

Chapter IV

Assamese Society under Colonial Dispensation

4. i Social Dimensions as Reflected in Life Writings

Social life is founded on family ties, community tradition, caste system, position of women, devotional practices and much more. These aspects are not of sedentary nature and, therefore, society is in a perennial state of change. The Indian society during nineteenth and twentieth centuries faced challenges under colonial dispensation. It is difficult to make concept of that society without the help of life-histories of those who were advocates of new social ideas. These life writings have several illustrations depicting the social environment and family relationships. Social change is neither a sudden entity nor a purposeless event. In fact, it is linked with the continuous chain of events.

Colonial rule of more than a century brought about major changes in the Assamese society. The account of Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua referred to different social issues at the dawn of the British rule. The Ahom rulers had divided the whole male adult population into guilds or *khels* according to their occupations. During the years of its decay, the *khel* system gave rise to disunion and confusion in the society. With this background, Harakanta admired his elder brother Shivakanta for some of his social attributes like that of maintaining cordial relations with some of the public figures of high esteem (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,19,24-25). Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897-1999) emphasised the importance of good social dealings and remarked,

I have tried to see social life and family life in the light of highest ideals of life... to live a happy 'life' in our social, and family relations is the first stage of living well (Chaudhuri,1970,15).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa favoured the idea of enriching cultural resources of the land from the other cultural zones of India through absorption and adoption. He was very disturbed by the evils of sectarianism. In his opinion, it was a killer of India's vitality and strength. He observed that the weakness of the Assamese lay primarily on their lack of patriotic sentiment and solidarity. It obstructed any noble endeavour. Some of his observations

signalled his commitment to the ideals of liberal humanism for ushering a change in social life (Bezbaroa,1998,57-58).

As in the other parts of India, social transition in the nineteenth century Assam was mostly an outcome of the contact with the British as well as with the other people of the subcontinent. At that time the *bhadralok* class in Bengal represented a wider canvas within the society. Many of them pretended to have represented the nation. Their 'hegemonic culture' was built upon 'a system of exclusions that distanced itself from less powerful socio-economic groups by setting up rigid caste, class and gender specific ideologies'(Banerjee,2004,4). The situation was, however, not same in Assam. Caste consideration was never so rigid in Assam. Audrey Cantlie explained that many tasks, which in other parts of India are assigned to particular castes, are carried out in Assam by individual households (Cantlie,1984,7). Benudhar Rajkhowa's ancestors belonged to the *barobhuyan* family. So he held a high position in the caste hierarchy. Close to his paternal residence at Khowang, there was a *Kaivarta* village. The *Kaivartas* were an underprivileged community uncharitably fixed up in the caste system. But Benudhar remembered that children from both the social segments visited each other despite caste differences. There was no discriminatory feeling (Rajkhowa,1969,5,10-11). In a Census Report, it is commented,

Perhaps the higher level of respectability on which the lower castes generally stand in Assam may be explained partly by the circumstances of a country where land is abundant, where nobody is restricted to any degrading occupation as the only available means of earning his bread (*Report on the Census of Assam 1881*, 63).

While writing about some of his schoolmates from the Muslim community, Benudhar Rajkhowa fondly talked about his intimacy with them and could not recall any religious rancour. He observed that the Hindu-Muslim distrust and incidents of ill-feeling were experiences of recent years; they appeared in this land only as an import from some other places (Rajkhowa,1969,70). He later on witnessed the unfortunate communal politics leading to the partition of the country in 1947. After all those years of violence, he still cherished the memory of the peaceful days of communal harmony in Assam. Sheldon Pollock observed that friendship and social relations across racial and national boundaries vitalized the writers, stimulated their literary activities and intellectual growth, increased

their degree of acculturation and contributed directly to their readerships and reputations (Pollock,2004,216).

Since the early twentieth century, the Assamese society came under extra-territorial demographic pressure. There was a continuous flow of people from lower Bengal and elsewhere. Marwari and Punjabi capitalists, Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims and Nepali Hindu peasantry migrated to Assam under various circumstances. The tea gardens of Assam were deployed with a large population from Bihar, Odissa, Central Provinces and Madras Presidency whose presence swelled up the working class population. The whole situation as documented in the Census Report was:

Immigrants from the Central Provinces, Madras and Central India are imported by the tea industry, and that those from Rajputana represent the Marwari merchants who practically have the monopoly of the trade of the province outside the district of Sylhet. The United Provinces people are mostly unassisted immigrants in the Brahmaputra valley consisting of carters and hucksters, cattle-dealers, earth-workers, fishermen and boatmen, cobblers and hide-dealers, police constables, and domestic servants: many of them have settled down, but most of them as the heads of temporary and periodic or semi-permanent immigrants. The Brahmaputra valley contains very large numbers of Nepalis, who are mostly engaged in breeding buffaloes and making *ghee* (*Census of India, Assam 1911*. 28).

Benudhar Rajkhowa was certain of the possibility that the people of high borne castes have migrated to Assam from far beyond its frontiers. He was told by his father that their ancestors came from Kanauj. Benudhar through his frequent public dealings noticed some tendency of assimilation of the migrated population in Assam. He also urged the native people to adopt friendly attitude and tolerance to the Bengali, Hindustani and any other community coming to settle here. For him, implication of the term ‘greater’ in either case of Assam and Bengal meant nothing special; he was not appealed by the terms with loaded values. He preferred greatness in terms of improvement in cultural, economic, industrial and political aspects rather than acquiring only a vast territory (Rajkhowa,1969,5). His ideas could be taken as a negative response to the claim of ‘greater Assam’ by some Assamese elites including the historian S. K. Bhuyan. Bhuyan idealised *Bor Asam*.

Haribilash Agarwala’s autobiography gave details of his father Navarangaram. He arrived in Assam around 1830 with none of his company from Rajasthan and his stable earnings

in some business made a few of his relatives come to Assam to join him in trading. There was a particular Marwari locality at Dibrugarh before 1851. They were seventeen households who might have come there after the shifting of the district headquarters from North Lakhimpur to Dibrugarh in 1842 (Agarwala,1967,15-16). Gunabhiram Baroah stated that harmonious relation existed between the Assamese and the Marwaris in Guwahati. During Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's childhood days, some of the Marwaris visited his residence, specially during the Holi festival. Gunabhiram also made a mention of a few prominent Marwari traders of the town like Bodh Singh, Himmat Singh, Maya Singh, Shobha Chand and Ratan Chand regarding their assistance to Anandaram for his stay in Calcutta (Baroah,1971,32,36).

A feeling of distrust and animosity towards the Bengalis started growing right from the nineteenth century. Benudhar Rajkhowa recorded that his father was intolerant to any Bengali. This could be a result of continuous and vile propaganda about the Bengali *babus* as cunning by nature. Benudhar could recollect the Assamese-Bengali antipathy since his school days during 1880s. He had no direct experience but heard from his father many stories on replacement of Assamese language by Bengali in Assam which made him suspicious about them (Rajkhowa,1969, 111,32-33). The term *babu* had a bad image in contemporary Assam. Colonial power viewed the educated Bengalis as cunning and distrustful; mainly due to the growth of nationalism in Bengal. The Assamese frame of mind regarded the *babus* as outsiders, with their least concern for the native people and disrespect towards the Assamese tradition. They are considered to be the terrible product of the nineteenth century (Bhuyan,1966,132). Lakshminath Bezbaroa was bitter at times against these Bengali clerks. His idea on this issue gets reflected in his autobiography as well as some other writings. He considered the Bengali clerks as part and parcel of the British administration who instigated their masters to introduce Bengali in Assam (Bezbaroa,1988,1854). There must have bitter fight for jobs between the Bengalis and the Assamese. The Assamese intelligentsia used to feel a thinly-veiled threat of cultural and occupational domination of the Bengali Hindus over all aspects of local life.

Composition of Assamese society gradually assumed a plural character. Assam's population swelled giving land and livelihood to the diverse groups of people across her physical frontier. There was simultaneous slow process of cultural assimilation. It was visible in Assamese society sometime later.

4. ii Family Life

Since the nineteenth century, the Indian society was passing through a period of self-introspection and reform. It is difficult to make an idea of that reality without knowing personal life-histories of those who were part of the process. Discussions on family, its changing pattern and roles find engaging attention among social scientists. Family history entertains the hope of interpreting society with its concerns over kinship ties, marriage arrangements, conjugal relations, parental attitude, gender specific roles, duties and expectations.

A family is defined as,

The medium through which the society or social class stamps its specific structure on the child and hence on the adult (Fromm,1973,158).

In the context of Assam, it was defined,

A number of persons living and eating together in one mess, with their resident dependents, such as mother, widowed sisters, younger brothers, etc., and their servants who reside in the house (*Report on the Census of Assam 1921.22*).

Almost all the lives in this study were keen on family history and childhood memories. None of the authors ignored roots. They all upheld the idea that early life, family atmosphere and training shape one's personality. These life writings reflect interpersonal relations in the Assamese families. While dealing with the interpersonal relations in the Assamese families, it may be useful to look at the model sorted out by A.M. Shah. He specified the descriptions of interpersonal relations in the Indian families in three types:

(1) description of the basic roles and relationships in the family, such as husband-wife, father-son, mother-son, father-daughter, mother-daughter, brother-sister, elder brother-younger brother, mother-in-law-daughter-in-law, and so on; (2) description of more general categories (i.e., each subsuming several basic roles and relationships), such as the Hindu widow, the Hindu woman, the aged, the youth, and so on; and (3) description of the general nature of interpersonal relations in the family, particularly of the personality traits and social values fostered in it (Shah,1973,165-166).

Benudhar Rajkhowa dedicated his autobiography to his family. He clearly mentioned his understanding of the term family as relatives, companions and anyone compassionate to him. Thus his conception of a family was much broader than a single family unit. He

further rationalized his idea by convincing himself that his involvement in expanding spheres of activities extended his family. Personal life was closely connected with family life. Benudhar took pride in revealing family relations to the reading public. At the end of his autobiography, he appended a separate segment with introductory notes on his spouse and all of his thirteen children. He acknowledged his association with a few prominent figures enriching his experience. He included twenty-eight biographical sketches as his acquaintances.

Pierre Bourdieu wrote,

Each family transmits to its children, indirectly, rather than directly, a certain cultural capital and a certain ethos (Bourdieu,1974,32).

But, as we know, inherent social inequality is the general rule and, therefore, 'cultural capital' of one family cannot match with that of other. We define it as 'family background'. An autobiography or biography writing is a process of looking at oneself or the subject with a family background and family values.

Though there is no statistical data, average Assamese family was a joint one. The identity of a joint family centred on the single kitchen. Lakshminath Bezbaroa described the dining arrangement in which his father played the presiding role in the family conversations. There was a special space arrangement in their seating room. The entire family took meals along with his father Dinanath Bezbaroa sitting on the floor of a large room which accommodated around twenty-five. He sat on a large wooden stool, his big plate was placed on another. The utensils for the others were placed on the floor. Young Lakshminath observed that in the serious discussions, his father's decisions were final. Traditionally Indians took their meal sitting on the floor. The men and children dined first. Dinanath by means of his status and authority was the Bhishma-like father figure (Bezbaroa,1998,6-7).

Gargaram Borooah, the father of Anundoram Borooah, had two wives. He fathered four children from the side of the elder one and then three children from the younger one (Bhuyan,1966,13-14). Dinanath Bezbaroa also married twice. Lakshminath had much of affection for his elder mother. She had been a comforting companion all through his childhood (Bezbaroa,1998,45-46). In depicting his ancestors, Benudhar Rajkhowa recorded that the old Assamese gentry were mostly polygamous. In fact, the one with

more number of wives was held in high esteem. But there was perfect understanding among them and, one did not treat the other as adversaries (Rajkhowa,1969,3).

Padmanath Gohain Barooah reminisced his early childhood in a large family. Three of his maternal uncles lived along with them. He wrote that they were a happy family with around thirty members under a single roof (Gohain Barooah,1987,2). This was the functioning example of a joint family. Even when the trend towards individualism was coming in, it maintained to be a joint family. In a joint family more than one married sons live with the parents sharing a common habitat, kitchen and labour. This might include a number of married brothers living together with parents or without them, in case they were dead and sharing a common social life and economy (Venkatarayappa,1973,186). The joint family had greater generation depth, generally of three or more.

