

Chapter III

Education as Window to the World

3. i Social Infrastructure

Distribution of power and mechanism of social control depends on a variety of factors. It mostly depends on how a society acquires, classifies and distributes educational knowledge. In every life writing learning experience of the author is a useful reference. The degree of concern and involvement varies from person to person. The lives taken up for discussion in the present study were adored during their life time and continue to be so for their scholarly and other social contributions. They took interest in the ideals of education and mode of imparting it, commented on it and suggested improvement whenever they felt necessity.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century there were only occasional schools in the Presidency towns of Madras, Calcutta and Bombay where English was taught to the Indian children. The fundamentals of the new western learning were disseminated through them. The main purpose of their education was to produce interpreters and clerks. The scenario began to change in course of time with Indian children learning knowledge in a variety of subjects. The respect and admiration with which the Indians observed the British in India was to some extent a result of a feeling of inferiority generated by the criticism of missionaries in particular and some British administrators in general. By the Charter Act of 1813, the English East India Company's monopoly of Indian trade was abolished. The Company for the first time allowed missionary organisations to work in India. Western Education was introduced in India not so much with the government initiative but by the Christian Missionaries. Subsequently, English schools and colleges were founded in the remote areas. The lives and careers of the writers of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries were mediated by specific, overlapping zones of contact and acculturation, with formal English education playing an increasingly influential role through the nineteenth century (Pollock,2004,232).

The *Orunodoi* (1846-83) introduced the tradition of western liberal and secular ideas in Assamese literature. It never rigidly prescribed the English language as the only vehicle for these ideas but said that translation of English books into the mother tongue could

prove equally useful. This suggestion was in keeping with the famous downward filtration policy in education formulated by Thomas Macaulay adopted by the British between 1833 and 1853. English education was to be given only to a select few who would in turn hand it down to the less privileged masses. In 1835 Macaulay recommended that the language of instruction in schools be English and that this also be the language of administration. Accordingly, among a number of institutions in different regions of the subcontinent, Guwahati English School with the name of Gowhatti Seminary was started towards the end of 1835. It ushered in a new era in the history of secondary education in Assam. In about 1842-43 the government resolved to set up a school in Hajo area (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,37). School buildings were a rare sight in Assam till the end of that century. It was reported that a large proportion of the primary schools in Assam had no houses of their own, but were held in any place available- in the verandas of private houses, in the village *namghar*, in courts, or in any other place wherever any space was available (*Report on Progress of Education in India 1897-98—1901-02*, 147).

Knowledge of local language and a group of people with that skill were a compulsory requirement of the officers in the East India Company. They were the interpreters between the rulers and the ruled. Both the officers and the early Christian Missionaries faced difficulty in finding teachers to teach them. There was no standard textbook, grammar or dictionary in an Indian language. In 1839, William Robinson compiled the first grammar for Assamese, *A Grammar of the Assamese Language*. Robinson was the Head Master of the first high school in the province, Gowhatti Government Seminary. He was hopeful in this kind of effort as he stated that knowledge of the local language would help the British entering the region ‘on mercantile speculations’ (Robinson,1839,Introduction). Next, Miles Bronson (1812-83) published the first Assamese Dictionary, *Asomiya Aaru Engraji Abhidhan* (A Dictionary in Assamese and English) with around 14,000 words in 1867. These grammar books and dictionaries by the English scholars were in English to serve the English speaking population in learning Assamese as their second language. The same situation prevailed in respect of the Bengali language. The first generation of Indian students under the British rule had such learning condition.

Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua narrated that in his childhood, his elder brother Shivakanta used to teach him some texts. Whenever Harakanta failed to read his lessons loudly, he was beaten up to tears. At that moments, his mother's kind and inspiring words enabled him to read easily (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,5,6). He was ever thankful to his mother for her kind support in the early stage of his student life. Benudhar Rajkhowa remembered that his mother was able to read some religious texts fluently. Though she could not write, she could introduce alphabets to her son. Gradually she taught Benudhar to take dictation of her letters to her husband (Rajkhowa,1969,18). A large section of the Assamese society no doubt, remained uneducated but some among them could realise the importance of learning. They appreciated its utility in daily life and urged for the education of their children.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan received his early education in the Government Seminary, Guwahati which was the first centre of English education in Assam. Two British officers persuaded the guardians of Anandaram and Durgaram to send them to Calcutta for their education. Anandaram was later educated in Hindu College of Calcutta. Anandaram's uncle, Jajnaram Khargharia Phukan (1805-38) had acquaintance with Rammohun Roy and was interested in western education. Haliram and Jajnaram were the two illustrious sons of Parasuram Barua and they are said to be the forerunners of an awakening in Assam (Guha,1991,207). They were aware of the big changes taking place in Calcutta. Jajnaram served as Superintendent of Police at Jorhat and was in very good terms with Commissioner Jenkins and James Matthie, Magistrate and Collector of Guwahati (Baroah,1971,22 and 29). Anandaram had his English education both at Guwahati and Calcutta. It was, therefore, imperative to acquaint himself with the educational and literary developments in the Bengal Presidency. Anandaram brought out an Assamese primer for the benefit of the next generation Assamese, *Asamiya Larar Mitra* (Friend of Assamese Boys) in 1849. Here he incorporated introductory themes of world geography, rivers, mountains, cities, political geography, agricultural production, business and customs of the people; their character and religion as well as geography and topography of Assam.

Haribilash Agarwala reported that his father Navarangaram knew none other than the Nageri script and could only make his signature in Bengali. But in the long run, Navarangaram proved no way unwise; he could deal with all sorts of practical situations.

It was surprising that with little learning, he could excel in his ventures in a distant land from his birthplace. In his early years, Haribilash too, did not have access to education. In 1851, when he was only nine, his family decided to send him to a place with access to education. Accordingly, a boy from Gomiri in the Darrang district was sent to Dibrugarh in the erstwhile Lakhimpur district; a bold decision on the part of his father. Haribilash was admitted in the Bengali school headed by Keshab Dev Sarma. One of his classmates was Ganga Gobinda Phukan who became a renowned personality in later life. They had to learn the Bengali textbooks compiled by the Christian Missionaries (Agarwala,1967,12,13,15-17). Experience of Haribilash was indicative of certain things; the schooling facility was then nowhere available in the entire northern bank of the Brahmaputra and the few affluent people who could, sent their wards to Dibrugarh. The medium of instruction in the school was Bengali. In the early stage the missionaries found it easy to use Bengal textbooks.

Haribilash Agarwala aspired for English education. The moment he conveyed it to the then Inspector of Schools, Priyalal Baruah, Haribilash was admitted to an English medium school in Sibsagar in 1857. It was the only English medium school in upper Assam till 1856. There was a regular system of scholarship for the students of the English medium schools. A scholarship of four rupees was sanctioned for Haribilash. In the absence of an English school in Dibrugarh, a cleric, Higgs made some personal arrangements to teach a few boys. A visit to Calcutta made Haribilash eager to read in the Hindoo School. But he could not continue his studies as his father decided to call him back to Assam because of his anxiety in putting up a young boy there in Calcutta. Accordingly, Haribilash had to wind up the hope of formal education in Calcutta and joined the family business in Dibrugarh. On his own part too, he was inclined towards trade and commerce. It was not a big challenge for him. He soon became a successful trader and knew the art of cultivating the goodwill of the British officers. He was nominated for the post of an assistant in the political office. But for the lack of formal English training, he was never appointed. It was obvious that without the knowledge of English there was little chance of a government job. Assamese speaking people were, therefore, eager to learn English and find lucrative jobs. According to one report on education in India, both the lower and the upper primary courses were disseminated in the vernacular language. While there were optionals between the vernacular and the English in case of the middle secondary classes, English was compulsory in high secondary

schools (*Report on Progress of Education in India 1897-98—1901-02*,5). As in other parts of India, knowledge of English became essential in Assam for progress in life. On his part, Haribilash was very concerned about the education of his sons and ensured that all of them received good education in schools which was then available only in Tezpur town (Agarwala,1967,22,18,19,31,32).

Anundoram Borooh had his primary education in a *pathsala* in North Guwahati. He then joined a high school in Goalpara, where his father was posted. Within a few years, Anundoram again came to Guwahati with his elder brother Parasuram and completed school education. Anundoram got himself admitted in the Presidency College (1855) in 1865. As a student he made good impression of himself. When his biographer, S. K. Bhuyan approached a few of his teachers, they spoke very highly of Anundoram. A veteran educationist, Gurudas Banerjee admitted extraordinary talent of Anundoram (Bhuyan,1966,5,18). Anundoram passed the B.A. examination securing the third position in Calcutta University. He held several ‘firsts’ to his credit in Assam. He was the first graduate, the first barrister and eventually the first and only ICS among the Assamese. He qualified for the ICS in 1870.

When Lakshminath Bezbaroa was a boy of seven or eight he was admitted to a school in Guwahati. He was there in school for four to five hours a day. But he did not develop any liking for it. He was scared of his school memory. He recalls the rigid system of school education and a totally unappealing learning environment. Corporal punishment to unwilling, weak and disobeying students was common. Teachers used to punish the pupils for imparting lessons and for character formation. But those harsh means could hardly bring academic progress. It was a tragic and frustrating phase of his childhood. Regarding Lakshminath’s school experience from his ‘fragmentary’ autobiography, Hiren Gohain remarked, ‘it was as though he suffered a daily round of imprisonment’ (Gohain,2013,2). Years after, Lakshminath wrote a short story entitled, ‘Mukti’ (Liberation), fictionalizing his school days as a prison experience through the characterisation of Sukumar. His father, Dinanath Bezbaroa (1813-95) held a transferrable government job and his family moved with him from one town to the other. The children had the advantage or disadvantage of attending schools in different towns. It was very clear from the account of Lakshminath that he loved only the school of his native place, Sibsagar. He considered himself as a boy of mediocre ability, mostly

interested in non-academic activities. He passed school examinations just in compulsion but did not enjoy anything. He had explanations for his passive attitude for studies. He recalled the beginning of his schooling with those books available only in Bengali (Bezbaroa,1998,22-23,12). There was communication gap between the Bengali speaking teachers and the Assamese learners. The mistaken view of the British government regarding the Assamese language was responsible for the parrot-like nature of learning system in schools in the nineteenth century Assam.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa admired his father for a number of reasons. He observed that his father, though a staunch believer of Vaishnavite philosophy, welcomed the changes that came with time. Dinanath Bezbaroa realised the merit of English education in the British India, learnt English and admitted his sons to those schools where English was an essential subject. Even then, it must be noted that Dinanath did not approve the idea of sending his boys to Britain for education. He feared that western system of medical education would ruin the indigenous system of health care practices (Bezbaroa,1998,12-13,94).

Padmanath Gohain Barooah also recorded the beginning of his schooling experience at the age of seven. Bengali was the medium of instruction in the schools all over Assam. Both Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Padmanath Gohain Barooah often spoke reverentially of the salutary influence of their teacher Chandra Mohan Goswami on them (Bezbaroa,1998,44,22 and Gohain Barooah,1987,13). The same gifted educator, Chandra Mohan Goswami was also the source of inspiration for Anundoram Barooah in his school days. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan called this veteran educator ‘a living history of colonial Assam’ (Translation by the present author) for his encyclopaedic knowledge (Bhuyan,1966,Preface). Padmanath repeatedly acknowledged contributions of a few other teachers in his school days in 1878-79. He passed entrance examination from Kohima Government High School in 1890. In order to pursue college education, he left Sibsagar for Calcutta.

By the end of 1852, the number of primary schools in the province increased to seventy-four. However, because of the medium of instruction being Bengali, the students could not make satisfactory progress. As a result, some vernacular schools sprang up. Govinda Bezbaroa, the uncle of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, established the Bezbaroa School in Sibsagar, Golaghat and Jorhat (Dutta, 1990, 68). In the meantime, Charles Wood’s

dispatch of 1854 emphasized the need to spread European knowledge to all classes of the people and this object was to be achieved 'by means of the English language in the higher branches of instruction and by that of the vernacular languages to the great mass of the people'. In stressing the need to extend primary education through the medium of Indian languages, the government was showing a welcome appreciation of the need to spread education among the masses. Wood dismissed the Anglicist idea of educating only the elite and hoped that its effect would trickle down to the masses as well. All must be given the opportunity to obtain practical knowledge so that they could be useful members of society (Dasgupta, 2010,175). The newly founded institutions could, however, serve only a fraction of the subject population. The denial of knowledge to the majority was a simple process of inequality in Assam, like it had been in traditional India. Even for a later period, from 1897-98 to 1901-02, it was reported that education in India was not compulsory; there was no regulation requiring Indian parents to send their children to school and no machinery for detecting and dealing with the truant (*Report on Progress of Education in India 1897-98—1901-02*,2).

