

**The Woman Question: Emergence of Women's Writing in Assam,
Women's Journal and Women's Organisations**

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Comparative Literature

By

Anuradha Goswami



CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

University of Hyderabad

Gachibowli

HYDERABAD-500046

Telangana

India

October, 2016

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A thesis submitted during 2016 to the University of Hyderabad

in partial fulfilment for the award of

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled **“The Woman Question: Emergence of Women’s Writing in Assam, Women’s Journal and Women’s Organisations”** submitted by Anuradha Goswami, bearing Reg. No: 07HCPH02 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

The thesis has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

Hyderabad

October 2016

Prof. Tutun Mukherjee

Supervisor

Head

Centre for Comparative Literature

Dean

School of Humanities

DECLARATION

I, Anuradha Goswami (Reg. No. 07HCPH02), hereby declare that this thesis titled **“The Woman Question: Emergence of Women’s Writing in Assam, Women’s Journal and Women’s Organisations”** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Tutun Mukherjee is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga / INFLIBNET.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation attempts to study Assamese women's status from late 19th till mid 20th century Assam. The various factors like colonialism, social reformation, and nationalism played a major role in constructing the various images of women in Assamese society and are analysed through the writings in the journals. The images of the uneducated women, the uneducated wife, the educated wife, the women writer, the women editor, and the freedom fighter are the various images that emerge with the changing condition of women over the decades. All these images point to the transformation of women's condition. Through the writings appeared in the journals of the period the dissertation would explore how native intellectuals and women articulated the women's question.

By attempting to look at various writings in the journals, the dissertation would trace the various agencies and individual endeavours in articulating the rhetoric of the "woman question"¹, which gradually shaped the Assamese women's consciousness and urged the growth of the Assamese women writers. When we look into the women's question in the context of Assam one has to begin with the role of missionaries as they have introduced education to mass and print. Question on women first appeared in *Orunodoi*, a news paper cum journal in Assamese started by American Baptist Missionary in 1846. While women's question gained prominence in many regions of India in the early 19th century, it was articulated in Assam only towards the end of 19th century. Vina Mazumdar argues,

¹Uttell Janine in "The Woman Question" defines it as the problem specifically of women's suffrage and more broadly of changing political, economical, and professional roles for women and of social and sexual liberation - gained urgency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The women's question emerged essentially in the context of the identity crisis of the new educated middle class- the first products of colonial system of education. Many of them, trying to imitate the life styles of the colonial rulers, found the condition of their own women to be stumbling block. The criticism of many of our traditional customs like the treatment meted out to widows, child marriage, the denial of education, were felt to be bolts on our society which earned, very rightly, the criticism of western commentators. The first generations of reformers were anxious to remove those blots. There were only a few reformers, who went beyond the need to imitate the west, and began to address some of the other instruments that were used to subjugate and oppress women. (Mazumdar, 1)

Vina Mazumdar argues, in the beginning, women's question was the product of identity crisis of the educated middle class. While imitating the western values, the educated middle class men found the condition of their women as degrading and therefore they focused on certain issues that engulfed their women. In fact, there were very few reformers who went beyond the imitation of west and addressed the subjugation and oppression of women (Mazumdar 1). If it was the case of social reformers, as Partha Chatterjee in his essay, "The Nationalist Resolution of Women's Question" suggests, the women's question in the nationalist movement was limited to a careful construction of traditional gender roles. Moreover, it was limited to the idea of nationalism.

The women's question was initiated in Assam scenario much later in comparison with states like Bengal, Maharashtra and Madras. These were the centres of the colonial powers. Unlike these regions the social reform in Assam was not an organised movement. In order to trace the history of Assamese women writing, one has to start from the discourse on women's question which later on led to the production of a new image of women as writers. The rise of Assamese writings by

women is intricately linked to the rhetoric of women's question that infiltrated into Assam in the middle of 19th century.

I was introduced to the works of Assamese women writers through the work of Tilottoma Misra and Aparna Mahanta's *Women Writing in Assamese a Bibliography*. Most of the writings of the first generation Assamese women are found in the pages of old Assamese journals "of which a few collections survive, or are out of print." (Mahanta & Misra: 2000. np) This work introduced me to a body of women's writings in Assamese which have been somewhat forgotten or may be neglected or perhaps people are unaware of it or it do not accord them any literary significance as they are by women who took up the pen for the first time. This study attempts to trace their writing in the budding or emerging period through selective Assamese journals.

Women in all cultures have a rich and vibrant oral tradition and Assamese women are no exception. The first story a child hears is probably from a woman, a mother or a grand- mother. The lullabies sung to a child, the night time story a child keenly listens comes from women. What I claim is that creative expression is an innate gift of women. But women had to wait for long to give expression to their creativity in the form of writing. Hem Baruah claims that a large number of Assamese women contributed to Oral tradition in the form of Bihu Naam, Aai Naam, Dhai Naam, Nisukoni Geet etc. These songs express the hopes, desires, aspirations and emotions of women. In Assamese folk literature Bihu Geet or Bihu Naam reflects the agro based livelihood, happiness and sorrows of the masses, hopes and aspirations and love and feelings of lovers.

By tracing the writing I attempt to study the transformation of Assamese women within the rhetoric of women's question. This transformation was not uniform. It was initially confined to

the privileged few. But did the new images of women become the site of contestation? How did the social, economic and political demands of a patriarchal society give rise to what kind of images? How did the Assamese women negotiate the changes imposed upon them by the patriarchal society?

The primary texts for this dissertation are selected journals in Assamese language published from 1846 to 1931. The study attempts to establish a link between the three key issues the rhetoric of women's question, the growth of Assamese women writers and the awakening of the Assamese women agency in auguring social change. When the reformation moment started in the nineteenth century women became the primary focus of reform. The first need was to educate the women and with education the image of women transformed. There arose the image of women as reader and writer of letters which later on led to the emergence of women as writers. Until the period of independence movement, women were confined to the four walls of the house. But the demand of nationalism made the women come out for their shelter and fight for the freedom of the nation. Slowly the image of women as freedom fighters has also emerged. The writings in the journals help in getting a better understanding about the Assamese society and the women's role and position in the 19th and early 20th century Assam. The period under study holds a very significant place not only in the history of Assam but in the history of India. It was a period marked by a transition from a traditional to a modern society. It was a period of 'renaissance' and social reformation. It was the period of resistance and revolution against the colonial rule and the establishment of nationalism. The thesis has tried to examine how these factors directly or indirectly played a vital role in creation of the identity of Assamese women.

Research Focus: The focus of this research is to trace women's question in Assam and how various agencies contributed towards the construction and creation of a new image of women. The study examines the significant role played by Christian missionaries, especially the work of the missionaries' wives and women missionaries' contribution towards education, health and hygiene of Assamese women. With exposure to Western education and Bengal Renaissance, few newly educated Assamese intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekhiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua tried to bring about social reform to improve the condition of women through their writing. The dissertation tries to analyse the works of these writers along with that of writers like Ratneshwar Mahanta, Purnakanta Sharma, and Lambodar Bora and so on who objected to the social emancipation of women. The work focuses on the writings on women's question appeared in the journals like *Assam Bandhu*² [Friend of Assam] (1885-86), *Mou* [The Bee] (1886-87), *Jonaki* [Moonlight] (1889-1899) & (1901-1903) and *Ghar-Jeuti* [Light of the House] (1927-31), within the timeframe mentioned above. I have mostly referred to the reprints of old journals like *Orunodoi*, *Assam Bandhu*, *Mou*, *Jonaki*, *Banhi* etc. which were re-edited and compiled by Assam Prakashan Parishad. Digitalised version of the journal *Abahan* was available online.

I would also examine the entry of Assamese women into print media as editor of the first Assamese women journal *Ghar-Jeuti* (1927-31) which provided a platform to many women to take up the pen for the first time. The pages of the journal articulate the dreams and aspirations of the educated women of the early 20th century. The journal became the mouth-piece of the first

² *Assam Bandhu*, I have taken for my study is compiled and re-edited by Nagen Saikia and published by Assam Prakashan Parishad (Assam Publication Board) December, 2003. In 1885 twelve issues were published and from January 1886 to April 1886 only two more issues came out

Assamese women organisation *Assam Mahila Samity*³ and recorded the annual celebration of *Joymoti Utsov*⁴. Apart from this I have tried to look into the life and work of Padmashree Chandraprabha Saikiani, without whom Assamese women's struggle for freedom and emancipation is incomplete.

The study tries to understand why there were so few women contributors initially and who were they? But with the publication of *Ghar-Jeuti*, the first Assamese women journal, the number of women contributors increased. Why was it so? I would also try to look into the conditions and factors that led two women Kamalalaya Kakoti and Kanaklata Chaliha to edit an Assamese journal for women. *Ghar-Jeuti* is not simply a women journal but represented the dream of numerous Assamese women of the 20th century who wanted a change in their conditions. It bears the record of the first struggles of Assamese women to unite and fight for their right and dignity. *Joymoti Utsov* was the first of a kind of gathering for women to meet and celebrate the death anniversary of Ahom Princess Joymoti. The second such organisational activity by Assamese women was the formation of *Assam Mahila Samity* led by Padmashree Chandraprabha Saikiani. With the entrance of Chandraprabha Saikiani into the social scene, the condition of Assamese women started to change significantly. Assamese women may have been waiting for such a revolutionary for a long time. She touched the lives of women through her social and literary works. The thesis examines the life and social and literary works of this enigmatic woman who through her selfless works brought changes in the social, political and economic condition of Assamese women of the 20th century.

³ Assam Mahila Samity is a woman organisation founded in 1926 under the leadership of Chandraprabha Saikiani. It was later known as Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity.

⁴ Joymoti Utsov was an annual celebration organised to honour the Ahom princess Joymoti Konwari. It was in commemoration of the death anniversary of Rani Joymoti also known as Sati Joymoti or Joymoti Konwari. She sacrificed her life to save her husband Gadapapani pursued by the king's men. The celebration was first held on 6th April, 1914 on the banks of Joysagar.

Scope and Limitation: The thesis will trace the history of Assamese women's writings scattered through various journals from 1846 to 1927. There have been some work done in this area by scholars but my focus is on the writings that articulated the questions of reform and emancipation of women. So, the key issues I have touched upon in the discourse of women's question are education, marriage, child marriage, widowhood and women organisation.

The area of the work is vast, so there were difficulties and hurdles. The works of women writers are scattered in different journals. Individual writer's works had to be sourced and collected and source all the issues of the journals were impossible as many are lost and others scattered in different libraries or private collections. I have mostly referred to the reprints of old journals like *Orunodoi*, *Assam Bandhu*, *Mou*, *Banhi*, *Jonaki*, *Usha* etc. which were re-edited and compiled by Assam Prakashan Parishad. To lay hand on the primary material was very difficult. The fieldwork was not always satisfactory because of the difficulty in procuring primary texts.

Review of Literature and Difficulties Faced: Assamese literary history is the record of the "his" story, as women voices are silent. For instance the name of *Ghar-Jeuti*, the first Assamese women journal, is not listed in many literary histories of the Assamese. Birinchi Kumar Barua in *History of Assamese Literature* mentions the contribution of Mr. Brown wife (Mrs. Elizabeth Whitney Brown) in a single sentence "His wife too wrote a few text - books and stories in Assamese" (Barua: 1964, 105). It was sad to see the few torn and worn out copies of *Ghar-Jeuti* lying in dust, waiting to be restored in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Guwahati. Yet it reminds us of a bygone era which records the history of the first women's writings in Assamese.

It was only in the late twentieth century that scholars like Hem Barua, Gobinda Prasad Sharma, Aparna Mahanta, Tilottoma Misra and so on have focused their valuable research in this area of women's writing. The contribution of Sadou Assam Lekhika Samaroh Samiti⁵ is commendable. This Samiti has taken immense effort in tracing and recovering the lost and long forgotten voices of the bygone era of our fore-mothers. They have published three volumes of biography of Assamese women writers titled *Lekhikar Jivani*. Apart from this they have published works of individual Assamese women writers and compilations of brief life sketches of Assamese women freedom fighters. The work of these scholars and Samiti has immensely helped me to explore and trace the development of women's writing in Assamese. Not much research work has been done on early women's writing in Assamese. My work is a humble attempt to ward a critical study of early women's writing in Assamese.

When I started my research work on *Ghar-Jeuti*, I was constantly demotivated and faced with severe disappointment as there was nearly no mention of *Ghar-Jeuti* in the literary history of Assamese literature. I was not able to lay hand on a single copy of the journal. What I had was just the name of the journal. Most of the libraries I visited in Assam had hardly heard the name of the journal. My search for the journal ended in the Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, where a few worn out copies of the journal are available, lying unread with layers of dust on it. I noted down the few issues as I was not permitted to photocopy because of their fragile and brittle state. In 2008, Assam Prakashan Parishad republished the first women journal *Ghar-Jeuti*, edited by Aparna Mahanta. This was indeed a great moment in the history of Assamese literature and women's writing in Assamese. A nearly forgotten history was retrieved and given its due place.

⁵Sadou Assam Lekhika Samaroh Samity is an organisation of Assamese Women writers.

Research Questions: The following research concerns are addressed in the thesis:

- How do the native intellectuals engaged with the women's question? What were their concerns?
- How women addressed the rhetoric of women's question, do their discourses differ from the male discourse on the same subject?
- Being women and addressing the women's question what themes were central to their discourse?
- How do the writings points to the changing role of women's participation in the social and political sphere in the time frame?
- How do women made use of the platforms like *Joymoti Utsov* and *Assam Mahila Samiti* to address various concerns? Was it limited to the question of women?

Methodology: The research methodology used in this work falls within the framework of historical, cultural and comparative study. By tracing the growth of women's writing in Assamese, I am looking at it historically from a particular period and trying to look at the condition of women in the nineteenth and twentieth century Assamese society. The work does not provide a chronological history of women's writing in Assam because it is difficult to locate all the works of all women writers. The task of locating the journals was indeed very challenging as well as demanding. There are many journals in which Assamese women started publishing their work but I could not get access to all the old journals. I have based my research on the

journals which I could get my hands on. As Mahanta and Misra state, “All the old journals were not available...Moreover the state of preservation of old Assamese books is not systematic. No doubt many such books are available in private collections of which we have no knowledge”. My research is a modest effort in trying to rediscover the voices of a nearly lost tradition and study the works. The period selected is the pre- Independence period. The time frame is from 1846 to 1931. The year 1846 is very significant in the literary history of Assam. This year marks the publication of the first Assamese journal *Orunodoi* (Sunrise) published by the Baptist missionaries. The year 1927 is historic for women’s writing in Assamese. The first Assamese women’s journal *Ghar-Jeuti* (Light of the House) got published this year. *Ghar-Jeuti* opened a new chapter in the field of women’s writing in Assam. This journal was edited by two women Kamalalaya Kakoti and Kanaklata Chaliha. Though I have tried to look into various journals published between 1846 and 1927, the major portion of my research focuses primarily on the journal *Ghar-Jeuti*.

Chapterisation: The thesis is divided into three chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter titled “Discourse on Women’s Question: American Baptist Missionaries and Native Intellectuals” examine how women’s question was addressed by missionaries and intellectuals thorough various journals. I have divided this chapter broadly into six parts. The first sub-section, “The Language Question: The Colonial and Missionary Intervention” looks at the language debate with the entry of colonial rule and missionary activities. The second sub-section, “American Missionary and the Emergence of Journals in Assam” discusses the arrival of American missionaries and bringing along with them the printing press marks the beginning of printing in the region especially the journals. It is from their press the first journal *Orunodoi*

(Sunrise: 1846-1882) in Assamese was published, and the name itself symbolizing the beginning of the journal also symbolises the beginning. The Third sub-section, “Missionary Women: Ideal Wives or the “Saviours” of Native Women?” examines the role of women missionaries in the lives of Assamese women. The section also problematises the image of missionary women as ideal wife or savior of natives. The fourth sub-section, “The Entry of Single Woman Missionaries: *Zenana*, Adoption and Education of Women, Child Marriage” mainly focuses on the entry of single women missionaries and their *zenana* work. The sub-section also looks at women’s education, missionary activities of adoption and intervention to stop child marriage. The fifth sub-section, “Women Missionaries: Language and Literary Endeavors” looks into the women missionaries contribution to Assamese language and literatures. The final sub-section, “Native Intellectuals Discourse on Women’s Education, Child Marriage and Widow Marriage” examines the native intellectuals discourse on ‘women’s question’. The chapter is an attempt to trace the question of ‘women’ in the beginning of the colonial period through the medium of Assamese journals especially *Orunodoi*, *Assam Bandhu* (Friend of Assam), *Jonaki* (Moonlight) and *Mou* (Honey).

The second chapter titled “*Ghar-Jeuti* and Joymoti Utsov: Women’s Writing and Public Sphere” focuses on Assamese women’s writing in *Ghar Jeuti* and their participation in the public sphere through Joymoti Utsov. As Shobna Nijhawan says studying the women periodical is a way of understanding “the literary, cultural and socio political developments of the time as reflected upon by women writers” (Nijhawan: 2012). The growth of female literary rate, the birth of various woman organisations, and woman participation in the freedom movement encouraged women in different region of the country to organise themselves and build different platforms to

articulate their concerns. *Ghar-Jeuti* was not only a journal; it played an active part in mobilising the Assamese women. It tried to bind the Assamese women with a single thread of sisterhood. This chapter is divided into four sub-sections. First sub-section of this chapter “*Ghar-Jeuti: An Introduction*” provides an overview of the journal with a focus on women as editors of the journal. The second sub-section, “The Journal: Issues and Concerns” would offer an account of the contents in the journal. It also provides a note on the contributors and examines the politics involved in the careful choice of contributors. The third sub-section, “The Discourse on Widowhood in *Ghar-Jeuti*” examines the discourse on widowhood in *Ghar-Jeuti* to see how Assamese women addressed the question. The fourth sub-section, “Women’s Participation in the Celebration of *Joymoti Utsov*”, would look at the history of *Joymoti Utsov*, the politics behind the celebration of the same.

This third chapter, “*Assam Mahila Samity, Chandraprabha Saikiani and Women’s Question*” looked at the formation, functions and development of AMS. Beginning with a short description of the status of women’s education in early 20th century Assam, the first sub-section of the chapter, “Social Reform Movement and Women’s Organisation in India: An Overview” provides a short account of the establishment of women’s organisations in India with focus on Assam and the factors facilitated it. The second section, “Making History: The Formation and Activities of AMS” beginning with a historical account of the formation of AMS, discusses the aims, objectives and activities of AMS. The section also highlights AMS role in the implementation of Sarada bill. The third sub-section “Chandraprabha Saikiani: A History of Doing” gives a short biographical sketch of Chandraprabha Saikiani, the forerunner of women’s movement in Assam. The fourth sub-section, “Saikiani and AMS” discusses Saikiani’s role in the formation and activities of AMS. The fifth section, “The Question of Women in Saikiani’s writings”

addresses the issues of gender and sexuality represented in the literary works of Chandraprabha Saikiani. The conclusions of the thesis recapitulate the arguments in all chapters.

The work tries to structure a historical study of women's writing in Assamese by attempting to understand how the category of women writers developed in the context of social reformation, colonial rule and the freedom struggle. The dissertation also examines the active participation of women in forming women's organisation.

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CHAPTER 1

Discourse on Women's Question: American Baptist Missionaries and Native Intellectuals

This chapter attempts to examine how women's question was addressed by missionaries and intellectuals through various journals. The chapter is broadly divided into six parts and it would focus on the medium of Assamese journals especially *Orunodoi*, *Assam Bandhu* (Friend of Assam), *Jonaki* (Moonlight) and *Mou* (Honey). Beginning with the question of Assamese language and colonialism the chapter reviews the contribution of American Missionaries to the Emergence of Journals in Assam. It would also explore the entry of single woman missionaries to Assam and their contribution to the mission and the development of language and literary endeavours of Assam. This chapter also analyses the various writings by Assamese male writers that addressed issues related to women i.e. education, child marriage and widow marriage.

1.1. The Language Question: The Colonial and Missionary Intervention

This sub-section looks at the question of Assamese language and colonialism. The British colonialists played a major role in replacing Assamese language with Bengali for the administrative purpose. The annexation of Assam to the British Empire marks the end of the Ahom rule in Assam.⁶ The Ahoms ruled Assam from the thirteenth century till 1826. The last

⁶ The six hundred year old Ahom regime came to an end in 1826. The last decade of Ahom regime was marked by political instability and uncertainties in the region, which was torn apart with internal strife. To add to the plight of people the region was invaded by the Mughals. This was followed by the Moamarian rebellion and the Burmese invasion in 1817. The Burmese plundered the region for wealth and finally occupied it in 1820. In 1826, the Burmese came into conflict with the British in Cachar and being defeated, surrendered Assam to East India Company under the treaty of Yandaboo.

days of Ahom rule were marked by Moamarian rebellion⁷ and The Burmese War. With the coming of the British, many changes came across the region with both positive and negative effects. The British rule brought about some peace in the region after the tumultuous years. Education and economy of the region underwent a tremendous change which was seen positively by the people. But the greatest damage British did to the region was the imposition of Bengali language in the law-courts and schools of Assam in 1836.

Scholars have varied opinions on the imposition of Bengali in the place Assamese. Birinchi Kumar Barua claims,

The British were strangers to the land and had no knowledge of the local tongue. So people from other provinces of India began to pour into Assam and settle down as interpreters and clerks of the British to enable them to carry on the newly established administration. Under the influence of these men, recruited mostly from Bengal, the British administration made Bengali the language of the court and medium of instruction in the schools of Assam (103-104).

In this case, as Barua analyses it was the Bengali interpreters who worked under British administration played a role in replacing Assamese. Whereas, Sisir Kumar Das in the *History of India Literature: 1800 to 1910* points out that the British administration imposed Bengali on the assumption that Assamese language was a dialect of Bengali, and the mutual intelligibility was so high that adoption of Bengali replacing Assamese would be administratively beneficial (138). In this case, the ignorance of the colonial rulers seems the reason for the replacement of Assamese with Bengali. This imposition lasted for thirty seven years and so this period is

⁷ The Moamarian refers to the supporters of the Vaisnava faith who rose in revolt against the queen during the King Rajeshwar Singh reign in the eighteenth century. The Queen was a supporter of Sakta religion and she humiliated the Vaisnavite heads this led to the revolt.

regarded as the darkest period in the history of Assam. The American missionaries like Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson and native intellectual like Anandaram Dekhiyal Phukan strongly protested against this policy and finally the ban was removed in 1873 and Assamese language regained its status as the official language and medium of instruction in schools.

The American Baptist Missionaries played a major role in the development of Assamese language which helped in re-establishing Assamese language. They arrived in Assam on the request of Major Jenkins. Regarding the first arrival of missionaries Mrs. A.K. Gurney says,

In 1836, Major Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam, and other friends of missions, asked the Calcutta Baptists to start a Mission on the frontier with reference to the Shan or Khamti tribes. The Calcutta Baptists asked the American Mission in Burma, to take the field as it could soon, they thought, be connected with their Missions in Burma and open to the Missionaries an immense population between Burma and Assam. This seemed a providential opening. So Rev. Nathan Brown and Mr. Cutter with his printing press were sent from Burma, to open the new Mission. In 1836 we find them at Sadiya, commencing their work or the Khamtis and Shans (20).

The following year, another missionary Miles Bronson arrived. Bronson was stationed at Jaipur, where he worked with the Singphos. But Brown and Cutter had to abandon their mission at Sadiya when they were attacked by the Khamtis. They reached Jaipur and worked there for few years before moving to Sivasagar in 1841. Tilottoma Misra says “it was from this press that various Assamese books like Bible stories and religious tracts, a grammar of the Assamese language, a dictionary, a history of Assam and several school books were published(1987,67).

Thus, with the introduction of printing press, the Assamese language and literature found new direction.

Another trajectory of language question in Assam can be traced thorough the activities of British Missionaries. The first missionary activity in the region began under David Scott; the representative agent of British administration in Assam invited the Serampore Missionary to establish a base in Assam. James Rae from the Serampore Mission established the first missionary centre at Guwahati in 1829. They were aware that the knowledge of the local language was essential to fulfill the missionary work and would help in establishing a bond with the local people and spread the message of Christ. Rae arrived in Assam with a few copies of William Carey's Bible which was in Assamese. The first rule in evangelical mission was to establish schools. Rae started a school from his missionary bungalow and the medium of instruction was Bengali. Perhaps, the use of Bengali as a medium of instruction in school was due to the unavailability of textbooks in Assamese. The use of Bengali is stated by Nagen Saikia thus "in Bengali there were many school books, while except the Bible there was none in Assamese. Therefore it was the British Missionary Society which introduced Bengali as a teaching subject in the first school of Assam" (126). According to Tilottoma Misra, the British missionary was unsuccessful in Assam. She says that:

This mission, however, could not make much of a mark in the socio-cultural atmosphere of Assam because of the considerable financial strain under which the mission had to function....This mission was finally wound up in 1836 and the Christian missionary activities in Assam witnessed a lull till the coming of American Baptists (1560-1561).

Though the mission was unsuccessful, they also played a role in introducing Bengali in the region.

1.2. American Missionary and the Emergence of Journals in Assam

This sub-section reviews the contribution of American Missionaries to the Emergence of Journals in Assam. The discussion here is limited to the journals selected for the study. The growth and development of the press in Assam was the outcome of the introduction of printing press in the province, The *Orunodoi*, the first Assamese monthly, was published, from the American Baptist Mission Press at Sivasagar in 1846. Barpuzari says that prior to this; accounts of the events of Assam appeared mostly in newspaper like *The Friend of India*, *Samachar Darpan*, *Samachar Chandrika* and *Sanjibani* (1977, 150). The publication of the first Assamese journal, the *Orunodoi*⁸, from the Sivasagar Mission Press in 1846 was a landmark in the history of Assamese literature. According to Misra this monthly journal set a new trend in Assamese literature which may broadly term as a secular one” (1987, 67). As part of missionary mission the main aim of the journal was to spread Christianity among the people. Apart from this, the journal carried articles on science and general knowledge. Misra says that the journal served a dual purpose:

By filling up the vacuum in the sphere of Assamese journalism and of serving as a useful school-book....Besides catering to the needs of the school children the journal provided a wide variety of attractive reading materials for the general reader. It contained not only news-items of general interest, religious information

⁸*Orunodoi* was edited by Rev. Nathan Brown. But in the initial years of its publication the editor's name was not given. Nagen Saikia mentions in “Orunodoi pora Jonakilo” [From Orunodoi to Jonaki] that it was only from March 1950 that the name of Nathan Brown as the editor was published. It was in August 1950 both the editor Nathan Brown and publisher Oliver Cutter's name was published. Before 1950 only the publisher Oliver Cutter's name was published. For more details see Saikia 113.

, moral fables , stories of other lands, history, geography, astronomy , botany, zoology and information about scientific discoveries, but also poems, riddles and even designs of embroidery on cloth (1987, 69).

Orunodoi did not restrict its contributors to the missionaries and native converts.⁹ It published writings of Assamese intellectuals of that period. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharjya in “*Orunodoi Sambad Potror Sambad*” (news in *Orunodoi* Newspaper Journal) mentions the names of Anadaram Dekhiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Hemchandra Barua, Kamalakanta Bhattacharjya etc as the contributors to the journal (84). The writings of Anadaram Dhekiyal Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua are examined in the last section of the chapter.

During the period of publication of *Orunodoi*, few other regional journals appeared. Gunabhiram Barua edited a monthly journal, *Assam – Bandhu*, 1885- 86 (The friend of Assam) from Calcutta. He contributed a number of articles on history of Assam in this journal. On January, 1885 the first issue of this daily was published from Calcutta. Altogether fourteen issues were published within a span of sixteen months (28). Gunabhiram Barua, the editor of the journal writes about *Assam-Bandhu*:

We would not like to enter in to politics. We are inexperienced in politics. We would not publish anything on grammar. We would not praise or criticize anyone...to give news is not our purpose. Our purpose is to provide entertainment and spread knowledge. The journal is a platform for literature, science and art discourse. Everybody is free to express their views in these areas. We would not

⁹ The main contributors of *Orunodoi* were the missionaries. Brown was a key writer of the journal, his wife Eliza also contributed to the journal. Nidhiram Farewell, the first native baptised by Nathan Brown in 1841 at Sibasagar frequently contributed to the journal.

be the mouth piece of any society or any person. We will work for the development of knowledge.” (2003, 2-3).

A monthly newspaper devoted to Assamese literature, language and culture. The journal carried articles on wide range of topics. For entertainment purpose the journal published poems, humorous topics for the development of the society creating general awareness and spreading knowledge among the educated. To attract the general educated masses the contents of journal range from articles on historical events, tracts on tribal life; to scientific analysis on different topics and review on literary works.

The journal *Mou* (The Bee 1886-1887) was published eight months after the *Assam Bandhu* disappeared from the literary scene of Assam. Almost all the writings in the journal were written by Bolinarayan Bora. The journal was edited by his brother Horonarayan. It was published from Calcutta, after four issues the journal ceased publication. Another Assamese journal *Jonaki* (Moonlight) was published from Calcutta between 1889 and 1899 under the editorship of Chandra Kumar Agarwala (1867-1937). After a gap of two years, the journal saw its second phase of publication from Guwahati in 1901 under the editorship of Satyanath Bora. But it was published for a brief span of three years. In 1903 it ceased publication. For my study I have taken the collection of *Jonaki*, collected, compiled and edited by Nagen Saikia and published by Assam Sahitya Sabha from Guwahati in January, 2001. Nagen Saikia in the introduction remarks that:

Jonaki was not simply a journal but an epoch, a revolution and literary spirit.

Jonaki was the mouth piece of the *Asomiya Bhasha Unnoti Sadhini Sabha* (Association for the development of Assamese language, literature and culture)

started by the section of Assamese youths who went to Calcutta for their education and felt the need to work for the development and promotion of the Assamese language and literature as well as Assamese culture and national consciousness. A group of Assamese youth studying in Kolkata organized the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnoti Sadhini Sabha* in 1888. This organization came into existence on 25 August 1888 at 67 Mirzapur Street, Calcutta (19).