One peculiarity of the Indian joint family was that the grandchildren were closer to their grandparents than with parents. It was obvious that young Lakshminath's intimacy with some family members influenced his upbringing. Rabinath Bezbaroa who was a distant relation residing in their family, was dear to the children; they called him *koka*. Lakshminath fondly remembered him as their supervisor and caretaker. Rabi *koka* gave them company, took them out and also told them stories from the classics (Bezbaroa,1998,5). These stories were the inspiration behind the making of storyteller Lakshminath. Three of his story books namely, *Kokadeuta aru Natilora*, *Sadhukothar Kuki* and *Burhi Aair Sadhu* owed much to his Rabi *koka*'s stock. Sometimes Lakshminath even tried to imitate his lifestyle.

Nalinibala Devi made vivid description of her childhood with her grandparents. *Ray Bahadur* Madhab Chandra Bardaloi (1847-1907) was very affectionate to his granddaughter. Nalinibala wrote that she had always been her grandfather's companion. She accompanied him in morning walk and studied her lessons sitting beside him in his chamber. She mentioned his philanthropic nature and humbly recalled that her grandfather did not leave any of her wishes unfulfilled. She was only ten at his death in 1907, but she wept for long years remembering him. Her grandmother was also caring. In order to avoid chapped skin in the winter, she prepared a paste of orange peels with milk cream for the young girls. For hair care, they had a special kind of wash by the grandmother. Nalinibala and her brother were in the habit of slumbering with their grandmother. She was very religious and proficient in uttering holy *mantras*. Nalinibala

could, therefore, learn a few hymns in her early childhood itself (Devi,1976,5,6,21,17-19). The grandmother practised traditional knowledge and imparted it to the younger ones. Thus oral traditions or moral training passed through generations. As such, the joint-family system was a potent factor in the continuance of cultural tradition.

In the large extended families, there was a lot of caring and sharing among members who functioned as stakeholders in various capacities. The children learnt lessons in this process of community living. All shouldered their joint responsibilities. This system was hailed as one of the major factors in the continuance of cultural traditions in India. Scholars like A.L. Basham (1914-86) believed,

In India as long as there is the traditional ideal which expects sons and grandsons to provide for their elders with necessities of life and to care for them in their old age, the joint family system will continue (Basham, 1982,15).

But this system was not all perfect. K. M. Kapadia observed that in the process of ‘subordination and superordination’ designed to regulate the lives of different members in the joint household, the individual lost his/her identity (Kapadia,1964,275). Jawaharlal Nehru was critical of the joint family. In his opinion, it would not last long. It hindered personality development because the head of the family enjoying absolute power provided limited opportunity for development of the other family members. Women had a low status in the joint family. Sons were considered as assets and daughters as liabilities; daughters-in-law were expected to merge their individuality with their husbands. Another disadvantage in this type of family was that it sheltered lazy people making them more inactive (Nehru,1972,175). According to Nirad C Chaudhuri, the two major evils in the system were ‘the destruction of individuality and the spirit of self-help and the erosion of good feeling among the members of a large family’ (Chaudhuri, 1970, 97).

Positive and negative representation of childhood was common and important component of life writing. On the one hand, it surfaced as a happy period brimming with joy and freedom (Gohain Barooah,1987,5-7 and Devi,1976,1,). Adolescence for most of the girls were marked by the imposition of restrictions, suppression of freedom and even denial of education to them (Das,2004,17-19). Their remembrance of childhood was peppered by episodes of kindness shown to them by their parents and other relatives. A child was taught to continue the family lineage and tradition. While growing up, he/she was trained to be worthy of the heritage.

In the Assamese society, the father was at the peak of a family with his role as its head. He controlled most of the household things. Higher the social status of a person, the more was his power within the family. Lakshminath Bezbaroa's father was the undisputed head of the family. Dinanath forbade his sons in using a gun and, therefore, Lakshminath never touched a gun even after long years in a place like Calcutta, long away from his paternal home in Sibsagar (Bezbaroa,1998,69). It was due to his heartfelt loyalty to his father. Padmanath Gohain Barooah also mentioned his father's unassailable personality. He noted that not to speak of violating the father's commands, he did not even dare to reason (Gohain Barooah, 1987,132). The dominant social values emphasized the supreme importance of filial piety.

Rajabala Das recalled that as children, all of them were respectful to their father and they were shy about anything to talk with him. It was through the mother that Rajabala and girls of her generation conveyed their wishes to the father. For crucial decisions, Rajabala was confident of her mother's role. When her marriage proposals came up, she was shocked. She wanted to do her M.A. in Benaras. Accordingly she pleaded with her mother. It was a very shocking request for the mother as well and she straightaway rejected it. More than that, she expressed their family's anguish over Rajabala's recent course of actions (Das,2004,28,46).

A feeling of fear and reverence for the father was commonplace experience in the Assamese family. The high esteem in which the father was held was based on a moral conscience that established relationship between parents and children. The mother was usually kind and pitiful to her children. She was their refuge and she bestowed good faith upon them. There was generally more intercommunication among women than among men. The mother discussed anything and everything with her daughters but the father did not do so with their sons. A mother was also honoured and revered. Benudhar Rajkhowa observed that his parents were opposite by their nature; his father was tough and mother was soft hearted. Yet Benudhar would call it a perfect match for the reason that if both of them were either very strict or very lenient there would be lack of balance. That situation may lead to malice and unhappiness (Rajkhowa,1969,33-34). Parents took it happily to see their children doing well by themselves with whatever knowledge, training, discipline and family values they would instill in them. Family tradition was given top priority. The duties of the family head were to guard the family, counsel in times of distress and restrict

any member from going astray disobeying family norms. Parents had their duty to restrain children from vice and to insist on the path of virtue. They contracted suitable marriage proposed for their children and handed over their inheritance in due time. The older generation was the custodian of ethical and cultural values. It was held that their authority was a must to maintain moral purity in the society.

Family was, however, the immediate site of difference that could also be termed as generation conflict. There was disagreement between rationalism and parental power. It was a gap between the two generations evident in 'matters related to ideas, taste, behaviour, hopes and aspirations, concept of sin and so on and so forth' (Chowdhury,1994,24). The elite trend of going for modernisation implied their acceptance of the elements of western civilization rejecting the traditional value system. Some of the contemporary autobiographies outlined a silent and passive manifestation of conflict arising out of such attitude in Assamese families.

Anundoram Borooah honoured parental authority still in his college days in Calcutta. Some of his classmates were planning to move to London to make them prepared for the I.C.S. examination. The youths having family restrictions for going abroad secretly left India without completing their college education. In spite of that temptation, Anundoram could not dare to defy his family. He resolved to complete the B.A. course. It was in the year 1868. Next year after his graduation, when Anundoram was selected for the Gilchrist scholarship to go for education in England, there was definitely some resistance from his family. But he was determined to follow his dreams and availed the prestigious offer (Bhuyan,1966,23-24). This was a case when a loyal son did not prefer going abroad without informing his parents. Yet, Anundoram had to disobey his parents in pursuance of his higher ideals of life.

In the family level, all children and parents were not equally sensitive to each other's necessity and choice. In many cases, liberal ideas of the sons did not find favour with their conservative fathers. The unexpected happened to the Bezbaroas. Lakshminath wrote that observing the tendencies of his sons, Dinanath announced, 'I would not say anything against your English education. Be whatever you like to, yet I wish to see one of my sons learn our ancient ayurvedic practice. I won't allow him to learn English' (Translation by the present author) (Bezbaroa,1998,6). Lakshminath recorded that his father was depressed to see none of them willing to respond to his wishes. It was an

indication of wearing down his father's authority. In case of Rajabala Das, her conscience was rooted in her personal judgement least apprehensive of the prevailing norms. Her conflict arose with her parents when she determined to go Calcutta for studies. Memoirs since the nineteenth century have documented existence of the emotional effect of parental loyalty as well as the ideological stance of the younger generation making the situation complicated.

Most of the people responded to the problems of others in the family. Those with knowledge and affluence could advise their relatives in crisis. On the other hand, those in poor financial condition expected monetary support from their well-off relatives. Haribilash Agarwala narrated that his father Navarangaram took responsibility of the families of his relatives who died in Assam. The widowed wives of his brothers came to him requesting for adoption of a single son from the respective families and build a house for each of them; Navarangaram fulfilled their every wish (Agarwala,1967,10-11). The residences of the new professional men in the urban areas were the sites of shelter for their distant relations and fellow villagers. They came for education, employment, treatment and leisure. In the joint family system, people came to help their kindred to overcome personal crisis. There was rarely any instance of misunderstanding, quarrel and division within families. Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua referred to one of his own family. Harakanta's father had two wives. The two sons of the elder wife were splitting up from their three brothers from the younger mother (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,9). This was an indication of deterioration of family values at the time of its split. Changing economic conditions perhaps generated this kind of feelings.

Society is primarily a system of relationship. Social changes in the first instance appear as changes in social relationships. Each member of a society has to act in accordance with the shared feeling. The marriage, the living together of husband and wife, forms a family which is the primary unit of a society. In traditional Hindu marriage, the authoritarian joint-family and caste afforded no scope for the recognition of any personal factor, individual aspirations in the relations between husband and wife (Kapadia,1964,169). However, a husband ought to take care of his wife. A wife was expected to fulfill her obligations not only towards her husband but also to all his relatives skillfully discharging her duties.

In the Assamese cultural set up, marriage meant companionship and sharing of responsibilities along with privileges. Benudhar Rajkhowa in his youth, felt the growing need of becoming efficient to cope up with the emotional as well as economic requirement of married life. He was courteous to his wife. He used to entrust her the duty of managing the home. There was mutual faith and respect. Since the nineteenth century, new notions of domesticity and conjugality came to prevail at least among the emerging Indian middle-class. The Assamese gentlemen expected to get their women learned in the new abilities of conjugality. During 1900-01, Benudhar Rajkhowa was writing a book entitled, *Lakhimi Tirota* (Ideal Women) in the pattern of amusing dialogue between a couple (Rajkhowa,1969,228). He got it published in 1909 and dedicated to his wife. Probably he could discover in her the woman of his choice. She was described as a helpmate for her husband, a faithful wife and a mother raising her children with love and care. She taught them to fear God, to be healthy and polite. In relationships, women were no longer dominated by men. She was no more a household drudge; she was her husband's companion with considerable authority in home. She came to be regarded as an equal; worthy of respect.

Benudhar Rajkhowa's reminiscences of his wife Ratnakumari was in his own words, 'written intentionally not so elaborately' (Translation by the present author). Yet it was in a separate section covering eight pages. Long years of companionship with Ratnakumari had much to his gratification. He denied one very common perception that the charm of husband-wife relationship was a waning thing depending on the ageing of the wife. Benudhar argued that with ageing, the inner beauty of a wife ought to transcend her physical appearance. He admitted that he was experiencing more love and respect for Ratnakumari since ever in their conjugal life (Rajkhowa,1969,185,190,192).

After the sudden death of Leelabati, Padmanath Gohain Barooah was thoroughly upset. He became reluctant to enjoy worldly happiness. Heavily upset, he preferred isolation and wrote a long poem named 'Leela' in memory of his loving wife (Gohain Barooah,1987,121-122). It was a mixture of thought on worldly and spiritual feelings.

Eventful public life was possible for Rajabala Das because of the continuous family support. In her earlier life, her elder brother's motivation helped her to move forward. After marriage she received same cooperation from her husband. She got married with Jyotish Chandra Das, a physician by training and a Congressman by political choice. He

was always a caring husband and did everything he could to give her comfort. He supported Rajabala's social activism and her role as institution builder. He had no problem in her political involvements like taking the membership of the Congress party. He was a wise counsel to remove her dilemmas. She found in him the moral strength to organize a new women forum in the state after some disagreement with the *Asam Mahila Samiti* on the proposal of tying up with the all India organization. He practically insisted Rajabala to join the M.A. course and throughout stood by her till taking her examination in Calcutta. He looked after their kids while their mother was working. He knew that Rajabala would inspire others and that it was helping the society. While going through the entire narrative, one would feel that Rajabala was always up to her husband's expectation. Nalinibala Devi also cherished her brief conjugal life. It indicates that conjugal happiness and domestic peace were desired things of aspiration for the literate couples.

Conceptions regarding the attributes of different stages of the life cycle are related to the family life. Every culture has strong expectation from each of the 'ages of man' (Bakscheider,1999,102). Likewise the Assamese society had innate pattern for different phases and relations. The present study considers some inputs on behaviour of the family members in different stages. The lives depicted left imprint of cheerful childhood, youthful vigour, authoritative fatherhood, merciful motherhood, comforting friendship and grandmotherly wisdom. Life writings displayed varying moods with differing people. It furnishes evidence of common sentiments and kinship associated stereotypes. Society was respectful to the old, compassionate to the sick, sympathetic to the weak and protective to the young. With the adoption of new lifestyle and means of livelihood, there was change coming in the family relations.