More people gradually became interested in modern education. In 1874 a School Committee was formed with the support of two British officers. Next year also such committees were formed in Guwahati. (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,190,200). There was no institution of higher education in Assam till 1901 and resourceful parents first sent their sons and later daughters to Calcutta for education. Lakshminath observed that people were increasingly inclined to English education. He remarked that scarcity of textbooks in Assamese posed a challenge to both teachers and students. Reading materials of various sorts were prepared at different levels in schools. The Calcutta based *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* that is the Assamese Language Improvement Society (1888) resolved to compile a comprehensive social history of Assam and to translate the important Sanskrit works into Assamese, to edit and annotate the difficult portions of the works written by Sankaradeva, Sridhar Kandali and other Assamese poets of the past (Bezbaroa,1998,81-83).

Assamese language was reintroduced in schools in 1873. A still more difficult problem was the need of textbooks in Assamese. Padmanath Gohain Barooah regarded it as a driven sense of obligation for the next generation Assamese. He compiled two textbooks, *Sahitya Samgraha* and *Niti Shiksha*, both of these school books were fairly received for a

long time in Assam. He had to his credit a minimum of twelve textbooks. Text-books in both English and Bengali which had been approved by the Text-book Committee at Calcutta were accepted in Assam, with a few additions made by the Director of Education. All recognized schools were required to use the books included in that list and no others (*Progress of Education in India 1892-93 to 1896-97*,397). It means that there was strict government vigilance on the contents of curriculum. Thereby the government ensured a minimum standard and kept a watch on the attitude of the elites who prepared the textbooks. In 1893, Padmanath Gohain Barooah in association with Panindra Nath Gogoi published the *Sahitya Samgraha* – a compilation of twenty-three prose items and nineteen poems. It contained lessons on philosophy, morals, economics, science, history, old literature and patriotism. In 1896, Padmanath compiled two books on moral education for the lower and upper primary levels. This series, called *Niti Shiksha* were adoptions from the English work, *Chamber's Moral Class Book* (Goswami,1971,140-142). The seven chapters in the text taught duties and obligations of children to family and relations, animals, teachers, the learned, friends and subordinates. Further, the book taught values of labour, perseverance and self-reliance, good health and morality. The language of the instructions was lucid befitting the students of primary classes. These lessons had an abiding influence on many children for life.

The University of Calcutta (1857) was the premier seat of western education in the whole of eastern India at that time. Assamese students went to various educational institutions of Bengal. Benudhar Rajkhowa first got himself admitted in Presidency College, soon he moved to City College (1881) from where he passed the F. A. examination in 1892. He passed the B.A. examination from Rippon College (1885) in 1896. The total number of students on the rolls in 1892 was 428 in Presidency College, 454 in City College and 447 in Rippon College. The number in the private college was more than in government college. A total of 273 students passed out the university examination in the year 1891-92. Benudhar was one of the two graduates from Assam, the other person being Nabin Chandra Bardaloi (1875-1936), the father of Nalinibala Devi. Benudhar observed that examinations used to be so tough in those days that few could get through (Rajkhowa,1969,91-93,102). Lakshminath Bezbaroa had similar opinion; he wrote that getting a B.A. degree by a student from Assam was just an outstanding achievement. That is why, he argued, Jagannath Baruah (1851-1907) was so famous as a graduate. This view is borne out by a government report;

It appears probable that the standard of the examination has been raised, while in consequence of the lowering of the Entrance standard a large proportion of the students receive at school an elementary education insufficient to prepare them to benefit by the instruction given in the colleges (*Progress of Education in India 1887-88 to 1891-92*,63,71).

Lakshminath recalled the teaching faculty and the ambience of Presidency College and Rippon College. He failed in the law examination of Calcutta University. He along with a few other students filed a case against the university. The course of trial and the results were recorded by Lakshminath in his autobiography (Bezbaroa, 1998,4-7).

From 1862, representations were made for the establishment of a collegiate school or a college in Guwahati. In 1878 the demand for a college was raised again. Cotton College (1901) came into existence for untiring efforts of Manik Chandra Baruah (1851-1915) with the public support. Benudhar Rajkhowa recorded the public discussions preceding this event; whether there was the need of a hostel in Calcutta, or a college in Assam (Rajkhowa, 1969,104). Henry Stedman Cotton, then Chief Commissioner of Assam was initially favouring for a hostel of Assamese students in Calcutta, but later he issued a circular to know public interest. People overwhelmingly demanded for a college in the province. The Cotton College was the result; which was formally opened by the Chief Commissioner on 27 May, 1901.

Sometime in 1930, Lakshminath Bezbaroa was coming to Guwahati and he attended a function organised by a group of students from Cotton College. He enjoyed the performances of a few Cottonians. Oversatisfied with their performance, Lakshminath acknowledged the contribution of Cotton College for ushering in ‘enlightenment’ in Assam (Bezbaroa,1998, 101). He saw its bright future. He had firm conviction in the worth of modern education; he could foresee the next generation Assamese enriching Assamese language and culture. He had faith on them. His contemporary government report also observed,

The period under review has been marked by a very rapid increase in affiliation, and consequently in staff, buildings, and equipment. Of the 197 students reading in the college, 124 reside in them, and that there are already 113 boarders living in the Hindu hostels alone, which are filled to overflowing. The numbers in the college have more than doubled, while it has maintained its consistent level of success in intermediate examination under the higher standards of the reformed university (*Report*

on the Progress of Education in Eastern Bengal and Assam During the years 1907-08 to 1911-12, Vol-I,29).

Wood's dispatch in 1854 recognized encouragement of female education as a matter of the Company's policy. Public indifference, however, hampered the progress of female education in the country. It took time to get the people convinced of primary and secondary education for girls. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, after his return from Calcutta, made personal effort to educate the womenfolk of his family. He was probably the first teacher ever to come to them. Considering the child marriage system of the age, Anandaram realised that the girls had rarely any education. So he took initiative to make the wives of his household literate. His wife Mahindri learnt reading and writing, she became able to comprehend both the Assamese and the Bengali texts (Baroah,1971,58,110). Nalinibala Devi's remarks on girls' education reflect the condition of women in the early decades of the twentieth century. She ruefully recollected the dearth of suitable schools for girls in Assam. But unlike the existing general image of the larger Assamese society, Nalinibala described the values of her home as a representation of an educated middle-class society. Her father Nabin Chandra Bardaloi appreciated the worth of female education. At that time, there were only two schools, one in Dibrugarh and the other in Guwahati. He was determined to make his daughters educated even without formal schooling. The best of selected tutors in Guwahati were entrusted with this responsibility. This was perhaps the only option for instructing the young girls of the respectable families. After the basic instructions in primary education, she was introduced to the Sanskrit *kavyas* and then subjects like English, Mathematics, Geography and History. Nalinibala had always full reverence for her first *guru*, the eminent scholar Gopal Krishna Dey who infused in her considerable strength in her tough times. Nalinibala later felt a great sense of satisfaction in serving the school that she started with the initial help from her uncle, Prabodh Chandra Bardaloi in Guwahati. In 1919, Nalinibala along with her uncle Prabodh Chandra Bardaloi and Snehalata Bhattacharya (daughter of Kamalakanta Bhattacharya) tried to establish a girls' school in the Uzanbazar area of Guwahati. The mission failed after a period of six months due to financial constraints (Devi,1976,26-27). But the quest of education itself signalled liberation. While laying the foundation of a women's college at Madras in 1955, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) clarified the purpose of women's education,

By education, I mean education and not merely learning to be ladylike. Learning to be ladylike may be good in itself, but it is not education as such. Education has mainly two aspects, the cultural aspect which makes a person grow and the productive aspect which makes a person do things. Both are essential (Nehru,1972, 127).

The wife of Oliver Cutter, one of the first American Baptist Missionaries in Assam, opened the first missionary girls' school at Sadiya in 1837. Then girls' schools came up in the Brahmaputra valley and in Naga and Garo hills by the effort of the wife of Nathan Brown (1807-86), Miles Bronson and the wife of Baker. But in reality, the ground was not yet ready for such a change in social attitude. The Census Report of 1921 recorded that among the Hindus, one male in every six in the province was literate, but only one female in fifty five (*Report on the Census of Assam, 1921*. 105). Education for the girls became an important site of contest between the colonial state and a section of local elites. Colonial state was niggardly and disinclined in allocating funds to spread modern education among the Indians, but a few from the natives desired more of it. However, it was not that easy for many of the natives to give a good education to their daughters. Geraldine Forbes documents the problems associated with the introduction of female education in colonial India. She writes,

Indian norms and social customs made the British model of schooling difficult, if not impossible. Deeply ingrained notions of sex segregation and, in some areas, of complete seclusion, meant girls had to have female teachers, and study in separate institutions. The widely accepted ideal of youthful marriage limited a girl's school-going years (Forbes,2000,40).

This kind of observation corroborates the real lived experiences at the threshold of modernity. In Assamese society, though there was not a complete isolation of the woman, yet her free movement was not allowed. There was no social support for female education. Even among the elite section, Benudhar Rajkhowa's wife Ratnakumari supported education for girls only in isolation. She never thought of higher education and co-education (Rajkhowa,1969,189).

Contradictions became noticeable when the first girls' high school started in Dibrugarh in 1918. Only a few students were there in the higher classes. The first batch of students passed matriculation in 1926. It was a big news. Rajabala Das battled throughout her youth to achieve education for girls. She recalled her childhood with one or two primary

schools in Dibrugarh. Her parents were totally opposed to anything like educating their daughters in a school, as girls walking through the street to school itself was an idea beyond their imagination. A girl's education was considered to be complete if she was adept in household tasks and was qualified on her weaving, cooking skills till her marriageable age. Accordingly, the parents, instead of sending them to school, kept them in home to learn all these domestic lessons (Das,2004,23,15,33).

Nalinibala Devi, through her reading of epic poetry in childhood was moved by the mythical character of Subhadra. She discovered in Subhadra the feminine ideals of love, kindness, aesthetics and love for nature. She started imitating Subhadra in whatever way she could. In general, the few literate women of those days were given access to the Hindu scriptures introducing them to the portrayal of saintly, virtuous and dutiful women (Devi,1976,30-31).

Two of the cousins of Rajabala, Hemoprova and Durgaprova were sent to Bethune School in Calcutta. After clearing the entrance examination, Durgaprova returned home whereas Hemoprova decided to stay on and passed the F.A.. Rajabala in her youth was getting confused regarding the value of education. She had her schooling in Calcutta. Initially, she wanted to come back home because of her thought that it was none of a girl's business and an issue of criticism as already faced by her cousins. After a vacation, she decided not to return to Calcutta. But Rajabala's cousin sisters inspired her. By this time, she had grown up attaining marriageable age. Rajabala and her younger sister Surabala now made determination for education in Calcutta. Their plea was not accepted. The attitude of their parents frustrated Rajabala. She was in utter dilemma as her will was deadly against deprivation of educational rights to women. She at times understood her parents' condition who just could not dare to incur displeasure of the society. She recalled, 'my desire for learning was so strong that I could no way undermine it' (Translation by the present author). A learning arrangement was made in home for the sisters with a few of their relatives as tutors. Rajabala reminisced their utmost dedication in learning. She realized that it is the humanity who can make everything possible in this earth; provided he or she does it sincerely (Das,2004,23-25). It was because of the yearning of two sisters, their family was obliged to permit them to do so. In 1912, they made arrangements for it. The news spread in no time. Society condemned the parents for their consent to their teenaged daughters' choice to study. Society believed the decision to

be a foolish one and an incapability of exercising parental authority. Rajabala was admitted at the eighth standard and Surabala at the seventh standard first in a school in Giridhi in Bihar and then they were shifted to Bethune school in Calcutta. From this school, Rajabala passed matriculation in the first division in 1915. In those days only a few students passed in the first division. Therefore, she received scholarship from Assam Government. Rajabala believed that the government awarded scholarships to those girls from Assam studying abroad who could pass out examinations.

According to an official report for these years, Assam offered eight special lower primary scholarships from the provincial funds, five special upper primary scholarships and three special middle scholarships. For expansion of female education, during 1906-07, thirty one scholarships of various grades were held throughout the province by girls, namely one junior, five middle, four upper primary, twenty one lower primary (*Report on the Progress of Education in Eastern Bengal and Assam During the years 1901-02 to 1906-07*, Vol-I,87). Rajabala's classmates in Bethune school belonged mostly to the Brahmo faith. Non-Brahmo Hindu girls were also there. Rajabala noticed the difference in the educational attainment of the girls of these two faiths. The Brahmo ones joined higher education whereas the practice of early marriage among the Hindus brought abrupt end to the education of their daughters. She particularly noted that most of the girls left school in the seventh or eighth standard. She held the custom of child marriage, especially among the Brahmin families, as one major factor of poor literacy rate of women (Das,2004,22,31,55).

Rajabala passed I.A. in 1918 and B.A.in 1920 with subjects like Mathematics and Economics. She was the first woman graduate from Assam. Following her successful example, a few guardians thought of sending their daughters to schools in Giridhi or Calcutta. Sometime later, when Rajabala was introduced to Madan Mohan Malaviya, she expressed her desire for further studies. Malaviya welcomed her to Benaras Hindu University for her post-graduate education and assured a job in a school in Benaras (Das,2004,30,32,33,45). It was a dream for Rajabala.