The monthly journal started publication with the sincere effort of this group. The literary stalwarts of Assamese literature like Sahityarathi Laskhminath BezBarua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala and Hemchandra Goswami were associated with this journal. The journal spells out its aims and objectives in the *Atmokotha* (self-sketch) written by Chandrakumar Gupta:

Politics is outside our area because in a dependent country people policy should be more important. Literature, science and society are the areas of our discussion. We are open to criticism and controversy and will embrace them warmly. We will make an effort to win the love from different sections of Assamese society. We will devote our entire energy for the nation. In this land of darkness we may not spread light but if through our sincere efforts we can find a path among the ambers we will be glad that our efforts have been successful. (Translation Mine, *Jonaki*, 4)

It is also mentioned that the newly educated youth found their land lagging behind in education, science, wealth, health sector and not a free country. Through the journal they have armed themselves to fight against darkness. The aim is national development, to spread light, *Jonaki* (moonlight).

As stated in the *atmakotha*, the themes in the journal were related to Assamese language, Assamese society, Assamese culture, history of Assam. It became the mouth-piece of *Asamiya Bhasa Unnoti Sadhini Sabha* and carried the proceedings of the organization. The journal published articles, short stories, drama, poems essays etc. Apart from these, it carried articles on national development, education, women education, marriage etc. The writings in the journal portray how language, literature and education are closely and intricately linked with the progress of a nation. The articles like “Jatiyo Unnoti” (national development), “Loraxokolor Siksha” (Education for Boys) and “Axomiyar Unnoti”(Development of the Assamese) deals with education and national development.

1.3. Missionary Women: Ideal Wives or the “Saviours” of Native Women?

This sub-section attempts to look into a relatively less explored terrain i.e. the role of woman missionaries who came as wives and single woman missionaries after the establishment of woman Baptist missionary society. If we look into the history of missionary activities and the role of the woman missionary in it, we find a lacuna. Assamese literary history comprises a major section on contribution of the male missionaries whereas it hardly mentions the contribution of women missionaries or the ‘wives of the missionaries’. For instance, Birinchi Kumar Barua in *History of Assamese Literature* (1964), published by Sahitya Akademi, has a single sentence on Eliza Whitney Brown: “His wife (wife of Nathan Brown) too wrote a few text-books and stories in Assamese” (104). Eliza Brown was not even addressed with her name. It is an interesting fact that most of the missionary wives who came to the region accompanying their husband were not addressed by their first name as seen but by their husband surname. Eliza Brown was a pioneer of women’s education in Assam. The missionary wives role as educator, writer of text books and grammar books, and health care provider has not been acknowledged.

When male missionaries set their foot in Assam, they were accompanied by their wives and children. The woman missionaries accompanied their husband as wife. Mrs. Philips, a missionary wife, called herself “devoted Christian wife”. The women followed their missionary husband as dutiful wives helping them, serving them, bearing the pain and hardship along with their husbands in order to make their evangelical mission possible. As Suryasikha Pathak claims:

They had equal contribution to the evangelical project and had sometimes to work harder in the mission field to get access to the indigenous society. The men missionaries often assigned their wives and single woman missionaries the job of trying to explore the inner domain of indigenous society where men were not allowed to influence the women to the ideas of the new faith. This happened in the initial phase of their work when they were met with repeated failures and counter attack from the institution of indigenous faith. In the second phase, women missionary or missionary wives were assigned certain “feminine” duties like teaching the children and women, mid-wifery and health care and music classes displaying the gender bias of missionary themselves (307).

The missionary wives who accompanied their husbands tried to become ideal help mates for their husbands. They shared the triumphs and hardships in the “heathen lands”. They led a lonely life away from their family and friends among the vagaries of nature of an unknown land. Mrs. E.G. Philips in “The Work for Missionaries Wives” narrates that the primary duty of a missionary wife is to be a devoted house wife. She writes that at the time of creation, woman was given the “position of a helpmate or counterpart of man”. Socially they are equal but physically man is stronger. He has the greater strength to bear the heavy burdens of life. Her role is to lighten the burdens by being his comforter in times of sorrow. As a wife of the missionary, she

has to perform the dual role of being his helpmate and the duties of a wife. As Mrs. Philips questions,

When a missionary wife steps on heathen shores does she in way cease to be a wife? As a wife, are not the same duties resting on her as were before she left her native land? It is true that when she sees the vast multitudes of human beings living in sin and ignorance, with no knowledge of the Light of Life, her heart goes out after them, with a longing desire to tell them of a loving Saviour. But is that to be her only work? Is she to give up the work which God has already appointed her to do? (205).

Mrs. Philips lays stresses on the role of the women missionaries as wives. The wives are to be blessings to their husbands, diligent, prudent, benevolent, hospitable, and adorned with modesty, sobriety, and good works (210). Apart from the duty of wife, the women missionaries can be “best fitted for teaching, some for evangelistic work and some can assist their husband in their literary work”. Mrs. Philips being a missionary wife had internalised the role of an ideal wife as set down the patriarchal society. She never questioned it rather she accepted the role and advised other missionary wives to do the same. This shows the nineteenth century idealism of Victorian womanhood that a woman proper vocation is the home, where she is the ideal wife and the ideal mother. The missionary wives accompany their husband as wife and when they take the role of working for the mission, her role is seen as a duty of an ideal wife. The time and energy she devotes in the mission calling is accepted as the qualities of a dutiful wife. The missionary wives so internalised the role of wives that they did not separate their contribution in teaching, preaching and literary work as their own endeavour. The image of a missionary wife as an independent, educated woman is shattered after reading Mrs.Philips’ paper on the work of

missionaries' wives. She describes their effort as an extension of their husband's work. She ends the paper by saying:

So it is that before the devoted Christian wife many unforeseen opportunities of doing good are continually arising. So let us, as such, bravely take up the duties which God has given us and,

“Work till the last beam faded

Faded to shine no more;

Work while the night is darkening

When man's work is o'er” (210)

In the same paper examines how the presence of the wives of missionaries was seen as a burden in fulfilling the mission goal. This was in response to a paper written on “If Single Woman Why Not Single Man for Missions” She discusses the drawbacks and offers solution to how missionaries' wives can support their husbands without being a burden on the mission.

This is only one interpretation of the lives of the missionaries' wives. The papers presented in the Mission Conference in Assam in 1886 point to the works missionary women were doing in order to help the evangelical mission. There are records scattered in different pages in missionary journals and books which present missionaries' wives working hand in hand with their husbands to achieve mission goal besides being mere wives.¹⁰

¹⁰ Some of the journals and books are *Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union, Minutes Resolutions and Historical Reports of the fifth triennial Conference* held in Dibrugarh in 1899, *Following the Pioneers: A story of American Baptist Work in India and Burma* by Joseph. C. Robbins, *Our Gold Mine: the Story of American Baptist Mission in India* by Mrs. Ada.A.Chaplin, *Stray Leaves from Assam* by Mrs. P. H. Moore. In the

It is true that the missionaries' wives did not take the mission as a profession and they were not paid for their work. But few of them played a vital role in the lives of the native women. Miss Orrell Keeler mentions in "The Work of Woman Missionaries" the three primary works married and single missionaries were doing among the native women. The first as the facilitator of education, second the *zenana* work and third their work in the health care. The papers and discussion of the Jubilee conference of the Assam Mission held in Nagaon in 1886 highlights the work of the three major stations in Assam and the role of the missionaries' wives in the school set up in the station. "Woman's work among the Assamese" by Miss Orrell Keeler, "The Work of Missionaries' Wives" by Mrs. E.G. Philips, "History of the Sibsagar Field" by Mrs. A.K.Gurney, "History of the Nagaon Field" by Rev. P.H. Moore, "History of the Guwahati Field" by Rev. C.E. Burdette are some of the papers from which we get a history of the missionary activities in Assam.

Barpuzari in the introduction to his work *The American Missionaries and North-East India* remarks:

The influence of the missionaries on the education of women was not small. Reluctance of the gentry to send their daughters to Christian schools compelled Mrs. Barker to depend on "Bazar girls". Since sixties there was a growing desire among the educated Assamese that their daughters and wives should be taught. "Time has come", Remarks Stoddard, "we can reach them in their house which we must do before we could gather them to school." Though the term "Bazar girl" is quite unclear, we can assume

title page of *The Stray Leaves from Assam* Moore mentions that *Stray Leaves from Assam* is a continuation of her Journal "Twenty Years in Assam", "Further Leaves from Assam" and "Autumn Leaves from Assam".

that it could be either the orphan girls or the lower caste girls. Long before attempts were made by the ladies of the mission to impart instructions to females of higher castes in *zenana* or private apartments as was done by the Women's Missionary Society in Calcutta" (1986,li-iii).

The first school they setup in Sadiya as mentioned by Mr. Nathan Brown in his journal dated June 19:

have been putting up a school-house, in which Mrs. Brown will endeavour to collect the village girls. Mrs. Cutter teaches the boys' school, which now contains about forty scholars; they appear to be making rapid progress, and are very ambitious to learn. Mrs. Brown commenced the girls' school today, with ten scholars. (As quoted in Barpuzari: 1986, 10)

The first school was started on 7th June, 1836.

A few half-frightened, wholly unclad young savages squatted on the matting at Mrs. Brown's feet in the just finished bamboo school-house....By degrees Mrs. Brown gained the confidence of the little boys, and Mrs. Cutter of girls; and began to give them such instructions as was possible with only ten weeks practice in the language (Brown 135).

With the passage of time, the number of schools in the vicinity started to grow and the village girls were enrolled.

The work among the Assamese women was in the initially taken by four women- Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cutter in Sivasagar, Mrs. Barker in Guwahati and Mrs. Bronson in Nagaon. With the

passage of time, they were helped by other missionaries but these four women had a major contribution. Mr. Burdette opines regarding women's education that

the education of women must be modified by the customs of the people among whom the work is done....The women should be taught to submit to their husbands in love as the church to Christ, and seek in education as a means of becoming, not men, but better women. (180)

Missionary men like Burdette emphasised on their role of nurturing the feminine qualities/ or making the native women better women.

Apart from studies, girls in the schools and boarding were taught Bible lessons, stitching, household management and child care. Eliza Brown, after successfully helping two women in finishing reading the book in 1850, writes:

Two of the women, (one a member of the church, the last baptized) finished 'the First Reading Book' to-day; a great day for Assam! I do not think the Herculean task of two married women having learned to read, has ever before been accomplished in this province. The women after having grown up in ignorance are fully impressed with the belief that they cannot learn. Besides, the ridicule to which they are subjected makes it very difficult to induce them to continue. Our Old Brahmin pundit often comes along by my little school-room, and laughs at the idea of my spending my time teaching women to read (353).

As the quote suggests, though the Brahmin pundits were associated with some missionary activities, they ridiculed the idea of women's education.

As we see in this sub-section, missionary men most often used their women as tools for their mission. In fact, missionary women's role was gendered. They were supposed to educate/ give training to native women and girls in feminine "qualities," health care and music etc. However, their role was immense since the missionary men did not have access to the inner domain of the indigenous society where they could influence the women. There were also in opposition for some missionary wives for forgetting their wifely duties while being part of the missionary activities. Regardless of all these, we see that the missionary women/wives displayed a "saviour" image. Though they were not paid like the missionary men, they indeed played a major role in influencing the lives of native women. In the initial stage they could only educate the "Bazar girls," but they have also facilitated education for upper caste women in their *Zenana*.

1.4. The Entry of Single Woman Missionaries : *Zenana* , Adoption and Education of Women, Child Marriage

This sub-section examines the entry of single woman missionaries to Assam and their contribution to the mission. Of the three institutions, the Nagaon mission was the most successful. It was started by Mr. & Mrs. Bronson in 1842 by establishing a school. In order to avoid heathen influence, Mr. Bronson started an Orphan Institute in 1843, accommodating both boys and girls. As the people were not ready to enroll their children in the school, Miss Keeler says "our missionaries went out into the high-ways and by-ways and sought the orphan and homeless." Mrs. Bronson had to take the dual role of a teacher and a matron of the girls' department. Until 1853, the Nagaon Orphan Institute full-fledged but the Orphan Institute was closed down in 1854.

The Nagaon Mission was the first to bring single women to work for the missionary. In 1851, Miss Shaw arrived with the Bronsons from America to work as a teacher. In 1875 Miss Sweet joined the Nagaon field and started the boarding school for girls. Miss Keeler says,

Between 1875 and 1885 seventeen girls have been inmates of the boarding-school. Five have married, three have returned to their relatives, one is a domestic in a missionary's family and one was expelled and one died. The present number is seven. Two have passed the Government Lower Primary Examination, one is a member of the school, but not a beneficiary, has passed the Government Upper Primary Examination, and has been sent to Calcutta, to the Bethune School, to study English, with a view of taking a medical course of study under Lady Dufferrin Fund (Brown: 1886, 186-87).

Few years down the line in 1915, two girls from the rural village of Daisingari came for admission in the Nagaon Mission School and stay in the boarding. They were Chandrapriya and Rajaniprova Das. Chandrapriya (later on known as Chandraprabha Saikiani) became the first feminist and the leader of women's movement in Assam. She received her teacher training here when the Normal Training Centre was started. She left the institute in 1917. Rajaniprova from a young age wanted to become a doctor and her dream was fulfilled when she reached the Nagaon Mission Girl's Boarding School. She went to Shillong to complete her entrance examination after receiving a missionary scholarship and went on to Calcutta to become a doctor.

From 1875, single trained missionary women joined the Nagaon Mission. Among them were Miss Sweet, Miss Orrell Keeler, Miss A.K. Brandt and Miss N.L.Purssell. Sometimes the burden of the school had to be taken care of by a single missionary because of the shortage of

missionaries. Most of the missionaries frequently felt ill because the weather did not suit them and they had to take break and go back to their homeland only to return after recovering. From 1842 to 1885, nearly twelve women missionaries, including married and single, offered their services to the Nagaon Department. They included Mrs. Bronson, Mrs. Stoddard, Mrs. Tolman, Mrs. Scott, Mrs. Bronson, Mrs. P.H.Moore, Miss M.S. Shaw, Miss Marie Bronson (daughter of Bronsons'), Miss A. K. Sweet, Miss Orrell Keeler, Miss A.K. Brandt and Miss N.L.Prussell. There were occasions where the Nagaon Mission work had to be left in the hands of native helper. P.H. Moore remarks "in 1857 for twenty months the Nagaon field was left without a missionary. The work was left in the hands of Charles Sonaram Thomas, a native helper." (33)

The *zenana* work became part of the programme of the single women missionaries. *Zenana* refers to work among the women who are kept within the home. The *zenana* is described by missionaries as "Dark stuffy *zenana* with their wan, listless hidden women- that world of untold tragedy and suffering" (Sheila Bora, 287). The missionaries tried to enter the homes of every woman irrespective of caste and class. But their mission was not always successful as Miss Keeler says "we sometimes meet a welcome, sometimes indifference, and sometimes a humble hearer". They used to visit the people home sit, talk and sing but the moment people hear the word of Christ, they did not care to listen. Spreading the word of Christ was the main part of the *zenana* work. They were sometimes called by the women of the higher caste to learn stitching and wool work. The knowledge they had about medicine helped them to enter the homes and hearts of the people. The missionaries' efforts to look after the sick, needy and helpless helped them to enter the lives of people of Assam. Keeler mentions that a medical missionary could do a good work in Assam. Keeler mentions the change of attitude of a Brahmin widow towards the missionary women after she lost her two daughters. She took help of the Bible-women to

overcome her sorrow and slowly was attracted to the words of Christ. This also proves how missionary were successful in converting people.

Adoption was another means through which missionary aimed at conversion of native. The girls who were adopted were also educated by them. Mrs. Eliza Brown started the boarding school for girls in Sibasagar. She planned to adopt few little Assamese girls as her own, that she might give them the nurture which children have in Christian families at home. “These girls”, she said, “I shall hope to train up, by blessing of God, to know and love the Saviour, and hope that they will become the wives of native Christians, and the most promising, of native preachers, and that they may live to do good to their fellow-countrymen long after I am gone. (Brown: 371)

The missionaries carried out strict rules in the adoption of girls to the Sibasagar Boarding School. As mentioned in *Whole World Kin* in order to execute the plan “it was necessary to receive from parents or guardians a written agreement, giving the children absolutely to her, and containing the provision that she should select their husbands and give them in marriage” (Brown: 1890, 371). Though native girls were educated by them, the marriage bond which they insisted could be seen as a strategy to convert them to Christianity as suggests by the following example.

The first success of Mrs. Brown was in Jan 11, 1850 when Akesuri was adopted with proper agreement prepared by a pundit and signed by seven witnesses. The girl’s father was paid three rupees for *baksheesh* (tip). Slowly, the number increased but almost all the girls were outcaste to the society. The children came from different castes and community. There were children from Muslims, Hindu, Doom (belonging to fisher community), Brahman and Eurasian community. There was a runaway slave girl, a Muslim girl of six years whose father was a prisoner, a girl from the Brahman family whose mother was an outcaste as she married for the second time. The

school was carried solely by Mrs. Brown with the help of the pundit who gave lesson on writing and arithmetic. But he was always critical about educating the girls “Teaching boys was all very well but girls!” (374). The boarding school created an environment of caste-less society where girls belonging to different class and community studied, stayed and worked together.

On the first Sunday in June, 1852, the gathering villagers witnessed a marvellous spectacle. The Brahman widow and the little Doom girl were led together into the baptismal waters, which washed away the ancestral barriers, and made them kindred in the Christ, ready to partake of the same loaf and drink from the same sacramental cup”(Brown 379).

Mrs. Brown in a letter to her daughter wrote as quoted in *The Whole World Kin*: “to see the proud Bamuni with the lowly Dumini-the highest and the lowest-both clothed with the same spirit of humility, go into the water together, and become of one caste!” (379). The act of conversion seems to be justified here on the ground that they are able to bring together the women of upper castes and lower castes. The converted women have encountered several problems. It is through the letters in *The Whole World Kin* the details of the girls who were converted in the 1851 can be found. Budhi, Jogori and Kunti were the oldest girls to be baptised by Brown on July 6, 1851 (377). Kunti was the daughter of a Brahman and she was under the care of Mrs. Brown. Kunti Caroline Simons (as she was known after baptism) was married to Ramsingh, a native Christian after completing her studies and training under Mr. Brown. There is also mention of Budhi Lizzie, another Hindu girl from a lower caste. She was given to the missionaries by her relatives at the age of twelve. She stayed with them for four years before getting married to Peter Boardman, an Assamese work men in the printing office (Brown: 1889, 388). But Budhi did not have a happy life. She left Sibsagar after her husband was transferred to

Dibrugarh. There she was treated with suspicion and abuse by the heathen neighbours. Mrs. Whiting who replaced Mrs. Brown noted that Budhi was called “the Christian dog” by her neighbour and the humiliation grew more day by day and finally Budhi succumbed to death without losing her faith in Christianity. These two tales of the girls shows how people treated the girls after they come out of the sheltered home in mission schools and land among their own people.

Some missionary women opposed evil customs like child marriage and widowhood. Sheila Bora in “Impact of American Missionaries on the women of North East India 1836-1900” says, “though the missionaries mention that social evils like Sati and Kulinism were conspicuous by their absence in the region, the women had a degraded position in society and social evils like widowhood, child marriage and polygamy appear to have been widely prevalent” (287). Mrs. Brown was aware of the two social evils that Assamese women had to bear. The custom of widowhood and child marriage was prevalent among the women of Assam. Mrs. Brown made it a point that none of her adopted girls underwent such a cruel custom. Budhi was married at the age of fifteen. In *The Whole World Kin* it refers to Mrs. Brown’s initiative in stopping child marriage. It says “Mrs. Brown endeavoured to correct the custom of child-marriage, retaining her own pupils not previously betrothed, to the age of fourteen or fifteen-as great an innovation as could at first be brought about” (383).

The American missionaries were not able to engage in conversion of the Assamese people in a larger way. After analysing the work of women missionaries, it became clear that they were able to limit their mission within a small group of people. They were able to impart education and also engage in the process of evangelization to a section of people who were neglected by the society. They might have come under the care of the missionary because of their poverty,

helplessness or in search of a shelter. In each of the girls' boarding schools, the pupils are either orphan or destitute. Further, the training given to the girls were mainly designed to become good wives or mothers and a good Christian. They were to enact the same role as the missionary's wives of being a dutiful wife and also a helpmate or counterpart of their husbands. Apart from the school curriculum, the girls were trained to become efficient housewives and helpful Christian women. They were trained in household management, hygiene, training children, gardening, stitching and mending of clothes, learning cross stitch, embroidery and woolen work. Further, they became misfit to their native societies as they were trained to live in a different lifestyle. Before they entered the missionary premises, they were deprived beings. But now, under the care of the missionaries, they have new hopes and desires which they will not be able to fulfil outside the missionary premises. They have lost their religion coming in contact with missionaries. Further, they would not be able to find any kind of engagements in their society. They are now outsiders to the society.

1.5. Women Missionaries: Language and Literary Endeavours

This sub-section explores the contribution of missionary women to the development of language and literary endeavours of Assam. The first mission undertaken by the missionary was to learn the language of the people which will help them in spreading the word of the Bible among the native people. The main hurdle of the missionaries was availability of texts in the Assamese language. So, they set out to learn the language by listening to the words and jotting them down with their meaning. The male missionaries took an active part in developing the Assamese language and publishing various books on Assamese language and grammar. In the *Whole World Kin* it mentions Mrs. Eliza Brown helping her husband in collecting data to learn the Assamese language after they arrived in Sadiya.

The people immediately around the missionaries were the valley Assamese; hence still another tongue must at once be learned. It was a written language, but without dictionary or grammar, and there was no interpreter. Pointing to an object Mr. and Mrs. Brown would catch the name from the lips of a native, and write the sound in Roman letters, enlarging their vocabulary of nouns day by day, and quickly picking up the verbs and modifiers with the imperative momentary necessity of using them (131).

She also helped Brown in translating tracts prepared for school texts. During the period when Brown fell sick, she helped in “copying and correcting proofs to hasten on the press work. In 1840, Mr. Brown left for Sivasagar for health consultation during this time Mrs. Brown “remained behind at work upon translations of school books” (214).

History glorifies Mr. Brown in bringing out the first books in Assamese. Mr. Brown played a vital role in fighting and restoring Assamese language to its proper place when Assamese was banned in the schools and courts of Assam in 1836. His *Grammatical Notes on Assamese Language* was published in 1848. But the above lines point to the fact that his wife was also involved in developing the language and helping him out in collecting and taking the notes on the language. History has been silent on women’s contribution to the language but a few lines jotted in *The Whole World Kin* points to the role played by Mrs. Brown in developing the Assamese language. Mrs. Eliza Brown translated the *Worcester’s Primer* to be taught in the school. In an entry by Mr. Brown in *The Whole World Kin* she says “Eliza has been translating Worcester’s Primer” and the pictures were engraved by a young Khamti boy from the school (154).

Missionary women have also contributed to the genre of children's literature in Assam. We get a list of the work published by Eliza Brown in *The Whole World Kin*.

Mrs. Brown had found enough time to prepare the Assamese children a series of twelve brief illustrate narratives, chiefly translations from English and Bengali, with some additional original matter of her own. Among them were, "Old Saul, the Praying African," "The Warrior Chief Converted," "Happy Death of Bajon," "The Orphan Girl," "The Eagle's Nest", or "A Mother's Love," and a "Memoir of Hube," the little Naga boy. She was fully repaid for the labour bestowed on these story-books when they came from the press and a copy was presented to each of her delighted pupils. They were so dainty and small, type so clear, after a child's own heart; they were the first story books ever made on the purpose for young Assam- and moreover they are true stories (386-87).

Mrs. Cutter another missionary wife who accompanied the Mr. and Mrs. Browns in their mission was another woman who showed interest in the Assamese language and bought out books. Mrs. Cutter prepared a book under the title *Vocabulary and Phrase Book*, in 1848. She in this book discussed about Assamese words. On the basis of this book Mr. S.R. Ward prepared a *Brief Vocabulary in English and Assamese with Rudimentary Exercises*, the Assamese title of which was *Ingraji Aru Asamiya Bakyavali*, it was published by and printed at American Baptist Mission Press, Sivasagar in 1846. Second part of this book was revised by W. Clerk and was published under the title *Phrases in English and Assamese*, in 1877 (Saikia Background 145-146).

Nagen Saikia in *Background of Modern Assamese Literature* on the contribution of missionaries to Assamese language and literature helps us in finding the works and names of missionary women. Besides Mrs. Cutter work on Assamese language, the works of Mary. F. L. Gurney and Mrs. S .R .Ward are notable. Mrs. Gurney translated the Bengali novel *Phulmani O Karunar Bibaron* (The narrative of Phulmani and Karuna) of Mrs. Hannah Catherine Mullens into Assamese under the title *Phulamani, Aru Karuna* (Phulmani and Karuna) in 1877 (Saikia *Background* 164). A short review on this book was published in *Orunodoi* in March 1853 which declared it was translated from Bengali and was especially designed for native Christian females. The work was written in a popular and pleasing style, and appears to have a peculiar charm for native readers.” (Neog 1122). Mrs. Ward published work on Assamese language and on Assam. Saikia points out:

Mrs. Ward published the *Brief Vocabulary in English and Assamese with Rudimentary Exercises* in 1864. The Assamese title of the book was *Ingraji Aru Asamiyar Bakyabali*. This was the second book of this type in as much as this book supplemented the lessons of Assamese Grammar to some extent. She wrote another book on Assam under the title *A Glimpse of Assam* in 1884. Moreover, she earned command over the language to write three books under the titles: *Paap Shema Puwa Ejoni* [A Girl/ Woman Attaining Forgiveness for Sins], in 1879; *Guru Ahile Aru Tomak Matiche* [Lord has Arrived and is Calling You], in 1879 and *Barir Mitra* [Friend of House] also in 1879 (Saikia *History* 165).

One of the primary texts in the study of missionaries’ role in Assam, *The Whole World Kin* is a product of a woman Elizabeth Wibberley Brown in 1890. This work is a compilation of various letters, diaries and records of missionary work in Assam with special reference to the work of

Nathan Brown. Apart from these, there were various women missionaries who wrote journals. Mrs. P.H .Moore wrote four journals from her experience staying as a missionary in Assam. It starts from the journey from America and records her stay as a missionary in Assam till the time she departed from there. *Twenty Years in Assam or Leaves from my Journal* (1901), *Autumn Leaves from Assam: A continuation of my Journal "Twenty Years in Assam" and "Further Leaves from Assam"* (1910). Another work on Assam mission by women missionary is Elizabeth Vickland's *Kingdom conquest in Fair Assam* (1924). Sudipta Phukan in his article to *The Criterion* on "Christianity and Women: A Glimpse at E. Elizabeth Vickland's *Daughter of Brahma: A tale of Brahma Country*" says E. Elizabeth Vickland was single lady missionary who stepped into the soil of Assam during the early 20th century. She was said to have sailed from North America to Assam in 1915. She originally hailed from New York. She worked for 'Women's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society'. She was appointed a teacher in the largest and the oldest of the boarding schools of girls located in Nagaon, Assam. She also started the mission Girls' M.E.School at Golaghat, now known as Ridheway Girls School. She penned down three fictional works out of her real experiences while working with the natives of Assam. These are: *Through Judy's Eyes*, *With Christ in Assam* and *Daughter of Brahma: A Tale of the Brahmaputra Country*.¹¹

The women missionaries did not come to Assam as wives, they played a crucial role in the evangelical mission. Though their work is not analysed in terms of the active life of a male missionary, their work are not less but in fact more. They not only had to teach the students at the school but also had to cultivate in the little minds the spirit of a true Christian. In the absence of their husbands on other mission work, she had to take the responsibility of the entire mission

¹¹ For details see <http://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n1/Sudipta.pdf>

filed work. The role as the matron in the girls' hostel is additional responsibility on them. The literary works, they produced as textbooks for the school are praise worthy. The only one shortcoming in their evangelical work was that they were unable to get women and men from upper caste of the society for conversion. Cases like that of Kunti, a Brahmin girl accepting Christianity is few. Apart from playing an active role as the facilitator of education among the native the women missionaries also worked as reformers bringing about positive changes in the lives of native women. They rescued the orphan and destitute girls and women and brought change in their life by providing education and gave a ray of hope in the otherwise bleak world of women. Their contribution in publishing books on Assamese language can be seen as contribution to developing the Assamese language which was banned from courts and schools in 1837.

1.6. Native Intellectuals Discourse on Women's Education, Child Marriage and Widow Marriage

These sub-section analyses the various writings by Assamese male writers that addressed issues related to women in the journals *Orunodoi*, *Assam-Bandhu*, *Jonaki* and *Mou*. It tries to focus on native views on education, child marriage and widow re-marriage. These journals were published between mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century. The country was under the colonial rule. Western education had entered the region in the form of modern education and English started by the colonial rulers. Nineteenth century witnessed social reformation in various parts of the country, the first being in Bengal. Because of Assam's proximity to Bengal, the reformation ideas slowly flowed into the region. Thus the condition of Assamese women was influenced by the colonial encounter, reformation movement and the western education.

The key issues on women that were addressed in the journals included un-education, marriage, child marriage, widowhood. The various writings on women published during this period are studied after keeping in mind the background of the period. The nineteenth century Calcutta was in transition. It was teeming with new ideas, social reformation, renaissance, western education, colonial rule, spirit of nationalism etc. Anandaram Dekhiyal Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua (1837-1894) became a part of this changing atmosphere. The exposure to English education witnessing the renaissance and social reformation in Bengal and holding a vital position under the British administration made them look at their traditional society critically. They interrogated, questioned and critiqued the social evils and superstitions of the traditional Assamese society and tried to inculcate new values in the traditional Assamese society.

The colonial administration and the missionaries realized the importance of educating the people in order to help the smooth running of the administration. They started establishing schools official and also helped the youth of the region to travel to Calcutta for studies as for example Anandaram Dhekhiyal Phukan (1829-1859) and his brother Durgaram. Though they were not able to impart education to all sections of women, their efforts were realized and people slowly started to become aware of the importance of female education. Social evils of *Sati* (self-immolation of the widow) and *Kulinism* were not present in Assamese society. The main problems faced by Assamese women were lack of education, child marriage and widowhood. The latter two issues were mostly confined to the upper caste women. The custom of child marriage and widowhood was not practised by the lower caste women but their education was neglected like the upper caste women.