4.iii Attitude Towards the Underprivileged

Some of the well-to-do families were sympathetic to the subjugated section of the society. At his young age, Anundoram Borooah used to take part in the *bhaonas* in North

Guwahati. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan noticed some sort of exceptionality in these participations from the 'respectable' families. A *bhaona* being the traditional Vaishnavite theatre was popular in society and effective form of mass communication. Still certain sections had some reservations. It was class consciousness of the elite families even within the institution of *namghar*. They disallowed their children coming into contact with the rest of the society. Some kind of slavery prevailed throughout the reign of the Ahom kings which continued with the sanction of the nobility even after the decline of the Ahom royal power. For quite some years, the aristocratic society with the medieval legacy used to have a good number of personal attendants. Then encounter with the modern values of equality and freedom compelled it to modify the system. Anundoram Borooah grew to be compassionate to the downtrodden people. He helped the poor and needy. During his service career, he listened carefully the problems of the *ryots*, unemployed and peasants. In different places of his posting, he responded positively to those approaching him asking help. He bore educational expenses of a few brilliant Bengali students in England. It was also a legend that Anundoram Borooah would always make a man stand with a sack of rice to donate the mendicants at his gate. It was his habit to regularly give a sum of ten rupees, a considerable amount for the time, among the street beggars of the town (Bhuyan,1966,16,50).

Madhab Chandra Bardaloi, the grandfather of Nalinibala Devi was a *Munsiff*, a very covetable post in those days and a man of modern taste. Naturally, he earned a good sum. Further, he had a habit of keeping aside some portion from his salary for the needy ones (Devi, 1976, 13-17). Nalinibala emulated this kind of traditional middle-class values.

When the grandfather of Benudhar Rajkhowa joined the Ahom nobility as the *burhagohain*, a few attendants were attached to him as part of his emoluments (Rajkhowa,1969,2). Harakanta *Sadar Amin*, while narrating the separation of his brothers, mentioned the portion of paternal properties received by each of them. Among other assets, there was division of servants who were attached thenceforth to their separate masters (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,9-10). Dinanath Bezbaroa's family always kept a few domestic helps residing with them for their day to day house work. Lakshminath remembered that the domestic hands formed integral part of their joint family. The Bezbaroa family offered them kindness. Lakshminath commented that it was the bond of affection between the household employees and their masters rather than a mechanical

relationship based on wages. Once, their servant Ahini's son Dhouram cried out to have the pram of Lakshminath's younger brother Lakshman. When Dinanath came to know about this, he got a special baby carriage built for Dhouram and loved to see the cheerful child (Bezbaroa,1998,4). This was perhaps an instance through which Dinanath tried to make his young sons understand that there must not be any discrimination in sharing love, care and happiness with the less privileged section of the society. The young ones in the family were taught to be respectful to the elder helpmates.

Nalinibala Devi reminisced about her grand ancestral residence in Guwahati. Her grandfather supported almost a total of eighty families. The domestic helps, destitute widows, poor students were among those who stayed there like members of the family. She noted that they had sixteen *bandi beti* or servants in the big household. The *bandi betis* were a kind of unfree/bonded labour and they, for generations together, depended on the gentry for their subsistence in return for loyalty. Nalinibala's grandmother got up at three in the dawn and a *beti*, named Gelibai was at her constant service. The well-bred women were customarily attended by the service of domestic slaves within the household. Nalinibala got married at a tender age, as was the custom of resourceful families; she was accompanied by a couple of domestic helpers to her in-law's place at Sibsagar. Existence of this system denotes to class divisions in the society. There was however, warm relation among family members and their domestic helps. They were never treated as slaves. (Devi,1976,1,4,17,49-50). This practice was also a part of the Bengali *bhadralok* culture. The Assamese middle-class in the early twentieth century was at times imitating their Bengal counterparts. From the early nineteenth century, hiring of servants in the urban Bengali families helped crystallisation of the *bhadralok* culture. The significance of servants and maids in the everyday life was documented by Swapna M. Banerjee. She argues,

The attempt to integrate servants within the family and treat them as their own offspring did not eradicate the caste-class distinction and the socio-cultural hierarchy that separated the two groups (Banerjee,2004,117).

During the Ahom rule there was a practice by which some war prisoners and criminals were assigned to the members of the nobility for their personal service. Age old practice of keeping servants was first discontinued in the initial stage of British rule (Rajkhowa,1969,3). Abolition of the slave trade and slavery by legislation was a

remarkable humanitarian initiative. Despite their advocacy of the principle of equality, the British faced growing unease about this social regulation among the native people. In 1843, a regulation ordering the liberation of domestic slaves was passed. Harakanta stated how he had to liberate all the bonded servants of his family during the period of Captain E. A. Rowlatt as Deputy Commissioner in 1853-54. They had been serving his family for long time. Harakanta expressed his anxiety at their release; he felt as if the society was in a mess affecting family pride and prestige. He observed a chaos like condition in the entire Kamrup and Assam. All the *Mahantas* and Brahmins of Kamrup assembled at Aswakranta and prayed for the continuation of the unfree labours. News came that thousands of applications were addressed to Francis Jenkins, then Commissioner requesting for his discretion (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 40-41). The legislations against the practice was, however, never set loose.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa recorded that the British government's effort in liberating the domestic slaves from the Assamese households was mostly successful. In a few cases, the devoted bondmen themselves hesitated to go away leaving their kind masters. Lakshminath called it ties of attachment. In his ancestral household a couple lived as one among them with all of their six daughters. More than that, the Bezbaroa family took the responsibility of arranging marriage for each one of them (Bezbaroa, 1998, 54). Haribilash Agarwala referred at several places to the family's closeness and dependence on the domestic servants. He used to carry domestic helps with others of his family when he was away from home. Haribilash remembered that when such an attendant was about to leave his master, there was chaotic situation in running the household (Agarwala, 1967, 48). There was widespread panic among the erstwhile privileged people. They were afraid that in absence of personal attendants and caretakers everything would go chaos.

The British did not want to modify the medieval social structure in India for their own interest. In spite of this, a few of the enlightened Assamese at times braved emotional opposition within the family itself in order to usher in some changes that they felt as essential in the true spirit of liberal humanism.

4.iv Anglo-Assamese Interactions

While narrating the personal life, the authors went behind the subject and portrayed the existing social relations. The Charter of 1833 legalised the permanent settlement of the

Europeans in India by giving them land rights. Before his visit to Europe, Rammohun Roy along with Dwarkanath Tagore had spoken in favour of the English residents in India in the Calcutta town hall on 15 December, 1829. In this memorandum, Rammohun delineated both the merits and demerits of this proposal. One major advantage mentioned there was that the Indians through their affinity with the European society would be relieved from dogmas (Baruah, 1974, 45-46). At a later time when a few educated and employed began to develop some kind of professional friendship with the British, they were still proud of their roots and committed to the ideals of Indian society. They had reservations on some of the traditional systems in community life. They were not annoyed but willing for modest reforms. Most of the colonial centres had distinct 'white towns' with dwellings of high ranking, white skinned section and 'black towns' with quarters of the coloured Indian population. Such segregation was not there in Assam. Usually colonial agents did not indulge in socialization with the Indians. But a few of them maintained cordial relation with the local residents. Some British officers were curious and sympathetic towards the Assamese customs.

By the end of the nineteenth century, there began mutual aid and sharing of values between the colonizers and the colonized at certain level. There was visible change in the social outlook of the Indians. It was due to their increasing contact either with European merchants or with the missionaries. The term 'colonial milieu' is used to indicate areas of time and place where indigenous cultural mind of the Indian subcontinent came into active contact with the British culture (Jones,2003,3). In the first phase of Westernization, their professional life in government service was attended to the Western world while their domestic and social life continued to be largely traditional (Srinivas,2005,59). There was then contact between the Indians and the British across the lines of occupation, income and class.

A colonial bureaucrat, Charles Scott was very kind to the Assamese people. He was said to have spoken that since his father occupied the land of Assam, so he felt it necessary to take care of the people of this province. The British etiquette could win the hearts of the indigenous people. E.T. Dalton, the collector of Kamrup personally called on one local officer called Krishnaram Barua during his illness and cured him with proper medicine. Dalton's gesture was widely appreciated. Harakanta met A.J. Moffatt Mills during the latter's visit to Assam in 1853-54. Mills was surprised to hear from Harakanta that there

was no sitting arrangement in the office of *Dewani* Collectors. Mills immediately offered him a seat. Harakanta was pleased by the British officer's sense of justice. On the Christmas day in 1889, Harakanta greeted the acting Judge-Commissioner, Lieut. R. Campbell at his bungalow. He was accompanied by three of his younger brothers, Ratnakanta, Dharmakanta and Devakanta to the Commissioner's residence. The visitors were warmly received by the *Saheb* (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 62, 59, 73, 280).

Francis Jenkins, then Commissioner, was popular among the native people in Assam. He too loved this place so much so that after his retirement in 1861, he decided to stay back in Guwahati. He lived here till death in 1867. Haribilash Agarwala always felt indebted to Jenkins for his inspiration; Jenkins gave a letter of introduction to the Principal of Hindu school and he maintained a friendly disposition to the student community of the town (Agarwala, 1967, 21). Anundoram Boroah and his school friends were fond of the varieties of fruits available in the residential campus of Jenkins. Some of the needy students even received money, books and notebooks from this kindhearted officer (Bhuyan, 1966, 17). The egalitarian outlook promoted by a few of the civil servants like Jenkins ameliorated the lot of the native people. He was the inspiration behind the making of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Baroah. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan made an estimate of Jenkins. He wrote,

His zeal for the enlightenment and education of the Assamese was best demonstrated by the manner in which he helped all deserving youths who appeared him for monetary help to defray the expenses of their education (Bhuyan, 2013, 45).

In a similar way, Anundoram Boroah had the occasion to meet some high rank British officers after his securing of the third position in the B.A. final examination. The Principal of Presidency College, James Sutcliff was the longest serving Principal of this college, from 1852-75 and he could see in Anundoram the best of talents. He introduced this young fellow to the head of the education department, Henry Woodrow. Woodrow was impressed by Anundoram and took him to the Viceroy of India, Lord Mayo (1822-72). Anundoram was now much enthused. These initiatives were significant. Besides advocating the importance of education among the Indian citizens, Lord Mayo as a principle, visualized cordial relations of the British government with the native people in the Indian provinces. Another British civilian, Ellec Macmillan found the Indian name 'Anundoram' appealing. He wrote a long poem in English, entitled *Anundoram Boroah*

and included it in his compiled volume of poetry. It is not known whether Anundoram ever had read the poem, written just after his becoming an I.C.S., otherwise he would have been delighted (Bhuyan,1966,23,33).

The Chief Commissioner of Assam, Bamfield Fuller was considerate to the aspirations of the Assamese intelligentsia. He went through the discussions in the Assamese periodical, *Asam Banti*, never opposed it openly; rather he developed his own perspective. Padmanath Gohain Barooah noted that the Assamese nation is gratified by the unconditional support of Fuller in getting the long due recognition for the Assamese language. The Calcutta University accepted it as a medium; Assamese was accepted from the matriculation to the master's level (Gohain Barooah, 1987,118). It was obvious that British Indian personal relationships emerged through mutual dependence and respect. Benudhar Rajkhowa recorded that his father took his family to the bungalow of a British officer, Wood who had gifted his visitors a tent house (Rajkhowa,1969,17). Sympathetic and friendly attitude of British officers endeared them to the native community. It is rightly observed,

As a space of contact and acculturation, the zone of friendship emerged around the second quarter of the eighteenth century, when English and Indian men formed their personal relationship (Pollock,2004,215).

An important dimension of the Assamese middle-class, particularly at its formative stage was that they wanted to see the development of the people within the shadow of colonial rule and, therefore, men like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Baroah did not protest against the colonial rule.

4.v Contours of Social Life

One discerning character common in the lives of the present study was their strong social commitment. Apart from the politically focused organisations, a few other social associations provided the public forums. They were mostly non-political concerns. In writing various experiences of the social gatherings, these people dealt with complexities of social situations. Their design of development was socio-economic betterment of the Assamese people through some mobilisation and organisations. The earliest organization in this respect was the Assam Baptist Association (1851). In 1884, the *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha* was founded at the initiative of Jagannath Baruah who was greatly influenced by

the activities of the British-India Association and Indian Association. At Tezpur, Haribilash Agarwala was one of the founders of the *Tezpur Ryot Sabha* (1884). In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a kind of assembly, *ryot sabhas* were organized in some district and subdivisional towns of Assam to convey people's grievances to the government. Though pro-British on the whole, the Assamese intelligentsia was not completely alienated from the poor countrymen.