A scholar on Assamese women's narratives observed that their real lives reflected two phases; first one was a struggle to educate themselves followed by a phase of demonstrating courage by setting up schools for girls and teaching in these schools. These educated women sought a larger role outside the household and this was made available

to them through the space of the community, which is outside the domestic space and not a part of the political sphere (Das, 2011,12-13). In a similar situation, Rajabala Das pleaded for admission of girl students in Cotton College in the Guwahati session of the *Asam Mahila Samiti* in 1934. She had already prepared an outline of a curriculum for women education (Sharma, 1993, 105). Her unflinching desire was supported by another champion of the women's cause in Assam, Chandraprova Saikiani (1901-72). The government approved admission of girls in Cotton College due to the huge public pressure in its support.

After marriage, Rajabala Das joined as Secretary to the Executive Committee of Panbazar Girls' High School in Guwahati and she served as the Headmistress for many years till 1947. She made solid contributions for school development; she raised public aids, ensured fund management, planned building construction, recruited teachers, arranged facilities like bus service and hostel accomodation. She gave details of her experience in founding a college. She knew that some matriculated girls were deprived of college education just because their parents did not allow them for co-education. She was set about starting a college. But the environment was not at all conducive for this venture. Parents from the aristocratic families did not approve of the idea of sending their daughters to college. Humfrey, the Deputy Commissioner of the district also discouraged the project. He warned Rajabala, saying that the time was too premature to start a Girls' College. However, the determination of an Assamese woman triumphed over all odds. In 1939, for the first time in the Assam valley, admissions were opened for the women's college in Guwahati, The college, later known as Handique Girls' College was affiliated to the University of Calcutta. Rajabala faced unfavourable public opinion and frequent meetings were held to oppose the women's institution. A local newspaper criticised Handique Girls' College as nothing more than a white elephant. Some students criticized its Principal being only a graduate. Rajabala then joined the private post-graduate programme of Calcutta University (Das,2004,62-63,65-70). She became an M.A. in Indian Vernacular in 1941. She was then square with the world. Personal experience gave Rajabala enough lessons to look at her contemporary education scenario in the state. She had to her credit a commentary on female education.

A set of social beliefs led to the under-estimation of girls by their parents. Though some sort of education was imparted to the daughters of a few well-off families, no girl child of

an average family could ever think of receiving education. They were not permitted to make their entry to schools where the boys only got admitted. There was gender disparity in the literacy rate in all levels of education. In the entire subcontinent, literacy among women was only 0.8 per cent in 1901. The number of girls enrolled for every hundred boys was 12 at the primary and 14 at the secondary stages. The total number of women in higher education in the subcontinent was 264 (Oommen,2002,188). The American Baptist Missionaries in Assam were trying hard to start female education. The first primary girls' school was started at Sibsagar by the year 1860-61 (Hazarika,1987,454). Still the education scenario in Assam was not encouraging until a few more decades. The opening up of secular education to women was a big step ahead for their liberation.

In Nalinibala Devi, there was a depiction of progressive parenting style. A daughter was given special attention. The feminine sensitivity reflected in Nalinibala's writing was perhaps due to her entry in early childhood into the female world of love and ritual. Her father played a pivotal role in fulfilling her wishes. He had faith and confidence in her abilities. Both Nalinibala and her younger sister Mrinalini were taught music by their father at a time when none could ever imagine a girl singing. But from a young age, the girls from the Bardaloi family were taught the basics of aesthetics. They received training in different forms of music, namely *Bargeet*, *Ghoshha*, *Durgabari Geet*, Bengali *Brahmo Sangeet*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Nalinibala, since her childhood, developed a good degree of drawing skill. Her father appreciated some of her paintings. Nabin Chandra could spot her talent and specially appointed a drawing teacher to develop her inner ability to its full dimension. Nalinibala continued drawing practice till old age (Devi,1976, 32-34). Nature of education and family values that they grew up with, emphasized a woman's primary duty centreing round her husband.

Benudhar Rajkhowa was one exceptional figure of his time. He emphasized on academic excellence and repeatedly spoke for developing the music faculty. In his opinion, music was necessary for a nation to make its people positively sentient. Benudhar was disturbed to see that singers were not getting respect in society. In the periodic meetings of *Mangaldoi Majlis* (1906), there were sessions on music. Benudhar compiled all the lyrics and got it printed in with the title, *Banhi*. In its preface, he indicated that music have something common with the divine blessings (Rajkhowa,1969,137,222,224). His own

ideal of music was made into a dictum in one of his short plays, *Jampuri* published in 1931.

Progress of education in Assam was behind the average Indian standard. The percentage of pupils in all the stages of education was even lower than the neighbouring Bengal (*Progress of Education in India. 1887-88 to 1891-92*, 11). According to the *Annual Reports of the Administration of the Madras Presidency*, between 1887 and 1900, the number of scientific and literary societies in that Presidency increased almost three-fold from 146 to 401. Calcutta went from having 49 libraries and reading rooms in 1886 to 137 in 1901, Bombay increased over five-fold from 13 in 1886 to 70 in 1901 (Blackburn and Dalmia, 2004,292). These figures do not compare favourably with Assam. Assam was a case for slow progress. But the intellectual attainment of some Assamese kept up the spirit and confidence of the community.

Christian Missionary schools and colleges in India were the vital English medium institutions both in colonial and post-colonial times. Modern civic values and practices evolved from these institutional seeds. Generally speaking, the Assamese youths till the late nineteenth century did not have clear idea of what constituted welfare of the people and how it was to be attained. Yet education was perceived as a means of social change and attitudinal transformation. It refined the Assamese sensibilities even in the midst of contradiction. Some educated people absorbed the rich cultural milieu of the land in their varying capacities; it shaped their evolving identity. This was the impact of education.

3. ii Intellectual Attainment

These life writings reveal the mental horizon of the Assamese elite society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast to the medieval academic approach, the learned section during this period focused on reasoning and empirical evidence. They were in search of identity and with intense feelings, they were busy framing the true face of Assamese society. They expected to rouse intellectual and moral sense of the nation under the influence of modern education. Acquaintance of both or any one of the 'foreign' languages, English and Bengali, was helping them in scholarly pursuits. It was an opportune contact for the region; impact of that intellectual transformation lingered on in succeeding periods. Intellectual history aims at understanding how ideas, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, emotions and concerns are reflective of a society. Socio-political

consciousness in Assam developed in stages. Early attitude towards the British rule was uncritical, integrated and supportive. But it gradually became complex suffused with internal probity.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan arrived from Calcutta almost at the same time with the coming of the American Baptist Mission. He was intimately involved in literary activities and disseminated his modern ideas through the *Orunodoi* brought out by the Mission. It had great social impact as the first Assamese journal (Sarma,2013,114-115). As already mentioned, Hemchandra Baruwa prepared the first dictionary in Assamese, *Hemkosh*. The new class of educated people were enthusiastic about their language. The Assamese intelligentsia was coming up with confidence after the restoration of Assamese language. They took upon themselves the responsibility of regenerating Assamese.

The transformation in the nineteenth century was due to Anglo-Bengali influence. If we use the word 'renaissance' even in a restricted sense, Anandaram was the forerunner of 'Assam Renaissance' (Talukdar,2012,154). He went through varied subjects; from religious scriptures to Murray's Encyclopaedia. In a short life of twenty nine years, he utilized his exposure to wide studies and shared the thoughts with his countrymen. He was skilled at three languages; Assamese, English and Bengali. English education inspired his essay writing in Assamese. His 'Englandar Bibaran' (A Description of England) was the first of its kind published in the *Orunodoi* in 1847. Anandaram brought out a Bengali translation, *Ain O Byebastha Sangrah* (1855) of a civil law compilation in English, for the benefit of the common man. He also prepared 'A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language on the Vernacular Education in Assam' (1855). He also submitted a memorandum, 'Observation on the Administration of the Province of Assam'. Besides all, he regularly maintained his diary.

Development of the print media contributed to the spread of literacy and cultural consciousness. Haribilash Agarwala used to read aloud the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Samachar Chandrika* to his father (Agarwala,1967,18). Benudhar Rajkhowa recalled that his father was a regular reader of the Bengali weekly *Sanjiboni*. The purpose was to keep oneself up-to-date by affiliation with the dailies from Calcutta. Benudhar fondly remembered his growing habit of reading newspapers. Lakshminath Das was a subscriber of the *Tattva-Kaumudi* and was truly influenced by Rammohun Roy and the Brahma ideology. He realised the Brahma philosophy; the people around him realised the

strength of his character (Rajkhowa,1969,34,20-21). The Brahmo movement was a strong component of Bengal Renaissance and its message reached out to distant places through some publications. The growth of native press fostered all forms of collective action. It was so effective that it could even draw the non-literates into debates of community, race and nation (Bayly,2005,149). *Sanjiboni, Tattva Kaumudi, Samachar Darpan, Samachar Chandrika, Bangadut* were the major Bengali periodicals that were in circulation in Assam.

Though most of the Assamese journals were printed in Calcutta yet, people in Assam used to eagerly wait for them. Some of the Assamese periodicals were *Orunodoi* (1846-83), *Assam Bilashini* (1871-83), *Assam Mihir* (1872-73), *Assam Darpan* (1874-75), *Chandrodoi* (1876), *Assam News* (1882-85), *Asam Bandhu* (1885-86), *Mou* (1886-87), *Jonaki* (1889-1903) and *Ghar Jeuti* (1927-31). They provided a platform and contributed towards the formation of a *jati* or a subnation consciousness. A literary public sphere emerged in this part of the country. It facilitated the formation of some associations. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, however, had a low opinion on the academic environment of Guwahati in the late nineteenth century. He lamented at people's lack of awareness as well as response to scholarly achievements (Bhuyan,1966,17). Before Anundoram Borooah, no one from Assam could set any standard or ideal for the student generation.

From about 1900 till 1947, the press in India was shaped and strengthened by the prevailing political and cultural conditions created by national movement. The elite society was at times against the British policies. For both the Indian-owned and Anglo-Indian Press, politics was the central concern (Karlekar,2002,231). The case was not exactly the same for Assamese newspapers; politics was not their first priority and they practically functioned as identity maker of the Assamese people. There were different levels of cooperation and confrontation with the colonial system. Press played a crucial role in facilitating communication and hence, mobilizing public opinion among the Assamese.

The way Lakshminath Bezbaroa responded and reacted to the surrounding world brought cultural rejuvenation to his people. His life marked the transitional moment of the Assamese society. He was aware of the Tagore family's illustrious social contribution. He was, therefore, respectful to them. In his late years he repented for his wrongheaded enthusiasm in literally 'killing' an Assamese periodical, *Mou* (the Bee). The *Mou* was

edited by Haranarayan Borroah, the younger brother of Bolinarayan Borroah (1852-1927), the first Assamese Civil Engineer. Bolinarayan was the brain behind the *Mou*. The periodical had an independent outlook and it did not care for popularity. Lakshminath was convinced that it was taking an unconventional road and supportive of the British and the tea planters. He got a letter published in it indicating the role of the Bengal press and explaining the shortcomings of the labour recruitment system in tea plantations in Assam (Bezbaroa,1998,78). He also recorded that the Assamese students in Calcutta were influenced by the political ideology of the Indian National Congress (1885) and reacted against pro-planter stance. Obviously, Lakshminath Bezbaroa's autobiography is at once self-revelatory and introspective.

Padmanath Gohain Barooah relished the challenge of doing jobs turned down by others. In 1890 he felt the absence of a novel in Assamese. He resolved to write a historical novel as that was the favoured form of the age. His *Bhanumati* became the first Assamese novel. He published the first Assamese 'social' novel, *Lahori* in 1892. He also endeavoured the publication of the *Bijuli*. Benudhar Rajkhowa mentioned in his autobiography that along with Padmanath and Krishnaprasad Duara, Benudhar made efforts to bring out the *Bijuli* (1891). They were gratified by the support of Gunabhiram Barooah. Benudhar wrote a series of articles to prove that Assamese was a separate language with independent identity (Rajkhowa,1969,92,101). In a series of writings entitled 'Political Articles', Padmanath Gohain Barooah emphasized on the significant role of newspapers as the connecting link between the government and the governed. He wrote,

The more the people write on political matters the more it would be conducive to the good of the government and thereby to the welfare of the nation (*Bijuli*,1892).