Women's education has been the centre of discussion and debates in almost all the journals that were published during the period 1846 to 1927. In this section, I look into the discourse of

women education originated, developed, and transmitted through the medium of Assamese journals. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Rateshwar Mahanta, Purnakanta Sharma were some of the native intellectual that articulated on education in the journals *Orunodoi*¹², *Assam-Bandhu*, *Jonaki* and *Mou*.¹³ The reason that women education became seminal might be because many changes were taking place in respect to women education. The discourse did not confine to the pages of the journals. Practically, many activities were taking place simultaneously with regard to women's education. The missionaries were establishing schools, the government and local boards and the general public was also taking initiative for the same.

Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan was one of the first exponents of women's education in Assam¹⁴, he was also the mentor and guide to Gunabhiram Barua¹⁵. Both of them travelled to Bengal for their studies and were influenced by the reformation movement and Bengal renaissance.¹⁶ Phukan, being an advocate of women education, educated his wife himself and initiated the education of his daughter at five years. Gunabhiram Barua describes Mahidri Devi, Phukan's

¹²*Orunodoi* played a significant role in the first half of the nineteenth century in addressing the mission of education for the masses. The first newspaper cum magazine became the mouthpiece of many people to advocate their views on education. Education became a central theme in most of the articles that were published. Most of the articles points out the appeal of the authors to send the children to school and highlight the benefits of education.

¹³ The question on women's education found space in Journals like *Assam Bandhu* (1885-86), *Mou* (1886-87) and *Jonaki* (1889-1916).

¹⁴ Gunabhiram mentions in the biography of Phukan that he showed keen interest in establishment of school. As there was not English medium school in Nagaon so he started an English medium school in his house. See Barua 113

¹⁵ Phukan took the responsibility of Gunabhiram and family after the death of Gunabhiram's father. Barua was forever indebted to Phukan and expressed his love and respect to his mentor by bringing out his biography entitled *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukanar Jivani*.

¹⁶ Gunabhiram Barua in *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan Jivan Charita* (Biography of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan) says in 1835 an English and Bengali medium school was set up with the help of the public and the government. Jagyaram Phukan provided financial help in the establishment of the school...in 1837 Anandaram Phukan and Durgaram Phukan duo enrolled in the English medium school. In 1841 both of them sailed to Calcutta for higher education on the advice of British official Metei and Jenkins and enrolled in the Calcutta Hindu College. During his stay in Calcutta he was influenced by the Bengal renaissance and reformation movement of the nineteenth century. See Barua 20.

wife, as an efficient housewife. She could read and write Bengali and Assamese. The limited knowledge of mathematics enabled her to manage the household accounts. She knew weaving and other traditional crafts. Barua says, Phukan had the opinion that if women remain uneducated, one side of the man suffers from paralysis. Barua further adds that Phukan was able to enjoy the domestic bliss from his wife (Barua *The Biography* 75). A picture of the newly educated woman of the upper caste society can be inferred from the women of Phukan's household. Apart from the traditional craft, women were exposed to subjects like Assamese and Bengali and a little bit of arithmetic which is sufficient enough to manage household accounts. All these educational qualifications were to make an efficient housewife and become a suitable companion to man.

Phukan's letter "Asom Dekhor Lok Sokolor Prati Nibedan Patra by ejon Asamiya Lok "(Letter from an Assamese in Calcutta to his Countrymen) published in *Orunodoi* in the May, 1853 issue gives a picture of the education scene in Assam which was in a sheer state of neglect. Though the colonial rulers have established schools, only a few of them attended the schools. He says the prime duty of parents is to provide education to both the girl and the boy. But in a country where boys are not allowed to complete their education then how one can imagine about girl's education. According to Phukan if girls are educated it will help them in their formative years to engage in healthy discussion with parents and later on with husband. In addition to this, education will help them in proper upbringing of the children. He appealed to the people in the letter that they should try to remove the cruel custom which denied the girl to be educated. Through the letter he also lays emphasis on education which will lead to the development of the nation. But Phukan wanted the girl to be educated so that she becomes an ideal wife who will be able to manage the home and take care of their children and be an ideal companion to their

husband. Though his idea of women's education was limited, it certainly has paved the development of women's education.

In another article, 'Baybisar Bixoyok' (Against Adultery and Fornication p.224-228) Phukan emphasises that for the benefit of society in general, moral education is necessary and both male and female need to be educated for the same. Phukan points to the evils of the society that are committed by people. A moralist tone evolves through the article in which the writer advises the people to maintain good conduct in the society by abstaining from committing adultery. He cautions people about adultery and fornication. Due to lack of moral education, man and woman are committing adultery. The incidence of sex outside marriage and prostitution are increasing. He says that religious texts do not support such conducts. He also criticizes the custom of staying together without getting married. Sometimes a boy and girl elope and stay together without getting married. Moral education is the only way of preventing such crimes. Every parent should educate their children in such matters. But Assamese people do not educate their girls at all. The writer argues that if boys are capable of receiving education so are the girls. Providing education to both will be beneficial.¹⁷

After Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua carried out the mission of women's education with more zest and vigour. Like Phukan, Barua began his literary career in the pages of *Orunodoi*. He wrote under the guise of an Assamese in Calcutta. The series of letters published in *Orunodoi* between June 1853 and April 1854 by an Assamese in Calcutta are attributed to Gunabhiram Barua. Misra mentions about the letters in introduction to her work on Barua's Ramnabami Natak says "these letters are the earliest Assamese writings on what is known as the women's question. They make

¹⁷ An article published in December 1849 entitled "Lorabilakok Podhiboloi Sikua Bapek Makor Useet" (Parents Duty to Educate the Boys) is on the importance of moral education. The writer says the duty of the parents should not be limited to providing the basic needs like food and clothes. It is the duty of parents to educate the child on value education, qualities of forgiveness and patience. See *Orunodoi* 398.

a forceful case for social justice, focusing attention on issues like child marriage, polygamy, widow remarriage, companionate marriage, and women's education (*Gunabhiram* ,xxix). The letters continued the discourse on women's education. In each of these letters Misra says the author reiterates the view that the duty of parents towards their children does not end by mere feeding and clothing them, but it must necessarily include their education as a primary requirement for the welfare of the children and of the country (*Literature* 82). Barua says education for children is necessary for building them as responsible citizens. Due to lack of education, youngsters are indulging in bad habits. Education also helps in running the conjugal life smoothly. Problems among husbands and wives will reduce if both the partners are educated. In the fourth letter published in October 1853, he stresses the need of women's education. He emphasises that the creator has given both man and woman the same thinking ability. So education must be equal for both man and woman. Gunabhiram's decision of sending his younger daughter to Bethune school was another milestone in the history of women's education in Assam.

Following this, we also see male writers like Ratneshwar Mahanta, Purnakanta Sharma, and Lambodar Bora having anxiety on women's education. Their articles appeared in *Assam Bandhu*. It is interesting to note that the editor of *Assam Bandhu* was Gunabhiram Barua who ardently supported the women's education and gave space to writers who opposed women's education on the ground that they would forget their duties. They emphasised on the duties of wife and felt that the Western education and ideas were posing threat to the traditional Assamese society and women were influenced by these changes.

Mahanta's "Ghoinir Kartavya o Stree Siksha" (Wife's Duty and Women Education) and Sharma's "Stree Siksha" (Women Education) were on women's education. Mahanta's article is a

critique of the women's education of the late nineteenth century. The gist of the article is that women's education must be designed to make them competent housewives and to fulfill wife's duty. Mahanta says, "wife's duty is not to be reader and writer of novels" and "the duty of our daughter in law and daughter is not to work in office along with their husband" (192). Mahanta's anxiety regarding women's education is reflected from this article. There was the fear that reading novel will corrupt women and there was also fear that engaging in reading and writing novels will make women lazy and forget their duties as wives. While the image of the women as readers of novels, as writers and professional women were emerging, he emphasized the goal of women's education as to fulfill the duties of a wife. As Partha Chatterjee's framework suggests, the public and the private space division are clearly drawn by Mahanta. While men go out into the public sphere and earn his livelihood and support his family, women stays at home and do her duty. Women's duty is defined by taking care of her family, husband, in-laws and her children. The duty of the women is to provide happiness and bliss in the house. Another duty of women is the duty of *patibrata* (the ideal wife).

Mahanta's article "Swadhinota ne Swaysosar" (Freedom or Anarchy) problematised the concept of freedom. According to him, women's entry from private space to public space poses a major threat to the tradition. The image of women removing the traditional *uroni* (the custom of covering the head by the Assamese women), walking hand in hand with husband in the public is appreciated by the newly educated youth and considers them as qualities of cultured, educated and progressive women. But Mahanta criticizes this image of women as sign of anarchy (139-40).

Mahanta, from a patriarchal point of view, imposes that if women are confined in the *antahpur* and do not get the opportunity to move freely in the open, they do not suffer. In this state of

confinement, he argues, women enjoy the status of holding the rein of the household in opposition to newly educated youth's criticism of the status of women as *saajar maina* (a caged bird). According to him, the uneducated daughter-in-laws who efficiently execute their household responsibilities are far better than the newly educated girls. He is anxious that the age old Assamese custom and values should not be replaced by foreign custom "asua niyaam" (outside rule).

Lambodar Bora wrote under the pseudonym Sadananada. His satirical dictionary defined women's freedom as

a women abandoning her husband, refusing a husband, roaming alone in a park, meeting educated friend, running the household without man, chasing away the in-laws from the house, not serving them food, making the husband do all the household chores, giving freedom to women, making them ride elephant., mounting elephants by putting feet on the back of men (267).

Bora shares the similar view of Mahanta on women's education. He argues education will make women engrossed in the art of reading novels, writing letters which will lead to forgetting household duties like cooking and weaving. The education would also make them fickle minded and they would reject prospective groom (267).

Panindranath Gogoi was another writer who supported education of women to become an eligible *ghoini*. In his article "Tente na Amar Upay Ki? (What is the solution then?). He says he does not want women to compete with men and earn M.A, B.A. degrees. He also feels that American women who have become Barrister and doctor are not happy in their lives. The highly educated American women do not get partners to marry. According to him, home is the school of

women and taking care of children, managing the household and being a companion to the husband should be the teaching of women (277-288).

The debate on women's education found space in *Mou*. Bolinarayan Bora's article "Tirotar Bon Ki?" (What is the work of Women?) is on women's education.¹⁸ As Mahanta and Gogoi, Bora also had problem with women aspiring for higher education to get the degrees of B.A and M.A and women occupying professional field. He supported education of women to a particular age and also supported home schooling of women. Bora says the male members of the family can teach the women. If women go to school, they should be taught by female teachers. He feels that home is the proper school for girls. He also had apprehension of girls being send to public schools because there they will meet children from different classes of the society and this might have bad influence on them. The content of the women's education must be little of reading, writing and mathematics by which women is able to perform the role of a *ghoini*. Apart from these, women should learn needle work, wool work, painting etc. Assamese women were expert weavers in the nineteenth century Assam but he does not mention the learning of weaving. Every household had a *taat khall* (traditional loom). Bora also did not support women becoming doctors and lawyers as he feels that they are male fields of work. On this, Mahanta says "Bora uses sexual division of labour, seeing women doctors and lawyers as transgressing the time hallowed barriers of what is defined as men's work and women's work (*tirotar bon*) and thereby losing their feminine character" (29).

¹⁸ The disappearance of *Assam Bandhu* was shortly compensated by the appearance of *Mou* in 1886 December. It was published eight months after the *Assam Bandhu* disappeared from the literary scene of Assam. Almost all the writings in the journal were written by Bolinarayan Bora. The journal was edited by his brother Horonarayan. It was published from Calcutta. After four issues the journal ceased publication. Satyendra Sharma says Bolinarayan Sharma was born in 1852 and completed his entrance exam from Guwahati Seminary in 1852. In 1872 he received the Gilchrist Scholarship and went to England. He joined the Cooper Hills College to study Civil Engineering. In 1878 he returned to India and joined as Civil Engineer in Nagaon. For details see Sharma 4

Srijo in the article “Prachin Bharotor Aryan Sabhyata (Aryan Civilization in Ancient India)” points to the prevalence of women’s education in ancient India. The writer says: “In those days, women composed verses for the Vedas. Romsa, Debojabi and Lopamudra composed verses. There were women in ancient India who established schools in Kashi and taught *Smriti Shastras* to students” (793)¹⁹

Chakradhar Barua in “Amar Tirotar abastha (The Condition of our women)” stresses that education of women is necessary for the development of the nation. Educated mother will help their children grow to become eligible citizen. He writes that an educated woman can become fit companions to their husbands. If women are knowledgeable and educated, they can become our eligible partners. The writer stresses on companionate marriage. Ratneshwar Mahanta emphasised that education must help women to become efficient *ghoini* and *grihini*. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and Chakradhar Sharma on the other hand raised the status of the women to *ardhangini* (better half). Apart from this, Sharma criticises the limited perspective of a section of people who are in not favour of women education. They believe that education will make women immoral and they will spend time in writing and reading love letters. This will make them character less. A proper system of education supplemented by good books will help women and in long run be helpful for the nation (715-717).

In the conference on *Assamiya Unnati sadhani sabha*, Rajkhowa gave a speech on “Asamot Stree Siksha” (Women’s Education in Assam) (934-938). He emphasised the need of women’s education in Assam and compares the status of Assamese to the status of women of other countries. Women in other countries are not only educated but also becoming writers, orators and are into publishing newspapers. He finds the Assamese women to be far behind and he blames

¹⁹ Translation Mine

the society for their deplorable condition. The system of purdah that exists among upper caste is criticised whereby women are caged like birds. In such circumstances women needs to be educated. The thought that education will make the women lazy and materialistic also stand as a hurdle in the field of women's education. In the discussion following the speech, Gaurikanta Talukdar proposes education for women to become eligible mothers. He supported George Herbert's philosophy that an educated mother is equal to hundred teachers. An educated mother will be true guide to her children. Talukadar believes that women's education will lead to the development of the nation.

The discourse on education of women by the native intellectuals reflects the nineteenth century Assamese society, especially the impact of western education on the male and female population. In the changing circumstances, the traditional women undergo transformation. From the image of an uneducated woman to the image of an educated woman was received with both positive and negative responses from the native intellectuals. In the analysis of the journals, we observe the emergence of a group of native men sensitive to the women cause and how the image of Assamese women is being constructed in their writings. After their exposure to the new world of Bengal renaissance, reformation and western education, they became critical about the position of women in their society and the various social evils prevalent in their society. They wanted to transform the position of women and construct a new image of the Assamese women. Another factor which might have initiated the native male in construction of the new image probably was influenced by the image of the Bengali women and wife of the missionaries; who were educated and helpmates to their husbands. The native women fall subordinate to the image of their counterpart. These desires for educated women drive the newly western educated male to construct a new image of the Assamese women.

The shift from a house wife *grihini* or *bhrajwa* to the image of a woman or a girl going to school, becoming an educated wife, a companion, the image of the woman as a reader and writer was not a sudden change. It was a gradual process from the *anthapur* (inner courtyard) to the outside world. The native men who were sympathetic and advocated the emancipation of women are Anadaram Dekhiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua. The new image these writers portrayed did not voice for the individual growth of women but rather a development in women condition which will be beneficial to the society and community. These images are of educated mother, efficient home maker and an able companion to the man. The effort of these writers in promoting women's education can be regarded as the first step towards women's emancipation. They created awareness, a social consciousness which proved to be beneficial in the long run. Native intellectuals like Ratneshwar Mahanta, Puranakanta Sharma and Lambodar Bora advocated women's education on the ground that it will make women better house wives. At the same time they projected a negative image of the women who are capable of reading novels and writing letters and would share public space with men.

The works on women education suggests the changing dynamics taking place in a traditional household due to the impact of western education. The newly educated modern men wanted their wives to be educated but were anxious what will happen to the household. So, they tried to give education to women as it was necessary to maintain the household. There is change in the image of the woman with the introduction to education. Education will make women efficient *ghoini*, *ardhandgini*, enlightened mother and nation builder. This is what the nineteenth century society expected from women's education.

The native intellectuals have responded to the questions on child marriage and widow re-marriage. Gunabhiram Barua's writing for marriage reforms²⁰, child marriage and polygamy appeared in an article published in *Orunodoi* in 1853. A series of letters were published under the pseudonym of 'An Assamese in Calcutta'. Misra says in the letters, he put forward his clearest and most forceful arguments for the cause of women's education. He wrote forcefully against the adoption of double norms for the education of boys and girls, advocating for an egalitarian attitude towards children of both the sexes in the matter of education. Citing shastric authority, he wrote in support of women's emancipation in matters of education and consensual marriage. His views on early marriage, polygamy and widow remarriage may be placed amongst the earliest modern Indian writings on the subject of marriage reform in the nineteenth century (1987, 87).

In *Orundoi* January 1854, Barua reports about a widow remarriage that he read in *Sambad Bhaskar* that took place in a village in Calcutta. The father of the child widow gave her in marriage to a boy of the same village. Gunabhiram was elated on reading the news and shared this with the people of Assam through *Orunodoi*. He writes, just as a childless woman cannot understand the pain of delivering a child so also a man can not realize the suffering of a widow.

²⁰ Gunabhiram Barua did not limit his belief in the reform of widowhood in his writings. In his life he applied what he believed in. He was a social rebel. Misra says, the handful of Assamese intellectuals of nineteenth century who tried to reform the orthodox Hindu society of Assam, were also social rebels on individual planes. But, they could not co-ordinate their efforts in order to build up an important social reform movement in Assam because the peculiar features of the Assamese society rendered the problems of the upper-caste society isolated phenomenon rather than the general rule. Gunabhiram Barua was a Brahmin by birth. During his student days at Calcutta he was attracted towards Brahmo Samaj. For details see Misra, 1987. In the appendix to the biography of Phukan it mentions Gunabhiram's inclination towards Brahmo Samaj. Gunabhiram since his college days was aware of the custom of widow remarriage not practised in Assam. He always had a mind for it. Though he was attracted to the Brahmo religion during his stay at Calcutta he did not acknowledge it publicly. In 1869 he formally accepted the Brahmo Samaj at Dhuburi. In April 1970 he married the widow of Parasuram Barua, Bishnupriya Devi. This marriage was formally registered in December 1872. This was Gunabhiram Barua's second marriage. Previously he was married to Brajasundari Devi, the sister of Mahidri Devi in December 1857. In 1868 Brajasundari died after delivering a death child. For details see Barua 2007.

He points to the evils which can be removed through widow remarriage. He questions if widow remarriage takes place it could reduce the number of abortions. He ends his article by wondering when will this moment of widow remarriage would happen in Assam (1089) Earlier in another article titled “Bibahor Samyat jixokol Niyom Pratipalon Kora Kartvya tar Kotha” (The rules to be followed at the time of Marriage) on Hindu marriage reforms and remarriage appeared in December 1853 which suggests some norms for couples to follow. However, the reforms seemed too radical in the context of nineteenth century. Firstly, the partners should spend time together in order to know each other better before getting married. Secondly, he raises the issues of age in marriage. With reference to Doctor Hughflond, Barua suggests the ideal age of marriage as eighteen for girls and twenty four for boys. He points to the various problems that arise if marriage takes place at an early age and if there are age difference between the partners. He suggests that they must be like friends. He also praises the custom in the ancient times where women were allowed to select their own partners in marriage. The last norm he proposes is that marriage should not take place between relatives.

Barua further deals with the question of widow remarriage in the same article. He points to the custom of widow remarriage prevalent the Muslim and Christian communities. He questions why this should not be among the Hindus. To have religious sanction to widow Re-marriage, he quotes the ancient text *Manu Samhita* to prove that widow remarriage was permitted by Hindu Shastras. He praises the custom of widow remarriage prevalent among the people of Orissa and among Shudras in Assam. In the article, the author points to meetings held by Hindu Brahman Pandits and Babus in Calcutta in favour of widow remarriage. He adds that the practice of widowhood leads to the incidents of abortion, prostitution etc. To prevent such social evils it is mandatory to practice widow marriage.

Gunabhiram Barua's *Ramnabami Natak* (1857) was the first Assamese social drama of the colonial period. The drama advocates widow remarriage.²¹ It deserves special mention since it was serialised in *Orunodoi* from March 1856 and was published as a book in 1870. It points out how reformers like Barua addressed the issue of widowhood through the medium of drama. The background of *Ramnabami* is the nineteenth century conservative Assamese society. The social atrocities and the cruel customs of the Hindu society perpetuated on the widows are represented. Gunabhiram Barua tried to create awareness among the upper caste Hindu society. It is the story of Nabami, a child widow who falls in love with Ramchandra. Through the character Nabami, he presents the desire of a child widow. After meeting Ram she tries to analyse her situation. She questions:

is there a Shastra which says that if a husband dies then no one can take a second husband? Let there be. What are Shastras? There cannot any rules above the Almighty. If a woman cannot marry if the husband dies, then how can men marry? This is sheer injustice" (Barua *Ramnabami* 43).

Through these powerful lines, Gunabhiram criticises the practice of widowhood. Though Nabami decides to accept Ram as her husband and follow every duty of a *pativatra*, she becomes pregnant with Ramchandra's child and is ostracised by the society and the family is imposed with heavy fine. Unable to bear the social ostracism, Nabami commits suicide. Gunabhiram Barua could have given a happy ending to the story by celebrating the marriage of Ram and Nabami. But the story ends with the four deaths-that of Nabami, her lover Ramchandra, her unborn child and her friend Jayanti. One reason for giving such an ending might be that he was trying to give

²¹ This drama was written by Gunabhiram Barua in a boat when he was returning from Calcutta. It can be said that the drama was a product of Gunabhiram Barua's exposure to widow remarriage reform in Calcutta. This was the year he was returning to Assam to get married to Brajasundari

a true portrayal of the nineteenth century Assamese society. Gunabhiram Barua did not limit his philosophy to his writing. After the death of his first wife, he married a widow.

In *Jonaki* Ratneshwar Mahanta wrote the article “Bibah” (Marriage). In this article, Mahanta critically analyses the concept of marriage. According to him, marriage is one of the most important things in life. We get a glimpse into the marriage system of late nineteenth century Assam from a male perspective. The article points to the system of arranged marriage in Assam, where the parents and close relatives of the prospective girl and boy meet and decide upon the match. Hardly, the groom has any significant role in taking the most important decision in life. According to the prevalent custom in Assam, the groom should not even stamp on the shadow of the bride. After a suitable girl is selected, the horoscope will be matched and have to wait for the approval from the girl’s family. All these take place without the awareness of the groom. Mahanta is not supportive of this custom. According to him, such a major decision should not be taken hastily. At least both the family should take a year in knowing and understanding each other. This will result in less conflict and misunderstanding between the two families.

According to Mahanta, the prevailing custom of marriage was challenged by the newly educated youth of the nineteenth century Assam. They are vocal in matter of marriage and take initiative in selecting their partner. The very thought of seeing the girl or boy before by the marriage by the respective groom or bride is considered as sin by the elders. The qualities the prospective daughter-in-law must possess are beauty with skillful attributes like weaving and knitting. They do not want an incompetent daughter-in-law. But the youths are more interested in the beauty than skills. Mahanta is strictly against this attitude. He shares similar views with the elders that it is talent rather than beauty that helps in life. Mahanta says that the girl too have the right to see their prospective groom, know them and understand them. The prevalent marriageable age in the

nineteenth century Assam was ten to twelve for girls. This data points to the prevalence of child marriage in the region. Mahanta tries to study the Brahmanical scriptures views on marriage. According to him there are stringent rules in respect to the marriage of a Hindu girl. The girl child is seen as a burden till she is not married. The desire of the parents to attain salvation drives them to marry off their girl at a tender age. The prescribed age in scriptures for girl is five or nine, at worst cases, ten years. The people blindly follow the words of the scriptures. The parents feel blessed if they are able to get rid of their baby girl. Parents realize their mistake after seeing the plight of the child widow. The discussion mainly centered on the ideal age of marriage of the girl child especially among the upper caste. Mahanta quotes numerous verses from the Brahmanical texts. He quotes Manu, Aatri, Gautam Muni and Bhritu Muni's views on marriage. Mahanta points that until and unless the girl and the boy realize the importance of marriage they should not tie the knot.

The next chapter is an attempt to examine the first Assamese woman journal *Ghar-Jeuti* published and edited by two women that contained a good number of contributions from Assamese women. The journal was published during the colonial and pre-independence India. Gandhiji had started the Non-Co-operative Movement in 1921 and he visited Assam the same year. During his visit, he appealed to the Assamese women to participate in the movement and make it a success. It is from this Non-Cooperative Movement Assamese women started mobilising in the public space.

Like in most of the states in India, in Assam too, widow remarriage was strictly forbidden among the upper castes. It was understood that the discourse of widow remarriage was an elitist endeavour, initiated by the first generation of elite male reformers. When they addressed the rhetoric of widow remarriage, they were addressing the widows of their caste. As we have seen,

the reform of widow remarriage in Assam was initiated by Gunabhiram Barua in the end of nineteenth century.

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CHAPTER TWO

Subversion of the Image of Ideal Woman: *Ghar-Jeuti*, *Joymoti Utsov*

This chapter tries to examine the role of women's journal, *Ghar-Jeuti*²²[Light of the House] and *Joymoti Utsov* [Joymoti Celebration] on the basis of reports published in *Ghar-Jeuti* as agents which tried to bring about changes in the lives of women of Assam in the early 20th century. By agent, I mean a medium that facilitates platform for women's articulation. *Ghar-Jeuti* the first Assamese women's journal was published in 1927, just a year after the formation of *Assam Mahila Samity* in 1926. *Ghar-Jeuti*, *Joymoti Utsov* and *Assam Mahila Samity* played a major role in developing women consciousness and women empowerment in the region. The speeches, songs, poems etc. that were presented in the *Joymoti Utsov* occupied a major space in the pages of *Ghar-Jeuti*. Both are powerful mediums through which women articulated and circulated their views of various issues concerning women. Through the articles, short stories and poems appeared in *Ghar-Jeuti*, an attempt is made to understand how women articulated the question of widowhood and how it was different from the way men addressed it. Though the *Joymoti Utvas* valorises the ideal woman image of *sati* through the figure of *Joymoti*, the chapter argues that women made use of this as a platform to address issues concerning women as well as nation.

Ghar-Jeuti was a literary endeavour by the women and it gave space to Assamese women to showcase their creativity through literary pursuits. Women wrote poems, short stories, articles, essays etc. It is through the pages of this journal the organisational activities of women were focused, particularly the celebration of *Joymoti Utsov* and the formation of *Assam Mahila*

²²The present study on *Ghar-Jeuti* is based on the volume edited by Aparna Mahanta and published by Assam Prakashan Parishad

Samity. The three forms of expression though distinct in its own way were tied together by the common thread of womanhood. The women who wrote in the journal participated in *Joymoti Utsov* and were members of the *Assam Mahila Samity*. In a way both complemented and supplemented each other. *The Mahila Samity* in various meetings promoted the journal and requested women to write for and subscribe to the journal. *Ghar-Jeuti* also became the mouthpiece of *Assam Mahila Samity* by publishing reports of the Annual Conferences of the *Samity*. *Assam Mahila Samity* would be discussed in the next chapter.

First section of this chapter “*Ghar-Jeuti: The Beginning/An Introduction*” provide an overview of the journal with a focus on women as editors of the journal. The sub-section, *Ghar-Jeuti: Content, Joymoti Utsov, Contributors, Readers* would offer an account of the contents in the journal. It also points out who are the contributors and readers which in turn bring out the politics involved in the careful choice of contributors. The third section *The Discourse on Widowhood in Ghar-Jeuti* examines the discourse on widowhood in *Ghar-Jeuti* to see how Assamese women addressed the question. The fourth section, *Women’s Participation in Celebration of Joymoti Utsov*, would look at the history of *Joymoti Utsov*, the politics behind the celebration of the same.

2:1 *Ghar-Jeuti: The Beginning*

As Susie Tharu and Lalitha argue,

Historians often remark on the sudden disappearance of women’s issues from the agenda of public debate in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The women’s question, they argue, bowed out as nationalism swept in and replaced the social concerns of the reform movement with political ones. There is certainly

a sense in which this is true...But what is rarely recognized is that between the 1880s and the 1920s, as its limelight faded, the movement was enthusiastically carried forward, expanded, and transformed by women. All over the country women had hardly begun to read and write before they were editing and publishing in journals that had surprisingly long runs (Tharu and Lalitha, Vol. 1, 167).

In Assam too women started journal when majority of women were deprived of education. This section traces the origin and development of the journal, *Ghar-Jeuti* edited by two women. It would examine the aims and objectives of the journal and the challenges women editors have to face in running the journal. *Ghar-Jeuti* was published under the editorship of sisters-in law Kamalalaya Kakoti (1894-1946) and Kanaklata Chaliha (1903-1935). Aparna Mahanta remarks “The two lady editors were wife and sister respectively of the England educated barrister Tara Prasad Chaliha. The Chaliha family of Sibsagar was well known for its political and social activities during the early years of the twentieth century” (Mahanta, 127). As the quote suggests, the strong socio political background of their family might have facilitated to begin a journal. It can also be assumed that different women movements taking place in different corners of the country and the emergence of the women’s journals, the growth of women organizations, the rise of the educated women, and the nationalist movement might have influenced and inspired the two women Kamalalaya Kakoti and Kanaklata Chaliha to conceive and materialize their desire to edit a women’s journal in Assam.

Other than running the journal, Kanaklata and Kamalalaya actively participated in the celebration of *Jyoti Utsov* organized by *Sibasagar Mahila Sanmilini* and they were the joint secretary of the *Sanmilini*. Apart from their social works for women, their creative venture *Ghar-*

Jeuti filled a much needed gap in the literary field and opened doors for women to venture into writing. Beside this, these two women were also active in other social activities: Kanaklata along with her mother-in-law Nikunjolata Chaliha and some socially conscious women of Sivasagar started the *sipini bhoral* (weaving centre) which opened new prospects for the poor as a source of livelihood. It not only provided employment but gave opportunity to people to showcase their creativity through their art work (Barthakur, 192). The centre worked as a training camp for village women. Women were given training in weaving and art of cookery (Barthakur, 136).

While there were several women's journals in Bengali and Hindi, this was not the case in Assamese. *Ghar Jeuti* was the only women's journal published in Assamese in colonial period. A journal, *Banhi* mentions another women journal *Lakhimi*. The editor says "*Ghar Jeuti* tried to illuminate the Assamese household for couple of years but ceased publication facing problems. *Lakhimi* also after a few issues disappeared. *Kuwari*, another journal, have not seen the light of the day. This is a great void among the Assamese women. To fill the absence of women's journal, *Banhi* started publishing a section on women titled *Gabhoru Mel* from its twenty seventh year and in the process they have devoted a small section *Gabhoru Mel* for women in the pages of *Banhi*" (27,2 115).