Dinanath Bezbaroa, besides being an *amlah* was a social organizer. He made vigorous efforts to construct a public *namghar* for holding public meetings and religious functions. It stood adjacent to their ancestral home in Sibsagar. But conflicts bred in that *namghar* and he worked hard to prevent it from dissolution (Bezbaroa, 1998, 57). After retirement, Dinanath's social engagements in Sibsagar symbolized the role of the elders of the community as the watchdogs of the socio-cultural values. After retirement, Benudhar Rajkhowa also concentrated on social activities. People responded to his call and he worked with renewed vigour. Educated Indians in almost all parts of India were the champions of public service. The Bengali *bhadraloks* and their counterparts elsewhere founded centres of learning and enlightened discussion. It was a feature of colonial civic life (Bayly, 2005, 149).

Padmanath Gohain Barooah viewed literature and society, one as to be complimentary to the other. He was motivated by the literary giants of Sibsagar. In some places around Sibsagar, he campaigned against opium addiction. While pursuing his teaching career in Kohima, he mobilised the local people there and founded *Kohima Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* and *Kohima Sahitya Sabha* to promote Assamese beyond the plains of the Brahmaputra. He also organised the leading public of Tezpur and tried to make them realise that each of them was to serve Assamese literature. He narrated an unfortunate incident in Tezpur when there arose some dissent among the members, divided among themselves as natives of Tezpur and those migrating to Tezpur. The 'grand old man' of the town, Haribilash Agarwala despised narrow-mindedness within such kind of an organisation. Eventually a new association, the Tezpur Assamese Club was formed (GohainBarooah, 1987, 46, 61, 250-252).

Benudhar Rajkhowa, another activist of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* in Calcutta, returned home with the idea of holding discussions on development of the region and founded in Mangaldoi the *Mangaldoi Majlis* in October, 1906. The *Majlis*

organised weekly meetings making it an enlightened forum. A total of fifty-two general meetings held in the first year itself. Its permanent president Benudhar recorded that the *Majlis* discussed forty different subjects of public interest with equally big number of speakers. They were to discuss ways and means to speak English, alleviate poverty, improve public health, extend women education, make people aware of harmful effects of opium addiction, make people learn entrepreneurship and business partnership. He once invited Padmanath Gohain Barooah who delivered an inspiring speech not in Bengali, but in Assamese (Rajkhowa,1969,138-140,135). Some people realised for the first time that the Assamese could be a competent language for debate and discourse. Lakshminath, Padmanath and Benudhar ventured to shoulder the responsibility of promoting enduring social values. In a way they responded to the call of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. The role of certain organisations was instrumental in the promotion of both literature as well as nationalist ideology among the Assamese people.

The two women writers taken for the present study were towering figures in the twentieth century women activism in Assam. Their autobiographies narrated their involvements in the social movements of the time. Rajabala Das could not remember as yet a single instance of woman taking any social or economic responsibility. Until her student days in Calcutta, she was reluctant in attending the meetings of the Assamese Students' Club. She explained the reason behind aloofness of her generation. They knew well that their parents had reservations for attending public meetings by the daughters. Rajabala also admitted her lack of courage for such kind of public affair. In the later part of her life, the same Rajabala became actively involved in organizing the women of the state. She recorded history of the *Asam Mahila Samiti* in her autobiography (Das,2004,19,39,56-57). It began in 1926 with Durgaporva Bora as its president, Rajabala Das as secretary, Swarna Lata Saikia as assistant secretary, Chandraprova Barua as treasurer and twenty-one other members. As the secretary, Rajabala undertook varied constructive programmes. Training on musical instruments, Hindi language, spinning and weaving were popular activities. It also arranged accommodation for a few girl students from upper Assam studying in Cotton College. One major involvement of any of the women's organization in the pre-independence era had been women's emancipation by preventing child marriage and propagating education for all. The Sarda Act fixed the marriageable age for the girls at not below fourteen. In around 1932, the *Asam Mahila Samiti* practically worked to implement the Sarda Act. In the Seventh Annual Conference of the

Asam Mahila Samiti held at Guwahati in April 1933, both Nalinibala Devi and Rajabala Das took active part in the deliberations (Sharma,1993,163). The Assamese women could lead an organisation and did their utmost to get equal opportunities for women.

Nalinibala Devi mentioned the role of this leading women's association in implementing the Sarda Bill in Assam. She associated herself with the *Asam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti* right from beginning. The goal was to organise political, social and cultural activities for women. Her compatriots were Swarnalata Saikia, Shashiprobha Hazarika, Chandraprobha Barua and Ghanakanti Phukononi. They made their mark in social life. Nalinibala was elected president of the *Samiti* in 1947. She emphasized in her presidential address the role of women in eliminating social vices like corruption, addiction to wine and opium. She believed that all these evil practices polluted the national character. She was not particularly interested in gender politics. She was not a feminist in the sense that one understands it today. The idea of feminism was apparently foreign to her. She was a humanist out and out. She was sympathetic to women's cause in all its manifestations. Though her literary works do not reflect feminist activism, the intersection of the two had been characteristic feature of Canadian and Quebec feminism of that time (Dowson,1999,74).

There arose some disagreements between Rajabala and the other members of the *Asam Mahila Samiti* on the matter of its coming together with same kind of a national organization, the All-India Women's Conference. This conference, in its first session in Poona in 1927, concentrated on the educational programme for women, but after 1929, it widened up its horizon to address other social problems. Rajabala walked out of the *Samiti* and formed yet another organization as the regional committee of the All-India Women's Conference. Through its effort, a primary girls' school was set up in a village and then a girls' hostel was constructed in Guwahati for the college students (Das,2004,59,60). Rajabala recalled her propaganda against untouchability in different places not without any bitter experience. While propagating Gandhi's social ideals, she was appealing to women in a rural family to take Congress membership; Rajabala narrowly escaped with her life when one of them was about to attack her. While following the Gandhian way of the National Movement, both men and women were trying to attain political, social and economic freedom for their countrymen. That was a time of 'making' history by women as they stepped out from their house for the first time.

The road was not rosy. A woman was yet considered incapable of leading but only to follow.

There were expressions like ‘the one to whom I belong’ and ‘they are my people’ (Translation by the present author). Their frequent use in the lives implied that they had always a tendency to identify themselves with their community. All the social gatherings had the single motive of directing how the Assamese people could rise above their present state.

4. vi Perception of Womanhood

Perception of the Assamese womanhood is primarily formed out of women’s day-to-day experiences as well as their life-long aspirations for identity formation. By perception it is meant that particular action of mind that refers to its sensation to external objects as its cause. Distinct from conception, imagination, judgement and inference, perception denotes the faculty that takes note of the sensible and quasi-sensible objects (Chakravarty,1989, Preface). Social history is in no way complete without taking the achievements and experiences of the women in any region at a given moment of time. To quote Gerda Lerner (1920-2013), an American pioneer in the field of women’s history,

History must include an account of the female experience over time (Lerner 1979, 52).

Personal narratives of women writers give a different perception of the social organisation and social perspective. It is observed by scholars like Sheetal Y. Thakore that ‘a woman’s autobiography remained a definition of her subjectivity as against the backdrop of something more powerful’ (Thakore,2010,170). ‘Women’s autobiographies’, says Aparna Basu, ‘are becoming increasingly important as sources of self-perception as well as providing insights into gender relations, social structure, political and social change and so on’ (Basu 2009, 263). The focus shifts from political history to social, cultural and economic history in India is reflected in the maturing of women’s history. Women are differently related to and affected by the currents of politics and society (Krishnamurty,1989,Introduction). Therefore, some questions naturally turn to be more significant in the narratives of women. This particular section of the study deals with the experience of Assamese women as well as the views of their male counterparts on subjects which were particularly concerned with women. Rajabala Das and Nalinibala

Devi were women of extraordinary quality pursuing literary, social and political careers. Their autobiographies, *Tinikuri Dah Basarar Smriti* and *Eri Aha Dinbor* reflected their individual struggles to create distinct social identity. Autobiography of a woman is, generally, a reflection of her culturally defined behaviour. It involves questions like how women made out themselves in society, how they were treated by others, what ability and role they did have in decision making in the family or in the public.

Womanhood is a theme located at the junction of two fields: intellectual history and women's history. Women's history provided a gendered dimension to the history of any given period. For the purpose of this study, by gender is meant what Joan Scott had defined it. According to him, it is 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes' and as 'a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott,1988,28-50). Since gender itself is a socially constructed definition of women and men, hence it has social and symbolic meanings. Intellectual history on the other hand, usually explores the factors behind the change of thinking process and progression of outlook on women. Historical enquiry into the status of women reveals that women occupied a subordinate position and enjoyed limited freedom in the patriarchal society. Traditionally,

A woman has always been conceived in terms of her relation to a man, that is as a wife or a mother. This partial and to an extent distorted perspective is challenged by women through some of the texts, whereby they seem to have taken active role not only in the public sphere of politics and employment, but also in the task of theorizing and conceptualizing human life...(Gatens,1991,8).

Historians have tried to analyse the position of women on certain parameters. In Assam, there were four major social evils relating to women; female illiteracy, seclusion, early marriage and widowhood. The lives concerned in this study touched upon issues of their contemporary social scenario. They articulated their pertinent views.

The *Mou* (the bee) was a monthly journal known for its progressive views on burning topics. One of its articles published that there had been a movement all around asserting women's problems. It felt the need to define the jobs of women for fear that some Assamese youths might claim both education and emancipation for the women. It forbade brainwork for women as they were unsuitable for it; it would hamper their primary obligations of bringing up children and providing companionship to men (Sarma, 1980, 7,6-8). Assamese students of Calcutta led by Lakshminath Bezbaroa reacted against

views of this journal. Popular opinion was also against the stand of the *Mou*. The editor closed their shop (Bezbaroa,1998,78). On an average, a woman was involved in her responsibilities, duties and preoccupations concerning her domestic household. Hence, she forgot her 'self'. Her individual existence inevitably merged with the surroundings.

The narration of Rajabala Das in *Tinikuri Dah Basarar Smriti* reflected her ideas on womanhood. Rajabala was the third among the four daughters of Ramakanta Barua, a leading personality of Dibrugarh town. He served as an Assistant Superintendent in railways and sawmills. It was an aristocratic and educationally advanced family equally known for conservative outlook. Rajabala and all her sisters were brought up as girls of a *bhadra* family. Rajabala noted, 'parents felt to be fortunate on marrying their daughters young' (Translation by the present author). She was critical of early marriage of girls. She observed that the root of this tradition lay in the absence of schooling for girls. She was forced many a times to marry when she was still in her early teens (Das,2004,19,15). In reality, the parents came under social pressure to marry off their daughters young. The girls were groomed for their future role as housewives.

Nalinibala Devi's autobiography, *Eri Aha Dinbor*, in her own words, is a reminiscence of seventy eight years. It is not merely an account of her life but also a document which retrieves and reconstructs history through the prism of her experiences, placing Assamese nationalism as a variant of the pan Indian phenomenon. This account comprising of her actions, ideas, explanations and interpretations were framed within the limits of the female sphere. She fulfilled all social conventions of marriage and motherhood but she did never let her readers know if she had any aspiration of her own. It was probably because there was as in Bengal and elsewhere, 'no separate agenda for a woman to develop in terms of any independent image of herself' (Banerjee,2004,9). However, she touched upon some issues affecting the women of her age in the country. Its importance also lies in the fact that it provides a scope for analysis of some aspects of gender history of the early twentieth century Assam.

The first generation of modern Assamese woman writers were motivated in their literary pursuits by some of the influential men in their lives. Writer and reformer, Gunabhiram Baruah encouraged both his wife Bishnupriya Devi and daughter Swarnalata Devi along with Padmavati Devi Phukanani (1853-1927), daughter of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan to write for the *Asam Bandhu* (1885-86) and arranged for the publication of books written

by them (Mahanta 2008,156). Lakshminath Bezbaroa did not make specific mention of extending women education in that period. Yet references were made of a few women who could memorise the *Mahabharata* and compose letters. He recorded that Swarnalata was an exception to the general standard (Bezbaroa, 1998,17-18). Nalinibala Devi's life repeated the same story as it was under the inspiration and guidance of her father Nabin Chandra Bardaloi that she began writing and became a poet celebrity of her time. The creative environment of the family was set to tune by her grandfather Madhab Chandra Bardaloi. His residence at Uzanbazar played a significant role; it shaped her poetic self and determined the course of her life along with instilling in her a nationalist fervour, which allowed her to contribute significantly to the nationalist discourse that was emerging in the early part of twentieth century Assam. The first women's periodical, the *Ghar Jeuti* came up from Dibrugarh in 1927. As in the rest of India, the written medium was limited to a handful of high-caste elite women. Women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere; literature offered them an opportunity to conform to and dissent against such norms, to enter the masculinised public sphere.