Before taking up the mission of bringing out a weekly newspaper from Tezpur, Padmanath Gohain Barooah had consultations with Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya. The *Asam Banti* edited by Mathura Mohan Barua came out from Tezpur in 1901 from the Asam Central Press. Padmanath was the man behind this venture. Popularity of the *Asam Banti* was largely due to the sincere effort of Padmanath. This weekly took up issues like reservation of jobs for local candidates, circulation of Assamese textbooks and enhancement of land revenue. These issues were opened up for an enlightened discussion. Padmanath, when necessary, criticised the government but had a mild disposition. He

next wrote to Hemchandra Goswami emphasising the need of an Assamese literary journal. It would facilitate expressions both of the old and the new generations. Discussions with Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Hemchandra and Satyanath Bora had positive outcome and the *Usha* was published in 1906. Padmanath was chosen the founder president of the *Sodou Asam Sahityik Sanmiloni* (later the *Asam Sahitya Sabha*) in 1917 in its first ever session held in Sibsagar (Gohain Barooah, 1987, 103, 105, 186).

Benudhar Rajkhowa was a passionate author and writing was his motto in life. His autobiography includes the complete list of books authored by him with a brief introduction of each of the forty one titles. Lakshminath Das, the post-master cum teacher of Dibrugarh High School guided Benudhar in his educational journey from the primary stage (Rajkhowa, 1969, 43).

While gathering information on Anundoram Borooah's life, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan faced paucity of material. He discovered that Anundoram was introvert by nature and hardly told his friends about his aspirations. Naturally he was never aimless. He had lofty dreams and worked hard to realise them. By any standard, Anundoram Borooah was an illustrious son of Assam. His extraordinary achievements are still a source of inspiration for the young. As revealed in his biography, he was so sincere in studies that he never entertained anything that might distract his mind. There is no need to judge him from the words of the biography, but one can form an idea of the man from his deeds. In a short life of less than forty years, he carried the responsibilities of a civilian, an ancient geographer, a Sanskrit scholar and a lexicographer with extraordinary success in all. He received the coveted Gilchrist scholarship from the British Government for studies in Britain. There he joined training courses for the Indian Civil Service (ICS). On one hand, he studied science in London University and on the other he was learning law in the Middle Temple. He went through all the Sanskrit collections in the library of the British Museum and the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford. He was fortunate enough to meet the British writer, scholar Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900). Young Anundoram was enchanted by the personality of this legendary Sanskrit scholar. Anundoram's reputation as a Sanskritist is still a subject of abiding interest. His *A Practical English Sanskrit Dictionary* (1877) has run into several editions. Some of his friends believed that he decided not to marry just to avoid sharing his time with anybody but to devote all his time in scholarly pursuits (Bhuyan, 1966, 7, 10). He was dutiful as a civilian and a

perfectionist as a scholar. What the sources of his personal pleasure were or if there was any, we do not know. The renaissance spirit in him kept him aloof and far above the average people. The biography thus leads us not alone to the facts of Anundoram's life, but also to the inner mind of the subject that grew amidst the social milieu of the time.

An autobiography generally becomes a means for airing inner sentiments. The two autobiographies by Nalinibala Devi and Rajabala Das revealed the inner emotions of the authors. Critical situations in their lives made them to reflect on the meaning or purpose of life. When they faced death of their loved ones, their world collapsed for some time. Then they questioned their value system, or the faiths and could gradually cope up with reality and redeemed their spiritual pursuits. Rajabala Das, by her own example, recommended complete independence of thinking. She had to bear up with severe mental stress on several occasions. Her eldest daughter died of complications at child-birth in spite of the fact that she was the daughter of Jyotish Chandra Das, the famous gynaecologist of his time. The unlucky father could not bear the shock and passed away unexpectedly. Rajabala's eldest son suddenly disappeared without any clue to the family. Her youngest son-in-law died of an accident. She was hurt by these developments; it took long years for recovery from her personal loss and pain. Rajabala recalled that she could get back to normal activities even after these tragedies bearing in mind her social responsibility (Das,2004,95).

Nalinibala Devi too, faced difficulties through various stages and confronted them calmly and boldly. She was a champion of liberty; she faced the unseen hazards in life with remarkable patience. Nalinibala cherished positive aspects of life and always stood by her inner strength. Realization of inner power and self-confidence had far-reaching effect on her readers. It raised the level of worldly consciousness. This realisation was a feature of the Bengal Renaissance. Rammohun Roy and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) had similar motivation for high-level personal ideals.

Spirit of western romanticism and liberalism created a new class of Bengali intelligentsia. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan returned imbibing the new spirit of the age and took to writing with the sole purpose of arousing the people around to the call of the new age and accept its challenge. He had a vision for Assam and wanted his fellow friends to work hard for the prosperity of his native land, its economy, language and culture. The greatness of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was realized by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. He

understood the inner motive of Anandaram. He got inspiration from the writings of Anandaram. It is perceptible in some serious essays by Lakshminath like 'Asamiya Bhasa', 'Asamiya Bhasar Unnati', and 'Asamiya Gauripurot Bangla Sahitya Sabha' (Bezbaroa,2010,34-68,71-79,122-138).

Westernization characterized the changes which came in Indian society and culture as a result of the coming of the British rule in the eighteenth century. It was a slow but an irreversible process. M. N. Srinivas observes that the term westernization subsumes changes occurring at different levels- technology, institutions, ideology, values (Srinivas,2005,50). Though 'west' generally means Europe, in this particular context 'west' means the British island. The British colonisers tried to shape up India according to their intention and necessity. In the nineteenth century, the British model of Westernization was the most influential ideological force in India for social and cultural change. It resulted in the introduction of new institutions like schools, college, universities, press, parliament, newspapers, elections and Christian missions etc. which also included the process of improvement of traditional institutions.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Padmanath Gohain Barooah and Benudhar Rajkhowa, these three authors, who constitute major part of our research belonged to the same generation. But they differed in individual talents and social outlook. The most outstanding personality among them was Lakshminath Bezbaroa. He created, shaped and nourished literary consciousness among the Assamese. He appropriated western ideas and made a creative use of it. He discovered Sankaradeva in the social as well as religious memory of his community and fixed him at the centre of Assamese identity. By invoking the contributions of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva he laid the path of emotional unity among his countrymen. He underlined the importance of Sankaradeva in the day to day and community life in writings like 'Shri Shri Sankaradeva', 'Mahapurush Shri Sankaradeva', and 'Sankar Madhavar Sahityar Bisoye Duasar Katha' (Bezbaroa,2010,76-78,236-9,246-9). By this standard Lakshminath imported the message of the nineteenth century Indian renaissance to Assam. He proved that Assam was not out of tune with the rest of India. The thing in the country has been explained as,

India came into contact with Western ideas at a very opportune moment, when they were dominated by the French Revolution and the Age of Illumination (Majumdar and Chopra, 1996, 155).

Under the impact of Indian renaissance, the educated Assamese could broaden up their mind. They developed aspirations for rationality and liberal nationalism. Historically, that was a crucial moment for development of the vernacular language. Lakshminath Bezbaroa and others imbibed the spirit of the age and placed Assamese literature on a solid basis. They inspired the Assamese in different domains of knowledge. That was a period of great enthusiasm that found reflection in multiple pursuits of the later generation.

3. iii The Calcutta Connection

The British Empire in India rested on three administrative organizations in the presidency cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Social changes that occurred in colonial India from the nineteenth century were visible in these urban cities. Calcutta was the capital city of the empire since its beginning in 1772 till 1911 when the British moved the capital of India to Delhi. Next to London, Calcutta emerged as the ‘second metropolis of the British Empire’. Apart from its role as headquarters of British Indian administration, Calcutta had twofold economic hold. It was a city with focus on British commerce, shipping, finance, investments in the East; and the British capital was in command in Calcutta more overwhelmingly than anywhere else in India. It was also the cultural capital of the subcontinent. The British rulers, accompanied by the growth of a mobile group of English-educated Bengalis, experimented with its various political cum legal and cultural innovations in Calcutta (Banerjee,2004,4). The impact of the West, be it education or way of life, came to have wider effect on the Indian society; particularly in Bengal throughout the nineteenth century. Naturally, Bengal became a melting-pot of cultures from both the east and the west. Assam’s administrative and trade contacts with this city opened up many possibilities. Of these, the ideas of modernity and *bhadralok* culture attracted and influenced the Assamese elites.

From 1826, Calcutta was not only the principal seat of administration for Assam, but also the centre of mercantile activities for the entire eastern India. Out of the total river-borne trade of Assam, 77 per cent valued over 720 lakh rupees was carried on with Calcutta (*Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam During the year ending 31March 1886*, 3). Same trend continued for many years and it was reported in 1905 that almost the entire trade of Assam was related with Bengal (*Report on the Rail and River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam for the year ending 31March 1905*,4).

Not everybody who wished could visit Calcutta. Occasions or opportunities were limited. Calcutta would fulfil the ambition of Assamese students for higher education and higher professional life through the opportunities of English education and modern outlook. Mostly from the non-urban background, these youths came to have the taste of Western city life. The Assamese student community, inspired and informed by the intellectual environment in Calcutta, became the harbinger of new ideas. Their efforts towards the promotion of the language formed an important component of the so called awakening of the Assamese community. Their sense of identity received a definite direction through the language of their land, which was proved by the activities of the students studying in Calcutta. They established the identity of Assamese as a distinct modern Indian language. They proved that Assam could be an important component of Indian national movement. Commenting on western influence coming through Calcutta, Tilottoma Misra observed,

The progressive winds from the West entered Assam through Bengal, thereby enabling the region to emerge from the physical and cultural isolationism into which it had lapsed during the long period of uninterrupted Ahom rule (Misra,1987,2-3).

The two brothers, Anandaram and Durgaram Dhekial Phukan were admitted to the Hindu College in 1841. A year after, Durgaram died of fever. Anandaram also returned to Guwahati leaving his studies unfinished. He was then sixteen years. The books that he carried from Calcutta were enough to set up a private library and he took care of it. His residence in Guwahati was the first among the Assamese families to have systematic arrangement of interiors. Anandaram had a respectable position in the society; because besides being the son of Holiram Dhekial Phukan (1802-1832), the *Sheristadar* of Lower Assam, Anandaram was educated in Calcutta. According to his biographer, Gunabhiram Baroah, for the people of that age, Calcutta was like the Great Britain of the day, which means that the city of Calcutta had some traces of the European civilization. People flocked around Anandaram who described Calcutta to them as a wonder land where they would have been wonderstruck to see the queer things. Over the years, this city was also undergoing transformations. Haribilash Agarwala noticed a sea change between the Calcutta of his youth and the Calcutta in his late years. He could no way compare the two, he would rather remember the earlier one as the hell (Agarwala,1967,22). Haribilash was dynamic and an entrepreneur. Most likely, he was implying the infrastructural development of the city as well as the material improvement of the city-dwellers. That was the third stage of British colonialism in India. Beginning from 1860, this period of

finance capitalism was marked by some measures increasing the investment of British capital in India. Roads and railways, post and telegraph, banking and other services gradually developed in the British colony.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was appointed Sub-Assistant Commissioner in 1850. Colonel Mathew expressed his pleasure for Anandaram and wrote to him that had he refused studying in Calcutta, he would have to suffer from poverty whole of his life and would have been deprived of a 'cultured' life. When Anandaram got an opportunity to revisit Calcutta for official purpose he really felt fortunate about it. He expressed the pleasure of that trip and the city he saw was a veritable 'paradise'.

When Anandaram was sent to Calcutta for the first time, his guardians engaged a Brahmin cook for him. In Calcutta, he realized that it was not wise of him to keep a personal cook. Very soon the practice was done away with (Baroah,1971,35,42). Hostel life in Calcutta encouraged common dining habit. Anandaram was smart enough to learn that life in Calcutta would make an intellectual rebirth in him. Though many people accepted such things in good spirit there were people who did not approve of it. Gunabhiram Baroah looked upon Anandaram as his well-wisher and a dependable guide. Gunabhiram was a bureaucrat serving as Extra Assistant Commissioner across Assam for long years, from 1871 to 1890. After retirement in the middle of 1892, he shifted to Calcutta with the whole of his family members 'severing' relation with Assam. Gunabhiram wanted to spend the retired life in Calcutta but died shortly afterwards. Jogendranarayan Bhuyan, in his study on the nineteenth century, analysed that Gunabhiram, the proponent of the Brahmo conversion and widow marriage in Assam, was not accepted by the society in the state. He, therefore, naturally decided to spend the rest life in Calcutta (Bhuyan,1998,54,86). Calcutta was thought to have accommodation for this liberal and intellectual class.

When Haribilash Agarwala, along with a few others, decided to go to Calcutta for education, they sailed in the monsoon season of 1859, the journey was full of risk in any case. On their way they halted at Goalpara and called on Gunabhiram Baroah (Agarwala,1967,21). Gunabhiram also wrote a letter of introduction to some Bengali *bhadralok* in Calcutta. Anundoram Borooah went to Calcutta in 1865. For him it was completely a new experience. He came to know the achievements and possibilities of human civilization. Calcutta was then 'shining bright with the best of the east and the

west' (Translation by the present author). A meritorious Assamese youth, Anundoram chose his field and tried to extract the best of all. In Presidency College, he was fortunate to have classmates like Surendranath Banerjee (1848-1925), Rameshchandra Dutt (1848-1909), Beharilal Gupta, Trailokyanath Bose, Kartikchandra Mitra, Umakali Mukherjee and Shivanath Shastri (1847-1919) - and such illustrious sons of Bengal. In fact, each of them contributed to the making of a vibrant modern Bengal. They all received training under Gurudas Banerjee. Anundoram Borooah had a publishing project of his own works. To get his things done, he set up a printing press in Calcutta in 1881 and engaged Purnachandra Chakrabarty to run things. Anundoram's biographer Suryya Kumar Bhuyan believed that Anundoram was ever engaged with high ideals and was blessed by his friends in Presidency College. It was a great coincidence (Bhuyan,1966,5,43,21).