The aims and objectives of the journal were expressed in the section *sampadokio jatkinchit* (a few lines from the editors). But the editorial was not a regular feature. It featured sporadically. In the first year second issue a *guhari* (appeal) was made by the manager of *Ghar-Jeuti*. The editor appeared as *samapadokoi jatkinchit* by referring as manager; it is not clear whether it is referring to the editor duo or someone else. In the *guhari*, the manager says "those women who will write good article will be given prizes" (Mahanta, 20). The editors appreciate both men and women for

the love and concern they have shown towards the journal by becoming the consumers from the first issue. Their letters and articles were source of encouragement for the editors (Mahanta, 40).

Through the editorial, time and again the editors expressed their concern of running the journal. Time and again the editors requested the public to send articles and help in the continuation of the journal. They also point out how many Assamese journals disappeared from the literary scene after one or two years of its publications because of financial problem, lack of readership and articles. If they have people's support, they can make the journal attractive and entertaining like any other leading journals like *BharatBorkha* and *Probakhi* (Mahanta,87). This shows that the editors were in constant pressure that if they do not get the public support the journal would not survive. There were instances where copies of the journals sent as Book post were returned. The editors in the fifth issue of the first year expressed their desire to publish the name of the regular subscribers from the ninth issue. But this plan did not take place. They also mentioned that they were charging minimum for publishing cost, paper cost and the book post cost. They have not kept any salaried workers. Everything they did was on their own. As this was their first experience of bringing out a newspaper, there might be lots of drawbacks and failures and requested the "*moromor bai-bhoni, kokai-bhaixokol*" [loving sisters and brothers] to forgive them (Mahanta, 115). Initially, they had a lot of reservations on the persistence of the journal among a limited number of people. So, they tried to bring out the journal in a limited way.

The various writings published in the journal reflect the attempts made by the editors to create awareness among the women community of Assam of what was happening in the national and international level among women community. This shows the editors' effort in building consciousness among women to bring change and progress in their life like women from other places.

Ghar-Jeuti also marks the beginning of Assamese women's entry into the print world as editors. The disappointments one faces in finding so few women's writing in *Orunodoi*, *Assam Bandhu*, *Mou* and *Jonaki* ends in *Ghar-Jeuti*. Anand Chandra Agarwala lists women writers' contribution in the journal in his article "Axomiya Sahitya Sewakini" (Women's service to Assamese Literature) published in the fourth year of *Abahan*. There are forty five women contributors to the journal (Barua, 55). *Ghar-Jeuti* is the first monthly women's journal published in Assamese from the historic city of Sivasagar in upper Assam, once the capital of the Ahom Rulers. As mentioned in the first chapter, it was here that the missionaries set up their mission after failing to do so in Sadiya. It was also the place from where the first Assamese journal *Orunodoi* was published in 1846. *Ghar-Jeuti* commenced its publication from October 1927 and successively continued for three years. The last issue of the journal appeared in May, 1931. Madhuri Kalita's²³ article "Ghar-Jeutir Jilingoni" [Ghar-Jeuti's Radiance] says *Ghar-Jeuti* illuminated the Assamese literary scene by the energetic effort of few women writers when the light of women's education had not completely spread through Assam.

2.2. *Ghar-Jeuti*: Content, *Joymoti Utsov*, Contributors, Readers

This section gives an account of the content, contributors and readers of *Ghar-Jeuti*. The section also highlights how *Ghar-Jeuti* and *Joymoti Utsov* complimented each other. *Ghar Jeuti* became instrumental in focusing the women's organisations formed in Assam. Questions relating to women were raised and women took the lead in writing about themselves. Articles, letters, stories pertaining to women were published. The issues on women question addressed in previous journals like *Assam Bandhu*, *Banhi*, *Jonaki*, *Mou* etc echoed in the pages of *Ghar Jeuti*

²³ I cannot give the publication details of the magazine because the title page of the magazine is missing. The article appeared in the magazine *Lekhika*. It was a special issue on Himala Baruani, an Assamese poetess. The page numbers are 47-51.

but with a new perspective. The journal was for women so its themes were women centric. Essays and articles on social reform, advice on domestic issues, women duties, health hygiene, household management, cooking, and news coverage on women were the highlights of the journal. They also contained narrative prose consisting of short stories and biographies. *Ghar Jeuti* did not restrict itself in focusing the creative endeavours of women writings. Through its pages we see the different women organisations formed by Assamese women for the betterment of the Assamese women.

Along with the image of the ideal wife, yet another image emerges in the nationalistic period which is that of the educated wife. The image of women as the mother, the mother of the nation emerged during this time. The image of Joymoti Kuwari also occupied an important space in the writings of the period. Joymoti resemble the image of the ideal wife and the mother of the nation. These images were created so that the women of the period look up to them and be inspired by them and imbibe the qualities of these celebrated women figures.

Ghar-Jeuti also advertised the Joymoti Utsov that was celebrated on 1 April, 1928 Sunday at Sivasagar. The advertisement helps us to know the different activities that take place on Joymoti Utsov. It was an occasion in which students and women participated in various competitions as in boat rides, singing competition, elocution and essay competition. Women and girls, had exhibition of handwork. Prizes were planned to be distributed for the best handwork. The art exhibition at Joymoti Utsov gave women opportunity to sell their art work for an income.

As it was a women's journal, most writers and readers were women of the upper and middle class. Perhaps these writers and their family members comprise one group of readers of the journal; the family members of the editors and the women associated with *Assam Mahila Samity*

may have been the readers of the journal. As Shobna Nijhawan²⁴ says “The periodicals were also effective in forging bonds among a newly imagined yet heterogeneous community of women. However, the readership-by default upper class and Hindu-was addressed as an entity, indicated by terms *strijati* (womankind), *strisamaj* (women’s society), *stri gan*(women’s group),...or through the more intimate kinship terms mother and sister. Accordingly, men were conceptualized as an integral group with the equivalent terms *purus jati*, *purus samaj* or *purus gan*, and occasionally also as brothers (bhai) (3-4)”.

Most of the women writers were from the Assamese community. Except Durbasundari Gogoi, an Ahom woman and Chasme Nurjahan from Muslim community, there were no women writers from other community. Gogoi wrote the article “*Ghor-Ghoini*”(Housewife) in which she mentions the various qualities a woman must have to be the perfect *ghoini*. She has to be spiritual, respectful, loving, caring and economical. Apart from these, she must be a good cook, should know art work like weaving. She has to maintain the health and hygiene of the family. The responsibility of the children’s education also falls on her shoulder. The image that Gogoi presents about a wife is of a machine. (165-168).

Why did the editor duo include male contributors and readers though it continuously reiterated that it was a women journal? *Ghar Jeuti* did not exclude male writers from contributing both as readers and writers. They wrote letters to literary personalities of the time asking for their writings. Kamalakanta Bhattacharjaya through a letter published in *Ghar-Jeuti* expressed his happiness at the publication of the journal (166-62). He also expressed that importance should be given to journal in mother tongue. He encouraged their effort and assured them that he will send

²⁴ Shobna Nijhawan’s observation on the readership of women magazine *Periodical Literature in Colonial North India Women and Girls in the Hindi Public* 3-4.

his writings to the journal. Kankalata Chaliha's husband Taraprasad Chaliha was a frequent writer in the first few issues. Apart from him their family friend and key person who inspired in bringing out the journal, Durga Prasad Mazinder Baruah, wrote in the name of Durga in the initial issues of the journal (Mahanta "Introduction" 11). ²⁵ It should be noted that the male writer is using a penname of a woman. It can be seen as an attempt to have more readerships of women since it is a women's journal.

Shobna Nijhawan illuminates the inclusiveness of male writings in women journal "one could simply explain repeated references to a male readership as a play by editors who did not want to appear too focused. Women's publishing was not an established institution. Excluding men as readers and writers could have very well jeopardized these young ventures by women. Besides, it would have been practically impossible to exclude men, who mostly provided the financial means for subscriptions, and who would adjudicate the appropriateness of a periodical for women. In fact, it can be argued that the contributors deliberately chose to involve men in their projects. The women's, girls' and children's periodical intended to create a critical, open, and discursive public for all future subject-citizens and not just a distinct women's or counter public. Writers were aware that their demands for female liberation would not be successful without men's support" (4). As Nijhawana's points out it might have been a strategy of the editors to include men's writing because they were able to run the journal with the financial support extended by them. Kamalaya Kalita's and Kanaklata Chaliha's biographical sketch suggests that

²⁵The lists of male writers who contributed to the journal are Kali Das, Durga Prasad Mazinder Baruah, Lokonath Kakoti, Satyananda Samya, Tara Prasad Chaliha, Hironyo Kumar Das, Guru Prasad Baruah, Atul, Sharma, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Hem Kanta Sharma, M.U. Ahmad Parsi Pariya, Padma Singh Deka, Buddhadhor Chaliha, Satyendra Prassana Singha, Padmasingha Deka, Mahendranath Dutta, Anandaram Hazarika, Yogakanta Baruah, Hemchandra Gosawami, Sailodhor Rajkhowa, Mahananda Baruah, Mahimchandra Singha, Ramchandra Das, Molin Chandra Baruah, Satya Prasad Baruah, Devadutta Goswami Adhikari, Raibahadur Parasuram Khound, Bhabanath Hazarika, Tarunram Phukan, Khagendra Narayan Sharma, Sashi Chandra Borbaruah, Padmanath Bora, Prafulla Chandra Baruah.

they did not have any source of income of their own. To run the journal, they got complete support from the male members of the family both financially and as contributors. To generate funds, they were dependent on men.

The section entitled “Samayik Jagat” (the Contemporary World) is focused on various things happening regionally, nationally and internationally in the field of science, education, politics and health. As it was a women’s journal, the focus was kept on women’s achievement in these fields. Almost each issue carried a section on *Samayik Jagat* written by the editors or some other women. The main purpose of these sections was not only to inform and inspire but also to inculcate among Assamese women the desire to make a mark of themselves in the various field like women from different corners of the world. Hiranyaprabha Barua in this section wrote about the organization of All India Women’s Education Conference held at Delhi. The achievement of women in education field also featured in this section. (Ghar-Jeuti, 113). Women contribution for the upliftment of the widows with the turn of the twentieth century women entry into the public sphere by participating in various social and political sphere there was a shift from looking into past for heroic women. They tried to draw inspiration from the lives of women of the contemporary period. One of the key issues that were raised in the journal was widowhood. The next section would deal with this.

2:3 Discourse on Widowhood in *Ghar-Jeuti*:

This section attempts to focus on widowhood that occupied majority of discourse on women question in the writings of the late nineteenth and early and mid-twentieth century. In the introduction to *Shadow Lives Writings on Widowhood*, Uma Chakraborti and Preeti Gill says that the complexities of the experience of widowhood and its diversity and range across India were

rarely addressed in the course of the public debates both in the past and the present. Here an attempt is made to look at the diversity of widowhood in Assam through the writings in *Ghar-Jeuti*. With the various articles, short stories, poems and biographical sketches, this section addresses the following questions: Why were writings on widows becoming the centre of discourse in journals when the women question was being raised? Do we find voices of women reformists that critique the condition of widows? Does the discourse on widowhood critique the Hindu religion which sanctified inhumane suffering on specific section of society? Do we find any radical voices or dissenting voices that critiqued the Hindu society and fought for the rights of the widows? Are they only portraying the injustice of the Hindu society on a particular group? Does any of these writings highlight widow remarriage or rehabilitation of widows or reforms on the widows conditions?

The wave of women's question was witnessed in the public media all over India. Assam did not lag behind. In Assam, the rhetoric on women did not take place at the same pace as compared to states like West Bengal and Maharashtra. It was towards the closing of the nineteenth century the wave of women question penetrated in this region. Almost all the writings in the journal are about the Hindu women except one article written by Kamalalaya Kalita on Begum Luft Onissa (*Ghar-Jeuti*, 83-86). Another article written by Dipeshwari Gohain titled "Goanwalia Tirotar Jivan" (The life of village women) was about village women. The marginalised section of the women community i.e. the dalit women, the tribal women, the peasant women, the lower caste women, the muslim women etc finds no space in the grand narrative on the women question. The narrative that exclusively occupied the literary imagination on women was the Hindu wife, the child bride, the widow etc.

The discourse on widowhood and widow remarriage was initiated by Gunabhiram Barua discussed in chapter 1. But it was not addressed in the manner or did not take a shape of movement as in Bengal. It seems the discourse on widowhood might have got side-lined in the wake of Assamese language agitation and nationalism. But the discourse on widowhood as we see in *Ghar-Jeuti* proves public concern on the subject. We also often see writers referring to Bengal reform movement especially on widowhood. The journal gave a platform to women to address issues concerning women through creative writing. Instead of directly addressing the discourse on widowhood, the contributors adopted different forms like articles, short stories, historical narratives, poems etc. It is interesting to note that the editors carefully selected a range of issues on widowhood by keeping in view the social, economic and cultural status of the widow. All these factors play a key role in determining the position of a widow in a patriarchal society.

Uma Chakravarti and Preeti Gill mention in introduction to *Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood* that:

It was the colonial encounter which first determined the focus on the ‘women’s issue’, triggering off a spurt of writing, is well documented. That much of this writing was marked by the concern for the oppression experienced by the widow is also recognised, what we need to remember is that it was the guilt of the emerging ‘bhadralok’-across India—which first made visible the widow ‘question’. The very narrowness of this class, and the predominance of men who were creating the ‘public’ sphere by filling it with their concerns, implied that it was they – not women-or other categories of men, who were fixing the terms of the debate. Equally, the specific experiences of this class and their narrow vision

limited the analytical field of widowhood as a gendered phenomenon of Indian social reality (5).

They argue, it was the guilt of the emerging 'bhadralok'-across India made visible the widow 'question' and it was limited to their perspective. In Assam too when the discourse of widow remarriage emerged was the upper caste male addressing the issue for their women. It was much later that women started articulating on widowhood.

Let us begin with the historical track on Rani Sarat Sundari by Sashiprabha Mazinder Barua which shows the condition of a widow belonging to a rich family of zamindar.²⁶ Barua points the necessity of reading biography of woman like Rani Sarat Sundari by women. Through the life of Sarat Sundari, Barua highlights two social customs prevalent in the Hindu society, especially child marriage and child widow practice prevalent among the upper caste. Sarat Sundari was married at a tender age of six to Jogendra Narayan who was also a minor of eleven years. He belonged to the family of zamindars. Jogendra Narayan during his stay at Calcutta for studies was exposed to the vibrant environment of renaissance and reform. During his time, there was no custom of educating a girl child in the village. So, after returning an enlightened youth to Puthia, he arranged for Sarat Sundari's education. Sarat Sundari with complete dedication was able to read and write and realized the importance of education for women. Her interest in studies is presented by Bora as "so with great enthusiasm she devoted herself to studies....at night when everyone retires to bed she engage herself in reading and writing. Sometimes under the moonlight she would read the weekly and monthly journals. She became fluent in the Bengali language. She acquired some knowledge in Sanskrit. In her library she kept a good collection of

²⁶ "Rani Sarat Sundari" by Sashiprabha Mazinder Baruah in *Ghar-Jeuti* 1:1,1927, 1851 saka.11-14. Assam Prakashan Parishad:2008.

Bengali and Sanskrit books. She read all the monthly and weekly journals that were published and offered her critical opinion like a literary critic”(Ghar-Jeuti, 13).

Her marital life did not last long. She became a child widow at a tender age of thirteen. In the due course, she took the responsibility of Puthia estate as a zamindar. The historical writing on Sarat Sundari Devi points to the privileged position she occupied by belonging to the Zamindari family of wealth and riches. After the death of her husband she devoted herself to the life of severe austerity of widow as imposed by society. She realized the helpless and pitiful conditions of widows in the Hindu household. She gave shelter to the abandoned and orphaned widows. She provided them the three basic needs for a human. She brought them under her care and shelter. Shared their sorrows and took them on pilgrimage to the Ganga along with her. Apart from helping the widows, she established schools and hospitals for the poor and needy. She realized the importance of female education and established girl's school. She encouraged and motivated the poor students to pursue their studies and offered financial help.²⁷ She is the image of the rich educated widow respected by the society. After the death of her husband she took the responsibility of her estate and successfully discharged her duties. She was a patron of learning and supporter of many public works. The government awarded her with the title of Rani in 1874 and Maharani in 1877²⁸. Here an interesting question arises why was this particular widow accepted as an integral part of the main stream society? It seems the educational, rich financial background and the social work she did might have helped her to occupy a privileged position in

²⁷Rani devoted considerable time in reading and writing. She always kept herself up to date with her times. She maintained a diary to keep a record of her development. She was indeed surprised and expressed her resentment for the people's indifference to women's education. She questioned why men deprived women from education, why did not they create opportunity for women's education? Rani had a great respect for Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. She shared a warm relationship of father daughter with Vidyasagar. During her old age, she handed the estate to her adopted son and left for Kashi, the holy place of pilgrimage (Sashiprabha Mazinder Barua, 49).

²⁸Sree Sa Babu “Raj Tapaswani” bibliography.com/Saratsundari-Devi.php

the society despite being a widow. Barua urges women of Assam to read the biography of Rani Sarat Sundari on the ground that women get inspired and understand the value of education which will not leave them destitute even if they become widow.

From the image of rich educated widow Rani Sarat Sundari to the image of the poor orphan widow Savitri as represented by Bhubeneswari Bordoloi in short story “Durbhogia”²⁹ (Unfortunate) is a major shift in the condition of the widow. Savitri’s life is troubled by hunger and starvation. She had to support herself and her five-year-old son, Haren with whatever she earned by begging. Her son becomes the sole reason of her survival in her lonesome world. When the entire world shunned her, she redirected all her love, emotions and energies towards her son. She dreamt for a better future for them by educating her son in the village school. But destiny had other plans in store for her; Haren goes missing one day after he leaves for school. Savitiri, is heartbroken and passes her days in the memory of her son. Time flies by and Savitiri is bedridden by her separation from her son. As the narrative ends mother and son are united but are united in death. Haren dies of illness and Savitiri dies of depression (Ghar-Jeuti, 152-154). Here we see the tragic fate of a poor uneducated helpless widow.

Hiranya Prabha Barua’s short story “*Smriti*” (Remembrance) is of a thirty-year widow leading a lonely and solitary life in spiritual pursuits by playing the *bina* and singing songs in praise of the Lord. She is attired in saffron colour clothing and lives on her own in a jungle. She believes that this process will help her to unite with her husband. The religious quest gives her inner peace. At a tender age she discarded all the worldly pleasures and adopted the life of a Brahmachari. Bora through the character of a traveller passing by the jungle where the widow lives narrates the plight of the widowhood. The widow says to the traveller “How can you see me? I am a being

²⁹Bhubeneswari Bordoloi mentioned that the story Durbhogia is based on a true story.

outside this universe. But, I was once part of this world but fate had other plans and my beautiful world was shattered. So, I have abandoned the earthly world and adopted the life of an ascetic. Do you see the village, I lived there. When I was sixteen years of age, my parents married me to a man from the same village that I knew from my childhood” (*Ghar-Jeuti*, 220). But her beautiful world changes when she becomes a widow and she is trying to find solace living the life of an ascetic. She still yearns to be a part of that world and the sharp criticism here is on child marriage and the practice of widowhood.

Through this story, the image of a lonely widow emotionally, economically and socially deprived is represented to the reader. The man is only a listener here. He silently listens to the suffering of the widow and leaves. He may be silent because he feels guilty for the treatment of widows by the patriarchal society or he resembles the entire male population that silently witnesses the suffering of the women. The man represents the patriarchal society who in spite of being aware of the injustice, prejudice and oppression of the widows hardly takes any steps to bring a change in the life of the widows.

The next short story explored on widowhood is Alaka Patangia’s “Kamala”³⁰. Kamala an upper caste childless widow lives with her fifty year old widow mother Kandapeswari; two generations of women bearing the social atrocities of being widows. Kamala has been living the life of a widow for fifty years. Patangia in minute details refers to numerous rituals and *bratas*³¹ widows

³⁰Alaka Patangia. “Kamala”. *Ghar-Jeuti*. 2yr,9 issue. Jeth, 1851 saka. (495-99).

³¹ According to Pradyot Kumar Maity in *Folk- rituals in Eastern India* different definitions of *bratas* have been given by different scholars, but broadly speaking, “the term *bratas* currently means ‘the taking of a vow’ or ‘to undergo solemnly certain physical and mental conditions with a view to achieving a desired result or object’. And a *brata* is observed to satisfy ‘the natural forces or superior beings’ believed to be divine powers or gods’. (Pradyot Kumar Maity, 1). And mostly the *bratas* are observed by girls and women.

have to observe on *Aushi*³² and *Ekadashi*³³. On *aushi* and *ekadashi* they have to observe the *bratas* by taking bath and remain in their wet clothes thorough the entire ritual.

Caste and gender question is beautifully juxtaposed and delineated through the short story. Alaka Patangia exposes the hypocrisy of the Hindu social custom. Though caste system is not very rigid in Assam, it is not non-existent. Its presence is there but not too rigid. Kandepswari and Kamala, the mother-daughter duo are Brahmin widows. They are cast off from their community and are living among the Shudras. The question arises, why they had to live among the lower caste? Are they doubly subjected to oppression? Firstly, their position being women and secondly being widows. Another reason may be that they are abandoned by their family. Kandepswari may have been thrown out because she could not give a male heir and Kamala was deserted because she was childless. Two lonely widows of the upper caste living among the Shudras, raise innumerable questions in the minds of the readers. One reason might be their subaltern position which could help them relate to each other's suffering and could sympathise with one another. They are victims of oppression, suppression and are marginalised as subalterns. The Shudras and the widows share a common history of being oppressed at the hands of the upper caste patriarchal structure. Kamala and Kandepaswari found shelter among the Shudra community but still occupy a privileged position because of their caste. Patangia draws a parallel between widows and shudras and brings them together as victims of the upper caste. How two socially exploited groups are brought together on the same platform to portray the inhuman atrocities by the upper caste brahmanical society is the centre of the dialogue in the story.

³² *Aushi is an auspicious day which occurs twice in a Hindu calendar month*

³³ *Ekadashi is an auspicious day which occurs twice in a Hindu calendar month*

Kamala has little education and can read the *Kirtaan*³⁴, which is the only book widows are expected to read. In her free time Kamala was made to read the *Kirtaan* by her mother. Initially, she read the text without any attempt to understand the philosophy propagated by Srimanta Sankardev. Later she realised the principles of *Ek sharan naam dharam* (Believe in one God) preached by the saint. She read the text aloud to the people of Shudra people who were denied access to this text. Slowly she could break the barrier existing between her and the Shudra community and accept them as one among her. Kamala gradually realizes the hypocrisy of the society in dictating different code of conduct to various section of the society on the basis of caste and gender. The Shudras were denied access to the religious scriptures which was regarded as the sole right of the upper caste. The guru followed the philosophy of *ek sharan naam dharam* where everyone is equal irrespective of caste and creed. It is a religion of inclusiveness. But the irony is his disciples; the bearer of the religion followed the principle of exclusiveness.

Through the representation of two generation of widows, along with a strong critique on caste and gender, Patangia bring out the sharp criticism of the practice and also portrays the stringent rituals which widows have to follow.

In Malinchandar Bora's poem "Bidhabar Ukti" (Widow's Appeal) a rebellious voice of widow emerges which describes the inhuman treatment meted out to widows by the patriarchal society. A voice has to emerge within the widows to revolt against the patriarchal injustice inflicted upon them. The deplorable condition of widow is poetically exposed by Bora. A widow is treated as an outcaste, untouchable and fallen woman. The poem is addressed from the point of view of a widow. It poses various questions like who will rescue them from this wretched state. How long will they lead the life of an outcaste, an untouchable and a fallen woman? There are references to

³⁴ It is a poetical collections composed by the medieval Vaishnavite Saint Srimanta Sankar Dev from Assam.

Hindu mythology. When the entire world turned unsympathetic to Sita Devi, she sought refuge in the lap of mother earth. The widows also appeal to rescue them from their condition and provide shelter in her abode. Apart from these, there are people who try to take advantage of their helpless situation. Society dictates the food habits and dress codes for them. Though they are in the periphery of the social fabric, they are constantly under the strict surveillance of the brahmanical patriarchy. All these rules are imposed upon them to control their sexuality.

The poet renders a rebellious voice to the widows. They must no longer go to bear the atrocities and humiliations. The poem critiques the Hindu religion and Hindu scriptures for their injustice towards a section because of their gender. They question the unequal treatment meted upon them. Why cannot a widow remarry? How can a widower enjoy the right and privilege to remarry after the death of his wife? Why are same rules not applicable for women? Only Hinduism follows such practices. So, it is better to not be born in a Hindu family. They are no longer going to bear these injustices. They are going to rebel by taking the form of *Ransandini*³⁵ (form of the goddess Durga) to fight against these evil practices. The poem ends with an appeal to all the sisters to come out as *Ransandini* and voice against the injustice by burning the Hindu scriptures.

The life of Hindu widow and particularly born in the upper caste is like life in death. After the demise of husband, the widow has to spend the entire life in mourning by devoting her life in memory of the dead husband. If the menfolk do not open the road for widow remarriage, then the womenfolk will no longer hold on to the dictates of the Hindu Shastras. A rebellious voice emerges through the poem. Question on women's sexuality is subtly raised in the poem. A widow is seen as a threat to the society. So, the scriptures impose rigid restrictions on their

³⁵ Ransandini is the most furious warrior avatar of Goddess Durga popularly known as Goddess Kali.

sexual behaviour. It is a radical poem which critiques the position of an upper caste Hindu widow. It is the voice of the Hindu widows who have suffered for hundreds of years.

Sarojini Bora's article "Bidhabar Bibah"³⁶ is a shift from other works on widows. Bora critiques the patriarchal society and the Hindu religion for their inhuman treatment of the widow. She proposes for widow remarriage which is not prevalent among the Brahmins in Assam. One of the reasons she cites is the fear among the upper castes of caste impurity if widow remarriage is sanctioned. She is aware of the reformation movements taking place in various parts of India on widow remarriage especially in Bengal and the active role played by Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar for marriage. She mentions how Vidyasagar set a true inspiration to the Hindu society by marrying his only son to a widow. In Assam, Gunabhiram Barua was the first Assamese Brahmin to register his second marriage to a widow but this fact has not found place in any of the writings on widow remarriage. Though Sarojini Bora mentions the contribution of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Raja Rammohan Roy towards widow remarriage but does not mention the contribution of Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua towards widow remarriage in Assam. Was Sarojini Bora unaware of them and their contributions? Why was it not written about? We fail to get answers to these questions. She further states that in Assam,

Widow Remarriage is prevalent among the Shudras. But it is sad to state that this custom is not at all practised by the Brahmins. It is heard that in Bengal and in some other state widow remarriage among the Brahmins is taking place but it has not been taking place in Assam at all (656).

³⁶ "Bidhoba Bibah" an article by Sarojini Bora published in the third year, second issue of *Ghar-Jeuti*. Here Bora critiques the patriarchal and Hindu society that forbids a widow to remarry and voices for widow remarriage. (*Ghar-Jeuti*, 656)

Due to the prevalence of these inhuman social customs, number of widows disown their religion and seek refuge in other religions. It pushes them in to a vulnerable position where they are exploited and taken advantage of. Their instinctive urges drive them to fall prey to cheating and this brings shame to the community and the family. She urges the educated women to take an active part in curbing these social evils. It is very important to notice her views that due to denial of remarriage many widows disown their religion and accepts other religion that permits widow remarriage.

This is the first voice of anger and revolt by a woman on the patriarchal society which deprives women freedom and happiness. She raises pertinent point and argues in support of widow remarriage. For example, if men can marry five to six or more women then why does a woman who is widowed at the age of nine and ten years have to suffer widowhood throughout her life? They cannot look into the face of any male and can seldom marry. Can there be anything more depressing and regretting than this? A girl who has to bear the brunt of child marriage, without having the privilege to enjoy life has to suffer her whole life. If a seventy or eighty years old man does not hesitate to marry an eight or nine year old girl, then how can a widow of eight or nine years reaching adolescence control her desires? She questions why there are different set of rules and regulations based on one's gender. Her article points to the prevalence of the custom of child marriage in Assam and how upper caste widows are denied right to remarry. It portrays how upper caste Hindu women are suffering and are victims of the patriarchal system.

Just as Malinchandra Bora in his poem "Bidhabar Ukti" points out how upper caste Hindu widows were accepting different religion in order to escape from the injustice meted on them by the Hindu religion, similarly Sarojini Bora also says "there is no limit /record to how many women have *jatibhrasto* (maligned their community) by adopting other religion because of the

injustice meted out to them by their society. *Indrio tadonat* (sensual desires) drive some widows to fall prey in the hands of cheats.

“*Eko dev, eko seva....ekot bine nahi kebo*”³⁷“one Lord, one service.....there is none except you” is what is expected of a Hindu women after the death of her husband. As in the life time of the husband, the wife dedicates herself to the happiness of her husband; in the similar manner the widow is expected to live her entire life in the service of her dead husband. The entire life of a widow is narrated in this single sentence. She ends the article with an appeal to all the well-wishers of the nation to awaken the society by eradicating the social evils and help in the growth of the nation. Every discourse is connected to the discourse of the nation.

“Sansar” a short story by Jogendranath Bordoloi, deals with the evils of child marriage and widowhood. The story opens with the marriage of the protagonist Maloti. Three phases in the life of the protagonist corresponding to three seasons is portrayed in the story. As Nature exhibits a panorama of images in its transition from each season, similarly, Maloti’s life transforms with passage of time. Three phases in the life of Maloti is depicted corresponding to three seasons- spring, autumn and rainy season. The spring season corresponds to youth, vitality, dreams, love, happiness and marriage. The second phase is autumn. Autumn is associated with harvesting representing a time of abundance and prosperity. Maloti is symbolised as a fertile woman. She is complete with a loving husband, a child and caring in-law. Autumn shows her transition from a house wife to a mother.

