-Swadeshi days. The post Swadeshi era is marked by Hindu conservatism and even extremism on one hand and evolutionary Gandhism on the other. Harakanta *Sadar Amin* and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan had already passed away. Of the rest, only Padmanath Gohain Barooah remained loyal to the British government till the end. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Benudhar Rajkhowa, Rajabala Das and Nalinibala Devi identified themselves fully with the liberal nationalist spirit. Interestingly, Lakshminath Bezbaroa did not subscribe to the views of the Hindu revivalist movement.

The common characteristic of the authors was to instil a will power in the people. The will power, they thought, was essential even for their survival. These persons could easily discover that there was competition in every field of life, both at the individual and social level. They realised that by only through persistent moral and physical efforts, they can hope to climb the social ladder and protect the interest of their own society. Very clearly,

Social Darwinism had its place in the world-view of the Assamese elites. Their social ambition was equally remarkable.

From Anandaram Dhekial Phukan to Rajabala Das, each one of them had played a role in shaping the Assamese consciousness and identity. This study comes up to the conclusion that the new Assamese elites were harbingers of change with their involvement in the nation-making exercise. It also shows how the social life of early modern Assam was mirrored in family and gender relations, community relations; with the parallel process of social transition. It also explores their contacts and connections beyond the physical frontier of Assam. Hopefully, these authors will continue to inspire the people of Assam in difficult situations.