Colonial modernity required women to behave in a certain manner for which changes at different levels of the conventional way of life and thinking became an imperative. It mostly affected domestic sphere and field of education. Government report supported this assumption. During the years 1907-08 to 1911-12, the education of girls in the province of Assam had not advanced far. *Purdah*, or a state of seclusion of women from the male gaze, system of child marriage and general indifference of parents to the education of their daughters hindered progress. Still the government was hopeful and put on record:

Parents have realised, though, dimly, that education need not make their girls more independent of their lawful guardians or less observant of established customs and domestic duties. And they have found by practical experience that with the progress of boy's education, the selection of a bride now-a-days depends no less upon her ability to read and write with tolerable ease, than upon her health and general appearance (*Report on the Progress of Education in Eastern Bengal and Assam During the years 1907-08 to 1911-12*, Vol-I, 92).

The texts by Assamese women on various aspects of education can be read as documentary evidences of the prevalent thought. These women cherished some aspirations at a time when the entire country was coming to terms with ideologies of freedom and *swaraj*. Idea of resistance to patriarchal norms was unknown at that time.

Even though Nalinibala never challenged the prescribed norms for women or rebelled against her fate, she definitely carved a space for women like her in the social and literary arena (Das,2011,109). She represents the 'new woman' with certain qualifications. A new woman in colonial India was the idea of a woman from an educated, modern, middle-class family who performed household responsibilities along with her equally demanding outdoor activities. She was learning to adopt new life style and was taking share of the modern ideas with the man. Woman intellectuals of the same period in the rest of India had similar interpretations on a society's assigned vocation for a woman. If feminism arises out of one's awareness of and discontent with the disempowerment of women in a society, then Rassundari Devi must be counted as a feminist, a female feminist in a milieu which nurtured eminent reformer like Rammohun Roy. One should never forget Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31) and Vidyasagar and their role in this respect. Rassundari was a revolutionary on three counts- as an autobiographer when autobiography was virtually unknown in Bengal; as a woman autobiographer when women reading and writing was a rarity in India; and as a woman who espoused what in a later time would be called a feminist consciousness (Dasgupta, 2010,228).

Rajabala Das has given detailed description of the rituals associated with the girls at the onset of their puberty. After the seven day long ceremony was over, girls were compelled to follow the 'stringent restrictions' so much so that most of the girls broke into tears at that moment. Relating this, Rajabala recalled an incident from her childhood. A big procession moved across their residence which naturally attracted all the young girls for a glance. Rajabala's elder sister, aged between ten or eleven was just about to accompany the group, when their eldest brother took her back from the front yard to behind the holes of thick bamboo fencing. Her sister got hurt but had to oblige the elder. A girl aged between ten or eleven was then considered matured enough not to indulge in any outdoor movement. She wrote, 'unlike today, there was not a practice like women walking on roads' (Translation by the present author). It was such that the elderly ones even visiting their neighbours, went in a group of two or three underneath traditional coverings called *bor japi* and were accompanied by a male attendant. The girls were restricted from taking meat (Das,2004,18,19,27). Rajabala compared the difference in the position of women in her contemporary society with those of sixty years back. She remarked that rarely any girl resisted the gender based social impositions.

The condition of women did not improve all of a sudden. There are records of similar feelings from a distant place even in the first half of the twentieth century. A woman autobiographer, Sethu Ramaswamy (b.1924) narrated the menace of child marriage in the Tamil society. Sethu's formal schooling ended after she was married just at ten years. She depicted how it adversely affected academic pursuits of her generation. In *Bride at Ten Mother at Fifteen: Autobiography of an Unknown Indian Woman*, Sethu wrote,

My school days were threatening to come to a close...I was now next in line to be married... In those days, girls had to be married off before they attained puberty and I was on the threshold of puberty (Ramaswamy,2003,47).

Regarding the physical movements of Assamese women, Benudhar Rajkhowa's opinion differed from that of Rajabala Das. He observed that the Assamese women of his time had no strict restriction in coming to roads. He marked out a sharp contrast between women in Assam valley and those in Sylhet in the Surama valley. There the girls hardly moved on roads and when needed, rode on palanquins (Rajkhowa,1969,158).

Nalinibala Devi in her work, assigned one section on the *purdah* system prevalent among upper caste women in Assam. She noted the 'dark' days behind the thick veil. The idea of a woman going outside the realm of home and family was considered outrageous. Girls from the elite society were put under restrictions from the age of ten. The woman was not only veiled but when she would go out she was covered on both sides by two big *japis*. While riding on a horse-cart, a woman should firmly lock the doors of the cart; women were even prohibited to be seen by the sun and the moon. Nalinibala was always accompanied by one person called *ganapat saheb* even for an evening walk. She noted the earliest public celebration of *Durga puja* in Guwahati. Plays were organised during the festival days and separate arrangement behind fencing were made for the women spectators. They were supposed to sit behind a make-shift thin bamboo wall. On the last day of the *puja*, separate tents were made on the river bank for the ladies from the 'respectable' families to watch the immersion of the goddess *Durga*. This seclusion is not exclusive to the women of Assam in general (Devi,1976,12).

Women do not form a homogenous group that cuts across class, caste or ethnicity. Class and caste were important social categories of the early twentieth century to distinguish one woman from the other. Rigid seclusion confined all the elite womenfolk within the household. But there was no *purdah* for the women of 'lower' stratum and they could

move around freely. Nalinibala made repeated use of the term *bhadra* in order to represent the stereotypical idea of virtuous, respectable, married women of the emerging middle-class. There lay the ideological distinction between the 'upper' class and 'lower' class women. This was never a peculiar sight only in Assam, as in the Indian context, it was observed,

Ideologies were shaped by the upper castes and are still accepted as beliefs and practices in Indian society (Chakravarty, 2004, 272-273).

It is generally observed that the position of the Assamese women was comparatively better than most of their Indian counterparts due to geographical, ethnological and cultural factors. Nalinibala Devi observed the position of non-Assamese women. During Gandhi's Assam visit in 1921, *Begum* Md. Ali accompanied the leaders. *Begum* addressed a meeting exclusively for the women, but arrived at the spot in a black *burkha* that was a veil covering the body. Nalinibala remarked that by that time, the *purdah* practice was disappearing in Assamese society; but it was still a custom among Muslims. Leaving aside the story of the common women, the Muslim women at the national leadership were under the influence of the Mughal harem culture. Regarding the position of Khasi women inhabiting in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district (now in the state of Meghalaya), Nalinibala Devi had a different observation. She made a tour of Shillong in 1926. She observed remarkable smartness in the behaviour of a few women. She was amazed by the sense of self-respect and identity of the Khasi women (Devi, 1976, 85, 113).

Caste hierarchy was another determinant in social restrictions on women. A girl's life was all the more a hell had she belonged to the Brahmin caste. It was considered a matter of great shame to keep the daughter unmarried after reaching the age of puberty. She was to get married before puberty or else, her family was excommunicated. The marriageable age for a Brahmin girl was fixed at nine or ten whereas it was relaxed for some years in others. This compulsion was stressful for Brahmin families. Rajabala remembered one instance of her neighbourhood when a father was trying hard to find a match for his youngest daughter. As the girl was growing up, he was consoled by the relatives and neighbours for the coming hazard. No way out, the father gave her in marriage to a doubly aged man who died within a couple of years. The hapless father kept the ill-fated daughter with him. Rajabala was sympathetic to this girl of her age, who was leading a severely restrained life just for being a Brahmin widow. Rajabala commented, 'how

miserable the Brahmin widowhood used to be' (Translation by the present author). Rajabala noted how this unfortunate incident drove her against the sufferings of women (Das,2004,19,23,20). The Census Report of that time commented,

In the central and upper Brahmaputra valley the only Hindu castes which are orthodox in the matters of child marriage and the prohibition of widow marriage are the *Brahmans* and *Grahabipras* (*Census of India, Assam 1911*. 70).

Caste hierarchy mattered even after consummation of marriage between families. Lakshminath Bezbaroa mentioned in his autobiography that his haughty brother-in-laws used to insult the Bezbaroa family as if they had done some favour upon them by marrying their daughter. They would not allow their wives to eat anything at their parents place. They were afraid lest their wives would get 'polluted' otherwise. This kind of obnoxious behaviour of the son-in-laws was a common thing among the other *bhadralok* families also in the upper Assam. Lakshminath hated this 'imported' attitude. He expected that the emerging educated class of people would make an end to unreasonable conducts (Bezbaroa, 1998,48).

The issues of women came up for discussion in the nineteenth century. Centering round Calcutta a reform movement for the uplift of women spread across the country. Widow immolation was banned in 1829. In 1855, Vidyasagar appealed the British government to legalise widow marriage and finally remarriage of widows became possible under the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Unfortunately, it was not followed into practice by the people. Gunabhiram Baroah married a Brahmin widow, Bishnupriya Devi in 1870. It aroused so much controversy that the couple was socially boycotted. There were a large number of widows in the country, particularly child-widows.

Nalinibala Devi's own reflection gives an idea of the widowhood among the upper caste Hindus. Prescriptions and prohibitions of sacred ordinances controlled her life. Widowed after eight years of marriage, a mother of four children and carrying her fifth child, Nalinibala returned to her paternal home. She became widow when she was still quite young; it was tragic but not uncommon in those days. At the same time, the child-bearing age for women in this country lay between fifteen and thirty nine. It was also estimated that on the average, a married woman gave birth to a child every three or four years during that period of her life (*Census of India, Assam 1891*.126). Nalinibala was quiet, restrained and always in control of herself. Her father in his own way supported her.

Though initially she was unwilling to accept the dress code prescribed for a widow, her father made her understand the necessity of following the age old social norms. Nabin Chandra declared that his life as a father would be blessed to see his daughter in the white attire of the *Sarvashukla Maheshweta* (Devi,1976, 61). He was referring to the *Saraswati*, the Hindu goddess of learning. These inspiring words had strong impact on her, encouraged her to face the life with confidence. Personally her father might not have any objection to his daughter's choice of dress and manners but he thought that by doing so his dear daughter would simply incur the displeasure of the society. Nalinibala realized the limitation of women even in an enlightened family like hers. Patricia Spacks making her study on the different stages of the self in life writing observed,

For women, adulthood-marriage or spinsterhood implied relative loss of self unlike men, therefore, they looked back fondly to the relative freedom and power of childhood and youth. (Spacks,1999,48)

Nalinibala recalled that one of her aunts, Dharmada Devi was widowed young and followed strict restrictions even on her reading material. She was left to spend most of her time in worship. As such from the ethical point of view, even a child widow was not spared from a life of abstention and negation. As elsewhere in the subcontinent, the Assamese widow experienced more distress than the widower. Uma Chakravarty explains,

The preservation of caste purity meant that the sexual behaviour of certain categories of women needed closely to be guarded (Chakravarty, 2004,279).

A woman is expected to be modest, shy, soft spoken and attractive. She is not encouraged to be assertive and competitive right from her childhood. The Indian men supposed themselves to be empowered to make decisions concerning the women; their code of conduct, food, dress, education and also the physical movement. Referring to the stereotyped ideal of Indian women, she is given the inheritance of their culture to imbibe the womanly virtues of mythical celebrities like Savitri and Sita. They are very often supposed to conform to the conservative family and social norms. The guardians with 'respectable' position ensured all protections for the women folk. Not necessarily on the widows only, movements of all women were kept under the close watch of the society.

The Colonial state interfered into the social scene due to the insistence of some reform minded Indians. The age of consent for consummation of marriage was raised from eight to as low as twelve years in 1892. This kind of legislation gave birth to debates and discussion. They were indications of the fact that Indians had to go a long way in emancipating women. Sumit Sarkar in his essay 'The Woman's Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal' observed that the early reforms failed to liberalize women because they were not visualized out of any ideological acceptance of rational values imported from the West. Women were still bogged down in the web of culture, tradition, purity and motherhood that projected them as shapers of the Indian nation pitted against the alien rule (Sarkar 1985, 157-172). At the same time, the western educated Indian men had their willpower to make Indian women fit for a modern and progressive society of their imagination. Education for women was thought essential in order to have better citizens for the prospective nation-state.