The last to come is rainy season which symbolises the tragic part of Maloti’s life. Rain symbolises multiple things depending on the context in which it appears, but most commonly

³⁷ It is a sentence quoted by Sarojini Bora in her article “Bidhobar Bibah” (Ghar-Jeuti, 657)

connotes sadness, rejection or despair. Because rain diminishes sunlight, it creates human emotions of darkness and depression. Metaphorical rain is often used in literature to represent discontent or invoke a forlorn mood.³⁸ Maloti's happiness was short lived. The rainy season corresponds to the tragic days in the life of Maloti. Unhappiness and grief engulf her life after the death of her husband and son. Within six months into her widowhood she is abandoned by her in-laws. At this juncture of life her sole hope is her brother's house. Here too she is subjected to neglect and abuse. Her brother, sister-in-law and her nephew drive her out of their house calling her a mad woman. The story ends with the helpless cry of the widow asking "who will rescue me today? Who will provide shelter?"

Can anything more happen than this? Childhood memories started pouring one after another. I was exhausted. Everything appeared black in front of my eyes. I felt as if something was suffocating me" (669).³⁹ This story gives us the image of a helpless widow who is struggling for her survival.

In a speech read at the Hindu Maha Sabha and Sibasagar Mahila Samity, Gormur Satradhikar addresses the gatherings in which majority were women. This speech is published in the third year of *Ghar-Jeuti* as "Sri SriSriJukta Gormur Satradhikar Prabhur Abhibhashan (Speech of Respected Gormur Satradhikar)."(*Ghar-Jeuti*, 732-37). In his speech he mentions about the changes taking place in the lives of Assamese women. He refers to the child marriage restraint Act 1929 is also known as the Sarada Act after the name of its patron Rai Sahib Haribilas Sarada and said that the consent age for marriage of boy and girl are changed legally now as bill has been passed but still people believes that if a girl is not married on or before the age of 14 years, then this may malign their religion. In this context Satradhikar says "some people say if

³⁸<http://www.ask.com/world-view/rain-symbolize-5892bd1c2cb7db83>.(Date 13.3.16)13:08pm

³⁹ Translation mine. Refer to page no 669 of *Ghar-Jeuti*. 666-669

we are not able marry the girls by the age of fourteen and keep them at home until puberty where will our religion be? Our religion will become extinct.” (Ghar-Jeuti, 735) Satradhikar finds this argument humorous and says if a Brahman can have gallons of liquor, and his religion remain intact. There are countless Brahmin widows who are forced to undergo illegal abortion. There are countless Brahmans who abandon or excommunicate the widows from their community and they are forced to accept shelter among the Muslims and Christians. Here we see that like Sarojini Bora and Malin Chandra Bora, Gormur Satradhikar is also anxious that the destitute widows be given a chance to convert to other religions.

Regarding the question of the status of women in Assam, early marriage and education can be found in the personal narratives *Eri Aha Dinbor* (The Bygone Days)⁴⁰ an autobiography written by Srimati Nalinibala Devi. She refers to the dark old days of Assamese women whose lives are engulfed in purdah. In the name of Purdah system daughters-in-law, daughters and all the women from Bhadrakok had to pass their life within the four corners of the house. If they had to go somewhere they had to go under the shelter of two big *japis*⁴¹ and cover their head and face with *uroni*. In those days there was purdah system applicable for the girls from the Bhadrakok family. There was no purdah system prevalent among the lower section of the society. They were able to roam freely without any inhibitions. (EAD, 40) She mentions about her grandmother’s education “daughter of a scholar our grandmother was taught at home by the family priest. Slokas from Geeta, Bhagawat, Mahabharat, Ramayan were at the tip of the mouth of our grandmother” (EAD, 44) She refers to the absence of women education in Assamese

⁴⁰ Here onwards I will use EAD to refer to *Eri Aha Dinbor*

Japi is a traditional head gear worn by people in Assam. A version of present day umbrella, used to protect one from rain and sun. It is also given as a mark of respect.

community in her days. With the effort of her father and help of her home tutor Devi showed interest in poetry. She was taught by a private tutor at home.

Kiranbala Saikia's narrative titled "Lilavati" portrays Lilavati as a strong woman of great intellectual repute. She is represented as the author of the great mathematical treatise *Lilavati*. She was the daughter of the great Indian mathematician Bhaskarcharya. But as I researched about this work I found that it is mentioned as written by Bhaskarcharya and dedicated to his daughter.⁴² According to the story of Saikia, Lilavati is a child widow whose life is transformed with exposure to education. The story portrays the figure of Bhaskarcharya as a strong personality. He does not helplessly watch the pain and suffering of Lilavati. He did not abandon her at her in-laws place. He realizes the condition of childless widow at the in-laws house. So, he brought her under his care and started her education. Without thinking and anxious about the consequences of his actions he educated his daughter in mathematics. Lilavati's intelligence and interest in mathematics drove her father to educate her in the field of mathematics, a subject exclusively restricted to men. Lilavati broke the age old tradition and proved that women can excel in any subject if given an opportunity. After being educated Lilavati realizes that "apart from *grihashram* household duties there are many wonderful duties for women."⁴³ The story points to the fact that a widow can be rehabilitated by giving her education in the subject she is interested in. She should be given education on practical subjects rather than in traditionally assigned subjects like religion. This example dismantles the stereotypical notion that man is head

⁴² In 1150 AD, Bhaskarcharya (b. 1114 AD), renowned mathematician and astronomer of Vedic tradition composed Lilavati as the first part of his larger work called Siddhanta Siromani, a comprehensive exposition of arithmetic, algebra, geometry, mensuration, number theory and related topics. Lilavati has been used as a standard textbook for about 800 years. This lucid, scholarly and literary presentation has been translated into several languages. world. <https://books.google.co.in/books/>(8.3.16 at 10:58 am)

⁴³ Quoted from Kiranbala Saikia's article "Lilavati". *Ghar-Jeuti* . 3rd year, 3rd issue. Aagahun, 1851 saka. Translation mine.

and women just heart. Lilavati emerges as a true inspiration for women not only of her generation but for all women cutting across time and space

Child marriage was prevalent among the upper caste Hindus. A girl was seen as a burden if she was not married at an age sanctified by the scriptures. Nowhere in the articles or stories have we found that the birth of the girl child is unwelcome. In fact, all stories point to the love and care a girl child receives at her parental home. But the moment a girl child reaches a marriageable age.⁴⁴ Pressure and tension engulf the lives of the parents. They will be ostracized by the community if they are not able to give their daughter in marriage before they attain puberty. This make them look at their girl child as a burden. If a girl child becomes a widow it is a great blow to the parents. Their hurt cries out for their child but they are helpless as widow remarriage does not have societal approval. If they remarry their daughter they will be excommunicated. Vidyasagar's fight for the right for widow remarriage was legally accepted by passing the widow's remarriage Act in 1856 but it did not get mass approval.

The writings highlight the position of Assamese women during the period. The percentage of educated women was negligible. The few who were lucky were home tutored or privately educated. If a girl was send to a school they had to discontinue it in between because they were married off at a young age. The education that a girl primarily received was in religious texts. When the question of widow's education was raised, most of the enthusiasts or people sympathetic to widows' education supported religious education.

Traditionally, widows if given an opportunity to be educated were educated in religious texts and scriptures. The age old customs are challenged, dismantled and a new chapter is written for

⁴⁴As prescribed by hindu scriptures.

women's education. The stories point to the fact that instead of thinking of widow remarriage, a widow can be rehabilitated by being educated and empowered subsequently. A widow may not want to get married if they previously had a bad marriage or married to an old man or suffered physical abuse. The immediate question they want to address is one of survival. All the stories are not from the point of view of a widow. It is from the third person point of view. We do not get a picture of their married life. Were they happy in their married life? Were they happy being a child bride? Are they happy in their present status being a widow?

Women are more concerned with the immediate problems a widow faces after the death of the husband. The question of survival is the foremost priority of the widow. Suddenly they are orphaned, they are driven to poverty. This issue occupies the central theme of most of the writings by women on widowhood in the journal. They are the marginalised and neglected population, leading a life of isolation, poverty and utter despair.

The discourse on widowhood has always projected it as a homogenous category. Analysis of the above texts suggests that it is a heterogeneous category. Caste and class play a key role in defining the position of a widow in the patriarchal society. In Assam too there is different dynamics working among widows belonging to the upper caste like Brahmins and Kshatriya and the lower class and the tribal communities. The question on morality and sexuality is extremely rigid among the upper class. Why can't a widow from lower caste get married after the death of the husband? This question is nowhere raised. A passing remark is only there that they can get married. The social, economic and political condition of the widow influences the position of a widow in a society. For example if a widow belongs to a rich family her situation will be quite different from a widow of a poor family, despite both belonging to the same caste. True they

have to lead a life of celibacy, devote to spiritual and religious pursuits and observe strict restrictions in food habits and dress code.

Nearly all the writings attempt to look into the upper caste Hindu widow. A slight reference to widows from lower caste is mentioned, just that a custom of widow remarriage is prevalent among lower classes. But the reasons for such a custom it is prevalent among them are not explored. Different codes of morality, economic condition and a free labour force are working in the guise of widow remarriage among lower caste women. It is not always a marriage of emotional and physical fulfillment but rather a compromise.

The various writings in *Ghar-Jeuti* on widowhood explored the condition of widows placed in diverse situations in society. All the widows in the writings belong to the upper caste. They point out the different ways a widow's situation can be changed by educating them and building shelter homes like ashrams. But, by doing these were they really helping the widows or were they trying to distance the widows from any form of emotional and physical entanglements with the opposite gender?

The women were uneducated, no property of their own and no employment. They were leading a life of poverty, social ostracism and neglect. But it was just the opposite for the other gender. They were not ostracised by society and acquired the right to marry again. So the hypocrisy of the entire patriarchal system is reflected in the treatment meted out to women, in the name of a different gender. In the case of men there are no restrictions in their food habits, in their dress codes and no mutilation of any kind of their physical appearance. The writings focused on the conditions widows were living in, the economic, social, emotional hardships they faced for their position as widows in the society.

Most of the contributors tried to address the question on widowhood on the basis of the economic positions of the widows. Different dynamics work for the widow depending upon her economic position. The innumerable images of widowhood reflected in the writings are the wealthy widow, the poor widow, the child widow, the childless widow, widow with children, the educated widow, the illiterate widow, the rebellious etc. All these widows are placed in different situations and conditions but they share the common thread of being widows. Each widow's condition has to be studied as a unique case because of the different, social and economic conditions they are placed in. The writings on widowhood cut across class and caste and it is not possible to homogenize the identity of widowhood as a single category. As mentioned earlier *Ghar-Jeuti* carried the speeches in the form of articles that were delivered in the annual celebration of Joymoti Utsov. The next section I would examine Celebration of Joymoti Utsov.

2:4 Women's Participation in the Celebration of Joymoti Utsov

This section would examine how women made use of Joymoti Utsov as a platform to articulate their views on Joymoti and what image can be drawn of her from their writings. In the earlier section we have discussed how issues related to women were discussed through the writings in *Ghar-Jeuti*. The following questions are raised. Why was Joymoti Utsov celebrated? Why the necessity to celebrate a festival of an Ahom princess of the seventeenth century? What significance did it have in the end of nineteenth and early twentieth century writings that it occupied the imagination of most of the established writers of the time? Since when did Joymoti become an iconic figure for Assamese woman? To look for answers to all these questions we have to look back into the genesis of Joymoti as it appeared in writing and how Joymoti became an iconic figure.

Sibsagar was the centre of the beginning of women activities. The first celebration of Joymoti Utsov was in the year 1914, the Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilini was formed a year after this. This was the first attempt of Assamese women coming together at a place and celebrating womanhood at the historical city of Sibsagar at the banks of Joysagar.⁴⁵ By the time *Ghar-Jeuti* made its first appearance Joymoti Utsov had rooted into the psyche of the Assamese people. The time *Ghar-Jeuti* was published Joymoti's celebration spread its roots in other regions of the state. Joymoti's story became a cult of celebrating ideal womanhood. Kamalalaya Kakoti, the editor and publisher of the journal was actively organizing the celebration being a member of the Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilini.

Ghar-Jeuti needed articles for the journal and women centric and Joymoti celebration provided the materials for the journal. It records the history of the celebrations through the speeches.

The story of Joymoti dates back to seventeenth century Assam, when Assam was under the Ahom rule. She was an Ahom princess and the wife of Gadapani, the Ahom King who became famous as Gadadhar Singha. She sacrificed her life for the well-being of her husband and achieved the status of *sati*. In short this is the story of Joymoti and Joymoti Utsov is organised to celebrate the story of incomparable self-sacrifice and *satittwa* [ideal womanhood].

Joymoti's sacrifice as an ideal woman is a partial representation of Joymoti. There is more than the image of an ideal woman. Aparna Mahanta claims that "Princess Joymoti and her martyrdom do not appear in historical record. There is no mention of Joymoti in Edward Gait's History of Assam, first published in 1906 and its revised form in 1926. Gait had based his history on numerous Assamese chronicles called "Buranjis," preserved as hand written manuscripts.

⁴⁵Sibsagar since historical days occupied a special place. It was the capital of the Ahom kingdom. *Ghar-Jeuti* was published from Sibsagar, from which year?

Though both Gadadhar Singha and Rudra Singha (son of Joymoti and Gadapani) play major roles in the historical narratives there is no mention there of Joymati or her story or of the fact that the tank and temples were built by her son Rudra Singha in her honour or named after her” (Mahanta, 2008, 62). This example suggests how history was silent on mentioning this figure.

News, speeches, poems and articles on Joymoti that were presented at the Joymoti celebrations appeared in print media like *Jonaki*, *Banh andhar-Jeuti*. Ratneshwar Mahanta’s article was the first article on this Ahom princess. Mahanta had first written about Joymoti Kuwari in the article “Maomaria Bidroh” [Moamarian Rebellion] serialised in the journal *Jonaki* in 1892. In Moamaria Bidroh Joymoti is referred to as the wife of Laksmikanta Singha. But later on Mahanta corrected this mistake. His article “Langda Gadapani and Joymoti” published in *Jonaki* portrayed Joymoti as a sati and this image continued in subsequent works on her. Mahanta’s article was the basis of most of the writing that were published on her. The story goes like this. Lora Raja was an inexperienced boy of fourteen years. His reign was marked by lawlessness and disorder, everyone was plotting and planning to kill one another and become the ruler. Lora Raja in order to consolidate his reign and throne ordered his soldiers to capture all the royal princes eligible for the throne and mutilate them. Many princes became victim of this cruel plan. Joymoti’s husband Gadapani was an Ahom prince belonging to the Tungkhungia clan of Ahom royalty. He was seen as a threat by Lora Roja and hence ordered his soldiers to capture him. Joymoti on hearing the conspiracy convinced her husband to flee to the Naga Hills. Lora Raja unable to capture Gadapani imprisons his wife Joymoti to reveal the whereabouts of her husband. Lora Roja orders the chaudhangs to torture Joymoti when she refuses to divulge the whereabouts of her husband. The king unlawfully summons Joymoti to appear before the court and confess the whereabouts of her husband. Joymoti is stern in her decision and does not

confess. This further irks the king and she is captured and taken to Jerenga Pathar by the Chaudhang [people engaged in execution]. She suffered the brutality of king's soldiers for fourteen days and nights and met her end. Here woman body becomes the site to fulfil political ambition. The body becomes a site of battle. The cut, bruises, blood, pain and sufferings on the body symbolises the scene of a battle. The body gives way but the spirit and the soul attains immortality. By inflicting pain on Joymoti, Lora Raja was trying to psychologically break Gadapani. On hearing the suffering of the wife, Gadapani comes to meet her in the guise of a Naga and pleads her to confess about her husband. But Joymoti stood firm in her decision. This gives more strength to Gadapani to fulfil his mission. She courageously bears the torture by the king's men and embraces death.

Kamalaya Kakoti,⁴⁶ in her welcoming address⁴⁷ as the secretary of Sibasagar Mahila Sanmilini in 1928 outlines the birth or origin of the idea of celebrating the Joymoti Utsov. The idea germinated in the minds of few men like Radhikanath Sharma, Indeshwar Borthakur, Premdhar Chaliha fourteen years ago i.e. in 1914. They planned to celebrate the death anniversary of Joymoti on a grand scale on the banks of Joysagar by gathering women folk, girls and general public with common interest and engage in discussions and talks on “*atmatyag and apurba satittva kahini*[self-sacrifice and extraordinary tale of chastity]” of Joymoti (*Ghar-Jeuti* 196). As per the plan a tea meeting (*chaa mel*) was organised near Hargauri dol near the bank of Joysagar in January on the special occasion of Magh bihu celebration and it was decided that on April the first, Joymoti Utsov will be celebrated with the help of Sibasagar Club. For two years the

⁴⁶Kamalaya Kakoti the editor of *Ghar-Jeuti*, was an active member of AMS and the Joint Secretary of AMS in Jorhat Annual Conference (1929). Apart from this she was also the Secretary of Sibasagar Mahila Sanmilini.

⁴⁷Kamalaya Kakoti. “Sibasagar Mahila Sanmilinir Sampadikar Abhibhakhon [Welcome Address by secretary of Sibasagar Mahila Sanmilini]”. *Ghar-Jeuti*. 1:10.p 196-197.

celebration was organised by the Sibasagar Club with the active participation of Indeshwar Borthakur, Padmadhar Chaliha, Sarbeshwar Barua' doctor Prassanakumar Barua etc.

The men associated with this group were lawyers, doctors, artists, writers etc.⁴⁸ In 1916 the celebration was organized by Ahom Sabha but it was not a grand success. For the next two consecutive years the teachers and students of Phuleswari Institution⁴⁹ took the charge. Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilini took the charge from 1919 and since then conducting this celebration over the years successfully with dedication and hard work. In her address Kakoti thanks and expresses her gratitude to all the people who have been helping them in the celebrations by motivating them and supporting them financially. The list includes people cutting across community, region and gender. Lotika Devi, wife of Jnandhiram Barua wrote letters from Calcutta to encourage the good work of the Samity. Woman writers like Padmavati Devi Phukanoni was part of this organisation. Regarding *Joymoti Utsov* Rina Barman in "A dirge for Joymoti: The story of Assamese Cinema" says

Since 1913, Joymoti Utsov has been celebrated around the Joysagar lake at Jerenga Pathar. The story is a part of this regions folk narrative; not quite the razzle- dazzle of celluloid but a virtual source of entertainment nevertheless. There are many layers, many ways of interpreting this story, regardless of whether you consider it fiction, mythology or reality. What cannot be denied is that Joymoti story has inspired the intelligentsia of Assam, especially of the *Jonaki* (an

⁴⁸ Aparna Mahanta in *Journey of Assamese Women*.p.61.

⁴⁹The first co-education institution in Sibasagar was founded by Radhika Nath Sharma , a school master of Government Boys School, Sibasagar in 1915.(Aparna Mahanta, *Journey of Assamese Women 1926-1937*.p.61)

influential Assamese language journal started in 1889) era and generated a host of healthy historical debates *The Sunday Guardian*. 17 January 2015)⁵⁰

As Rina Barman says the story of Joymoti has generated a lot discussion around it. There has been a sprout of writing on Joymoti after Mahanta's writing. Padmantha Gohain Barua wrote a historical drama entitled *Joymoti* in 1900. Fifteen years after this Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938) wrote his drama *Joymoti Kuwari* (1915). By 1914 the first celebration of Joymoti Utsov was celebrated at Sibsagar. The story of Joymoti from print media got translated into film in 1935. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala poet, writer and filmmaker made the first Assamese movie *Joymoti* based on the Laskminath Bezbaroa's play *Joymoti Kuwari*.

From the time the first article was published, to the time a movie based on the life of the princess released, *Joymoti Kuwari* had occupied a special place in the collective consciousness of Assamese people. All these narratives on Joymoti has limited its focus on the few last days of her life. The readers get an image of a helpless woman suffering at the hands of her enemies. Ratneswar Mahanta introduces the heroine of the article as the wife of Gadapani. She becomes the symbol of an ideal wife and she is mostly remembered for her selfless love and devotion for her husband. Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Joymoti* is the first historical drama in Assamese. The dramatist has portrayed the character of Joymoti as the image of an ideal womanhood. Manorama Borgohain says that "through the effort to idealise the moral courage and great sacrifice of the character the author has tried to incorporate some divine characteristics to the

⁵⁰ Web accessed on 23.8.2016.12:20pm www.sunday-guardian.com/artbeat/a-dirge-for-joymoti-the-story-of-nemaassamese-cinema

character”⁵¹. Borgohain mentions that the author himself admits this in the preface of the drama that though the character of Joymoti is worldly her characteristics render the character divinely. So, it is an attempt to render the character divinely without removing her from history. It takes away the character from history and showcases her sacrifice as divine and represents her as a *devi*. A woman of flesh and blood is put on a high pedestal that gives her an aura of divinity.

The story is not simply about a wife’s sacrifice but portrays women as victims of political conspiracy and conflict. At time of wars and political anarchy women are the most vulnerable and crimes on women are on the rise. The story of Joymoti can be seen as one of a victim of political conspiracy webbed by Sulikphaa (Lora Raja) at the advice of his official Laluksola Borphukan. In this political conspiracy, a wife is not only separated from her husband but a mother is also separated from her children. Joymoti as a mother does not occupy space in the narrative. Kashinath Burman in *Nari Ratna*⁵² wrote an article “Joymoti Kowari” in which he mentions Joymoti as the mother of three children. Lai and Lesai were the two sons and the youngest one was a girl. The baby girl met with an untimely death as she was denied her mother’s breast milk. Motherhood and a mother’s separation from her young kids is not represented in the narratives. In other narratives Joymoti is represented as the mother of two sons. There is no authentication of these facts as we do not have historical evidence to all these facts about Joymoti’s life.

⁵¹ See “Padmanath Gohain Barua’s Sahityat Nari (Women in Padmanath Gohain Barua’s Literary Works)” in *Asamiya Sahityat Nari*.p.41-54.

⁵²*Nari Ratna* (Women’s Gems) is a collection of biographical sketches of well know Assamese women figures that made a mark in history starting from Mula Gabharu. The book was first published by Lawyer’s Book Stall in 1929. The second and third reprint was 1938 and 1951. I have referred to is the fourth reprint in 1956 by Chapala Book Stall, Shillong.see19-25.

Joymoti's story, apart from celebrating the image of the ideal woman in mid-twentieth century, also takes on a nationalist narrative. Joymoti was seen as a woman's sacrifice for her nation and her people. In an informal talk with Santanamoi Mazumdar, a writer and an active member of Assam Lekhika Samaroh about the significance of Joymoti Kuwari in Assamese women live. She stresses upon the image of Joymoti and her practise of sati as part of understanding her nationalistic fervour. She sees her sacrifice as sacrifice for the nation. A similar view is shared by Kamala Bora, an active member of Assam Lekhika Samaroh and Tezpur Mahila Samity. She eulogises Joymoti for her patriotism and love for the nation. Joymoti was a princess, a daughter of an Ahom official, a mother and a prospective queen to the Ahom throne, none of which were fully exploited by writers and film makers. Apart from the figure of the ideal wife she was also a true hero who sacrificed her life for the well-being of the nation. Joymoti played a crucial role in Ahom history; her intervention in the volatile political situation changed the course of Ahom history. If she had not sacrificed her life Ahom history would have been different. As she was the daughter of an Ahom official, patriotism was in her blood. It was a time of political turmoil in Ahom rule. Every Ahom was plotting and scheming against one another to be the king. She was not only saving her husband but she was securing the life of the future king of Ahom kingdom. She was an ambitious, intelligent and clever woman. When she heard that Lora Raja's soldiers were looking for a husband she advised her husband to disguise himself as a Naga and flee to the Naga Hills. Her heroism, patriotism, valour and courage for the nation and community fail to occupy the imagination of writers. Gadapani was able to revolt against the tyrant ruler because of the sacrifice of his wife. He and his successors were able to become the future kings because of the great sacrifice Joymoti made. The image of Joymoti's sacrifice for the nation most probably appeared during the period of India's fight for Independence. Ratneshwar Mahanta

introduces his heroine Joymoti as the wife of Gadapani. That is all we know about Joymoti. The narrative is limited to fourteen days of her torture in which she stood firm in her decision to not disclose her husband's hide. She only emerges as an ideal wife. Although Gohain Barua sees her sacrifice for the nation he does not elaborate this aspect of Joymoti's character. He too follows Mahanta's ideology of celebrating ideal womanhood. But there is mention about Joymoti's father Lai Thepena Borgohain sorrow at seeing the plight of his daughter.

The main motive of organising Joymoti Utsov was to celebrate the sacrifice of Joymoti Kuwari and celebrate the image of ideal womanhood. Though it was a celebration for women, men also participated in it. The celebration gave women opportunity for the first time to come together at one place and engage in an activity that was different from their daily chores. They were main participants in remembering a woman who was the symbol of ideal womanhood. Joymoti celebration gave women an opportunity to develop the feeling of sisterhood and to celebrate womanhood. Women from different districts belonging to different class, community and religion assembled together breaking their difference to remember this iconic woman. Joymoti Utsov gave women an opportunity to express their creativity in the form of writing speeches, songs and articles. It gave women and girls an opportunity to participate publicly in singing which was seen with disrespect otherwise in those days. But singing songs in praise of the ideal woman did not come into the critical scrutiny of the patriarchal society.

The image of women as public speakers were almost rare during this period but Joymoti Utsov gave opportunity to women to deliver speeches on this iconic figure. Speeches and songs by women gave rise to the growth of women narratives on Joymoti. Every speech by women or men in the celebration began with narrating the story of Joymoti. Women were taking up the role of

president and secretary of these celebrations and their speeches were published in the journal. These were performative texts which had a direct connection between the speaker and audience. The speeches might have been followed by discussion and feedback. The moment these speeches are transformed into print it has a different impact because it does not have a physical connect between the reader and speaker.

In the first year of *Ghar-Jeuti*⁵³ there appeared nearly five speeches of women in its tenth issue namely by Jagyalata Dowara, Shantiprova Gohain Barua, Punyaprova Gohain Barua, Ratnakumari Rajkhuwani and Kamalalaya Kakoti. As there were no alternative texts available, women too relied on the male texts available on Joymoti. All the women speakers narrate the story of Joymoti's sacrifice with key emphasis on the image of sati, the ideal woman. But in addition to this, speakers also highlighted the sacrifice of Joymoti for the nation and its people. These speeches were delivered between 1927 and 1931. Himala Baruani in her reception committee inaugural speech on Joymoti Utsov published in *Ghar-Jeuti* second year says that if we analyse Joymoti Kuwari's story we can see a revolt, a revolt against a tyrannical power. It was her courage, determination, will power, truth and love that she was able to fight against the despot. Though she died because of the torture she transcends death by her revolution against the oppressive force (*Ghar-Jeuti*, 463)

There appeared an article in *Banhi* titled "Joymoti Utsov" (*Banhi*.6:6.p.1126-27) written by a *darshak* (audience/spectator) on the celebration of it in 1914. The first celebration of Joymoti Utsov took place on 6 April, Monday in 1914 near the banks of Joysagar. There was excitement among the audience and the organisers. The sub divisional officer of Sibsagar declared a half day for the schools so that girls could participate. The Utsov gave an opportunity for different

⁵³See *Ghar-Jeuti* 1:10.p178-207.

communities and religions to be united under a common platform. Hindu, Muslim, Christians, Asamiya, Bengali, Marwari, Desuwali etc. gathered to celebrate the utsov together. It was a celebration primarily for the women of ideal womanhood for women but most of the speakers of the occasion were male. Eminent personalities like Radhikanath Sharma, Kuladhar Chaliha, Gulap Chandra Sharma Barua, Indeshwar Borthakur etc. graced the occasion by their presence and delivered speech on the ideal woman Joymoti. Kuladhar Chaliha asked women to be a symbol of feminine chastity. "Sisters, imbibe the qualities of devoted wife and think of the well-being of your husband. And do not hesitate to sacrifice your life for your husband. There is peace in such death. Such an act can serve in favour of society and the community." (Banhi.6:6.p, 1126). The image of Joymoti caught up the imaginative frenzy of Indeshwar Borthakur and found expression through a painting of Joymoti. Joymoti was portrayed as tied by chain and tortured by the Chaudhangs.

Mahanta through his story had raised the sacrificing figure of Joymoti as *Sati*. In case of Joymoti's story the woman dies saving her husband and becomes *sati* whereas *Sati* refers to a woman who burns herself at the pyre of her husband. The honorific title given to Joymoti has to be problematized because this practice is not prevalent in Assam. From the inaugural speech by Kamalalaya Kakoti, it is inferred that the initiative and idea originated among educated men of Sivasagar to honour the sacrifice and immortalize the life of Joymoti by remembering her as ideal wife. Men's enthusiasm in bringing and celebrating the sati image while the practice of sati was "banned" in Bengal needs to be noted. This can be seen as a deliberate attempt by men like Mahanta to bring an ideal woman image as opposite to the newly emerging educated woman who was seen as a threat. As we see here the other image of Joymoti as a nationalist figure, rebellious figure and sacrificing mother etc is brought through the writing of women. More

importantly women's entry into public space is made possible by Joymoti Utsov and women use the same platform to address issues of education and role of women in nation building.

Celebration of Joymoti Utsov and the formation of Assam Mahila Samity, which later came to be known as Assam Pradesik Mahila Samity played a significant role in developing women's movement in Assam. The study of women's movement in Assam will be incomplete if we do not study Joymoti Utsov, *Ghar-Jeuti* and AMS as sites of women's revolution and women's emancipation. They all were working in their unique ways in developing women's consciousness in the region. The next chapter would focus on Assam Mahila Samity.