After joining government service, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan again visited Calcutta and found out the Bethune Society of Calcutta. He attended its inaugural meeting in January 1852 along with a few other prominent figures like K.M. Bannerjee, Pearychand Mitra (1814-83), Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), F.J. Mouat and Rev. Long. The first President of the Bethune Society, Mouat requested Anandaram to present something either on history or culture of Assam in one of its sessions. Anandaram came in direct contact with an organisation devoted to female education. The Bethune School established by the Bethune Society was the pioneer of women education in Bengal. The Bethune College was established soon afterwards. Public library system also came up by this time. Anandaram visited the Metcalf Hall Library and was delighted to make full use of its rich collection. He went through the biography of Peter the Great of Russia. He was greatly excited by the achievements of Peter which also inspired him to take a solemn vow to think and work for the betterment of his native land Assam (Baroah,1971,95,101). Another young Assamese with extraordinary merit, some years junior to Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was Anundoram Borooah. In Calcutta, Anundoram too had the same access to the literate society. He utilized the rich library of Sanskrit College. His intellectual contribution was appreciated in Calcutta. He became a fellow of Calcutta University in 1885. In the opinion of Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, this honour was quite well-placed. Anundoram was a prominent figure in the enlightened circle and he came with novel thought in the intellectual conversations. Moreover he constantly motivated the Assamese students in the city by his personal visits to their hostels (Bhuyan,1966,48).

Calcutta had then a good number of educational institutions. The Hindu College was established in 1817. Raja Rammohun Roy joined David Hare and Rev. William Adam and founded the Anglo-Hindu School in 1822. The Hindu College was renamed as Presidency College, in 1855. It became the first choice for students aspiring for higher education. Pursuit of reason and ‘useful’ knowledge were the thrust area of the education system in all institutions of higher learning (Raychaudhuri,2005,52-53). Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s student life in Calcutta was eventful in so many ways. Some of his contemporaries from Assam were Padmanath Gohain Barooah, Benudhar Rajkhowa, Satyanath Bora, Debicharan Barua, Kalikanta Barkakati, Ghanashyam Barua, Radhakanta Handique, Gunjanan Barua and Gopinath Bardaloi. Though all of them were not classmates, they were intimate friends and their friendship generated unbelievable energy. They chalked out a common agenda and worked together.

Benudhar Rajkhowa recalled that he shared the same mess on the 62, Sitaram Ghose Street with Lakshminath Bezbaroa, among many others. He also shared with Padmanath Gohain Barooah the mess located on 67, Mirzapur Street. Benudhar and Padmanath jointly initiated the *Minor Club* for the boarders of their mess. Acquiring fluency in English was one of their goals (Rajkhowa,1969,86-87,106). There were several boarders from Assam, putting up in another mess in the city, in 43, Amherst Street. They studied in different colleges, took up mostly literature and kept themselves aware of all the literary and cultural activities.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa was inspired by the creative environment of Calcutta. He took interest in public activities participated by the eminent personalities of Bengal. Whenever there was a chance he listened all the speeches and noted down the core message of the speakers. Lakshminath’s concern for Assamese language and literature was shared by his compatriots in Calcutta. Each one of them took a vow to enrich it. Contribution of Calcutta in the making of the Assamese middle class was so great that it is rightly called the first school of the Assamese middle class (Saikia, 2001,169). It served as a catalyst of change of mindset. The role played by Bengal in the awakening of India was, with some apparent exaggeration, compared by Sushobhan Sarkar to ‘the position occupied by Italy in the story of the European Renaissance’. There is some truth in the statement. The principal protagonists of the Bengal Renaissance were from the middle-class. The Assamese students appreciated modernity and imbibed the spirit of the Bengal

renaissance in Assam. It was visible in the development of a standardized language, secular literature, rediscovery of the past achievements, mobilization of public opinion, gradual emergence of nationalist aspiration, and some social reforms.

The more one reads Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the more it becomes clear that he had an enlightened approach to the question of Assamese identity. His patriotism had no vice or weakness. Banikanta Kakati characterised his literary output, 'patriotism is essence of all his writings' (Kakati,2003,281-286). Lakshminath absorbed the spirit of the Bengal renaissance and inspired a few kindred spirits. They followed him and empowered the Assamese society. Writing about the Indian renaissance and Lakshminath, Suniti Kumar Chatterji remarked,

More than any place in Assam, Calcutta became the real centre of a progressive literary and cultural movement for the Assamese people; and the real modernization of the mind of Assam began with Lakshminath Bezbaruwa and his group (Chatterji,1972,8).

Debarshi Prasad Nath analyses the trajectory of Assamese Modernity in looking for Lakshminath Bezbaroa's identity as a writer of a new kind of literature in the Assam of his times. He proceeds with a significant remark,

In nineteenth century Calcutta as elsewhere in India, colonialism was responsible for replacing an old set of social hierarchies with a new one. In any case, at around this time feudalism was making way for capitalism in Calcutta and the culture of subordination of a subject race was giving way to the assertion of a new state of mind mainly under the influence of English modernity (Nath,2014,148).

The introduction and popularity of the print culture changed the parameters of Assamese social life. It was a newcomer in public life. Journals and newspapers appeared one after the other and those were sought after things. English, Bengali, or Assamese journals and newspapers - all were welcome. Hemchandra Baruwa edited an Anglo-Assamese weekly, the *Asam News* from Guwahati under the patronage of a business house named, the Baruwa-Phukan Brothers. After the *Asam Bilasini* which according to Lakshminath could not captivate the young educated mind, the *Asam News* could satisfy the young and the old alike and it had a wide readership. Young Lakshminath waited eagerly every week to receive his copy of the *Asam News*. He would not simply read it but grasped it all. He appreciated its prose style. It being bi-lingual, Lakshminath learnt the art of writing both in English and Assamese. He also acknowledged the spade work done by the *Asam*

Bandhu, the first monthly Assamese journal in 1885. It was the brainchild of Gunabhiram Baroah. Though the editor wished not to dabble in politics, some political ideas of the day entered into the editorials and in a few articles. Lakshminath condoled the untimely death of Gunabhiram and considered it as a great loss. He said, 'had this great man lived for another ten years, he could have served Assam much more' (Translation by the present author) (Bezbaroa,1998,33).

In his college life, Lakshminath used to visit his native place once in every two years unlike his fellow Assamese students who paid annual visits to Assam. Lakshminath reasoned it out in his autobiography. Though fond of his home, he was unwilling to waste money while commuting between Calcutta and Sibsagar. At the same time, he expected that his stay in a city like Calcutta would be rewarding in any case. He wanted to acquire some utility skills in the city- a desire which was not fulfilled. After completing his study in Calcutta, Lakshminath spent most of his life in Calcutta and Sambalpur. He, therefore, often considered himself as a *chira pravasua* or a permanent emigrant. There is no doubt that Lakshminath became what he was because of his personality. His character took shape at home; he learnt to identify and respect the valuable treasures of Assamese culture. As he understood the Assamese society from top to bottom he was not blind to their negative aspects. But he was optimistic. He believed that the Assamese can also rise on their feet; rise to strength and eminence (Bezbaroa,1998,1,96).

After high school standard most of the Assamese boys, who could, liked to go to Calcutta for higher education. Calcutta had a great charm for them. It was a city beyond their imagination. It took quite a couple of months and even a year before they could acclimatize themselves to the unknown norms of city life. Autobiographies of Padmanath Gohain Barooah and Benudhar Rajkhowa give us accounts of discovery of a metropolis by the simple minded Assamese youths. Haribilash Agarwala, on the other hand, remembered that he was quite at ease in Calcutta, he was never nervous being alone in an unknown city (Agarwala,1967,21).

Padmanath Gohain Barooah admitted that in his early years, he was more attracted by Bengali literature than Assamese. But for the efforts of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, he began to write in Assamese. He went to Calcutta, like many others for college education. He left Sibsagar for Calcutta along with three others Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Basanta Kumar Goswami and Dwarakeshwar Sarma. Padmanath was one of

the leading youths in Calcutta. He appreciated the painstaking efforts of the Assamese youths there in bringing the two Assamese monthlies, the *Jonaki* and the *Bijuli*. Their association transformed an ordinary college student into a champion of Assamese language and literature. Padmanath ignored his own mission for the interest of the community. He was unsuccessful as a student. Like him Benudhar Rajkhowa was also unsuccessful in his first attempt. Benudhar was, however, immediately brought back to track. His father insisted that he should devote his energy to prepare himself for a higher good in future (Rajkhowa,1969,94). Similar was the case with many other students.

Padmanath Gohain Barooah, in his own statement, made the best use of his time in Calcutta. He had a strong conviction that the metropolis was the ideal place for introspection and improvement. Introspection is necessary for analysis of the self. Without self-analysis no man can make improvement. On his way back, Padmanath brought some ideas for the future of Assam. He was grateful to Calcutta for two of his attributes, which he would call as heavenly attributes. They were the patriotic feelings and passionate love for his language. Padmanath remembered that in his first year in Rippon College in 1890, an annual session of the Indian National Congress was held in Calcutta (Gohain Barooah,1987,35). He observed that the Bengali people had given their best effort to make the Congress session a success. Padmanath was overwhelmed by the wave of patriotism in Calcutta. He made acquaintance with the national leader S. N. Banerjea and with his approval Padmanath organised a Congress volunteer group with the Assamese students reading there. After returning home, Padmanath was in a position to give concrete shape to his ideas. He discussed his ideas with many at Sibsagar and received support from Dinanath Bezbaroa, Jagannath Baruah, Ganga Gobinda Phukan and others. The outcome was the *Asamiya Jatiya Unnati Sadhini Sabha* which resolved to work for the all-round development of Assam. The influence of Calcutta on Padmanath can best be expressed in his own words. He summed up that his concern for the all-around development of the Assamese was a fruit, the plant of which was nurtured during his years in Calcutta. With their new ideas and a new world-view, the Assamese students of those days appreciated social transformation.

The educated Assamese middle-class was at the root of the formation of identity consciousness in the modern sense. The *Jonaki* group namely Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Chandra Kumar Agarwala (1867-1938), Hemchandra Goswami sharpened that

consciousness. Their own perception was crystallised in Calcutta. The stirring public speeches of the nationalist leaders like Sir S. N. Banerjea, Sir Ashotush Chaudhuri (1860-1924) and many others had their wholesome effect on them. The patriotic writings of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Nabinchandra Sen (1847-1909) also inspired the Assamese students to do something extraordinary. While as a student in the General Assembly College, Lakshminath was touched by some of the best lyrics of the West. He resolved to try his hand in composing lyrics but he wrongly believed that he could do so only in Bengali. He sent two poems for publication in Bengali magazines; the refusal to publish them by their editors punctured Lakshminath's desired fame in the Bengali literature.

Padmanath Gohain Barooah was also proud of his 'golden opportunities' of having seen Bankim Chandra Chatterjee on his way to office on the College Street almost everyday. Through intensive reading of Bengali, Padmanath was influenced by the prose style of Bankim *babu* and poetry of Rabi *Babu*. He was so much attracted by them that he did never lose a chance to attend any of their public meetings. He did not bother to wait for hours on the street to catch a glimpse of these champions of nationalism (Gohain Barooah, 1987, 29).

Like Lakshminath and Padmanath, Benudhar Rajkhowa also attended the public meetings in Calcutta. He was appreciative of the lectures of S.N. Banerjea, Pratapchandra Majumdar, Shivanath Shastri, Kalicharan Bannerji and Anandamohan Bose. One of his Assamese friends, Kamalchandra Sarma cultivated public speaking in English so perfectly that S.N. Banerjea appreciated and predicted, 'some day you will take my place' (Translation by the present author). The Assamese youths were inspired by the stirring speeches and writings of S.N. Banerjea, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindra Nath Tagore. Eventually these students played a role in disseminating the new ideas in Assam. Benudhar was impressed by his fellow Assamese youths of Calcutta whom he believed to be capable of achieving any goal. He found Calcutta a nice place to stay. He was even willing to settle there forever. He revealed to none other than the readers of his life the fact that he was looking for a teaching job in the city, but his desire was not fulfilled (Rajkhowa, 1969, 88-90, 87, 106, 109).