Most of the caste Hindu families hurried up to give away in marriage their daughters as soon as possible to maintain their custom as well as to keep themselves free from any social embarrassment. Nalinibala Devi herself was given in marriage at the age of eleven in 1909. To quote her, 'out of superstition, thousands of girl children were sacrificed at the altar of marriage' (Translation by the present author) (Devi,1976,212). Other historical sources defend this type of remarks. At the age period, ten to fifteen, the number of married females was over ten times that of the males (*Census of India, Assam 1911*. 70). Nalinibala's heart bled for the lakhs of child widows who had to sacrifice everything observing strict restrictions. On 15 September 1927, Har Bilas Sarda introduced the bill in the Imperial Legislative Assembly to regulate marriages of children amongst the Hindus. The primary object of the bill was to put a stop to child-widowhood. He made a strong plea in his speech,

The gravity of the question will however be realised when we remember that out of every 1,000 Hindu married women 14 are under 5 years of age, 111 below 10, and 437 under 15 years of age (Sarda,2007,126-7).

Nalinibala was critical of those leaders of society who often dictated lessons of chastity citing the Holy Scriptures but they themselves enjoyed all the material happiness. She was against child marriage so much so that she was determined in marrying her younger daughter Aruna not before she attained eighteen. She wrote a great deal on the Sarda Act,

which fixed the marriageable age for girls at fourteen years and its impact on the conservative section of the Assamese society, which was not ready to comply with the decision. There were bitter debates on the Act and it split public opinion. She referred to the passing of this Bill in 1930 and its immediate repercussions. The subject of child-marriage drew public attention in the province of Assam. The change was recorded by the Census Report; in the previous twenty years since 1901, the average age of marriage for males had risen and that for females much more (*Report on the Census of Assam for 1921*. 92). She also expressed her gratitude for the commendable change that it ushered in.

Rajabala Das did not forget one peculiar situation associated with Mahatma Gandhi's rally at Dibrugarh in 1921. It was his first visit to Assam. People were enthused to hear Gandhi; they had so much faith in him that the men could allow their wives to attend a kind of public meeting. The fact that women were permitted to attend any gathering was an unprecedented event in Assam (Das,2004,41). It was completely a new development in the Assamese social life. One of the visible implications of Gandhian movement was that for the first time in history, people dared to pose a challenge to the socially-accepted role of women.

Nalinibala Devi identified the nationalist movement with the liberation of women. She was happy to see the learned women in Assamese families who have brought about a qualitative change in the society. Women could now enjoy freedom for personality development. Matrimony as an institution and women's experiences within it were also at work to shape the process of identity development in them. In its traditional representation, it was marked by male domination and female subservience and negation of their independence. Delaying of marriage till the attainment of adulthood provided the Assamese women limited freedom to participate in the selection of their spouses.

Nalinibala Devi analysed Gandhi's strategy of involving women in the struggle for freedom. It was a firm conviction of Gandhi that spiritual power can win over any brutal force. Therefore, during the days of communal cruelty of 1946, Gandhi moved with a team of three beautiful unmarried women, Maniben Patel, Monu Gandhi and Sushila Nayyar. Sometimes, Gandhi asked them to visit riot-torn areas unaccompanied, to pacify the violent mob, just by the message of universal love and non-violence. This approach was effective. A physician by training, Sushila Nayyar committed herself in the treatment

of the sick and wounded masses in the areas around Noakhali. For Nalinibala and her generation of women, these remarkable stories were always a kind of inspiration. (Devi, 1976,189). In this way, Gandhi associated feminine power with spiritual and moral strength. Women can heal wounds with their emotional support.

In the early twentieth century, the enlightened view was influenced by ideals of equality and liberty. These were the social ethics of the British for whom the Indians had high admiration. There were many agents of western civilization. Western education, new legal system, bureaucracy, Christian missions were some of the means. New forces, destined to transform ultimately every stratum of Indian society began to penetrate slowly into this country (Datta,1978,51). Men as well as women became aware of changes required to ensure a rightful position of women in Indian society. These changes dawned in their minds well before they could be practically translated into reality. The nationalist consensus symbolised in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress, 1931, postulated freedom, justice, dignity and equality for women as essential for nation building. The nationalist movement indirectly helped to improve the position of women. The world considered as public sphere had entered her home or the private sphere and she could enjoy privileges of both the worlds. Domestic life of a woman became an integral part of the national life. Still there was no scope to answer some fundamental questions. There was no conscious or considered decision on whether a woman should conform to the socially prescribed code or to lead life fulfilling her requirements based on her own reason. A few women like Chandraprova Saikiani had objection in accepting the existing social norms; she also joined the struggle for the independence of the country. Hence, a very small section of women visualized a dual movement for attaining freedom.

A number of social reform movements of the country sought to deal with the dilemma of social restrictions in the traditional Indian societies. The perceptions of the reformers about western civilization, glimpsed through the British presence in India, made them to contemplate and explain the Indian backwardness (Shakkeela,2003). 'Progressive' elements also worked to some degrees in Assam as they attempted at changing of social attitude towards women. One would however, find a contrasting picture on the position of women in other parts of the country. If one considers the case of the Kumaoni women,

their own perception was found different from that of the Assamese women. Namita Gokhale, a Kumaoni by birth who grew up amidst them observed,

I imbibed from these women, femininity never stood for weakness, and my gender was never congruent with anything but the strength, physical, emotional, moral, of my sex (Gokhale,1998,10).

Discussing the autobiography of the eminent Hindi poet, Mahadevi Varma (1907-87), Francesca Orsini observed that for poets of her generation, writing was both a question of self-expression and a form of public address (Orsini 2004, 54). In a similar vein, Nalinibala Devi also wrote for pleasure and self analysis and she very much wanted that her writing should reach out to a wider readership. The author was not completely into the making of a self portrayal. She was narrating the story of her individual involvement with the outer world. Nalinibala's image was also made through her activities in the public sphere. Her family, relations, responsibilities and commitment for the nation and its language were important constituents of her personality. Readers never fail to notice contradictions between inner and outer pulls of her mind. She could enjoy the material environment of her life. But she did never part with the spiritual quest of life which she imbibed since her early childhood.

Nalinibala Devi found solace in the pages of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagvata Gita* and in the songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore and after that, she herself started composing poems, which were published in Assamese journals and periodicals such as the *Ghar Jeuti* and the *Avahan*. Well versed in Sanskrit literature and spiritual thought, Nalinibala looked forward to the future with optimism. No matter what she depicted, but her descriptions were quite lyrical. She always enjoyed her femininity and played her part well like a daughter, mother and wife. She narrated her role as a sensitive poet and a loving mother. She had her own way of protest against patriarchy from the same site. She inspired other women citing her example. She identified fully with the suffering women and inspired them to stand up and move forward. In the preface of her autobiography, she mentioned that despite some tragic experience she never lost hope. She created a space for her own and gave expression to her pathos in poetry. Apparently, some of her poems are pessimistic but it has been pointed out by K.K. Handique (1898-1982) that 'the poems really reveal her faith in the immortal spirit of man' (Barua,1978,126).

Rajabala Das portrayed her image as an empowered woman who could negotiate and deal with her struggles and conflicts. The ways of coping and dealing with them as reflected in this study include individual and collective acts of resistance, negotiation and challenge to the stereotypical notions. It reaffirmed belief in one's self-worth, abilities, assertion of one's rights, justice and dignity. She concluded her autobiography with some words of hope for the women of the country. She put into words an optimistic vision of a woman's life. She was convinced that women were now no way inferior to men and could bring in peace and prosperity to the nation by their moral strength (Das,2004,95-96).

Whether it is *Tinikuri Dah Basarar Smriti* or *Eri Aha Dinbor*, it is important not merely to classify these works as autobiographies of women, but also to note their contributions to the understanding of gender and as nascent feminist consciousness in the realm of the colonial state. Their responses to different social stimuli shaped up their personal qualities. Kumaoni by origin, Jeeya considers herself old-fashioned to get puzzled by feminism. She argues,

Why should we fight for our rights, why should we demand them so vociferously, when it is possible to simply exercise them with a quiet but unshakable sense of determination?
(Gokhale,1998,114)

Neither Rajabala nor Nalinibala recorded any bitterness of this kind of confrontation with the members of the opposite gender. Most likely, they hardly had any contradiction in their private lives and their public image. It might also happen what Paula R. Backscheider has observed. She said,

Perhaps our culture does not yet have an acceptable, accessible language to describe many of women's experiences (Backscheider,1999,22).

This is an extreme view. There were, however, traditions of female thought, women's culture and female consciousness that were not feminist. Whenever there was any problem, they somehow arrived at a binding settlement with the contending values. In this manner, women in the twentieth century began to negotiate with their not so friendly environment but they have won the battle in any case. There are many examples.

The attitude on the position of women also rested on male observations. A woman's experience itself was in shared space. Many a time, men mobilised the nation for their ardent support on women's issues. Therefore, it is relevant to take note of the perceptions

that a few of the male in prominence had about the place of women in Assamese society. Lakshminath Bezbaroa gave a sensitive representation of the condition of Assamese Hindu women. There was reference to the widespread polygamy. But at the same time widows including the young ones, were debarred from getting re-married. Lakshminath observed a few female members of his family and made a general remark that women after marriage, gradually become quiet and diffident. He remarked that the women of Bengal who had exposure to education and arts were better placed than the average women of Assam (Bezbaroa,1998,49-50,54). He had words of appreciation for the talents of his wife Prajnasundari Devi. He felt proud to invite to his residence many of his colleagues for the warm hospitality offered by Prajnasundari. She authored and published a book on culinary art, *Amish O Niramish Ranna* (Vegetarian and Non-vegetarian Cooking) in 1913. It was received well. It meant that the new Assamese women wanted to know more about tasty and healthy diet, rather than the traditional eating habits. Educated husbands desired that their wives should learn skills from other cultures particularly the Bengali in order to prove their modern attitude (Chaudhury, 2009,189).

Benudhar Rajkhowa could realise a woman's vulnerability. He seriously thought about the inevitable plight of a Brahmin child widow. He was disturbed to find that re-marriage was prohibited even in distressful situation. He turned critical to Hindu ethics for actually making things unethical. He was perplexed by religious conviction and its utility in terms of reward and punishment (Rajkhowa,1969,65). The problem of early widowhood was, in fact, very serious among the 'higher' caste women across the country.

Benudhar Rajkhowa placed the Assamese women, particularly of the older generation, in high regards. He narrated a story of admirable capability of one such lady, the bold wife of *Ray Bahadur* Sadhon Hazarika of Dibrugarh who could pacify the wild tempered elephants and brought them under control. Benudhar was supporting the leading women forum of the day, the *Asam Mahila Sanmiloni* for some time. His wife Ratnakumari got involved with it and collected fund for its session in Jorhat in 1929. Chandraprova Saikiani, Secretary of the forum, delivered a very effective speech. Benudhar was surprised to see the huge gathering there, he called it first-time in his life time. After this booming session, he was convinced that women's sincere effort can make anything a success (Rajkhowa,1969,16,179). He expected that a woman should be an ornament at home and a jewel in society. He fully appreciated his wife Ratnakumari and wrote

passionately about her. She was perfect in doing all her duties in different roles. In spite of her little formal education she managed to overcome all the household problems. Benudhar observed in her an absolute Hindu religious woman who never abandoned the teachings of chastisement and good conduct. But he himself recorded that he could realize the worth of his wife's worldly wisdom only at his later years and, repented for not attending to her suggestions in their conjugal life. By their social conditioning, men did not expect themselves to be managed by women. Even the few gentlemen employed under the British could rarely make them free from the gender related conventions.

Gender bias was rooted in the psyche so much so that even enlightened parents succumbed to social pressures of having a baby boy as their first born. In fact, neglect of women's reproductive and physical health, restrictions placed on the mobility and freedom of girls and women, gender injustice mirrored through denial of rights such as right to personal happiness, property, denial of opinion in matters such as marriage, were important social questions that awaited solutions. Padmanath Gohain Barooah was aware of the debates around the practice of child marriage. He was outwardly opposed to early marriage. But when he found a good match for his daughter, he decided to arrange the marriage of his eldest daughter in her childhood itself. He was not willing to take chance of getting another eligible groom by the time his daughter attained maturity. Another crucial observation regarding Padmanath's attitude was that after fathering seven daughters at a stretch; he approached to an astrologer praying for a male issue and followed all his recommendations. Padmanath was subsequently blessed with a son. Padmanath was thrilled about this experience to the extent that he gave details of it in his autobiography in a chapter entitled 'Fathering a male child' (Translation by the present author) (Gohain Barooah,1987,215,294-297). Benudhar Rajkhowa also revealed that after having their first child, a daughter, they did not lament as such. His statement itself was suggestive of the general expectation of the time more for a son than for a daughter. However, the records of the two women autobiographers hardly touched upon this question. Possibly they did not ever feel to be a less preferred child by their parents.