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Third Chapter

Assam Mahila Samity, Saikiani and the Women's Question

This chapter attempts to look at the formation, functions and development of AMS (*Assam Mahila Samity*). Under the leadership of Chandraprabha Saikiani, a few educated women formed the first all-Assam women's organisation called *Assam Mahila Samity* (AMS hereafter) in 1926. Through a short biographical sketch and an analysis of Chandraprabha Saikiani's works, the chapter tries to address the question of women in this period. The primary sources for this chapter are the reports of Saikiani's speech at AMS which was published in *Ghar-Jeuti*. For her biographical sketch, the chapter has relied on three biographies: Pushpalta Das's *Agnisnata Chandraprabha* (1998), Achyut Kumar Sharma's *Chandraprabha Saikiani* (2001), and Anjali Sharma's *Chandraprabha* (2011) and Saikiani's writings.⁵⁴

Beginning with a short description of the status of women's education in early 20th century Assam, the first section of the chapter, "Women's Organisation: An Overview" provides a short account of the establishment of women's organisations in India with focus on Assam and the factors which facilitated it. The second section, "Making History: The Formation and Activities of AMS" which begins with a historical account of the formation of AMS discusses the aims, objectives and activities of AMS. The section also highlights AMS's role in the implementation of the Sarada Bill. The third section "Chandraprabha Saikiani: A History of Doing" gives a short biographical sketch of Chandraprabha Saikiani. The fourth section, "Saikiani and AMS" discusses Saikiani's role in the formation and activities of AMS. The fifth section, "The Question

⁵⁴ From 1998 to 2011, four biographies have been penned on her. *Abhijatri* (One Life Many rivers), written by Nirupama Borgohain in 1993, is a novel which gives fictionalised account of Saikiani's life. She received Sahitya Akademi Award for this work in 1996. Prodipto Borgohain translated the work into English.

of Women in Saikiani's Writings" analyses Saikiani's writings to understand the way she addressed the women's question.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the reformation in Assam did not take place as a movement. By reform I chiefly refer to the reform of women. It was confined within the pages of magazines. Educational institutions for women were very scarce in Assam in the early 20th century. Cotton College, one of the premier institutions in the region was established in 1901 under the initiative of Manikchandra Barua. But it was not until 1934 the doors of this institution were opened to women. Women who aspired for higher education had to travel as far as Calcutta to receive education. Women from affluent families and women receiving financial aids from missionaries travelled to Calcutta and enrolled in the Bethune College. Gunabhiram Barua's daughter Swarnalata was the first Assamese woman to receive admission in Bethune School. Jnanadabhiram Barua in his autobiography *Mur Kotha* mentions the schooling of his sister. As there were no proper school for girls in Nowgaon, Swarnalata, a girl of hardly nine years, was admitted in Bethune School in 1880. She spent seven years at this school. Occasionally, Bishnupriya Devi, who was Swarnalata's mother used to go and stay with her for months. *Puroni Kotha* published in the third and fourth year of Abahon; Jnanadabhiram says "Once I stayed with *aai* (mother) in 65 Manikatla Street...*aai* stayed there for nearly a year for Swarna *baideo*'s (elder sister) education. She stayed in the boarding. But a mother's heart loved to keep the girl within her sight. Swarna *baideo* will stay with her and continue her studies, so *aai* stayed in Calcutta" (*Abahon*, p.60). This is a picture of late nineteenth century women's education in Assam.

Hemoprova Das, the first Assamese female post graduate in M.Sc. was denied education in Cotton College because it was exclusively an institution for boys at that point of time. She

travelled to Calcutta and enrolled in the M.Sc. programme at Calcutta University. These two cases were of women having strong financial support. But women coming from a rural and economically poor background with a desire for education had to abandon their dreams or wait like Rajaniprabha Das to be noticed by the missionaries and get financial support.

The various writings on education published in different journals point to the dismal status of education in Assam. After the region came under colonial rule, the new government, the missionaries and the newly educated native intellectuals tried to create awareness among the people regarding the benefits of education. The percentage of literacy was very low, let alone the percentage of educated girls. Assam Mahila Samity, since its inception, worked towards promoting women's education. It is a non-governmental democratic institution striving for the development of women across caste, class and community. "Women's education had developed in Assam only since the latter part of the 19th century. At the time of her (Saikiani's) birth in 1901, secondary education for girls was not available in Assam and even girls' primary schools were few..." (Mahanta, 91). It is in this context that the contribution of AMS and Saikiani deserves special mention.

3.1 Women's Organisations: An Overview

The struggle for women's emancipation is closely related to both the nationalist movement and the social reform movement. Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Assam in 1921 was a major boost to the women there and they participated in large numbers in the freedom struggle. Gandhi's entry into the scene requesting women to organise themselves gave inspiration to Assamese women like Chandraprabha Saikiani to organise and mobilise Assamese women by forming an organisation exclusive for women. Gandhiji's emphasis on women's education, women's participation in

national development not only made them politically conscious of the need of freedom for the country, but also to a certain extent, made them conscious of being an individual. During this time, the purdah system existed among the urban women and upper class. Despite this system, the wives and mother of leaders freely moved in the public, working and delivering speeches for the country's freedom.

When the zest for social reform was replaced by the spirit of nationalism, a handful of women formed women organisations for the reform of women's conditions. Radha Kumar in *History of Doing* says: the decade 1910-1920 was one in which first attempts at setting up all-India women's organization were made. The earliest women's organizations were both urban and sectarian in nature pejorative as they were mostly Arya Samajist or Brahmos. From the late nineteenth century they were followed by local or regional women's organisations, such as Banga Mahila Samaj and the Aghorekamini Nari Samiti in Bengal; Satara Abalonnati Sabha in Maharashtra, the Mahila Seva Samaj in Bangalore, the Bharat Mahila Parishad in Benares and the Prayas Mahila Samity in Allahabad. Some of these were practical social reform organisations, others mere discussion platforms for women (54).

The three major women's organisations in India emerged after World War I. The first is Women's Indian Association (WIA, 1917 in Madras), the second is the National Council of Women in India (NCWI, 1925) and the third is All India Women's Conference (AIWC, 1927). All three organisations emerged in the period from 1917 to 1927.⁵⁵ In the context of Assam, there were three women's organisations functioning at a local level—the Dibrugarh Mahila Samity (1915), the Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilini (1916) and Tezpur Mahila Samity (1919). Sarala

⁵⁵*Women in Modern India*. VOL IV. By Geraldine Forbes and Geraldine Hancock Forbes.

Debi Choudharani⁵⁶, Sarojini Naidu and Chandraprabha Saikiani of Assam are notable personalities. These women worked simultaneously for both social and national movements.

In the context of India as quoted in the book *History of Doing*,

the first attempt at coming together on a large scale was made in 1908, when there was a 'Mahila Parishad' or 'Ladies Congress' at Madras, attended by women all over South India, at which nineteen papers were presented by women in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi and English. Two years later, Sarala Debi founded the Bharat Stree Mahamandal with the intention of forming an all-India women's organization, with 'the object of bringing together women of all castes and creeds on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of women in India....In 1917, the Women's Indian Association was founded by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Malati Patwardhan, Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs. Dadabhoy and Mrs. Ambujammal (Kumar, 54)

In the same year the Assam Mahila Samity was, there were attempts to organise an All India Women's Conference in Poona. "In late 1925 or early 1926, Margaret Cousins, the founder Secretary of the Women's India Association, and editor of *Stri-Dharma*, wrote a letter which was sent to several women's organizations and many individuals, in which she asked women to come from all over the country to discuss education." (Kumar, 68). The first conference at Poona was successful, with 2000 people attending. It was held at Fergusson Hall in Poona University. There is no evidence whether Assam Mahila Samity got an invitation to participate in the Conference or the members of Assam Mahila Samity were aware of the Women's Conference. But it put

⁵⁶Sarala Devi (1872-1945) was the founder of the first women's organisation Bharat Stri Mahamandal in 1910 at Allahabad.

forward the common agenda of women's education in its first year. At the same conference, another resolution in the support of Rai Sahib Harbilas Sarada's Bill for the restraint of early marriage was passed. And in the second conference they decided to campaign for the Sarada Bill. Its chief memorandum was the upliftment of women through education, but in the subsequent years, it involved itself in other issues such as women's political rights, campaigning for the Sarada Bill, etc. Similarly, AMS in the second conference held at Jorhat in 1930, proposed to support the Sarada Bill "the sabha supports Harbilas Sardar Singh's Bill and it supports Doctor Gaurav Bill on Cohabitation age for girls 16 and for boys 25."(*Ghar-Jeuti*, 584)

There were a few women's organisations in various towns working independently before the formation of Assam Mahila Samity. In 1915, the Dibrugarh Mahila Samity was formed under the leadership of Hemoprova Das⁵⁷. This organisation was known as Sevak Mahila Samity of Dibrugarh. The Samity supported women's education and provided financial support to some poor girls (Sharma, *Chandraparbha Saikiani*). The Alochani Club was formed in the town of Dibrugarh. "The club sat weekly at the Amolapatty nam-ghar (community prayer hall) and later began the publication of a progressive journal *Alochani* (1910). Women also attended these meetings and read papers which were published in *Alochani* and other magazines of the time. Around the year 1915, the local ladies including Hemprova Das, the headmistress and the teachers of the Girls' School began organising their own weekly sittings, calling themselves the Mahila Sevak" (Mahanta, 98).

Mahanta mentions another such organisation that was established by ladies in the historic city of Sibsagar in 1916. This organisation came into being at the time of celebration of the Joymoti

⁵⁷ Hemoprova Das was the first woman from Assam to complete IF. She established the first Girls' High School at Dibrugarh and remained the headmistress of the school till her last days.

Utsav. A few educated men decided to celebrate the death anniversary of the Ahom princess to instill nationalist sentiment in women. In 1914, the first celebration took place where men took an active interest in organising the celebrations. From the next year onwards, it became an annual event. By 1916, the responsibility of organising the celebration was taken over by the women of the town and the Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilini was formed for this purpose. It brought the women together and its organisational format later enabled it to initiate other activities among the women (Mahanta, 99).

In 1917, the Nagaon Mahila Samity was established by Chandraprabha Saikiani. She was working as a teacher at Primary Girls' School. Swarnalata Barua was made the secretary (Sampadika) and Khagendripriya Baruani, the president (Sabhanetri) of the Samity. This Samity was later known as Nagaon Zila Mahila Samity (Sharma, *Chandraparbha*. 52). The Tezpur Mahila Samity was formed in 1919 with the effort of Chandraprabha Saikiani and Kironmoyee Agarwala⁵⁸. Prior to this there had been a Mahila Samity at Tezpur mainly for the promotion of education among the financially weaker section of the society. Dandinath Kalita, the famous literary figure of Assam, as a young boy, received financial aid from this organisation (Mahanta, *JOAWI* 1836-1937, p.100). But for some reasons it stopped functioning after a few years. Under the president ship of Kunjalata Devi, the wife of Mahadev Sharma, the first session of the Tezpur Mahila Samity was held. Kironmoyee Devi was the president and Chandraprabha Saikiani the secretary. The first resolution of the Samity was to abolish purdah system. This was a strategically thought-out resolution because if the Samity was to progress they needed the support of women from all sections of the society and women had to come out of their sheltered

⁵⁸She devoted herself to various social and political activities in the twentieth century. She opened a sipini Bhoral in her house and formed the Tezpur Mahila Samity. She was the wife of Paramananda Agarwala and mother of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. As the mother of the student leader, she helped in the Chatra Sanmilan organization.

spaces at home. In those days there were strict codes to be followed by the upper-caste and upper-class urban women. They had to travel only by horse-drawn carriage. They could not walk about freely. Nalinibala Devi in her autobiography mentions the prevalence of the purdah system. She refers to those days as days of darkness. The carefree nature of contemporary women was considered shameful during those days. Especially the girls in a *bhadra* family from the age of ten-eleven years were not allowed to step outside the house. All the *bhadra* mahila had to follow this cruel custom and confine themselves to the interiors of the house. If they had to travel somewhere, they had to cover their heads with *uroni* and walk within the cover of two big *japis*. If they travelled in horse-drawn carriages, they had to close the doors and travel. During marriage there is the ritual of *pani tula* where women folk sings songs and draws water from the nearby stream or river. Women had to observe this ritual within the confines of *choduli*. It is a kind of mosquito net. Within that congested space of the *choduli*, twenty to thirty women perform the ritual of *pani tula*. This is analogous to the oppression perpetrated by the purdah. (Nalinibala Devi, 39-40). She also mentions that the system of purdah was restricted to the women of *bhadraghor*. There was absence of purdah in the lower classes. The lower-class women had the freedom of moving about freely in the public. Mahila Samity through their efforts tried to rescue the upper-class women from the purdah system. The members of the Samity decided to walk freely in the streets and this was criticised by a large section of the people.

3.2 Making History: The Formation and Activities of AMS

The foundation of AMS can be seen against the backdrop of a new wave of social and political activity among women. It coincides with the activities of three organisations— Assamese Students' Literary Society (ASLS, 1889), Assam Chatra Sanmilan (1903) and Assam Sahitya

Sabha (1916)—which were working in developing and promoting Assamese culture.⁵⁹ Saikiani in her *Mahila Smaity Ittibritti* (The History of Assam Mahila Samity, 1961) says that “the formation and activities of these nationalist organisations of the Assamese people prepared the way for the emergence of the Mahila Samity by spreading awareness about the necessity and value of such organisations ”(95). Women’s entry in to the public sphere was facilitated by these three organisations which were formed by the newly western-educated young men. It is difficult to ascertain whether there were any female members in these organisations during the initial period. It can be said that these organisations were exclusively male dominated. But women were welcome to be a part of the annual meet of these organisations. Though they were less in number, the women were slowly making their presence felt in these three organisations which were working towards the social, economic, literary, cultural and political development of the nation. From 1916 onwards, women started participating in the public platform along with the men in these organisations. Saikiani and a group of young, educated women and teachers started attending the conferences. Lashmipriya Chaliha, Punyaprova Das, Chandrakanti Das and Rajabala Das were the other women who attended the conferences (Sharma, 94).

The first participation of women in one of these conferences was in 1916. Aparna Mahanta in *Journey of Assamese Women: 1836-1937* refers to the participation of women in Assam Chatra Sanmilan as recorded in Lakshmidhar Sharma’s *Rachanavali*. In 1916, Laskminath Bezbaruah presided over the first annual conference of Assam Chatra Sanmilan, and in this conference, his three young daughters studying in Calcutta performed songs. Bezbarua requested his wife to

⁵⁹ The Assamese Students’ Literary Society (ASLS) was founded in 1889 in Calcutta by the Assamese students studying in Calcutta. The Assam Association which was formed in 1903 was the first socio-political organisation of Assam formed by a few educated and politically conscious people. Assam Chatra Sanmilan was formed in 1916 to promote education and culture. In 1917, the first Assamese literary organisation Assam Sahitya Sabha organised its conference at Sibsagar. Most of the male members of these organisations were lawyers.

attend the Assam Association Conference held the following day (*Journey of Assamese Women 1836-1937*, p.93-94). The sight of educated women participating in the conference might have raised eyebrows because this was a very rare sight. Hence, it was the upper-caste women who started the trend of participating in the conferences. They were encouraged by their husbands and fathers.

The third conference of Chatra Sanmilan organised at Tezpur in 1919 proved to be a historic event. Laskhmiprova Chaliha, Chandrakanti Das and other female students joined the Sanmilan for the first time (Sharma, *Chandraprabha*.p 51). Here, for the first time an educated rural woman participated along with urban woman like Kironmoyee Agarwala. She was none other than Chandraprabha Saikiani who was working as the headmistress at Tezpur. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala had requested Saikiani to work in the reception committee of the Chatra Sanmila. Besides working with the volunteers, she was also given an added responsibility of delivering a speech. She occupied the dais along with dignitaries such as Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Amiya Kumar Das. She delivered a powerful speech on the evils of opium and spoke in favour of banning it. This was probably the first speech by a woman in a public platform. In the same year, Rajabala Das (after completing her B.A) and Saikiani attended the third conference of Assam Sahitya Sabha at Barpeta. Saikiani delivered a speech on untouchability (Sharma *Chandrapapaha*, 51). It marked two important historical developments. Saikini's participation and speech in the conference denoted the beginning of women intellectually sharing public space with men. Also, for the first time, women belonging to different backgrounds joined hands for female empowerment.

The history of formation of AMS is to be found in the pages of *Ghar-Jeuti*. It published the reports of the three annual conferences of AMS held in the period 1928-1931 at Goalpara, Jorhat

and Golaghat respectively. From these reports we get the background, history and beginning of the women's organisation, its aims and objectives and the names of the members who were the backbone of the Samity. In the report of the first annual conference held at Goalpara in 1927, Saikiani gives a brief history of the formation of the Samity, the purpose and aims of the Samity, information on the funds of the Samity, etc. As per the report, the Assam Mahila Samity was formed in the historical as well as holy site of Dhubri. The women gathered in the Bijni Hall of Dhubri with the support of a few male members such as Benudhar Rajkhowa, Amritlal Das, etc. The president of the meeting was Lotika Devi, the wife of barrister J. Barooah. The female members present in the session were Snehalata Bhattacharjee, Ratnawali Bezbaruah, Charubala Das the wife of police officer Amritlal Das and women from respected families and wives of high-ranking government officials. For promoting the educational and other kinds of development of Assamese women, a proposal was passed to form the Samity. Saikiani says that it was a spontaneous decision to form the Samity. With the encouragement and support of Benudhar Rajkhowa and Amritlal Das—a police officer—the Samity was formed. All the arrangements were made within half an hour. Das took care of the transportation of the women and Aparajita Agarwala provided refreshments.

One of the many factors that led to the formation of AMS was an unpleasant incident which took place in the meeting of Nagaon Sahitya Sabha in 1925.. In the meeting, the women were segregated from men and they had to sit inside a bamboo enclosure (traditionally known as *sikar purdah pratha*) and witness the proceedings of the Sabha just like animals in a farm. Saikiani, as a women delegate occupying the dais along with men, could no longer tolerate this inhuman treatment and reproached the reception committee: “if we keep half of our population within the confines of a *sikar* then how are we going to engage in literary creation for the social

good?”⁶⁰(Das, *Agnisnata Chandraprabha*. p 4-5). Under her leadership, the women present in the meeting demolished the *sikar* and removed the segregation. It was a historic moment in the history of women’s movement in Assam. From that day onwards, the tradition of *sikar pratha* came to an end. Saikiani called for a meeting for women the following day at the same place. As the meeting was in progress, some of the members of the reception committee started dismantling the makeshift venue. Therefore, the women organised the meeting in an open field where through a proposal, Saikini was entrusted with the responsibility of forming the Assam Mahila Samity (ibid, 9).

For the publicity of the Samity, Saikaini requested different newspapers to report the activities of the organisation and promote it. Saikiani in her second annual conference proposal says: “The Samity’s tenth proposal was to bring out a monthly magazine, but with the publication of *Ghar-Jeuti* this proposal has been postponed.... With the publication of this magazine due to the effort of Kamalalaya Kakoti, a big lacuna in Assamese women’s community has been filled. We hope the magazine will become a pride to the nation... (*Ghar-Jeuti*. p.592 [Translation Mine]). It published the speeches of Chandraprabha Saikiani, the secretary of the Samity and the report of the various Samities.

The first annual conference report by Saikiani gives details of the sources of funding for the Samity. Women from different corners of Assam came forward to raise funds for the community. The first help came from a person from Calcutta. He published eight receipt books for the Samity. So, with the help of the funds collected by both men and women, the Samity organised its first conference at Goalpara in 1927. Nearly fifteen hundred women were present in

⁶⁰Translation mine.

this conference.⁶¹ Saikiani says “From all sides we got the support and help from men in the formation of the Samity.” The reception committee of Assam Sahitya Sabha provided help by arranging the stay, food and transportation of the women (*Ghar-Jeuti*.p.93-100). Ratnakumari Rajkhowani’s article also provides the details of funding of the AMS.⁶² In the article she mainly focused on the people who had contributed to make the annual conference a success. Kamalalaya Kakoti, the editor of *Ghar-Jeuti* is specially acknowledged for helping in raising funds and for bringing some girls to sing and act some portion of the play *Joymoti* at the conference.⁶³ The Samity got strong support from men sensitive to the women’s cause. They helped mostly by providing financial support for the smooth running of the organization. Their funding helped in managing the boarding, transportation and food expenses of the Samity.

Mahila Samity was born at a juncture when a group of educated women felt that they did not have space in the male-dominated organisations. They felt that their needs were different and that the men were not doing enough for the betterment of women. In a way, it was a revolt against male organisations which treated women unequally. It is important to note that the women who were associated with the development and formation of the AMS were all educated. Education had widened their horizons. The educated women began participating in various literary and cultural activities of their time and were inspired to build an organisation where women could express themselves freely. Both Hemoprova Das and Chandraprabha Saikiani were teachers and they were had personally experienced the emancipatory qualities of education.. It

⁶¹Chandraprabha Saikiani. “Assam Mahila Samitir Duitiyo Basaror Kajya –Biboron”. *Ghar-Jeuti*. Assam Prakashan Parishad: Guwahati . Print 2008.p. 588-598.

⁶² Ratnakumari Rajkhowani, the secretary of the welcoming committee of the second AMS conference mentions that the conference was held in Jorhat Government High School on 30&31 March, 1929. Ratnakumari Rajkhowani was the President of the Reception Committee. She was the wife of Benudhar Rajkhowa, a nationalist and the President of Assam Sahitya Sabha (1926) held at Dhuburi.

⁶³*Ghar-Jeuti*.p575.

was through their education that they were able to create a dent in the patriarchal society. They tried to focus on education as an agency of change in the life of women.

Assam Mahila Samity (Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity) felt that nothing much was done towards women's rights and women's education and tried to ameliorate the condition of women. Every reform was caught in waves of controversy and debate which attempted to push the agenda of women's development to the margins. Women themselves had to come forward to fight for their rights. The way media portrayed women were different from the lived reality of women in society. Education was the priority of the Samity. AMS also aimed at making women self-dependent, hardworking and devoid of materialistic aspirations. Saikiani mentions in her annual report that AMS does not want to make women masculine by organising meetings and bringing them out of the house. Their agenda was to educate women and make them responsible citizens, emancipate widows and to develop the organisational spirit among women.

AMS after its formation passed a resolution to put an end to the purdah system. Saikiani in her second Annual report mentions that in Assam there was no purdah system in the past. Also, texts like shastras, vedas, puranas, the Ramayana and Mahabharata and histories do not refer to the practice of purdah system. She turns to India's past and tries to find if purdah was traditionally worn by women in other regions of the country. She wanted to drive home the point that the purdah system was not a part of Indian culture or nation. She highlights the complete freedom enjoyed by the Kachari, Manipuri and Khasi tribal women of the region and the property rights possessed by the Khasi women. Purdah existed to some extent among the Muslim community. Saikiani opined that with the passage of time, this practice might have got melded with the custom of *uroni* and attained the present form.

AMS tried to reach out to rural women. They planned to form a group comprising of female teachers to promote education and teach in the villages. It was decided that widows would be recruited and trained to become teachers for spearheading this movement. They planned to work in such a way that all women benefitted. Through this mission they were trying to bring changes in the life of rural women as well as the widows—the neglected half of the society. AMS aimed to develop a class of women who were literate in their mother tongue and could contribute productively to the family, society and nation and who, if required, would not hesitate to be independent, live on their own terms. Further, AMS proposed that each year on a particular day the women should get together to engage in various discussions and exchange ideas. (*Ghar-Jeuti*, 99-100)

It is also important to mention AMS's role in supporting the Sarada Bill. When the Child Marriage Constraint Act was proposed in 1929, the Samity provided full support to it. Saikiani in her report on the annual conference of Assam Mahila Samity held in Jorhat while accepting the sixth proposal of the Samity supported Haribisas Sardar Singh's Bill by mentioning the consent age of marriage for boy is 25 and girl is 16 (*Ghar-Jeuti*, 584). *Ghar-Jeuti* published a short account on Sarada Bill titled "Bibah Sanmoti Bill [Marriage Consent Bill]" (*Ghar-Jeuti*, 688). This bill suggests that through social reform Indian society is trying to change.

T. R. Kalyavani says in her article "Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) - A Historical Review"⁶⁴:

⁶⁴ T.R. Kalyavani," Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929)- A Historical Review". *International Journal on Humanities and Social Science Invention*. Vol 4, Issue January 2015. p.14-18.
[www.ijhssi.org/papers/v4\(1\)/Version-1/D04101014018.pdf](http://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v4(1)/Version-1/D04101014018.pdf)

It was at the instance of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar the first step in this direction was taken in 1860. The India Penal Code prohibited the consummation of marriage if the girl was less than ten years old. This age was considered low by later reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen and Brahamji Malabari. Keshab Chandra Sen of the Brahmo Samaj introduced a novel marriage ceremony whereby the consent of the bridegroom and bride had to be secured....The marriageable age fixed under the Brahmo Act 1872, as it later came to be known as the Native Marriage Act, for girls was 14 years and for boys was 18years....Malabari was another social reformer of this time. He took up the cause of enforced widowhood and child marriage in the nineties of the last century. Malabari wanted to have legislation on the subject...He published a pamphlet entitled 'Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood'. (15)

The Sarada Bill by Haribilas Sarada was passed in 1929 and it came in to effect in 1930. The same has been mentioned by Radha Kumar in *History of Doing* published the Bill to restrain the solemnisation of child marriage by V.J.Patel, President of Legislative Assembly dated 25th September, 1929. The Act was known as Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1928 and it was applicable to the whole of British empire and came into force on the first day of April 1930(Kumar,70). According to the Bill, the age of marriage of girls was set at fourteen and for boys eighteen. AIWC had supported the proposal of the Sarada Bill but it was not able to decide whether to campaign for the Bill:

Underlying the debate was the question to campaign for Harbilas Sarda's Bill against child marriage, which attempted to raise the marriage for girls from 10 to 12 years. A formal support for the Bill had already been made by the Conference,

with the caveat that Hari Singh Gour's Bill of 1924, which attempted to raise the age of girls at marriage from 10 to 14 years, was preferable. Sarda's watered down Bill, however aroused a storm of protest both from Hindus and Muslims of all classes all over the country..." (Kumar, *HOD*,p.71-72)

According to Kumar, the question to campaign or not became secondary to "the debate which focused more on the method AIWC should employ in order to work effectively among the Indian women, with one side arguing that AIWC would isolate itself if it threw itself into agitation over the Sarada Bill, and the other arguing not only that it was vital to agitate for the Bill, but that the scope of the Conference be widened to include 'all questions affecting the welfare of women'." (Kumar, p.72)

AMS played a major role in the implementation of the Sarada Bill. The Sarada Bill was passed in 1929 and it became a law in 1930 "if the Mahila Samity members came to know that some people are breaking the law of Sarada Bill, they used to take immediate action. They used to stop the marriage from taking place and help the bride's family in getting an eligible groom." (Das, *Agnisanata Chandrabhabha*.p.12) The Samity won the goodwill of the girls' families and notoriety in the society in equal measure. . Anjali Sharma mentions that the Samity was referred to as "biya bhonga". The Samity took up social reform to uproot child marriage. It criticised the custom prevalent in the rural area where girls of ten to twelve years were married off to old men of fifty to sixty years. The Samity, from the second year onwards, raised the issue of marriageable age. The Samity tried to focus on the age disparity between the bride and groom which was an issue of serious concern. Such a relationship inflicts physical, emotional and psychological damage on the child bride and leads to early motherhood and early widowhood.

The aims of the AMS were: Promotion of Women's Education, Abolition of Purdah System, Mother and Child Care, Literacy among Adult Women, Fight against Child Marriage, Promotion of Khadi and Cottage Industry (*Kutir shilpa*), Promotion of Inter-caste Marriage, Service to Harijan, Shelter Homes for the Abandoned, Removal of Untouchability.

3.3. Chandraprabha Saikiani: A History of Doing

Chandraprabha spearheaded the women's movement in Assam in the beginning of the twentieth century through her social activism and writings. The section makes an attempt to find how this woman mobilised the women of Assam to fight for women's emancipation and equality. Her life is a story of struggle, fight and revolution against all forms of oppression, which suppressed and silenced the voice of the subaltern. As mentioned earlier, Chandraprabha's life is representative of a rural woman's struggle in twentieth century Assam. Most of the writings on women that appeared in the magazines of that time primarily focused on the urban, upper-caste women.

Aparajita resolved, service to the nation will be her life mission. She could see in front of her eyes thousands of poor and destitute women, the pathetic image of the orphaned widows emerged, widows admonished, widows mistreated and neglected, the deplorable conditions of these women. She decided, along with these suffering woman she will establish an ashram for the widows, she will educate them and in future, make them capable of becoming learned Pandita, like Gargi, Mayettri and Ayteri. Woman will no longer be helpless, frail and neglected. The country will be filled with women's pride. The hands of the male exploiters will become immobile...These women will travel from village to village, spreading women's education and take the initiative of women's liberation. Then

she remembered the outcasts...whom people think are born out of sins committed in their previous lives, her present state is because of her caste and birth.

(Puspalata Das⁶⁵, *Agnisnata Chandraprabha*, p.38-39)

These are lines from the unpublished novel *A-parajita*⁶⁶ by Saikiani. Aparajita is the female protagonist of the novel. The above lines echo the philosophy of Chandraprabha Saikiani's life. She was committed to the cause of the downtrodden, the underprivileged, the abandoned widows, orphans and the destitute and the outcaste; in fact for all the subalterns. She resembles a period of transition, a revolutionary chapter in the lives of Assamese women. She ushered the Assamese women into the public sphere by organisational activities.

She was and is the *arhi*⁶⁷ of hope and aspirations for countless Assamese women. In the beginning, she single-handedly started her fight against all forms of hegemonic forces, but gradually, a large number of women joined her mission and gave it strength and power. Her seventy two years of life is "a life of doing". She was ostracised by the society because of her unconventional life style. But society could not completely ignore this firebrand woman for her sincere dedication and rebellious nature against all forms of oppression. People were drawn towards her as a "fallen woman" and a radical and a rebel. She represented the dreams, aspirations, desires and hopes of generations of twentieth century Assamese women. She was the dynamic force behind the women's movement and women's organisation in the state. She was the harbinger of change in the condition and status of women. She was a visionary, who dreamt

⁶⁵ Puspalata Das wrote the first biography of Chandraprabha Saikia titled *Agnisnata Chandraprabha*.

⁶⁶ Saikiani's *A-parajita* deals with the complex relationship between man and woman. Puspalata Das could get hold of only pages 331-439 of the novel. She included these pages in the biography *Agnisnata Chandraprabha*. Pages 1 to 330 of the novel are missing. *A-parajita* is the story of Aparajita, a low-caste girl who falls in love with Debojit who is an upper-caste man. Their union is impossible due to the caste difference. I will discuss this novel in detail later in the chapter. Translation mine.