That was the general attitude of the Assamese students. They differed in tone and degree while expressing their thankfulness to the city of Calcutta. At times they criticised some aspects of the city life. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan always referred to his experience of Calcutta as ‘your eyes would have popped out if you were to see these things’ (Translation by the present author) (Baroah,1971,49). Gunabhiram Baroah was never over pleased with Calcutta and had a balanced opinion. It was a place of indulgence; in spite of the widespread poverty, most people led luxurious life. When young Haribilash Agarwala was studying in Calcutta, one Judicial Commissioner of Assam, Vetch advised his father to call him back to Assam and to train him in commercial activities. That would be much better than keeping him alone in Calcutta (Agarwala,1967,22). They all feared the risk of bad association.

While referring to the evil temptations in Calcutta, Lakshminath Bezbaroa claimed that the discipline and ethical values which he learnt from his father and the family saved him. He could brave all provocations in Calcutta and went ahead with his mission. After matriculation in 1886, Lakshminath was willing to take higher education in Calcutta and on persuasion of his two elder brothers, his parents decided to send him to Calcutta. Arrangements were naturally made to put him up in a Bengali Brahmin family. Before he left, his father called him in and advised certain things. It included some daily practices such as bath in the Ganga river, timely prayers and some tips for keeping good health (Bezbaroa,1998,18,72-73).

In the perception of the Assamese middle-class, Calcutta was a foreign land even in 1920s. In different contexts, Calcutta was referred to as *bidesh*. Gunabhiram Baroah reported the anxiety of Anandaram’s mother before sending her son to the ‘foreign’. Similar scene could be seen in the families of Lakshminath and Benudhar (Baroah, 1971,35, Bezbaroa,1998, Das,2004,24,27-32 and Rajkhowa,1969,83-84). The physical distance between Assam and Calcutta was multiplied by the lack of regular transport and communication system. Journey by waterways to ‘far away’ Calcutta took several days. Anandaram’s boat reached Calcutta on the twenty-fifth day in 1841. By the end of the nineteenth century, there was some improvement in the water traffic. When Benudhar himself was about to leave for Calcutta for college education, his entire family members broke into tears. His first sea voyage on a ship took eight days to reach Calcutta in 1889 (Rajkhowa,1969,83,84). In the year 1890, the entire journey from Assam to Calcutta took

two nights and three days on a ship. Padmanath, however, recalls it to be a 'long and tiring' one (Gohain Barooah,1987,21).

Rajabala Das was grateful to her eldest brother who took her to Calcutta for admitting to Bethune School. This school, founded in 1849, as mentioned earlier, was the first institution in Calcutta for female education. Calcutta was then the abandoned capital of British India, but the metropolis was still full of charm. She was only eight and was permitted to go by the parents only for the insistence of her brother. In any case parents would not allow a girl child to travel to a distant place without a male guardian. Rajabala narrated her first journey to Calcutta over ship and gave a bit of her homesick mind. Her schooling experience in Bethune was tough at the beginning because of her complete ignorance of the Bengali language. Her cousin Hemoprova who was studying there was the only person to have Assamese conversation. Rajabala took some time to become fluent in Bengali (Das,2004,21).

During his long stay in Calcutta for business purpose, Lakshminath developed good relation with the other Assamese families. He wrote about Haribilash Agarwala's affluence in business and the mansion in Calcutta. It was a matter of pride for the Assamese in Calcutta. Haribilash also mentioned that three of his sons, Bishnu, Chandra and Kan were carrying out their studies in the City School in the 1880s. Chandra Kumar and Lakshminath became close friends in no time and they discussed literature. Hemchandra Goswami later joined them forming a pure trinity. Lakshminath had earlier shared a single rented house with Bholanath Baruah and Gunabhiram Baroah. He acknowledged their wholesome influence on him. Haribilash and Bholanath Baruah went to Delhi to call on R.C. Benjamin in 1885. A few years after their camaraderie, the two went to a place called Jharsaguda to form an idea of rice trade (Agarwala,1967,36,41,44).

Lakshminath had access to most of the aristocratic families of Calcutta for his relationship with the Tagore family. Following his marriage, rumours spread around his home in Sibsagar. In his autobiography, Lakshminath revealed his intention of marrying a Bengali and making relationship with one of the best educated and cultured families of Calcutta, the Tagores. Ramakanta Barkakati was a translator in the Calcutta High Court. He and his family socialized with the Assamese elites living in Calcutta (Rajkhowa,1969,107 and Das,2004,33). Ramakanta was a friend of Haribilash Agarwala, who stayed for sometime in Barkakati's residence (Agarwala,1967,51). Rajabala fondly

recalled the wedding reception of her classmate Aruna, the daughter of Lakshminath Bezbaroa in the year 1920. Lakshminath invited all the Assamese students in the city.

Higher education in Calcutta opened up wide possibilities for the Assamese students. Though all of them could not give a good account of themselves as students, they succeeded in enriching the literary and cultural life of Assam.

3. iv Language as Cultural Determinant

It is a common fact that Assamese 'nationalism' as a part of Indian nationalism, is based on Assamese language. Whether one calls it 'sub-nationalism' or 'nationalism', Assam was no exception to the general Indian pattern. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines sub-nation as a sub-division of a nation often distinguished by community of culture and interests rather than by administrative dependency. The ideal of the Indian National Congress was linguistic states. The process of formation of linguistic states started during the freedom movement has not come to an end even now. Language divides one Indian from another more continuously than creed, caste or colour (Mukherjee,1981,74). There must be some psychological explanations for which one readily defends an Indian language of his/her affinity against another Indian language of another's affinity and yet readily concedes the superiority of a foreign, especially; a European language.

In colonial days, it was customary for the eldest son of the family to abstain from learning any foreign language, for example, English or Persian, since otherwise he was considered unfit for offering *pinda* during funeral rites of his ancestors. Parasuram, the grandfather of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, with this inhibition, got his sons educated in Sanskrit and debarred the elder one, Holiram from learning Persian. The younger son alias Anandaram's uncle, Jajnaram was the first one from Assam to learn the English language. Anandaram engaged himself, what his father had abstained from; he learnt too many 'foreign' languages; English, Sanskrit and Bengali. Mastery of Persian was a mark of extra educational attainment. Anandaram took to learning both Persian and Urdu. Hemchandra Baruwa, more famous as a social reformer in his late years, had to learn English without the knowledge of his family. He learnt English secretly as he could foresee its importance in the years to come. But very soon the restrictions were replaced by positive encouragement (Baroah,1971,42). Another witness of the nineteenth century,

Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua received some formal training in Sanskrit. But more than that, he acquired working knowledge of English, Persian and Hindi.

From 1836 to 1873, for a period of about forty years, Assamese was replaced by Bengali in the local schools and courts. How and why this decision was taken by the British rulers are altogether a different issue being still debated by social and literary historians. Different theories are put forward and discussed by scholars. There were reactions against the government policy. The American Baptist Mission did not antagonise the government, but published the *Orunodoi* considering Assamese as an independent language. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan criticised the government policy by submitting his Remarks to A. J. M. Mills in 1853. Apart from the lower primary schools, there were Middle English (M.E.) and Middle Vernacular (M.V.) schools as a transitory phase before high school. Padmanath Gohain Barooah observed that the syllabus of M.V. schools in Assam was similar to that of Bengal. Same books were in circulation in both the neighbour states (GohainBarooah,1987,8-9). A.H. Danforth (b1817), an ardent missionary pointed out the adverse effects of introducing Bengali in the schools of Assam. He wrote rather forcefully,

The boys are set to learning Bengalee, they spend a year or two in running over, parrot-like, unmeaning words and sentences, without the slightest idea of what they read...this feature of education policy... (is) destructive of the highest motive of education, and must necessarily cripple the advancement of the schools, as well as separate them from the sympathies of the people....It is like learning to swim without going near the water (Mills Report, 1984, 91).

In April, 1873, the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Campbell decided to re-introduce Assamese in schools in Assam on condition that a class having twelve or more students could study Bengali separately, if they wished (Barpujari, 1999,141). The linguistic tensions of later period were rooted in the British language policy. Lakshminath Bezbaroa was never convinced of the justification offered by the government that the Assamese was not an independent language, but a distorted form of Bengali. He apprehended that the government introduced Bengali in Assam under the influence of the Bengalis employed in lower bureaucracy. It is precisely known as the clerk-conspiracy theory (Saikia,2001,196-7). Across the province, several Bengali medium schools named as *Adarsha Banga Vidyalaya* were established for the local pupils. Naturally, the teachers were mostly Bengali. Lakshminath remembered them all. He said that long after Bengali

was replaced by Assamese, the negative influence of Bengali texts and grammar remained with the learners (Bezbaroa,1998,12,37-38). Many a time, Lakshminath spoke of *Bideshini Bangla Bhasa* that is foreign Bengali language. He depicted himself as a 'true' Assamese keeping distance from Bengali. He believed that the Assamese had its identity not inferior to the Bengali culture. Benudhar Rajkhowa, while writing about his student life, reminisced the teaching faculty of Dibrugarh High School, describing their individual contribution (Rajkhowa,1969,58). It was a team of ten mastering in the teaching of arts and science. Only two of them were appointed to teach Assamese. The teachers in the schools of Assam were coming from Bengal. Assamese taught by the Bengali teachers did not serve any purpose.

The childhood memories of this group of people about the plight of Assamese turned them all great devotees of the Assamese language. Besides other commitments of life, their life-long agenda was to contribute something to the enrichment of Assamese literature. Such efforts could make some change. In 1891-92, 97.2 percent scholars in Assam learnt the vernacular, 7.5 percent learnt English (*Progress of Education in India 1887-88to 1891-92*, 21). Strangely enough, in 1906-07 the number decreased to 62 percent for vernacular. In 1911-12, it was a rise to 93.6 percent for vernacular and 10.1 per cent for English (*Report on the Progress of Education in Eastern Bengal and Assam During the Years 1907-08 to 1911-12*, Vol-II, Appendix Table XVII,9). The statistics suggest that after some setback, there was again the demand for vernacular medium of learning. Corresponding to these figures, there was a slight decline of Bengali speaking population in Assam. Their percentage was reported as 48.1 in 1901 and 44.1 in 1921 (*Report on the Census of Assam 1921*. 120).

Rajabala Das noted that matrimonial relations between families from Kamrup and upper Assam were indeed very rare in those days (Das,2004,52). There was a very big difference between the speech of upper Assam and that of Kamrup. Upper Assam elites looked down upon the people of Lower Assam and called them *Dhekeri*.

In the wake of Indian renaissance, interest for Sanskrit, the classical language of India was growing slowly among an enlightened section. Anundoram Borooah devoted himself to an intensive study of Sanskrit. He learnt Sanskrit from his *pathsala* days. His father Gargaram, realizing the importance of Sanskrit, engaged a Sanskrit tutor for him. A keen student, Anundoam proved his knowledge of Sanskrit and allied Indological studies.

Suryya Kumar Bhuyan identified the generation of Anundoram as the fervent explorers of classical literature, inspired and influenced by the element of thoroughness in European scholarship. Sir William Jones, Colebrook, Friedrich Max Muller, Wilkins, Weber, Hamilton, Paul Dewsen were the prominent European figures who mastered the Sanskrit language and literature. A new category of Indian academics listed by Suryya Kumar included Indrajit Bhabani, Rajendralal Mitra (1822-91), Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (1837-1925), Rameshchandra Dutt and Anundoram Borooah (Bhuyan,1966,8-9). R. G. Bhandarkar was an orientalist and social reformer. In his view, promotion of Sanskrit was the basic condition for academic renaissance in India. In the preface to the *First Book of Sanskrit* in 1864, he said,

The Study of Sanskrit has but recently risen in the estimation of the educated natives of this Presidency and of our educational authorities....The newly-awakened and more enlightened zeal in favour of Sanskrit cannot last, or produce extensive results, unless books are produced to facilitate the general study of the language (Dandekar,1999,138-139).

Bhandarkar urged for critical appreciation of Sanskrit texts. He guided his fellow-men both by precept and example. He set forth a model through his edition of Bhavabhuti's *Malatimadhava*. It was perhaps with the same sort of scholarship that Anundoram Borooah too, selected the compositions of Bhavabhuti. It is no surprise that only a handful of Indians studied Sanskrit seriously and their fame spread far and wide. Anundoram embodied the spirit of the Orientalists. He was moved by ideas and inspiration quite new to his motherland. He might have, therefore, chosen the land of Bengal and the language of Sanskrit other than his own one in order to keep his pursuits in track. He authored *Bhavabhuti's Mahaviracharitam* (1877), *Bhavabhuti and His Place in Sanskrit literature* (1878), *Higher Sanskrit Grammar* (1879) and *On the Ancient Geography of India* (1880). His biographer nowhere mentioned of Indian renaissance and Indology in the assessment of Anundoram. But it cannot be the fact that Anundoram stayed cut off from the current developments. Most likely Cultural Revolution of the time was yet to assume the character of Renaissance.