Female bonding is depicted through a diverse set of relationships which include peer and sibling bonding. The emotional bonding is characterized by love, affection, cordiality, warmth, emotional support and understanding. The adult women's relationships are egalitarian in nature and are characterized by emotional maturity and feelings of mutual

respect. The queen mother of Yogeswar Singha and Harakanta often used to have long conversations in the afternoon.

Position of women was also dependent on the relative position of her husband in a particular context. There had always been positive correlation between a man's social standing and the status of his spouse. The woman is a woman by her own right but society looked upon her, whenever situation called for, as the wife of someone. Nalinibala did nowhere mention the name of Md. Ali's wife. This lady was always addressed as *Begum* Md. Ali (Devi,1976,85). Nalinibala, on her part too, was not curious to know her name. This was an evidence for the idea that wife's identity was hidden under that of her husband. Women learnt to be conscious about such dual identity.

The identity of women is not only shaped by the dominant or the significant persons in their lives, but also by the social beliefs and practices. They are made to feel it in every moment of their existence. Girls and women are thought to have developed a social identity through acculturation and internalization of the social norms and traits (Vaidyanathan,2012,151). The feminine traits implied compliance, unquestioning obedience, selflessness and negation of one's own desires for the good of domestic life. Patriarchy, on the other hand, was associated with masculine power, independence, self-assertion, domination and action. There were a few instances when men wanted that the women nearest to their lives should have the traditional image of a perfect Hindu wife. Benudhar Rajkhowa was gratified by the company of such women. They had clear division of their public realm and private sphere. It suggested that though a few Indians spoke for a change in the existing social set-up, they too were doubtful to be a part of it initiating a change in their domestic sphere.

What is common to the women writers is that they expressed their perceptions, on issues of growing up as female, family life, marriage, motherhood and relationships with frankness. Often they took recourse to a vocabulary normally forbidden to them. They wrote with a sense of social responsibility intended to draw attention to the problems and challenges unique to women in Assam. Nalinibala Devi and Rajabala Das had active public life all through their lives. The lives of these bold, strong and confident women symbolised empowerment, embodied what in contemporary times may be called life skills. Assamese women did rarely enter the employment market through modern education. The women from the respectable families were not expected to get employed

and earn. Independent choice of either career or life partner, was beyond her reach. There was cold receptiveness to liberal ideas in some areas. From childhood to old age, girls and women used to face vulnerabilities on account of their gender and they exhibited traits of determination and courage to confront adversities. They imbibed certain skills that facilitated their participation in decision making. They showed remarkable ability to turn adversities to their advantage.

4. vii A Question of Faith

Clifford Geertz treated religion as a 'cultural system' (Geertz,1966,1-46). Religion has its influence in everyday life. Assamese society was no exception. Relation between religion and culture can be brought out more clearly from the functional point of view. By setting up moral codes of conduct, both the entities regulate behaviour of people. It is said, 'it determines their upbringing, education, customs and habits, diet, occupations, dwelling-place, type of home and in fact their whole social environment' (Chopra et. Al 1974,77).

Man has a yearning for moral and intellectual elevation. In Indian philosophy, every individual has a scope for spiritual growth and regeneration within one's own self. This concept of religion was above and beyond social customs and tradition. Mahatma Gandhi always argued that true religion and true politics have both to concern themselves primarily with human life and action and both must have a common basis in a common morality determined by a common set of values. Gandhi explained,

I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind and that I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole game of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole (Gandhi,1984,90).

Assam is also a composite entity constituting of people of different religions living together in peace and harmony. The people here worship gods in many different ways. Some go to the temple to offer flower, fruits and sweets. Some people have prayer facility in their home usually in a corner of the house or a separate room where all members of the family worship. Some Hindus do neither. In Hinduism, going to a temple and worshipping god is not compulsory. The basic belief of Hinduism is that a person's fate is determined according to his deeds. These deeds in Hinduism are called *Karma*. The Brahmin by their birth maintained their superior position in Hinduism. They were a close sect and others could not join it. On secular criteria alone a Brahmin might occupy an

average position, but being a Brahmin, he was the spiritual head and was entitled to respect in rituals. Religious beliefs were some way connected to social practices. The dos and donots prescribed by religion, surround a Hindu at his/her every step. While eating, drinking, moving, sitting, standing, a Hindu is to adhere to 'sacred' rules, to depart from which is no less than a transgression (Basu,1940,63).

The Assamese Hindus belonged mainly to two sects- the Vaishnava and the Sakta. We do not have quantifiable data as regards the number of followers of the Sakta or the Vaishnava faith. The institutions of *namghars* and the *sattras* in the rural localities suggest that the entire peasant population were followers of *Vaishnavism*. The *sattras* had authority over individual and social lives. The revered gentlemen occupying the highly responsible position of religious preceptors or guides were called *Gosains* and *Mahantas*. They used to reside in the *sattras* and continued to have their influence on the masses in matters of social, moral and spiritual domain even in a critical period. Although the Brahminical rituals continued, *Vaishnavism* was then the dominant thread in religious orientation of the people. Before the beginning of the twentieth century, the Sankaradeva movement had already spread across directions and increasing population came under the *Vaishnava* influence. Practice of *nam kirtan* and institution of *namghar* were the two most elementary components of everyday religious life in Assam. The *bhaonas* were a regular part of the rituals in a *namghar* or a *sattra*.

Harakanta recollected that in an autumn season during his early years, he bowed to the *sakta* mother goddess *Kamakhya*. After a few days, there were *Durga puja* celebrations at both the residence of a *munsiff* and in the royal household. The concluding day was marked by a boat race (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,202,203). *Durga puja* became an event of urban life only after its public celebrations, towards the end of the nineteenth century. Next it entered the tea gardens. Benudhar Rajkhowa referred to *Durga puja* being celebrated in the tea gardens with a lot of enjoyment. He found the practice of buffalo-sacrifice before the goddess *Durga*. There was no restriction against animal sacrifice. Rather it was believed to be a pious duty. This happened in spite of the widespread influence of *Vaishnavism* (Rajkhowa,1969,66). Without any regulation restricting animal killing, the practice of animal sacrifice in the *sakta* cult was common in those days. Nalinibala Devi wrote about the cult of *kumari puja* in the *Kamakhya* temple in her childhood in the early twentieth century (Devi,1976,10).

The Hindu ethical system was an attempt to regulate an individual's personal and public behaviour. Religious discourse had a long tradition. Deliberation on the sacred texts was considered a virtuous activity of the learned people in the company of some devoted listeners. Some of the practices signify distinct religious identity. Spiritual wisdom was their strength. It is argued that representation of a particular past legitimised the status and authority for a community; and it also justified that particular people's socio-political privileges (Dutta, 2014,209). Arrival of print culture facilitated this practice. Harakanta made a reference to his compiled work on the *Gita*. His younger brother Durgakanta sent him the printed copy of the *Bhagvata Gita* from Calcutta (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991, 191,215). Padmanath Gohain Barooah was a true follower of his tradition and he authored big volumes on religion and theology. His books namely, *Gita Saar* and *Shree Krishna* had wide acceptance. People looked upon them as a source of useful spiritual knowledge.

Haribilash Agarwala's father Navarangaram was a Vaishnavite. From his youth, Haribilash was familiar with the holy prescriptions in Sanskrit. There was such an environment of devotion that he used to have its oral practice in the company of some elder people. He was known by everyone as Bapiram till the year 1861. He was initiated to a spiritual preceptor known as Shivnarayan Paramhansa, from whom he got the new name Haribilash. He also accepted the Brahmo religion. Shivnarayan inspired Haribilash to make a translation of the Bengali *Sar Nitya Kriya* into Assamese (Agarwala,1967, 17,23,48). He translated the book and published it in 1898. With great effort he sold and circulated his book in Assam. He also published some of the Vaishnavite literature; those were *Kirtan*, *Dasam* and *Namghosha*.

Some parents, like that of Anundoram Borooh wanted to make their children trained in the religious conduct. A Sanskrit teacher was asked to reside within that household to train the kids. His daily religious practices influenced the young boys. Anundoram imitated him, made idols of clay and enjoyed worshipping the idols with his friends (Bhuyan,1966,15).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa grew up with a commitment to spiritual values. As a Brahmin child he had his formal initiation into the Brahminical order. He said, during the initiation he was supposed to chant what he called *mantras* from the *Vedas*. He was unable to make out any meaning of his prayers. Yet he was obedient enough to form a habit of chanting and praying. When he could comprehend them in later years, he realised their

significance and repented for his earlier waywardness (Bezbaroa,1998,36-37). It suggests that leaving aside the illiterate masses, even the members of the learned, well-to-do families could not comprehend the real meaning of their prayers. There was complete aloofness for understanding the significance of the religious performances. The young ones were also instructed to blindly follow the rituals.

Pilgrimages were practised by a few which enabled them to satisfy their religious aspirations. (See Sub-chapter 5.v) Harakanta wrote about their family visit to the shrine of Hajo when they were fleeing to avoid persecution of the Burmese. In 1875, a devout Hindu from Auniati named Dharmeshwar Sarma came to Guwahati and went out for a pilgrimage to Gaya, which was a prominent seat of Hindu faith (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,4,203).

There was an endeavour to transform the everyday life as well as the other spheres in life. Wide range of daily activities epitomized the religious fervour of the Bezbaroa family. At different hours of the day, their rituals varied. There were at least three rounds of prayers a day in their family. The children were expected to join their father in the morning prayer. The prayer was followed by *carita tola*, that is reciting of the biographies of the saints. Young boys also joined such session. They could play the accompanying musical instruments with devotional songs. They were engrossed in that part of their duties which could be called a 'performance' even if they took place within their family. Young Lakshminath followed a daily habit of wiping off his family temple. It was believed to be a holy practice and non-Brahmins were, therefore, never allowed to do that in a Brahmin household. Lakshminath felt very privileged to do so. Social relationship was dependent on caste and social tradition.

Colonial society facilitated the rise of a section of the Assamese population to a position of power and wealth. The main lever of support for their eminence was western education. But their examples did not make any major alteration in the core of the traditional society. Old values, social norms and caste hierarchy remained almost intact. The government was sensitive enough never to disturb the social bastion. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was respectful to the norms of Assamese Hindu society. But he was not a conservative Hindu and recognised the inspiration present in other religious traditions. As an enlightened liberal, he was tolerant towards the different belief systems (Baroah,1971,160,168). Rationalism involves, among other things, the replacement of

traditional beliefs and ideas by modern knowledge (Srinivas,2005,126). Sometimes Anandaram used to attend the Sunday prayers in the Church and the Brahmo prayer meetings in Calcutta. He used to worship regularly the idol (*Salagram*). It is interesting that he carried their family deity for worship at Calcutta. He utilised his time during journeys by studying scriptures and even rendering the *Quran* into English. His uncle, Jainaram's interest in Brahmo faith in Calcutta was interpreted as conversion to Christianity despising his own religion. Jainaram was brought back. Gunabhiram Baroah remarked that Jainaram's high level of religious and social conduct was the result of his links with Rammohun Roy.

Gunabhiram Baroah was drawn towards the *Brahmo Samaj* during his student days at the Presidency College in Calcutta, but there was not enough sociability of the Brahmo faith. So he married his first wife according to Hindu rites. She was the sister-in-law of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Gunabhiram was formally initiated into the Brahmo faith in 1869 when he was a government official in Dhubri (Baroah,1971, 134-135,176-77). Gunabhiram however maintained his secular disposition even during editorship of the periodical, the *Assam Bandhu*. He could have utilised it as a medium to broadcast the Brahmo faith, but he did not. Instead of sectarian feelings, what he tried to cultivate was commitment to none other than the Assamese literary tradition (Bhuyan,1998,57). The common people were not yet all set to go by the belief system of Gunabhiram Baroah. He ultimately reconciled to leave Assam for Bengal. Most of the Brahmos in Assam suffered social ostracism.