⁶⁷ *Arhi* is an Assamese word for model or ideal.

of a nation with gender equality and a classless society. Raibahadur Anandachandra Agarwala describes this multi-talented woman in the following words:

Chandrabhabha Saikiani has dedicated herself for the nation. She can beautifully pen thoughtful articles and also deliver fruitful fiery speeches. It gives immense pleasure in reading her articles published in journals like *Chetana* and *Banhi*. Among the Assamese women, she was the first representative from Assam to attend the India Congress Mahashabha. By participating in the Congress activities she served imprisonment. The establishment of Assam Mahila Samity can be said to be the result of her immense care and untiring hard work.⁶⁸ (*Abahon*: 512-517)

Saikiani was the victim of gender inequality, child marriage and caste system. Her interest in studies was made fun of by the society which was apathetic about women's education. Chandrabhabha Saikiani was named as Chandrapriya Mazumdar at her birth. Chandrapriya Mazumdar was born on 16th march 1901 to a humble rural family. Her parents were Gangapriya and Ratiram Mazumdar who was the village headman of Daisingri which was then situated in the undivided Kamrup district. She was the seventh among eleven children. There were limited opportunities for a girl from a rural household in twentieth century colonial Assam. But she overcame all obstacles and within the limited options available to women of her time, she created history not only for herself but for her fellow Assamese women. Chandrapriya's parents had big dreams for their children. Though they were common village folks, they knew the importance of education. To get proper educational environment and good guidance and care Chandrapriya along with her sister Rameshwari and brother Dharmeswar were sent to their aunt's place in

⁶⁸ Raibahadur Anandachandra Agarwala "Asamiya Sahitya Sewakini" *Abahon*. 4:5.p.512-517. Since the first two pages of the article were missing, I could access only pages 514-17. Translation is mine. The article is on the contribution of Assamese women to Assamese Literature.

Bhaluki. Their aunt Senipriya Das was the headmistress of a primary school there, and under her able guidance, the sisters completed their primary education. They faced lot of opposition in the village when they started attending the M. E. Boys' School at Kathalmoria and were forced to discontinue their studies. Thereafter, they attended the primary school at Daisingori. At the age of thirteen, Chandrapriya started her career as a teacher in a girls' school near Akoiyagaon on a monthly salary of six rupees. The school was a few kilometres away from her village. Nilakanta Baruah, the assistant supervisor of education saw this talented girl on his visit to the school and advised her parents to send her to Nagaon Mission School for her studies. In 1915, Chandrapriya and Rameshwari took admission in the school as Chandraprabha Das and Rajaniprabha Das. She worked as a teacher in a primary school in 1917 after completing her training. From Nagaon, Chandraprabha travelled to Tezpur and took charge as the headmistress of Tezpur Girls' M.E. School in 1918 and Rajaniprabha went to Shillong to pursue her studies. Later, Rajaniprabha received missionary scholarship and went to Calcutta to pursue a career as a doctor. At Tezpur, Chandraprabha was exposed to a vibrant atmosphere of youth movements aimed at securing freedom from colonial rule.. She was surrounded by leaders such as Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Omeo Kumar Das, Chandranath Sharma.

Chandraprabha Saikiani's role as a social and political activist is also worth mentioning. The history of India's fight for independence will be incomplete without the inclusion of the contribution of women. They fought against the colonial forces with utmost courage, determination and valour. They were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and some became martyrs in their struggle for freedom. This section is an attempt to place a woman's narrative within the grand narrative of Indian nationalism in the colonial period. Stories such as Saikiani's are silent narratives which play a vital role in the grand narrative. The narrative of Indian nationalism

which dominated the political scenario in twentieth century India was mainly a male dominated discourse. But within the dominant discourse Saikiani created a space for herself and for many other women.

History has often failed to focus on the presence of women as subjects and agencies of social change. Examining the contribution of Saikiani as a social and political activist is a way of understanding the role played by Assamese women in the nation movement and nation-building process. Assamese women played an active role in the freedom struggle between 1921 and 1947. It was the clarion call of Gandhiji in 1921 that motivated numerous women to step out from their sheltered spaces of home to the streets waging a war against the colonial power. Most of the women joined The Non-Cooperation Movement through programmes of weaving, spinning and boycotting of foreign goods. Initially, the works that the women were assigned were related to gender-defined activities such as weaving and spinning. This was a field in which Assamese women were skilled. Regarding the weaving skills of Assamese women, Meeta Deka says:

Women in Assam contributed to the economy primarily by engaging themselves in the entire process of weaving since early times. It is of importance to note that weaving in Assam was not about merely providing for the household. It had economic, social and ideological implications as well. An interesting aspect related to it is the association of magical/divine power with the women. Assamese warriors marched to the battle field wearing a ‘wonder-working and evil-averting *Kavach Kapor*, or talisman cloth’, the yarn of which must be spun and woven in the course of one single night. It is said that the Ahom general, Pharsengmung Borgohain, husband of Mula Gabharu, died in the battlefield as he did not wear

this protective gear. Herein lies the ideological significance of the role of women in political battles and warfare. (Deka, 7-8.)

In 1921, Gandhiji⁶⁹ was on a 12-day visit to Assam. Tarunram Phukan⁷⁰, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi⁷¹, Chaliha and Chandranath Sharma attending the AICC meeting at Bombay on 28 July, 1921 had invited Gandhiji to visit Assam and propagate the message of non-cooperation among the masses.⁷² Gandhiji landed at Assam on 18 August, 1921 and left on 30 August, 1921 to Calcutta. He was accompanied by Mohammad Ali, Begum Ali and Saukat Ali Brothers. During this period, he toured Guwahati, Tezpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Silchar. In the various meetings he addressed, he requested the people to boycott foreign goods, adopt Swadeshi and attain Swaraj. He requested the women to play an active role in the freedom movement. He spoke on the removal of evil practices such as polygamy, child marriage, superstition, and exhorted the people to fight against the use of opium and stressed on the importance of women's education for the progress of the nation. He said that women should adopt Charkha in support of the Non-Cooperation Movement. In the article "Lovely Assam" in *Young India*,⁷³ (21 September, 1922) Gandhiji praised the artistic skills of female weavers from Assam. "Every woman of Assam is a born weaver. No Assamese girl who does not weave can expect to become a wife. And she weaves fairy tales in cloth. Some of our old pattern that our hosts, Mr. Phukan, showed me were of matchless beauty. And as I saw these beautiful patterns, I could not help shedding a silent tear over India's past glory and her lost work. (Quoted from *Nationalist*

⁶⁹Gandhiji visited Assam four times. In 1921, 1926, 1934 and 1946.

⁷⁰Tarunram Phukan was a leader and freedom fighter of Assam.

⁷¹Nabin Chandra Bordoloi was also a freedom fighter.

⁷²"The Non-Cooperation Movement". *Political History of Assam* Vol 2. Government of Assam: Guwahati, 1978 Print. P38

⁷³ Young India was the journal published by Gandhiji from 1919 to 1932.

Upsurge in Assam. Ed. Atul Bhuyan. Dispur: Government of Assam. 2000 Print. p.371-72

“Gandhi, Spinning and India’s Independence in the Folk Songs of Assam”)

At the end of every meeting Gandhiji used to preside over the burning of foreign clothes by first igniting the heaps. This spectacle was witnessed by young Chandraprabha who was then working as the headmistress of the girl’s school in Tezpur. She was very impressed by the ideology of Gandhiji and from that moment onwards she gave up foreign clothes and started wearing khadi. The first set of khadi clothes she received was from the family of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. Before this she had heard about Gandhiji from her father. Gandhiji met the women of Assam and appealed them to join the movement by spinning and weaving clothes. In *Young Assam* he wrote of his visit to Assam

Who were the women who joined the freedom struggle? In the very beginning of the movement it was the upper- caste and class educated women. They were the wives, daughters and mothers of the freedom fighters. Bordoloi’s wife Hemanta Kumari Devi, daughter Nalinibala Devi, his sister Dharmeswari Devi, Kamalakanta Bhattacharje’s wife Sumitra Devi, daughter Snehalata Bhattacharya, Nilakanta Barua’s wife, Gaurikanta Talukdar’s wife Lavanya Talukdar were promoting the movement. (Sharma, *Chandraprabha Saikiani*.p 43) Saikiani recorded the role played by Assamese women in the freedom struggle in the incomplete article “Swadhinota Andolornor Logot Asamiya Mahila Samporko” (Assamese Women’s Association with the Freedom Movement)”. The exact date of the article is not known but it was written after India got independence. The article begins in this manner: “At present it is almost difficult to imagine that this great nation India was once under the British rule...the nation of forty billion people was colonised for two hundred fifty years.” Saikiani’s account of the women’s contribution to the freedom movement adds important dimensions to our understanding of the freedom struggle.

Though it is in no way detailed and complete, it sheds light on the contribution of women in freedom struggle. The identities of the female contributors point to the fact that the women's participation in the freedom struggle was confined to the elite and urban social circles. The wives, daughters and sisters of the intelligentsia were exposed to the political and social debates in their households. They were silent or actively engaged in conversations on the freedom movement with the male members of the family. They closely witnessed their male relatives' participation in the movement and when requested by them, joined the movement. Nalinibala Devi mentions in her autobiography *Eri Aha Dinbor (the Bygone days)* that her house became the nerve centre of the political revolution. She along with her siblings enjoyed the conversations with her father on political matters of the time. (Devi, *Eri Aha Dinbor*.p.18). Devi in the autobiography mentions: "Women from the aristocratic family gave up purdah and came out from the four corners and stood on the same platform with the male freedom fighters. I remember that the women from the households of Guwahati leaders Phukan and Bordoloi—my mother Hemanta kumara Devi, aunt Dharmada Devi, Girija Devi, elder sister of Phukan Dev, Kamalakanta Bhattacharjya's daughter Snehalata Bhattacharjya, Laskhmi Das's aunt Ganeshwari Devi, Krishnakanta's wife, etc.—went to the villages as *swesa sewika* and were engaging in the promotional activities. (Ibid.p93)

In the beginning, they actively supported the movement but did not play an active role in the public space. Every woman in the Assamese household had got politicised. They encouraged their husbands, brothers, sons and fathers to participate in the freedom struggle from their private spaces. They gave the centre stage to male members of the society and they worked from the periphery. Within the confines of the traditional private spaces they extended solidarity by spinning and weaving clothes for the family members and the volunteers. Nalinibala Devi and

other women stitched around five hundred Gandhi caps for volunteers during Gandhiji's visit. Ghanakanti Phukanani wove a *chelang sadar* and welcomed Gandhi (ibid, 95). Devi mentions that she spun cotton dhotis for her father and brothers. Apart from weaving, she and other women of Assam contributed to the freedom fund by organising fund-raising campaigns. She along with Amalaprova collected fund from the masses. Assamese women whole-heartedly filled the *anchal* of these two ladies with gold ornaments. Every well-to-do family household organised volunteer *sibir* in their households and the house wives and female members provided food from their kitchens.

Saikiani, on the other hand, neither belonged to any upper-caste or aristocratic family nor was a family member of leaders. She was a lower-caste village girl without any political background. Her family was not involved in politics. Her parents were humble supporters of the movement. From the humble background she created a space of her own in the freedom movement through her fiery speeches as an orator, a member of congress and as a freedom fighter. She travelled to the villages on foot, bicycles and bullock carts. It was her hard work, dedication and fearlessness nature that brought her in to limelight. She became the most sought-after freedom fighter by the leaders. She travelled to different parts of Assam with her fellow male leaders without any inhibitions.

In the second phase of female participation in the freedom movement, the women commenced venturing into the public realm by organising meetings, taking out procession and rallies, fighting against the evils of opium, and leading the women in the movement. They worked in various capacities as leaders, orators and public speakers. Women picketing colleges and shops became a regular sight during this period. The nationalist struggle for freedom brought out the women from the inner spaces to the open spaces where they joined the freedom movement. This

gave women a break from the drudgery of home. This was a new experience. Female leaders and freedom fighters were arrested, imprisoned and suffered atrocities at the hands of police. Some succumbed to police brutality and became martyrs.

As a social activist, Saikiani raised voice against the oppressive forces of the society. She fought for women's equality, abolishing the caste system and untouchability. She took a vow to fight against all kinds of exploitation that existed in the name of religion and caste.

Her major rebellion was against the unfair gender differences that existed in the society which stood as a major hurdle in the progress of the nation. She came from a rural background and could identify herself with the various problems in the life of a village woman. The foremost problem was the discrimination based on one's sex. Girl children were either barred from getting educated or married off at a young age before they could complete their education. She suffered political imprisonment during the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) and the Quit India Movement (1942). She was a good orator and was able to gain the confidence of the crowd through her powerful speeches. Her fearlessness, rebelliousness and the unconventional life drew large crowds to her meetings. Her social activism and political activism sprung from her bitter personal experiences. From a young age she realised that to fight against any kind of oppressive power one had to forge larger solidarity. A collective group stands a better chance at dismantling existing power structures.

An incident which occurred at the Mission hostel during Saikiani's stay there illustrates her acumen in organising collective protests. Miss Long, the person in charge of the hostel, allotted a store room to a Hindu girl. Saikiani perceived this as an act of discrimination based on religion. Realising that a solo protest will be futile, she mobilised all the Hindu girls to protest against

Miss Long's unjust behaviour. In 1921, Saikiani could not actively participate in the freedom movement in Tezpur due to her professional commitment as a teacher. In 1923, she actively participated in the movement after resigning from her job the previous year. She was motivated by Gandhiji's visit to Assam during the Non-Cooperation Movement and the dedication of her mother Gangapriya to the freedom movement. At home she was influenced by her mother and sister Yogamaya who contributed to the freedom struggle by weaving and spinning clothes. In the rural areas too women were equally enthusiastic in participating in the national freedom movement. The *jotor* (spinning wheel) became the symbol of freedom and hundreds of women in the villages took to spinning and weaving. In Bajali, Saikiani's mother and sister joined the women in the freedom struggle. She followed her mother and sister's path. (Sharma, *Chandraprabha Saikiani*, p.24)

. The nature of women's participation in many ways echoed the traditional gender roles they were assigned. The female relatives of leaders cooked food for the volunteers. Assamese women were skilled weavers and they displayed this talent in the freedom struggle by spinning and weaving clothes in the *jotor*. Apart from this, they joined in the picketing of colleges and shops selling foreign goods, yarns, opium, liquor, etc. The first female picketer from Assam was Durgaprova Borah. She organised picketing at Cotton College in 1929.⁷⁴

At times, when male leaders of the movement got arrested, their wives and sisters used to take over and continue the work by organising meetings and participating in processions.

Some women were proficient orators. Such women were requested to give speeches to motivate and inspire people to take part in the freedom struggle. In the male-dominated political space

⁷⁴ As Saikiani was not able to reach on time, the female picketers, under the leadership of Durgaprova Borah organised picketing at Cotton College and Law College.

Saikiani carved a space of her own. She was sought after by the leaders. In 1929, she was requested to lead the picketing at Cotton College. The leaders had faith and confidence in the competence of Saikiani. Torn between her duties towards the nation and towards her young son, Saikiani chose the former. This did not mean that she neglected her duty as a mother. Saikiani had to travel frequently to different corners of the province and in her absence; her son was under the care of her mother. Saikiani could not join the picketing group as she reached Guwahati at night. But she attended the meeting organised at Curzon Hall which was attended by the student picketers. The whole hall resonated with powerful speeches and Saikiani gave a fiery speech to the packed audience. This was her second political speech and marked the beginning of an active political life. From Guwahati she travelled to Nagaon at the request of the Assam Congress President Toibullah and a muslim boy Abu. There was no student participation in Nagaon in the revolution. Mahindra Borah was the President of the Nagaon district Congress. He sought Saikiani's help to raise money for Congress fund. She started the mission to collect funds with a handful of *Swesa Sevaks* (volunteers). Saikiani exhorted: "That which is flying (flag) is the symbol of freedom, with raised head move forward" (Sharma, *Chandraprabha Saikiani*, 25). She led the procession on foot, holding the tricolour and singing patriotic song in the streets of Nagaon. Slowly, the number of participants increased and people contributed whole heartedly. Every household contributed; women donated their prized possessions such as bangles, earrings and neckpieces. Nagaon that was hitherto in a deep slumber was awakened and the volunteers were able to collect many kilograms of gold and almost twenty thousand in cash. She left Nagaon after this successful task. Her motherly instinct could not keep her away from her child for long. (Sharma, 25) After spending some time with her child at Bojali, her next mission was at Barpeta. Addressing the people at Barpeta Saikiani said:

You do not have to leave behind wealth and riches for your children, instead of that, the only true resource, the freedom of the nation, earn and leave that. Send your young man to this war and provide ration for this war. Why do the volunteers of the freedom movement have to struggle for a morsel of rice, a place of shelter at night? If the fish owners while going to the market provide fish; if the oil owner provides oil; if everyone contributes in their own way, it will be sufficient for the volunteers.”(Sharma, *Chandraprabha Saikiani*, 25)⁷⁵

Saikiani’s participation in the movement led to mass mobilisation and the freedom struggle was at its zenith. The Government in order to stop this mass revolt imposed section 144 on Saikiani and ordered her to leave Barpeta within twelve hours. She travelled to Bojali on a bullock cart. Section 144 was imposed on her for the second time and she was placed under house arrest at Bojali to prevent her from participating in any freedom-struggle activities. She had to go into hiding to escape being arrested by the police. She was charged with instigating the students and masses against the government, for delivering political speeches, trying to break the Wild Act and for being a member of the Congress. Sarat Chandra Goswami, the secretary of the Education Department, Assam accused Saikiani of misleading students. Saikiani gave a fitting reply to the accusation: “You should have been the torchbearer in this mission, instead of that you have been a strong supporter of the colonial government. Are you aware that such education of yours is hated by the students?” (Sharma, *ChandraprabhaSaikiani*, 26).

From Bojali she escaped without being caught to Nagaon and participated in a procession to eradicate opium. Mahikanta Borah and lawyer Purna Chandra Sharma lead the revolution in

⁷⁵Translation Mine.

Nagaon. In villages such as Kampur and Saparmukh, the prevalence of opium was more. Saikiani along with the leaders and volunteers visited and organised meetings on the evils of opium consumption and forced many addicts to give up this habit.

She made people realise that every individual is independent irrespective of gender. Being married does not mean that a woman has no independence. Every individual is unique. In one of her fundraising campaigns in Saparmukh, she came to know the Excise Inspector had not permitted his wife to contribute to the movement because he was a government official. The wife was very hurt. Saikiani told Inspector Changkakoti: “You might be a government official, but your wife is not a government employee. If you die, your wife would not receive government salary. You and your wife are two separate individuals. There is no reason that your wife cannot contribute to charity in which you are not allowed to. No husband can deprive a wife off contributing towards charity by claiming husband’s right. A woman can claim half of the earning of her husband. So, we do not think that it is justifiable on your part to prevent your wife. (Sharma, *Chandraprabha Saikiani*, 27). Mrs. Chankokoti protested against the conduct of her husband by observing *amaron annakhon* (hunger strike). Fasting was a key weapon employed against the colonial forces during the freedom struggle. Mrs. Changkakoti’s fast was a protest against the inequality of woman in society. This presents her as a woman conscious of women’s right to freedom.

During all these political activities, Saikiani was continuously reminded of her little boy. The anxiety of separation from her son was always there. The only relief she got was that during her absence he was under the care of his grandmother. From Nagaon she travelled to Kaliabor to mobilise the crowd which was not supportive. Saikiani was accorded a grand welcome at the Kaliabor station and people thronged in huge numbers to have a glimpse of this lady and hear her

speech. In her speech she said: “On a fine day five hundred years ago during the Ahom rule from this very place (Kaliabor) in the Kaliabor war, Mula Gabhoru led a huge army of Ahom soldiers and fought against Turbaq and left behind a successful accomplishment. After defeating the powerful Mughol army will Kaliabor remain behind in this India’s war?” In a collective voice thousands of people cried in unison “We won’t wait. We will fight.” Saikiani continued “I know your patriotism is no less than the people of Nagaon, in fact more. So, I will like to say, your youth should try helping the volunteers by providing rations and be part of the national war. (Sharma, *Chandraprabha Saikiani*, 28) In 1923 she resigned from the post of a teacher. She gave speeches in various meetings in Bojali. People sought her, her status as an unwed mother did not stop people from approaching her in giving speeches at various meetings. People had accepted her. Her works defined her. She had become an object of people gossip and ridicule but presence in meetings could not be avoided. She was a lady of firm conviction and belief in the female strength. She herself states that her first active venture in to the freedom fight was in response to Gandhi’s Dandi March. This was the time when Gandhiji was taking out the Dandi on 12 March 1930. In support to this movement people in Assam planned to organise picketing in front of shops selling opium, liquor, foreign clothes and foreign yarns as salt manufacturing facilities was not available in here. As the leaders like Bishnuram Medhi, Maulbi Toibullah and Gopinath Bordoloi were arrested; some of the students of Cotton College and Law College took initiative and led the movement urging the students to join the movement. Saikiani received an invitation from an unknown person to do picketing in Cotton College she came from Daisingori to Guwahati. Assamese Women leaders like Durgaprova Borah⁷⁶, Sashiprova Hazarika, and Lavanyaprabha Talukdar along with groups of women started picketing in front of Cotton

⁷⁶ Durgaprova Borah was the first Assamese woman matriculate from Bethune College, Calcutta. She was the elder sister of Hemoprova Das. (“Swadhinata Andolonor Logot Asamiya Mahila Sambandha”(Assamese Women’s Association with Freedom Movement. Achyut Kumar Sharma. *Chandraprabha Saikiani* , p 44)

College and many students boycotted classes and joined. Though Siakiani could not join the picketing, she was part of the meeting held in the Curzon Hall by the Student Union. She delivered a speech and was extremely happy. From 1930 onwards Saikiani travelled to different corners of Assam, delivering speeches, mobilizing people and collecting funds for the movement. The first active venture into nationalism started with giving a speech at Curzon Hall in Guwahati. After that she was invited to Nagaon by a boy Abu, which she was initially reluctant. But when she received a telegram from Mahidhor Borah, the Secretary of Nagaon Congress Committee and a request from Congress President and leader Maulbi Toibullah she went to Nagaon. Her Nagaon Mission was a great success. She led the procession and sang songs to inspire the masses and collected funds from each and every household. From Nagaon she went to Barpeta, then again upon the request of Nagaon Students she again returned to Nagaon to deliver speeches. From this it can be noticed that Saikiani was a great orator. As a result of revolution in Nagaon, women like Guneshwari Devi, Kiron Borah, Muktabala Baishnabi and Dariki Kachari were imprisoned. Guneshwari Devi was imposed imprisonment for eighteen months and the rest had to serve for six months.⁷⁷

Jails in Assam were not up to the standard and in some jails there were no provisions to keep women prisoners. The prisoners were classified into A, B and C group according to the standard of living at home. Chandraprabha was classified as a B Group. In 1942, when she was imprisoned in Barpeta jail she protested against the ill-treatment and unhygienic conditions of political prisoners within the jail. In Barpeta jail there was no separate provision for keeping women prisoners. When her appeal was not heard by the authorities she went on a hunger strike along with fellow prisoners. For this, she was transferred to Guwahati jail.

⁷⁷Ibid.p45.

Saikiani was given the charge to mobilize the women. To stop Saikiani from mobilizing the masses section 144 was issued in her name to stop her from taking active role in the movement. Saikiani says “section 144 was imposed on me seven times”⁷⁸.

Chandraprabha Saikiani, a Congress worker, and some other women were ill-treated by the police, while they were holding a meeting inside a *Kirtanghar* at Pathsala on 26 January 1943. Police and the women had a tussle when the former wanted to drag out Saikiani from the meeting place. The police abused and slapped Saikiani and used physical force against the women volunteers. Later on, people of Pathsala protested to the district authority against police misbehaviour towards women. The matter was however, hushed up by the administration. (“The Quit India Movement” *Political History of Assam*. Vol 3 p 116)⁷⁹

“Chandraprabha Saikiani served with a prohibitory order under Section 144 at Kaliabor on 20 September 1930”. (*Political History of Assam*. Vol.3. 1940-47.p 220)⁸⁰. “On 9 January 1931, they arrested many at Guwahati including Chandraprabha Saikiani”. (*Political History of Assam*. Vol 2. p175). Saikiani was arrested at Kukurmara camp. On hearing her arrest Nabin Chandra Bordoloi appealed for her bail but it was rejected and she had to stay in the prison as a under trial prisoner. The jail authorities suggested Saikiani to give in writing that she would not organise any meeting. To this she replied “Haven’t you recognized the Indian women? I am not

⁷⁸It is an incomplete article by Saikiani on the role of Assamese women in the freedom movement. The title is “Swadhinota Andolonor Logot Asamiya Mahilar Samporko”. This article was published by Achyut Kumar Sharma in his biography on Chandraprabha. (*Chandraprabha Saikiani*. P.45.)

⁷⁹ This was quoted from APCC (Assam Provincial Congress Committee) Papers “Atrocities committed in 1942” in the book *Political History of Assam*. Vol 3. 1940-47. Guwahati: Government of Assam, June 1980 Print.

⁸⁰*Asamiya* (1918-1947) was an Assamese weekly published from Dibrugarh and edited by Maheshwar Baruah. The weekly actively supported the Gandhian movement, nationalist in tone and was critical of government action. It carried reports on the sufferings of the leaders and volunteers in jail and of the police atrocities on the leaders, volunteers and women. For details refer to “Freedom Movement and the Press” in *Political History of Assam*. Vol.3.1940-47. Government of Assam: Guwahati, June 1980 Print. p 199-244.

doing all these activities thinking that I would not be imprisoned. Put me into jail,... (Sharma, Chandraprabha Saikiani,p.29) Her six years old son and her mother came to visit her in the prison. She had nothing to offer her son except few kisses. From Guwahati she was transferred to Jorhat prison where she stayed as second class prisoner. Saikiani, along with other political prisoners were released after the Irwin Pact was passed on 31 March 1931.

Chandraprabha Saikiani in those days was known as Chandraprabha Das. The exact date or why Chandraprabha took the surname of Saikiani was and still is under many speculations. But one thing is clear—she adopted this surname after she left for Daisingari after becoming pregnant with her lover Dandinath's child. Scholars have interpreted it in many ways. Some believe that she adopted this surname to create a new identity of her own after giving up her maiden surnames Mazumdar and Das. Changing her surname also signified the severing of all her former ties. She was not legally married to Dandinath, but they were married according to the Gandharva ritual which was not recognised by the society. She was at once his wife and not his wife. She might have avoided adopting her partner's surname Kalita because of this reason. However, she chose to use the surname Saikiani maybe because Dandinath's original surname was this. He started using the surname Kalita only from his college days onwards. Saikiani is derived from the root word Saikia and the suffix 'ni' symbolises the married status of a woman. Saikiani might have used this as a protective shield against public humiliation of an unmarried woman or she might have used it as protest against a society which did not accept a man-woman relationship outside the purview of marriage. It can also be seen as a defiance of the caste system which prohibited their marriage. However, Saikiani's adoption of this surname can also be construed as her desire to occupy the socially-mandated position of a wife.

3.4. Saikiani and AMS

As noted earlier, Saikiani played a major role in the formation of AMS. From the first report it can be understood that Saikiani was aware of various women's organisations in different parts of the country and their role in the establishment of orphanages and schools. She also realised the importance of having a state-level organisation which could redress the problems faced by Assamese women.

It can also be assumed that the missionaries played a major role in facilitating women's entry in to the public sphere. Their contribution to women's education has already been discussed in the first chapter. Their influence on women like Saikiani was immense. Saikiani says: "We know that in many mission schools, orphaned children are taken care of. It is only in Nagaon Mission School these kids abandoned by their close relatives are taken care of. If these works can be done by people crossing *khat sagar tero nodi* (seven seas and thirteen rivers) —having a completely different religion, thoughts and language than us—why? We should do it, shouldn't we? Most of the missionary workers are women. They travelled all the way from their country to a foreign country and are working hard-Why?" (*Ghar-Jeuti*, 99)

The work of the missionaries must have definitely helped Saikiani in forming the Nagaon Mahila Samity just after she finished her normal training at the Mission school. Saikiani during her stay at Nagaon Missionary School must have definitely observed the discipline and organisational skills of the female missionaries. This rigour helped them in improving the educational, health and economic conditions of hundreds of women. The few years she spent among the missionaries helped her to be aware of her identity as a woman and the problems faced by women in general. It made her realise that they have the same right to education, right to equality

and right to freedom of choice. Women from a foreign country came forward to give a life of dignity and freedom to hundreds of destitute women and orphaned children in India. This was possible because of the organisational method. She learnt that woman must fight for their rights themselves and for this they must organise themselves. They must become an agency of change. For this change to take place, they have to form an organisation which must be an exclusively a women's organisation. The female missionaries had a big role in moulding the humanitarian side of Saikiani. Her ideologies were shaped by the different agencies that were working for bringing changes to women's conditions. Missionary women travelled all the way from their homes in distant lands and worked under unfavourable conditions to give a better and dignified life to women who had been subjected to oppression. They were able to feel for women who were staying thousands of kilometres away from their homes. They came as a group of women and worked for the benefit of women. As a result, women staying under their care became educated and economically independent. They left the boarding school as confident women ready to face the world with a new outlook made possible by the experience gathered in the Mission School. Some of the native women became teachers, some worked as wives of missionaries. Saikiani became aware of the necessity for such organisation for women. The bitter experience at Nagaon Assam Sahitya Sabha annual meet in 1925 further spurred her to build a state-level women's organisation.

As we have seen in the first chapter, opposing views on education persisted .While one group argued in favour of women's education, the other group was anxious about the newly emerging category of educated women. Saikiani also writes about the two camps on women's right to education and right to freedom. According to her, women were caught in between these two groups. The supporters of the pro-women's education camp believed that the development of the

nation cannot be envisioned without the emancipation of women. The other camp believed that women's rightful place was at home and were against women's education. According to Saikiani, in such circumstances, women have to take up reins of the movement. To substantiate the need for women's education she refers to the ancient times and argues that all religious books acknowledge women's education. She shrewdly says that since the media projects women as the strength of the nation, peace of the nation, honour of the nation, Laskhmi of the nation, the symbol of freedom, etc., women must indeed be powerful and definitely well informed about world affairs, geography, history and literature (96).