A section of the Assamese society was interested to pick up English which would help in getting a government job. Knowledge of English, they thought, would help them in commercial activities. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan in his effort to grasp English language, developed the regular habit of memorizing *Johnson's Dictionary* (1755)

(Baroah,1971,51). Benudhar Rajkhowa learnt to speak English since the age of ten. With his ability to converse with the British, he tried to save his family from some kind of distress (Rajkhowa,1969,25). He believed in the utility of English, providing the vital link among the people across regions.

In Calcutta, the classmates of Benudhar Rajkhowa often tried to convince him that Bengali is superior to Assamese. But he never agreed. He argued that the root of both the languages being Sanskrit, they were obviously similar, like affinities that many other Indian languages have. At the same time Benudhar had good regards for Bengali. He was grateful to this language and acknowledged his debt to Bengali literature in the making of his poetic self. From his mother, he developed an interest in classical texts, extant only in Bengali. Since his young age, the reading habit enabled him to compose verses in Bengali. He did not have ill-feeling for Bengali. At the same time, his motto to serve the interest of the Assamese, drew him against anything obstructing its progress. Benudhar was pondering whether or not the language of the Sylhetee people resembled more to Assamese or Bengali. His study came up as a book, *Notes on the Sylhetee Dialect* with his concluding remark that this unique style was influenced by Assamese language. In his presidential speech at the annual session of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* held at Dhubri in 1926, he asserted that Assamese was older than Bengali; rather Bengali was an offshoot of Assamese (Rajkhowa,1969,56-57,44-45,173). He had no reason for that statement but knew that his audience were much delighted to hear this.

The Assamese-Bengali linguistic conflict was a long-drawn social issue. No doubt arguments in favour of Assamese against Bengali as medium of instruction in schools and regular business of court were made at administrative level but the debate was extended to a handful of Assamese and Bengali elites. It was soon discovered that eminent scholars of Bengal expressed very poor opinion about the originality and richness of Assamese language. At the same time a section of enlightened Assamese acknowledged the beauty and richness of Assamese literature (Gohain Baroah,1987,9 and Rajkhowa,1969,45). Linguistic sensibility being the essence of India's language communities, the Assamese-Bengali conflict was nothing very particular. Oriya was sought to be suppressed by Bengali, Hindi and Telugu; Telugu was sought to be swallowed by Tamil; and Konkani was dominated by Marathi and Kannada. Indian independence movement recognised this

reality. Therefore, the Indian National Congress contemplated the linguistic states. Language was an important component of identity and nationality formation.

3. v Engagement with History

Intellectuals can provide a vision for future only when they understand their present and the past. In this process, history more particularly biography as history, plays an important role. They go through the biographies of famous personalities that are entertaining, inspirational and resourceful. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar compiled the *Jivan Charit* (1849), a volume on a few great western lives namely Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, William Jones, Thomas Jenkins in the model of 'Exemplary Biography'. He explicated the purpose of writing life-stories in a straight forward way that showed how some people overcame immense obstacles to achieve greatness. His motto was to disseminate new waves of thought on scientific methods and rational philosophy among the Indian students (Baruah, 1974, 105-106).

Engagement with history and historical writing was a common practice among the Assamese intellectuals. Padmanath Gohain Barooah was a historian with a romantic view of the past. He authored several popular works on history, namely *Joymoti* (1901), *Gadadhar* (1907), *Lachit Barphukan* (1914), *Banraja* (1932). He had to his credit *Asamar Buranji* (History of Assam) (1899) and *Buranji Bodh* (Sense of History) (1918). In addition to this, he compiled books on British history and geography. Padmanath was also a biographer of repute. He selected lives of some Assamese heroes for a single volume entitled, *Jivani Samgraha*. It was the only standard collection of biographies in Assam for many decades. It was the sincere effort of Padmanath to instill a sense of pride among the Assamese by projecting ideals and examples of the great historic figures. The awareness of being one of the Ahoms who shared a common historical ancestry was central to his idea of history. But he was neither chauvinistic nor parochial. His writings could arouse patriotism among his readers. He believed that only those who know themselves are capable of self-rule. Mahatma Gandhi held self-realization both as a political and moral act. Gandhi also believed that performance of duties and observance of morality were necessary to know and rule one's self (Suhrod,2009,5).

Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua's depiction of events in a way combined memory with history. He was aware of the methods of history. Not having enough access to historical

data, he relied on collective memory. He was respectful to historical artifacts and monuments. He visited the sites of the relics of Ahom rulers and was proud of the Ahom history. He stationed at Rangpur, the centre of Ahom royalty to collect source material for a study. In his autobiographical note, he gave a description of the Ahom royal palace, *talatal ghar*. That was an architectural achievement of the medieval age. But, Harakanta was surprised to see people taking away the bricks out of that building. They used to take the bricks to the nearby pond and washed them to extract gold and valuable stones. They hardly bothered the destruction of the antiquities. Harakanta abhorred the way people misbehaved. With so much of interest in history, Harakanta edited the *Asam Buranji* originally written by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 53-54).

Gunabhiram Baroah wrote a history of Assam, *Asam Buranji* in 1884 to instil a feeling of pride among the people. One of the elder brothers of Anundoram Borooah, Janakiram was planning to write another history of Assam in English. But a sudden fever took his life in 1860 and it never happened. Anundoram was a native of North Guwahati, a place of historical importance. He was a curious student of history. So just after completion of the Entrance examination in 1864, he did not waste time and tried to locate all possible sources to reconstruct the past of North Guwahati. He interviewed some local people from the aristocratic families to know about their ancestors (Bhuyan, 1966, 17, 19). Local history that Anundoram was attempting to write was naturally not a comprehensive one. His choice of the patricians leaving aside the large section of common people emerged from his epistemological ideas. It was the general trend of historiography in the late nineteenth century.

Benudhar Rajkhowa expressed his keenness for archaeological excavations of historical sites. He was hopeful that interesting facts could have been gathered from excavations around the significant places of Ahom history (Rajkhowa, 1969, 23). Cognisant of the oral sources of history, Benudhar suggested for collecting information from interviewing the older people. He was unwilling to forget the past and wanted others to remember and also to get remembered. Nalinibala Devi had a retrospective view of life in her autobiography. Her expressions glorified the past. She was convinced that miseries in every sphere eclipsed the happiness in the post-independent Assam (Devi, 1976, 5). This may be a universal presumption. Eric Hobsbawm considered it as a general experience. He remarked,

Each generation copies and reproduces its predecessor so far as is possible, and considers itself as falling short of it, so far as it fails in this endeavour (Hobsbawm,1997,10).

Western educated Indians belonging to various linguistic and regional groups infused ideas of regional consciousness into their communities. They focused on documentation of the preceding events and protection of the ancient monuments. No doubt, reconstruction of the history of the region and rediscovery of its past achievements reflected their renascent spirit. They believed that it would provide the native people a sense of history which was a pre-condition for revival of the nation. They also began to think in terms of a larger Indian consciousness. Most of the Assamese, Bengali or, Gujarati intellectuals of the nineteenth century taking up leadership in moulding the group consciousness of their respective regions were also the spokesmen of nascent Indian nationalism (Misra,1987,146-147). The general attitude of the concerned lives in this study indicates that they tried to have emotional balance in developing a discussion on the past. They realized that a correct understanding of the political, social and religious history of a country was essential for the next generation Assamese. It would help maintaining cultural continuity among the youths.

3. vi Nurturing the Nature

Every child is sensitive to the environment to which he/she belongs. As one grows up, personal feelings and interests also shape up his/her attitude to the surrounding things. Environmental history maintains that nature is not merely the backdrop of human affairs, but an integral part of it. Human activities depend on the natural environment (McNeill,2010, Introduction). Geographical condition is determinant of a country's life and culture. There is always an environmental impact on human behaviour. It shapes the spirit of the people and effects their polity, economy and culture. Their everyday life as well as the world-view is rooted in this integrated system. It is also about the popular thoughts on nature. Every society has its own way of rendering love and care to the environment and understanding of the man-environment relations in its own terms.

Relation between man and nature has undergone transformation through ages of history. Since the nineteenth century, the British had a desire to tap India's vast natural resources for agricultural and other economic purposes. To that end in view, they explored the plains and hills, improved transportation and communication, arranged irrigation and

canal systems, and discovered the potential fields. Among the colonised people, a few enlightened subjects had a feeling of pride in the resources of the native country. Assam was particularly known for vast natural riches. Therefore, the lives concerned for this discussion were found to have taken account of the natural world. During entire period of the British rule, most of the people in Assam lived in village. The Assamese middle-class intelligentsia were close to the countryside. Since their childhood, they knew well the benign gifts of the Nature and also the disasters that it brings occasionally. They were in close touch with the hills and rivers, flora and fauna of their land. The image of Assam as the eternal beauty is noticed in their depiction.

Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua, while making his tour of the upper Assam was determined to come to visit the land of his forefathers at Nazira. On the frontyard of his ancestral dwelling, he witnessed an old tree belonging to his forefathers. The neighbouring people attached some significance to it as whenever any one of the branches broke off, it was an indication of a death in the family (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,53). They let Harakanta know that the size of the broken branch used to be proportional to the importance of the dead one. There was no scientific correlation between these two events. It was indeed a strange phenomenon that the identity of the deceased was thought to have determined the extent of change in plant life. It was a family myth at the best. Death is a natural event; therefore, the myth might be that the animate world in the vicinity also mourned for a family member's demise. This belief suggested that man used to live in close intimacy with the nature. The first journey by boat on the Brahmaputra was an unforgettable experience for Haribilash Agarwala. He enjoyed the serene beauty of the river and the river banks to his heart's content as if he discovered the natural beauty of Assam for the first time in a boat journey. In absence of other modes of transport, people used waterways. Agarwala was always thrilled whenever he was on the Brahmaputra. In an autobiographical essay, *Mor Matrimukh Darshan* (Visit to my Mother), Lakshminath Bezbaroa described his itinerary to motherland and visits in different places in Assam. He was much amused by this trip. He had particular weakness for Guwahati. For him, Guwahati offered two of his best friends, Chandra Kumar Agarwala and Jagannath Baruah. Lakshminath felt at home with their company. He also wrote,

I am fond of Guwahati. A few of the reasons include natural beauty, historical memory, and a proud ancestry of knowledge (Bezbaroa,1998,100). (Translation by the present author)

In Lakshminath's opinion, Guwahati had not deteriorated compared to the general condition of the state. It was his lament for the degradation of the chastity of a town which was a model for cleanliness. He was conscious of his physical distance from the motherland, at the same time, as a true patriot, he identified his attachment with the natural beauty of Assam. He spoke out on every issue concerning the Assamese life, culture and security. His observations were thoughtful and critical. His observation on Sibsagar was a case in point. He was always passionate about his childhood days in Sibsagar and he carried with him the memory of its liveliness, prosperity and enlightened environment of the aristocratic families. He had a close affinity with the landscape as he was growing up. But when Lakshminath got a chance to revisit Sibsagar after an interval of a few decades, he was surprised to notice the symptoms of decay and desolation of the town. He had a cherished memory of the past beauty and was stunned to notice the pathetic signs of decay all around the town (Bezbaroa,1998,118).

Benudhar Rajkhowa reminisced his stay in the town of Tezpur for a couple of days in 1899. He recorded in his diary its picturesque beauty. He in fact considered Tezpur as the neatest town in Assam. He was also impressed by the serenity of the river island Majuli and was optimistic about its potential of becoming a 'heaven' on earth. He made a general appeal for some attention to this beautification project. He was much fascinated by the natural splendour of the place called Parasuram Kunda and observed that none can realise by mere imagination the allure of the place as it stood there. By observing the landscape, Benudhar enjoyed tranquillity of mind. He particularly talked about his wife's love of nature. Whenever she had any stress of mind, Benudhar saw her in the garden (Rajkhowa,1969,117,169,183). Nature was thus a suitable place for recovery and sublime thoughts for the sensitive people. Everyone was fascinated about the Great Book of Nature.

Human civilisation is concerned about protection and preservation of the environment. Regarding the environmental concern, there was fundamental difference in the outlook of two schools of philosophy. Tapan Raychaudhuri made the distinction of the attitude of the western and the eastern world. For the Europeans, knowledge was a road to power over nature and men; Indians on the other hand, expected from knowledge the achievement of salvation with uncertain results (Raychaudhuri,2005,5). Environmental conservation is embedded in the cultural and religious tradition of Assam. According to Hinduism, the

Supreme Being is present in everything around. Since the divine force sustains all living creatures and organic things on this earth, to please God, people feel that they must live in harmony with his creation including earth, rivers, forests, sun and air (Bora,2014,6). The Assamese Hindus, like any other Hindu society, used to follow birth and death rites, puberty rituals, marriage and sacred thread ceremonies in close association with the Nature. Their religious faith is associated with the *tulsi* plant that grew in their yard. While depicting the day-to-day activities of student life, Lakshminath mentioned the Assamese tradition of revering the *tulsi*, especially in the month of *Kartika (Kati)*. Some particular plants and animals have always been associated with emotional and customary values. There was a sense of nourishment and concern for conservation.