There was a time when Vaishnavism and the Brahmo faith stood opposed to each other in every town of Assam. Lakshminath Bezbaroa noted the general hostile attitude towards the Brahmos in the 'orthodox' society of Sibsagar in his tender age. He saw the craze of some people for the Brahmo religion as well (Bezbaroa,1998,64). In the later stage of his life, Lakshminath came close to the Brahmos in Calcutta. His views were influenced by the *Brahmo Samaj* through his marriage with the grand-daughter of Debendranath Tagore. Benudhar Rajkhowa attended some prayer sessions of the *Brahmo Samaj*. He was moved by the lectures of the great Brahmo preacher Shivanath Shastri, who visited several towns of Assam from Dibrugarh to Guwahati. He was convinced that its lessons had an enduring effect on his character and outlook (Rajkhowa,1969,89).

Rajabala Das wrote about a family from Dhubri who got converted to Brahmoism (Das,2004,31). This could be a single instance among many, when Brahmo faith began to penetrate in urban centres of Assam. It signified the coming of a liberal social atmosphere in Assam, people could accept or reject a faith within the broad contours of Hinduism. It was reported that most of the adherents of Brahmoism were immigrants from Bengal and that it made little way amongst the indigenous Assamese (*Census of India, Assam 1891*. 82). During her student days in Bethune hostel, Rajabala and her friends were all taken to join the prayers of the *Brahmo Samaj*. She recalled the stirring speeches of one very popular Brahmo leader, *Shastri Moshai* (Das,2004,38). He could be none other than Shivanath Shastri.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa recorded that his father, though a staunch believer of Hinduism, welcomed the changes that came with time. Lakshminath's cultural nationalism was rooted in his commitment to the Vaishnavite tradition of life. He inherited taste and appreciation for the literary and intellectual richness of the land from his father. There was the cultural influence of Vaishnavism among the children of Dinanath Bezbaroa. The childhood training of Lakshminath had a lasting effect on him. His family atmosphere instilled in him the will to live upto the values. From his experience, he discovered that Vaishnavism had a great potentiality for social unity, education and progress. S. Radhakrishnan discussed the worth of religion, 'belief and conduct, rites and ceremonies, dogmas and authorities are subordinate to the art of self discovery and contact with the Divine' (Husain,2010, Foreword). Likewise, Lakshminath's devotion made him discover what he thought to be a unique mother tongue that is Assamese and mother Assam. In his construction the element of religion was proportional to that of his art. He was trying to bring together various strands of the humanistic philosophical thought. It was a constant source of inspiration and energy for Lakshminath not only in his youth but even in later years. In a very famous essay, 'Religion of Love and Devotion', Lakshminath analysed the basic concept of Vaishnavism as he understood it. His essay was a common reference point of many scholars who have written about Sankaradeva and his philosophy. He upheld creative freedom and defended Assamese nationality. He cultivated a positive attitude towards the national heritage which could reap tremendous benefit in the formation of Assamese identity.

Lakshminath recollected his visit to a number of *sattras* in different parts of Assam. When Dinanath was posted in Barpeta, Lakshminath visited Barpeta *sattra*. When his father was transferred to Tezpur, the family moved with him. There Lakshminath went to Nikamul *sattra* and enjoyed the beauty of the shrine. The priests of the Kamalabari *sattra* were particularly held in high esteem by the Bezbaroa family (Bezbaroa,1998,3,1). All made him interested in the Vaishnavite institutions and the lives of the great saints.

A landmark contribution of Lakshminath Bezbaroa was the biography of Sankaradeva. It is not exaggeration to say that he discovered Sankaradeva as much as different scholars of India discovered the saints of the *Bhakti* Movement. Somebody was writing the life of GuruNanak, somebody else was writing the biography of Sankaracharyya, some others did write about Namadeva or Chaitanya or Kabir. Those life studies were a great inspiration for Lakshminath. He might have read *Kabir* by Kshitimohan Sen.

Benudhar Rajkhowa himself was a practitioner of the Vaishnavite faith. He had an in-depth understanding of the Vaishnava sculptures. In his service life itself, he made fine translations of Sankaradeva's *Gunamala* (1923) and Madhavadeva's *Namghosha* (1920) in English. He was happy to notice the exceptional devotion of his wife, Ratnakumari. He thought her orthodox but not superstitious. Ratnakumari believed that the rites and rituals of the Hindu religion were framed suitably for health and hygiene. Followers of those codes of conduct enjoy good health and long life. She also associated herself in founding of a public *namghar* in Jorhat and her team raised donations from men like *Ray Bahadur* Shivaprasad Barua for the construction of a temple (Rajkhowa,1969,224-226,188-189,180).

Benudhar Rajkhowa gave a deal of thought to the belief system of the Hindus. He developed some questions for which he had no answer. For example, he did not believe in occult powers. But he himself saw persons with occult powers which made him a little confused. Was it a part of Hindu belief or an alien element? Benudhar could not believe, but after long years, he admitted the existence of strange things in Hinduism. He was critical about the whole business of branding religions as good or bad ones. He considered religion as a formal institution; people adapt themselves to their faith as they found it. He did not see the worth of changing the eternal values of life despite doubts about them (Rajkhowa,1969,41,21).

Nalinibala Devi's upbringing in an enlightened family shaped her belief system. Her grandfather, Madhab Chandra Bardaloi, besides being a bureaucrat, had literary talents. He was the first publisher the *Ramayana* in Assamese. Nalinibala's association with an aunt, Mahindri Devi, who returned to reside at their home after years of meditation, had definite influence on her. Coming of a few sages to her place also had a sacred effect on her. She could make her mind strong and could realise her spiritual power through all her interactions with these insightful figures. For Nalinibala, God is the controlling power. She repeated her belief with more and more emphasis. For her, God is nothing but a 'simple feeling of existence' with no past or future, no pleasure or pain. Belief in God gives perfect happiness and a condition of being self sufficient (Devi,1976,65-69,88). She considered the glory of God in natural objects. She believed that self fulfilment was possible only through divine grace. She very consciously led an inward life with all reverence to God as the Creator.

Relating to many incidents of her life, Nalinibala Devi resigned to her fate. She considered herself ill-fated that carried the touch of death. She had an extremely shaking experience of a dream. It is, in fact, a very strange story. In a dream sequence she heard as if there is an oracle for her. She was fore-warned in her dream, which she described as the forecast of the goddess *Bhawani*. She related it to her husband who was not willing to believe the story. But within a couple of days her husband died of an unexpected and sudden illness (Devi,1976,57-58). Dreams had always a particular meaning and suggestion for Nalinibala. She believed that the dream sequences had a direct bearing on her real life. Unconscious mind co-existed with her conscious experience in making of her everyday life. It is also to be noted that Nalinibala, in spite of her education, believed in supernatural power. The masses took for granted that everything in life had been ordained by a higher power. The Bezbaroa family was even not free from irrational belief. Lakshminath remembered that the marriage of his elder brother was postponed only because of a shower just before the time of finalizing the date. It was the winter season, and the untimely rain was considered to be an unfavourable signal (Bezbaroa,1998,49). A contemporary chronicler rightly observed,

so much blinded by superstition and prejudice that they are easily led to attribute any illness or misfortune in the family to the influence of some evil spirits or bad planet, whom they will try to propitiate by all manner of means suggested to them... (Barooah,1946, 207).

Following the death of Nalinibala's spouse, her father Nabin Chandra Bardaloi brought her back to Guwahati. This was a period of emotional crisis. He realised that Nalinibala could find solace in philosophy and accordingly, made arrangement for it. The religious philosophy was conducive to the rehabilitation of 'ill-fated' women. Nalinibala's faith in the Upanishadic thoughts played a supportive role in her activities. Her vows to piety and thorough reading were in search of peace. The women of that time were thus made to believe that they cannot deny their destiny but can only take up devotion to seek out solace and satisfaction.

Rajabala Das's father was a follower of the Sankaradeva movement and, therefore, was against the *sakta* ways of religious practice. He used to tell them essence of the Vaishnavite philosophy, on futility of the allegiance to other gods and goddesses than the one and only Supreme Lord. Occasionally, their *sakta* neighbours gave them sacrificial meat offered in worship but it was not allowed to be cooked inside the house. Rajabala had a habit of reading aloud texts like the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Kirtan* in their home since her teenage. Each household in her locality had some sort of a *namghar*. The women used to have regular prayer and offerings. Sometimes, Rajabala joined her grandmother in chanting the holy words. The old lady was a believer of the Radha-Krishna (Das,2004,27,23). The stories Rajabala regularly listened from her grandmother were of Radha-Krishna. Probably out of this inclination from her childhood, she compiled a few commentaries of the great epics, *Gita Bachan*, *Mahabharatar Katha* and *Ramayanar Katha* in her late years. Rajabala revealed her innermost self in speaking about her faith in God. She regarded her achievement in life as an act of providence. The supreme power drove her spontaneous involvement in different activities. She was religious and felt everything in life as a gift from God.

It is observed that the Assamese intelligentsia took to writing theological books. Their works, mostly as the commentaries of the religious texts were received well among the emerging educated class in Assam. The efforts to develop interest on mysticism could be explained by the simple reason that western education introduced in Assam was secular for all time. Teaching of religious faiths was excluded from the curricula. Instructions imparted in the formal institutions overlooked rituals and sentiments. Its natural reaction was a cultural awakening in the pursuit of indigenous religious traditions.

Along with the new dispensation, there was natural import of new belief systems and religious institutions. Harakanta *Sadar Amin* noted that construction of a church in concrete was completed in Guwahati by December 1845 (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,45). It was an indication of the advent of Christianity into Assam. Benudhar Rajkhowa mentioned that the tall building of Dibrugarh church attracted him very much in his school days. He also expressed his gratitude to the Christian missions for making immense contribution to Assam. He specially mentioned of the American Baptist Missionary Union for its untiring effort in recognising the independent status of Assamese language (Rajkhowa,1969,73,75). The influence of Christianity permeated the educational system. The Christian proselytizing activities ranged from street-corner preaching and distribution of free Christian literature in regional languages, to religious debates and actual conversions to Christianity (Kosambi,1999,183).

The Christian influence had historical significance in the diffusion of English in India. It paved the way for the Anglo-Indian literary culture. Conversion to Roman Catholicism in British India produced a high proportion of the major Indian-English writers of the nineteenth century, from Henry Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73), his brother Girish and his daughters Toru and Aru. Lakshminath Bezbaroa recorded that one of his elder brothers, Golap went to England to learn medicine. He became a successful physician and served in places abroad. For some reason, unknown to his relatives in Assam, Golap converted to Christianity. It was a shock for Lakshminath and their family. This conversion to Christianity had long repercussion in the Assamese society. Nobody could accept the conversion of an educated man like Golap who happened to be the son of an illustrious father. He was alienated from the larger Assamese community. Such things had already become common in Calcutta. It was an indication of a trend coming in the colonial rule. There was a sense of curiosity for the religious faith of a superior nation as presumed shown by a few of the western educated.

Education of Rajabala Das in Calcutta's Diasason College was governed by a set of new elites and Christian environment. Students were taught by the Catholic nuns. Rajabala was taken to the Cathedral Church in Calcutta. There she saw the practice of covering the head of the girls inside the church, whereas the boys went uncovered. The reason was explained to her by a Christian lady, 'by covering their heads, women should express their politeness to the Lord and while the men entered bareheaded as a sign of pride'

(Translation by the present author). The Principal Mary Victoria was herself a Sister and dressed like a nun. The hostel management was vested in the three nuns, who discharged every kind of authority over the boarders. One of the nuns often tried to motivate Rajabala into Christianity. She criticized Hindu gods as scandalous and questioned how the Hindu believers still could revere them as the worshipful. Rajabala recognized her hidden intention of forceful conversion and strongly resisted that unwelcome pressure (Das,2004,39,35). This incident could be related to the general attitude of the Christian Missions in India. They were interested in education of the womenfolk, they felt, women needed to be brought into the fold to make conversions permanent (Forbes,2000,37). The teachers taught them with kindness and generosity but some of them targeted the students to convert them to Christianity. Rajabala admired the personal qualities of her teachers but she was not ready to give up her own religious faith.

These life writings showed, the Assamese elites came to share and believe in the common interests of social upliftment. They had intense sense of loyalty to their family, clan and community. No doubt, there were social stratification but those at the bottom of the social ladder did not suffer human indignities. The teachings of Sankaradeva and other Vaishnava *gurus* had a great harmonising effect on the rich and poor alike. Tradition and modernity did not work against each other. By religiosity the elites gradually learnt to practise goodness to all. They were capable of adopting themselves to the changing situation and were confident of their 'modern' outlook regardless of criticism. Social issues of child marriage, widow remarriage and female education drew attention of the Assamese intellectuals. Modernisation was an important agenda for the educated since the nineteenth century.

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