In order to honour a traditional physician of their family, Harakanta once made arrangement for him an elephant ride around the town. It was a special case as elephant rides were enjoyed only by the aristocratic class. It symbolized that an elephant used to entail both power and respect in the Assamese society. In the severe quake of 1888, Harakanta's beloved elephant named, Monkoli fell down at the front yard at the same spot where it was used to be tied. The moment Harakanta was informed of it, he made utmost effort for its recovery. The elephant, however, could not recover and died a day after. Harakanta now instructed his men to bury the dead in a large ground and paid all the expenses (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,274).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa was a kind hearted person. He explained the circumstances behind his use of a gun. It was actually not for a prey but for the mere cause of frightening a suspected thief among his servants. He avoided hunting for quite some years. His experience of hunting in his youth made him repentant for the whole life. He abhorred slaughtering of animals. Lakshminath mentioned that it had been since his childhood that he could not tolerate torture on living bodies. He looked at the fishes brought from the market, selected the living ones, and used to let them free in the nearby pond. He had special weakness for the eyes of a deer. He considered butchery as a cruel practice and could not bear its sight (Bezbaroa,1998,69-71,75). His kindness extended from the members of his family to the domestic help and even to the domestic animals. His biographer Jatindranath Goswami mentioned that his house at Howrah and Sambalpur had accommodation for a variety of inmates. The Howrah residence was almost a mini zoo with horse, cow, mynah, peacock and poultry (Goswami,1968,78). He had love and

compassion for all of them. When his dear got some injury in its leg, he got a cage specially made for its care and observation. Once his horse got some injury on its ride in Calcutta. The horse was given a few days rest and he managed with a hired cart.

As a luxury, Padmanath Gohain Barooah had a pet horse and travelled in his own cart. He named his favorite parrot as Bharat. In spite of all his busy schedules, Padmanath used to enjoy the company of his pets (Chetia,1971,43-44). He argued that man should be trained to nurture the animal life from a young age. Therefore, in a textbook on moral education, Padmanath included a chapter on morality towards animals. The text went like this,

There is a wide range of animals, some small in size- birds, butterflies, snails, insects, ants and frogs ; you see them every day. They roam at their free will and, never harm others. But a few impious children hurt them without any reason. They are so much irrational that they kill them (Goswami, 1971,150). (Translation by the present author).

Benudhar Rajkhowa remembered from his childhood a herd of elephants tied to big trees, each one screaming and trying to free itself from bondage. The young boy found the whole atmosphere a dreadful one. The pathetic condition of the elephants later on made him realize the worth of freedom. Benudhar felt that man can learn from the plant and the animal world. He reminisced an elephant's unbound affection for its young ones. Benudhar had love and empathy for the entire living world. He was so much sensitive that he could not bear cruelty even to the smallest creature. He recorded an incident of childhood when a dead tiger was given a royal farewell. The tiger was given the last honour in a procession with a musical band and it was taken on a sheet over the heads of a few villagers. Benudhar was surprised by the behaviour of those hunters who took pride in killing their prey. He recorded his agony for human brutality over the innocent beasts. He noted that his own son used to hunt down the wild birds in the sky in a mindless way. Benudhar was disappointed. He was doubtful about the righteousness of such activities. In his words, 'I still find it baffling whether God has really given man the dictate either to trap or kill the innocent lives or not' (Translation by the present author) (Rajkhowa,1969,8-9,14-15,184).

Haribilash Agarwala explained the circumstances behind his father's involvement in the elephant hunting. Herds of wild elephants came down from the hills and destroyed crops in the plains. The British government had the only hope in Navarangaram Agarwala's help as an experienced person. They granted him a license to control the menace.

Navarangaram caught an average of fifty elephants annually. Most of them were sold outside Assam and a few were given on hire to the tea planters (Agarwala,1998,14). The elder brother of Rajabala Das, Rajanikanta Barua was also engaged in elephant trade. It involved intense activity in the jungle of Assam. Rajabala was sensitive to the physical stress of her brother as well as for the wildlife (Das,2004,27). Nalinibala Devi was gifted a number of pet birds in her childhood. Madhab Chandra Bardaloi especially brought varied kinds of birds from Calcutta just for his dearest granddaughter. He built a mini zoo to accommodate these birds. Nalinibala was very much amused with her pets. Their colours, sounds, feeding habit, drew attention of Nalinibala (Devi,1976,19-20). This way the old and wise fostered in the young ones the habit of love and caring towards the nature. The children were made familiar with the animate world and in the process, they learnt to treat their pet as one among the family. It contributed to the emotional development of the young members in the family.

Personal experiences of these few select lives revealed their perceptions on environment. Their love of nature was spontaneous. This feeling was clear in spite of the differences in intensity and style of their expression. These eminent figures had to tour normally on carts and boats through Assam's countryside full of nature's bounty and beauty. They consistently maintained caring and compassionate attitude towards animal and plant life. The Western notions of morality added to the values ingrained in their culture. Its emphasis was to care for the entire living world. Their environmentalism was an extended form of humanism. It developed since their childhood. The rest came from their learning. This sensibility is reflected in their literary career.

3. vii Notions of Morality

As a general rule, the *Caritas* as mentioned earlier (Chapter II) put more emphasis on the moral and spiritual concern of the characters than their worldly concern and material happiness. The *gurus* appeared as perfect human beings with rare moral and spiritual qualities. The authors of modern life writing have comparatively a different approach to life. Family, career and society exert considerable influence on life. Personal friendship becomes an important aspect of community life. There are several narrations of rewarding friendship possible with great attributes of faith and honesty in the lives of Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Padmanath Gohain Barooah and Benudhar Rajkhowa.

The decline of the Ahom rule was marked by political and social chaos, loss of virtue, mutual distrust and jealousies. During the reign of Purandar Singha, corruption was a common practice. Corruption by the crown prince Kameswar Singha, Purandar's wives and his *Sheristadars*, was reported by Harakanta *Sadar Amin*. He further stated that Kameswar was in charge of revenue collection and he harassed the collectors. Harakanta blamed Maniram Dutta Barbhandar Barua (1806-58), Lathou Khargharia Phukan and Kashinath Tamuli Phukan for ruining the country and the king for receiving bribes. These were serious charges. Harakanta had once lent a huge amount, of rupees three hundred to one needy person just on trust without a written record. There was, however, a mention of theft incident within Harakanta's household by a Brahmin-cum-traditional physician. It was an instance of moral degradation (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 14-18, 90, 226, 47-48).

Harakanta *Sadar Amin* was a witness to the last phase of the Ahoms. During the reign of Purandar Singha, young prince, Kameswar, pressurised the offices in upper Assam to collect excess tax. The king himself as well as his relatives were dishonest in making appointment of officers of the state. It was obvious that one who bribed the royal family would be a strong contender for a position. Harakanta describes his own experience of harassment by Purandar Singha for money. As a retired person he resisted the pressure of the king. But his brother Gopikanta was unable to resist the illegal demands of the king and shifted to Guwahati. Harakanta lamented that the Assamese people were lazy and they loathe to work. These incorrigible habits have led to their loss of wealth and honour. Harakanta believed that money corrupts people and that moneyed people were of dubious morality. In the early British period itself, David Scott convened a meeting to eradicate corruption at all levels of administration. Mohan Ram Paniphukan refused to swear against any involvement because it was not possible for him to promise such abstention. This was an instance of the greed for extra money, a common habit of the salaried staff (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 17-18, 20).

Haribilash Agarwala made a mention of the tiny jail in Dibrugarh in connection with the regular provisions supplied to the inmates by the Agarwala family on some conditions with the British. This fact pointed to the existence of crimes, operational court cases and also the working out of its subsequent verdicts for the population in and around Dibrugarh. Haribilash did not hesitate to disclose some of his bad habits in his autobiography. He particularly repented for the loss that he brought upon himself in

gambling. In 1898, he took a loan of rupees four thousand and two hundred in Calcutta to recover some business failure. But he ruined the entire amount just in gambling with one Bengali fellow Harishchandra Ray (Agarwala,1967,16,49). It sounds weird when this extraordinary entrepreneur could not resist himself against such a vice even in his middle age. There might be two reasons; he was tempted to earn more money in a short period of time, some of the emerging moneyed Indians fell prey to the gambling circle common to a big city like Calcutta.

Anundoram Borooah had an atypical way of dealing with the criminals. He insulted the guilty people, scolded them over their misconducts, but never ruined their lives in punishment. He did not expel the convicts from their jobs; he did not want that a whole family or the dependents should suffer for the fault of a single person. He wanted repentance and reformation of the offenders, not more than that (Bhuyan,1966,49). The kindness of this officer was very much admired by the subjects under his control. It proved an effective measure in preventing public disorder.

Benudhar Rajkhowa reported that during his school days in Dibrugarh High School, students at the Sibsagar centre adopted unfair means in the entrance examination (Rajkhowa,1969,55). The moment the Head Master came to know, he shifted examination centre from Sibsagar to Dibrugarh. Delinquency of some students was reported to the government. On the question of moral training of the students, the Director of Education commented that the most common instance of misconduct was attempts to gain unfair advantage at public and school examinations (*Report on Progress of Education in India 1897-98—1901-02*,427).

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan developed friendship with some families in Calcutta and he had enough liberty to indulge himself in bad habits but he did not. He was shocked to hear from a friend that there is nothing immoral in drinking or visiting brothels. He could protect himself against some of the common vices of the city life, which his friends never cared (Baroah,1971, 49,101). An elder brother of Benudhar Rajkhowa was reported to have spoilt himself in the city (Rajkhowa,1969,54). This youth, admitted into Shivapur College wasted all his time keeping bad company with all bad habits. He misused the government scholarship and returned home as a failure.

Nalinibala Devi talked about a colony of prostitutes in North Guwahati which she used to pass by very often. She described them as the disreputed section of the society. In her teens, Nalinibala had a sense of repentance to see these women with impious habits who were regarded as outcasts. Nalinibala wrote that they were advised not to go that way by the elderly people. Even a glance at them was considered a sin. Nalinibala was so much disturbed that she told her grandmother who advised her not to get troubled and pray to God to keep away from all vices (Devi,1976,41). It points to the notion of morality for the women who even feared to look at that community of women considered to be sinners. But they rarely asked themselves why those women were living a sinful life and whether they could come out of that situation.

The strict regulations and severe punishments of the British government prevented the Indians from resorting to any crime. People were not morally bankrupt during the pre-independence period compared to the post-independent period. In this regard, Nalinibala Devi opined that nobody could escape the hawk-eyed British officials. There were no loopholes in the British administrative machinery. Colonial subjects were submissive. But at the same time, this helped the British government in maintaining the law and order situation. Nalinibala was much disturbed to find the Assamese youths developing masochistic spirits in themselves (Devi,1976,42-45).

Rajabala Das recalled an incident of 6 December, 1941 when she and her husband were alleged to have been responsible for some hard action on some students in Guwahati. She was surprised to see that nobody was interested in finding the truth. Public opinion was strong against them. This incident was a social setback for the couple. Rajabala tried to console herself that there was a conspiracy against them and it was destiny that made them suffer (Das,2004,73-74).

Every generation is worried about its future. Lakshminath Bezbaroa was worried to see that a large section of the people had become indifferent to the future direction of the society. He observed, 'By being indifferent to our own future we destroy our legacy' (Translation by the present author). He was particularly apprehensive of the moral degradation of the younger generation (Bezbaroa,1998,8). Benudhar Rajkhowa was disheartened to observe lack of passion among the Assamese youth. Without will, he thought, they will not exert themselves for a respectful living. He disliked their waywardness in religious matters. He believed that the best interest of the society is

served by its adherence to religion. It was his firm conviction that people ignoring religion actually ignore the rule of virtue. The gradual disinterestedness, according to him was expediting the march of the *Kaliyuga*. Hard work, concern for the entire humanity and healthy outlook towards life, are some virtues that a society must not ignore (Rajkhowa,1969,82,113).

Almost all the stalwarts of that age had poor opinion about their youths. But it is difficult to accept their views uncritically. The Assamese youths have justified their role in various fields of activities. There was no reason to form a total negative perception of the younger generation. Efforts for national reconstruction and cultural self-assertion of the late nineteenth century could be taken as an answer to those negative perception (Raychaudhuri,2005,18). In the era of colonialism the country required youths with commitment and courage. In Assam, whatever may be the apprehension, the youths in every generation played their part well. Generally, the Assamese were a peace loving and law-abiding community. Therefore, while giving support to the national movement they might have exceeded their limit. The elder generations who usually took a conformist view of things could not appreciate the over-enthusiastic activities of the youths.

The lives taken up for the present study belonged to that time when education was a privilege for a few. The ideals of their lives were formulated by their education. Their attainment in education was closely associated with their concern for language, history, morality, and environment. The efforts and attitudes of the time indicated the inclination of the Assamese society for modernity.

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