The position of women in the colonial and nationalist periods was precarious. When the society started embracing modernity due to the exposure to western thoughts and education, the conventional gender discourses started to get challenged. Saikiani gives a bleak picture of women's education in early twentieth century Assam in her annual report:

The number of primary and Chatra Britti schools for girls provided by the Government, Municipality and Local Board is not at all satisfactory. Within a Mahakuma there are only six to seven primary schools. And their conditions are pitiable...The importance of women's education for the nation is not realised by the officials. In the district headquarters, there is a single Chatra Britti school run by the Municipality, but it is impossible for girls from villages to go there for studying, especially because there is no boarding provision. The officials in the education department should make provision for establishing sufficient number of girls' primary schools...the demand of boys and girls of the country are same chiefly in matter of education...Instead of inspecting the school, the inspector responsible for the girls' school should take an effort and keep an eye on the

establishment of new schools, make the rural parents realise the importance of girls' education and send girls to school. (*Ghar-Jeuti*, p.97) [Translation mine]

She articulated the importance of girls' education for the nation. While pointing out the insufficient number of schools for girls, she makes an important point that girls from villages are not able to have access to these schools since they do not have boarding facilities. Apart from this, she also urges to educate parents on the importance of girls' education.

Radha Kumar says: "Vir Bharat Talwar and Indrani Mukherjee have discussed how a discourse of equality began to develop in the late 1910s and 1920s amongst women who had been active in nationalist or woman's rights campaigns. Not only did they link women's right with nationalism, they used nationalist arguments to defend demands for women's rights to equality with men." (*History of Doing*, p.65-66). As Kumar suggests, for women, the fight for freedom was not only for the country, but a fight for their own freedom. Right to education was their first fight as this would prove them to be rational beings capable of thinking on their own terms. This was followed by the fights for freedom to equality and freedom to equal rights. The entry into the public space gave them self-confidence and provided them with a space for intellectual discussions. New images of women were emerging in the freedom movement—women as leaders, women as freedom fighters, women as orators, women as martyrs and professional women (teachers). These images were a break from the stereotypical images. These new changes were accepted by the society. The idea of women in public spaces was unacceptable a couple of years ago, but it became a regular sight due to the women's movement for equality. Saikiani in the second annual report of Assam Mahila Samity mentions the absence of the purdah system among the rural women. But slowly, this cruel custom was finding its way into the villages in the name of *sabhyata*. She questions a person named Kameshar Das who tried to impose restrictions

on the movements of village women by forbidding their participating in meetings, *bhawna* and fishing (*Ghar-Jeuti*.p. 598-99). Since Saikiani came from a rural and lower-caste background where purdah was non-existent, the presence of purdah among the urban women might have shocked her. The free-spirited Saikiani travelled freely and uninhibitedly on foot and bicycle in the villages and towns, promoting and organising new branches of the Samity. She was criticised and mocked by the people for roaming about freely. But this did not deter her from working for the cause.

. Since they followed the purdah system, the upper-caste women had to cover their heads in front of strangers and travel in covered horse-drawn carriages. Saikiani who came from a rural background found these customs quite strange. Compared to the women, rural women had more freedom of mobility and worked in the fields along with men and contributed to the household income.

A report on Assam Mahila Sanmilini by Ratna Kumari Rajkhowani recorded the presence of a European woman who was referred to as Miss Long at the Second Annual Conference held in Jorhat (*Ghar-Jeuti*, 575). It could have been the Miss Long of Nagaon Mission School who significantly contributed to the education for women through her missionary work during that time. Chandraprabha Saikiani might have studied under the guidance of Miss Long during her days at Nagaon Mission School. Miss Long must have been happy and proud to see one of her students following in her footsteps and working for the development of women.

3.5. The Question of Women in Saikiani's Writings

The questions on gender inequality, child marriage, women's right to ancestral property, and widowhood were dominant themes in Saikiani's writings. Gender refers to socially-constructed roles, behaviour, activities and attributes that are assigned to males and females in any given society. These expectations are not fixed, but are constantly being constructed and reinforced through social relationships and economic and political power dynamics. Society creates strict norms that are meant to be followed by the two genders. These norms are upheld by a system of punishment and privileges. These norms are not only policed, but also internalised. In her work and writings, Chandraprabha Saikia was vocal about the gender discrimination that existed in the society.

Chandraprabha was known chiefly as a social activist, freedom fighter and as a feminist leader. She was also a writer. Apart from devoting her time to various social and political activities, she spared some of her valuable time for writing. Just like other contemporary female writers in Assamese and other regional languages, she too started her literary career by contributing to the regional journals. Most of her writings are in the form of poems, short stories, articles, translations and speeches that appeared in the renowned journals of her time like *Banhi*, *Assam Hitoshi*, *Milan*, *Awahon*, *Chetana*, *Ghar-Jeuti*. But it is indeed very sad to note that only one novel, *Pitri-Bhitha*, could see the light of day. *Pitri-Bhitha* was the first novel of Chandraparabha, published in the year 1937. This was the second novel in Assamese by a woman. The first attempt in novel writing by a woman goes back to the year 1888. In 1888, Padmavati Devi Phukononi's work *Sudhamar Upakhayan* was published. As, Govinda Prasad Sharma writes, Padmavati Devi Phukononi's *Sudhamar Upakhyan* could not attain the novel form in the truest sense, but because it is the first example of an attempt by Assamese people at the art of novel

writing, it holds historical significance.⁸¹ Chandrababha's *Pitri-Bhitha* appeared nearly forty-eight years after *Sudhamar Upakhyān*.

In the *lekhikar nibedon* ⁸²(preface) to the novel, Saikiani narrates the obstacles she and many writers of her time faced in publishing a work. Firstly, it was difficult to find a publisher, secondly, there was no adequate financial support and lastly, a female writer had less readers and. Aparna Mahanta mentions that a similar situation was faced by Saikiani's partner Dandinath Kalita: "With no publishing industry or a stable reading public, most Assamese writers including Saikiani's friend Dandinath Kalita, had to publish their own books, using their own resources or appealing to friends for financial help. They even had to do the distribution themselves."⁸³

Mahanta mentions that Saikiani went from house to house selling the novel. Saikiani must have been disappointed and dispirited by the response her work received. She was grateful to the owner of Jayanti Art Press for bearing half the cost of publication. The rest of the expenses were borne by her. Due to lack of financial support, she was not able to publish the other novels. She hoped that if *Pitri-Bhitha* was well received by the readers, she could publish other works such as *Gauri-Sankar*, *Ghor-Juwai*, *Biyar Bikh* with the profit she made. Only the hand-written manuscripts of these works were in circulation at that time. In the *lekhikar nibedon* to the novel she writes: "writings books, particularly novels, is one of the biggest aspirations in the life of a female writer....Today with such aspirations and hopes for financial assistance, I present to the readers the first drop in the form of *Pitri-Bhitha* or *Pitri Bheti*." She refers to the other novels

⁸¹ Its quoted from Govinda Prasad Sharma's article "Chandrababha Saikiani "*Pitri-Bitha*" Narir Dristit Naribad" p. 42

⁸² Chandrababha writes about the difficulties a writer face in bringing out a work. Apart, from the financial problem, being a female writer in a male-dominated publishing and literary industry raises the odds. And writings of Chandrababha which were mostly rebellious definitely found it difficult to find a publisher

⁸³ Aparna Mahanta's work *Journey of Assamese Women 1836-1937*.p183.

that she was ready to publish if she could get the financial support. Mahanta in “Chandraprabha Saikiani: fiery feminist” published in the *Seven Sisters Post* says:

The male-dominated Assamese literary establishment has not taken notice of Chandraprabha Saikiani as a writer even though many lesser male writers find a place in the literary canon...Gender constraints hampered Saikiani as a writer. Like other women at that time, she could not find any publisher for her writings. Nor did she have the money for self-publishing...As the female literacy rate in Assam was less than one per cent, there were few women readers, not to speak of women critics. The male readers and critics who made decision on a work's merits could hardly grasp or appreciate the women-centric and often fiery feminist content of her writings. As a result, her writings remained unread, unnoticed and literally disappeared from sight.⁸⁴

After *Pitri-Bhitha*, the novel next in line to be published was *Gauri-Shankar*. During the time of *Pitri-Bhitha*'s publication, she was working on another novel titled *A-parajita* (The Undefeated or Unvanquished). *A-parajita*, as mentioned by the writer, “is an attempt to resolve the complicated relationship between men-women”⁸⁵. Puspallata Das in the biography *Agnisnata Chandraprabha* devotes a chapter to the novel. She was aware of three novels of Saikiani—*Pitri-Bhitha*, *Xekh Ashroi* and *A-parajita*. But from the preface to *Pitri-Bithi* we get to know that Saikiani was writing or wrote five novels. But the novel *Xekh Ashroi* is not mentioned by Saikiani. Puspallata Das says: “except a few worn out pages of the two unpublished novels, the

⁸⁴Many female writers had to face this challenge in their life time and this dilemma was presented by Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room's of One's Own* where she says “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she has to write fiction”.p 4. The book was published in 1929, almost ten years before *Pitri-Bitha* was published

⁸⁵ Quoted from *lekhikar nibedon* in *Pitri-Bitha*.

rest were not found. I saw a few *oxonglogno*⁸⁶ pages of the novel *Xekh-Ashroi (The last refuge)* long time back. But I do not exactly remember its key debate. From the little that I can recollect, it can be assumed that Saikiani had tried to find answers to some of the burning problems of the time from the intellectuals of the society.”⁸⁷ From the analysis of *A-parajita*⁸⁸ by Puspallata Das we get to know that it is the love story of Debojit and Aparajita who are victims of the caste system. Debojit, afraid of being ostracised by society, expresses his inability to marry Aparajita who belonged to a lower caste.

One of the major characteristics of Saikiani’s writing is the autobiographical element. Most of the themes of her short stories and novels are rooted in the personal tragedy of the writer. Personal life is translated through the medium of her literary outpourings. At one level the novel *A-parajita* seems to be the story of Chandraprabha. But a closer look into her work reveals that it is the story of many Chandraprabha’s.

While the early generations of women’s writings were confined to the domestic sphere, Saikiani’s writing marks a shift from the comfortable sphere of domesticity to the real problem of women. Her writing examines and critiques various institutions such as marriage, family, patriarchy, caste and gender through the voice of the oppressed, subaltern woman. The various female characters in her writings narrate the sorrows, sufferings, desires, duties and rights of women. Most of the women in her narratives are victims of caste and gender atrocities in a patriarchal society. All the female characters are strong and revolt against the oppressive forces and find ways of liberating themselves.

⁸⁶ Meaning of *oxonglogno* is Not linked

⁸⁷ By burning problems of the time Das is referring to the deplorable condition of women in the society. Quoted from *Agnisnata Chandraprabha*.p.32. Translation mine.

⁸⁸ Puspallata Das analyses this work based on the few pages of the work she got access to. She got the pages from 331 to 439. The first 330 pages of the novel are missing.

The short story “Akul Pathik” (“The Perplexed Traveller”, 1929) is the story of Karuna, a low-caste woman who is abandoned by her “husband” of high caste. The woman questions why she has to face such a fate. She is born with the same flesh and blood and is equal in the eyes of the creator; then why such discrimination?

I too am a woman of flesh and blood, I may be a low-born in this society, but not lowly in the kingdom of God...Yet my dear husband of higher status, society, caste, lineage and rank abandoned me, his rightful wife, because I am low-born....I wonder if this is God’s decree or man’s doing. Why am I so ill-fated, so miserable? When will this sorrow end? Where is peace? (Saikiani, “Akul Pathik” [1929], 196.)⁸⁹

The story is narrated through the monologues of the two central characters Prabhat and Karuna. Karuna is an unwed mother with a son. As she is referred to as an unwed mother, we can infer that she has not been accepted by the man she considers as husband. The desire of Karuna to be united with her husband and enjoy a family life and the status of a wife remain a distant dream.

Saikiani’s first literary work was published in the journal edited by Lakshminath Bezbarua titled *Banhi* in May, 1921. It was a short story named “Devi” written under the name of Kumari Chandraprabha Das. It dealt with the issue of child marriage and child. Women’s sexuality had not hitherto occupied a central position in the writings of the period. But Saikiani through her stories *Daibagya Duhita*, *Akul Pathik* and novel *A-parajita* focuses on the question of female sexuality. Menoka, Karuna and Aparajita are the three strong female protagonists in her works. They take independent decisions regarding the selection of their life partners. They submit

⁸⁹ Translated by Hem Jyoti Medhi. For details refer to Ph.D dissertation by Hem Jyoti Medhi *Women Question in Colonial Assam, A case study of Chandraprabha Saikiani and Assam Mahila Samity*. p 179.

themselves to their beloved and over the course of the story, they never regret their decisions. The men in the stories are usually presented as weaklings. They are indecisive and more concerned with the societal norms. When society pressurises Menoka to divulge the name of the man she does not relent because the man is not ready to take the responsibility. He humiliates her by questioning her chastity. Menoka does not abort the child of her lover under society's pressure. She is an unwed and single mother to her girl child Tiloka. It was her choice to bring the child into this world without thinking about society's rules. To the world the child might be illegitimate, but to her she is her own flesh and blood. Similarly, Karuna is also a single mom with a son who raises her child single-handedly after being abandoned by her husband.

In *Chetana* two of Saikiani's essays "Balya Bibahor Apokarita" ("Evils of Child Marriage", 1920) and "Bharator Narir Sikhsha" ("Women's Education in India, 1921) were published. In January, 1922 "Mula-Gabhoru", a historical narrative was published in *Banhi*. In *Awahon*, two of Saikiani's short stories "Akul Pathik" ("The Perplexed Traveller", 1929) and "Daibonagiar Duhita" ("The Astrologer's Daughter", 1947) appeared. "Devi" and "Daibagiar Duhita" share the same theme of child marriage and widowhood but the treatment is different.

The female protagonist in "Devi" is a child widow. She is a rebel, fights against injustice and oppressive forces. Devi protests when she is offered insipid food and demands her mother to give her mutton curry. When her mother decides to give it to her secretly, she takes her plate and relishes the mutton curry among other people. By doing so she was revolting against the age old of custom of denying a widow the right to eat whatever she desires. The second instance is when she points out to her father what religious scriptures says and what actually they are practising. The first story ends happily where Devi marries an England-returnee civilian.

Similarly, through Menoka in *Dubagya Duhita* Saikiani portrays the desire of a young woman. Menoka wished to get married to a young and able man, but she was married off to an old man. In reaction to this injustice she tries to commit suicide by jumping into a river. Menoka gets widowed at a young age due to no fault of hers. But she was not ready to follow the strict code of conduct imposed upon widows by society. She would not fast on the occasion of her husband's death. She does not shed a tear on receiving the news of her husband death since she was not emotionally attached to him. Menoka represents the voice of dissent. She rebels on being married to an old man, rebels against the code of conduct widows have to follow, rebels against abortion, rebels against inequality based on gender. She is the master of her own life. It was her choice to keep the baby; it was her decision to earn her living as a prostitute in order to expose the hypocrisy of society though in reality she is not able to cope with that profession. The treatment of widowhood in this story is radically different from the usual public preoccupation with solely the evils and chaos that are created by widows. Even the reforms were initiated without taking into account the needs and welfare of the widows.

The story of *Pitri-Bhitha* is about Madhabi, a seventeen-year-old girl who fights to protect her ancestral property from the hands of the creditor Lalit Das. Within the main plot there is a parallel plot about the romance between Madhabi and Madhab. It is the story of women's right to property, which at that time was unthinkable. The title *Pitri-Bhitha* means "Ancestral Homestead" or "Paternal Homestead"⁹⁰. The story depicts the psychological conflict Madhabi faces since she has to choose between the duty towards her parents and her love for Madhab.

⁹⁰ Saikiani pays her gratitude and respect to her father Ratiram Mazumdar in the section *Shradhanjali* in the beginning of *Pithri-Bithi*. She is grateful to her father for valuing his girl children and not considering them inferior to boys. She praises him for taking great pains to educate them.

Madhabi is the single child and heiress of Mandar Chamua's⁹¹ and Kanchalata's vast property. But tragedy befalls these two women when Madan Chamua dies and leaves behind a huge debt.

Madhabi's fight is a fight against the traditional society in which women are denied the right to their ancestral property. It was impossible to imagine a woman as the protector of the property. Madhabi's fight is against the existing gender discrimination. Women were and are still denied the right to perform the last rites of their parents. It is the male who has the right. Madhabi, by performing the last rites of her father, breaks this traditional norm. The Dharmashastras⁹² say that a woman has to be protected by her father as a child, by her husband as a woman and by her son in her old age. She is portrayed as a being dependent on the protection of others throughout her life. Despite the financial crunch they are facing, Madhabi performs the *xakam* of her father without taking financial help from others and she is able to free her ancestral property by deciding to marry the person ready to clear the debt. Madhabi is an independent woman who stands tall in her lone fight in protecting her land.

The story has an autobiographical element. Madhabi's fight to protect her ancestral property can be related to Saikiani's struggle to protect her paternal homestead when her brother sold some of their land without their knowledge. Puspallata Das refers to another similarity between the writer and Madhabi. "Without her (Saikiani) wish she had to agree to her first marriage mainly to prevent her ancestral paternal homestead from getting auctioned off. She has imaginatively portrayed her life story with a twist. Due to age difference or other reasons, the writer could not

⁹¹In Kamrup district of Assam, zamindars were known as Chamuas.

⁹² The Dharmashastras are "the ancient law books of Hindus, which prescribe moral laws and principles for religious duty and righteous conduct for the followers of the faith...it throws considerable light upon the social and religious conditions of ancient India, family life, gender and caste based distinctions, and principles of ancient jurisprudence." [http. www.hinduwebsite.com/sacred](http://www.hinduwebsite.com/sacred). Accessed on 19 July 2016. 13.25p m

cope with the person from Ulua village to whom the writer's parents had decided to marry her off."⁹³

Puspalata Das had once overheard her mother saying about Saikiani: "I have immense respect for this woman for her extreme courage. Can anyone else give a declaration about their life in newspaper like her?"⁹⁴ Saikiani's home in Bojali was a place of shelter for all the women of the family. She grew up in a society of gender discrimination, but her parents treated the children equally irrespective of their genders. The doors of Saikiani's paternal house were always open to her in good and bad times. Her home occupied a special place in her heart. When she left Tezpur in 1922 fearing a scandal because of the alleged relationship with Dandinath Kalita, it was her parents who took her in. To the society she was a fallen woman as she had conceived without entering into wedlock. She became an unwed mother of a child on 13 August, 1922. During the worst days of her life she found shelter in her home. Little Atul, her son, was taken care of by her mother in her absence.

"*Daibagya Duhita*" ("Astrologer's Daughter") published in *Abahan* is another take on widowhood by the Saikiani. Saikiani as mentioned above belonged to a low caste but she being a woman was sensitive to the problems faced by upper caste women in a Hindu society. Both her protagonists, Devi and Menoka are from upper caste Brahmin families. They are victims of caste and gender oppression. Devi is daughter of a Gossain and Menoka is the daughter of an astrologer. Both the fathers are custodian of the Hindu religion. Accordingly, they have to marry off their daughters before they attain the age of twelve. In other words they are to be married

⁹³ Quoted from *Agnisnata Chandraparbha*. p 41. Translation mine. In the same book Das says that Saikiani had given a public declaration in a leading newspaper about putting an end to this relationship. But Anjali Sharma finds it hard to believe until there is more substantial proof.

⁹⁴ Ibid.p.2. Translation mine. It is in reference to the child marriage of Saikiani, from which Saikiani walked out.

before they attain puberty. In case they are not able to marry off their daughter at that particular age they will be ostracised from their community and lose their caste. Fearing this consequence they marry off their daughter to any man of their caste irrespective of their age. Devi is married to a man much older to her age. Similarly, Menoka is hardly eleven years when she is married to Giridhar Sharma, an old man “whose hair had started greying and teeth began to fall”⁹⁵. Bhargav, Menoka’s father responsible for this marriage transaction takes hundred rupees from Giridhar Sharma as bride price. Menoka is sacrificed at the altar of caste and religion. The bride price was used in performing the *upanayan*⁹⁶ ceremony of her brothers. If Bhargav had failed to do this ceremony at an appropriate age of the boys he would have been ostracised by his community people.

Menoka was sent to her husband house at the age of fifteen. Menoka rebelled against this relationship by running away the same night from Giridhar’s house. She ran and jumped into a river to save herself from Giridhar. Luckily, she was saved. After this incident Menoka was sent back to her paternal house. After one year Menoka and family got the news of Giridhar dead after suffering from illness. She was only sixteen years old. On hearing the news of her husband’s death “Menoka did not cry then. She was standing and smiling. After she smilingly erased the vermillion bindi from her forehead she removed her two bangles and neckpiece and asked...”and what else to do?” “What else to do?”⁹⁷ To this a few women replied after taking bath she has to remain in her wet clothes, follow the rituals and until the fourth day she could not drink a single drop of water. And some told at least she should shed some tears as he was her wedded husband. “Menoka silently thought...got rid of this life thorn and said “I have to remain

⁹⁵ Saikiani’s “Daibagya Duhita” from Lekhikar *Galpa* edited by Preeti Baruah.p.15.

⁹⁶ The meaning of Upanayan is the threading ceremony

⁹⁷ Quoted from “Daibagya Duhita”p.17. Translation Mine.

in my wet clothes. Why should I? I won't stay. I won't follow the ritual'(17). What a shameless girl! This would not happen to you than who else? It is better you die by tying a pot to your neck." Menoka argued with them. A sole women fight against the society's cruel custom of child marriage and widowhood. She is waging a war against the social evils that prevents woman to make her choices in life. Defying and not conforming to the rules laid down by society for a widow. Menoka single handily wages a war against society. There is none to support her. She is a lone fighter. Her courage, her boldness makes her more appealing to the reader. She fights against all the customs she has to follow as a widow. She never accepted Giridhar as her husband. For her he was a messenger of death "*yaam doot*". She was living a life in death." Why should I observe *okhush*⁹⁸ for the person who is a *yaam doot* for me, and for who, I had to jump into the river at the death of the night?

Why should I observe? When Gauri her childhood friend tries to convince her to follow the custom Menoka says "You too have gone crazy like others! The greatest enemy of my life has died, today is my greatest day of freedom and you too come to say that I have to shed tears. Strange."(17)

She questions the cruel customs of gender difference. The custom of marriage is prevalent in society but should not one take into consideration the age of the partners to be married. "An aged woman marrying a young man is unheard of and considered sin. But an aged man can marry a young girl and make her his wife...this is also...a sin. This is society! And I have to cry for this so that society remembers it. Everything in life has been destroyed in the name of

⁹⁸ The ceremonial cleanliness process one has to observe at the birth or death of a person. Menoka refuses to observe it.

religion and society. You can Gauri, but do not tell me. When I listen to you all my body is on fire and poison spreads.” (18)

Saikiani presents a comparative take on widowhood by presenting two widow characters that have totally different take on widowhood. Gauri, the childhood friend of Menoka is also a widow but she has silently accepted her situation as a widow. Her husband Kanteshwar was young and handsome quiet the contrast of Menoka’s husband. But she did not have the privilege of meeting her husband. What remains is only a thin memory of Kanteshwar. Now, at the prime of her youth she is leading a life of a beggar. For what women are living on this earth?

Gauri embraced Menoka and said “I know about your plight and sorrow Menoka. But you are a woman, why are you forgetting this? Do you know the means of support for women like us? The being called man! Whether he is old, blind, hunched back, lame or whether he is suffering from leprosy-Tb or sickly still he is the Bhagyadevata of women-⁹⁹(18) Menoka says that she cannot spend her life like them in the name of her aged husband. “Truly, Gauri because they provide the basic needs like food and clothes that you have to obey them. Love them and respect them. but instead of that if for a morsel of food and a piece of cloth you keep on sacrificing yourself centuries after centuries to man. Is it a religion of mankind or a religion of woman?”(19).The whole neighbourhood women surrounds Menoka’s house when they get to know that Menoka was not observing the rituals a widow has to observe .To this Menoka retaliates at them angrily “Who told you all to get me married to a man who was in his death bed? Was

⁹⁹ Gauri is trying to convince Menoka that the husband is everything for woman. Without him a woman life is like a radar less boat lost in the storm of life.

hundred rupees more precious? I will eat fish and rice.”(20) “the other widows do not have the courage so do I have to do the same?”(20). The rebellious widow and the Saikiani uses the term “Bidrohini Suwalijoni” (Rebellious girl,20).

The difference between marriage ritual of Brahmin and Shudra is comparatively mentioned “when the wife dies, a Shudra carefully chooses a marriageable aged girl and marries but the Brahmins however aged will look for a very young girl— a eight, nine, ten, eleven or twelve years old girls. So, in every Brahman and Astrologers household there are widows. (20)

Menoka- Are woman not human? Why do you all spend your time thinking of a morsel of food and a piece of cloth? Why don't you become qualified like man? Cannot woman be independent and earn her livelihood through education and professions? Gauri- Yeh, we can its true but where are those opportunities, those prospects available for women?¹⁰⁰ Saikiani writings reflected the limited scopes and options available for women in twentieth century Assam. Society was engulfed in evil customs like child marriage, widowhood, lack of education, right to freedom, right to paternal property, right to freedom of choice, right to taking the important decision in life all these were denied to women.

An upper caste widow suffers greater marginalization and discrimination than a woman from a lower class. Upper caste woman movements are restricted; she has to suffer the social custom of purdah system. She cannot move about freely. That is not the case of the lower caste woman; she is not confined to purdah. She is free enough to work outside and remarry. A life devoid of love, happiness, comfort and companionship.

¹⁰⁰P.19.DD.

Against the rebel widow character of Menoka Saikiani has juxtaposed the character of Gauri, who silently bears and obeys all the atrocities meted on her by society in the name of widowhood. She is aware of the injustice but fears to voice against the authorities. She has to beg for her survival. Her brother and sister-in-law expressed their inability to support her. As she is a widow she can beg suggested her sister-in-law and support them. Initially, she felt ashamed to beg. But as there was no other provision available she had to take it much against her wish. Woman has no qualifications to earn a livelihood except the art of weaving. That too, how many clothes can they weave monthly and who will buy them? And woman does not have the knowledge of advanced weaving techniques. The Shudra women by their labour are able to support their children. But this provision is not available for Brahman and Ganak women. Society does not allow them to work. (21-22) They form an integral part in contributing to the economic and financial condition of the house. If education is the only way out from their deplorable conditions where is such provisions? Who will educate us? Who will give us this light? Who will be the torch bearer? Who will take us through the path of knowledge? (22). Gauri curse herself for being born in a Brahmin and Ganak family “ it is because of sins in our previous lives that we are born in Brahman and Ganak’s house and trying to purify ourselves from some unknown sin. Why is it only woman that has to suffer?” Why are the doors of pleasure always available open for man? As long as woman bears all these violence the doors would not be closed. We are sacrificing ourselves for our family prestige and honour but how far they think of our happiness. Thinking about themselves as an individual not in relation to others. Who am I? What I want?

Menoka is sold twice in the story. She is sold in the marriage market by her father for a meager hundred rupees. Secondly, Menoka sells her body to earn money for her father’s funeral. Each

time woman is a commodity which is sold to restore the honour of the family. Menoka, earning the money as a prostitute is used for her father's last rites. The hypocrisy of the society is shown in its nakedness. She is the fallen woman but her brother comes to meet her in the brothel to seek financial help. Sexual exploitation of the widows. Shunned and seen as a burden and a liability, an additional mouth to be feed by the family. They are cast out from their home. She becomes invisible. They lead a life in isolation, poverty and despair. They have no choice but to beg. High caste Brahmin. Prostitution, Abortion of young widows. Many of these widows were married of at the very age of eight, ten, and twelve. They may not be educated but they have several skills which will make them economically independent.

The gender difference in a society takes place at the time of birth of a child. In the story, Bhargav is paid in different denomination in predicting the horoscope of a child. The birth of girl child is not welcomed in a grand way as that of a boy child. Bhargav's fees differ accordingly. He is paid one rupees if it is a boy and half the amount if it is a girl.

In the short story "Devi"(Goddess), the protagonist Devi is a child widow of eight years of old. She is the daughter of a *Stradhikar*. Two stages in the life of the child widow are shown by Saikiani: the widow as a small innocent child and the widow in her adolescence after puberty. Devi is not protesting against society. It is the protest of an innocent child denied to wear bangles and put *bindi*, forced to eat insipid food and restricted to meet friends. During the *shradha* of her husband, Devi is adamant in eating non-veg and sits along with her father and others. Her helpless mother brings her inside and serves a plate of non-veg food but innocent Devi takes the plate and eats the food with utmost relish in front of everyone.

Chandraprabha's writings raise the issues of child marriage, widowhood, child widows, illegitimate children, women's rights in a traditional Assamese society, women's duties and prostitution. Every female character in Saikiani's literary works is strong and independent like the creator.

The most prestigious award Padmashree was bestowed on Saikiani when she was nearly on her death bed. She succumbed to cancer before she could receive the award. But, on her death centenary, a postal stamp was issued in her name and the centenary celebrations were organised in different parts of Assam. One hopes that her dreams of publishing all her novels will one day be fulfilled if ever the hand-written manuscripts of these works are recovered. The fact that the precious manuscripts of many of her novels have been lost speaks volumes about the callousness and indifference of society and intelligentsia towards the preservation of history and heritage. In recent times, several researchers have been trying to shed more light on the life and works of Chandraprabha Saikiani.

Through the stories the writer tries to break some of the stereotypical belief that existed and still exist in the society on the basis of gender. The protagonist is always a woman in the writings of Chandraprabha. The themes, the rebellion, the struggles of the protagonists in her writings are portrayed from a feminist perspective. The issues of gender and sexuality which she raised were rebellious in her times. Her female characters question the existing social order that denies a category of people the right to equality based on one gender. She presents a traditional society engulfed in social evils and superstitions against women.

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CONCLUSION

The thesis has attempted to unravel the question of women in Assam towards the end of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century. Few journals are selected to examine the discourse on women's question. Both male and female perspectives are analysed with a focus on women's education, child marriage and widow marriage. The thesis has also highlighted that apart from the journals women have made use of the platforms provided by *Joymoti Utsov* and *Assam Mahila Samiti* to articulate various issues concerning women. Chandraprabha Saikiani's role in the emancipation of women in Assam and the way in which she addressed the women's question has also been explored to argue that women addressed the question of women differently. A detailed summary of the chapterisation is provided below to highlight the arguments made in the thesis.

The first chapter titled "Discourse on Women's Question: American Baptist Missionaries and Native Intellectuals" has examined how women's question was addressed by missionaries and intellectuals thorough various journals. In the first sub-section, "The Language Question: The Colonial and Missionary Intervention" has provided an overview of the language debate in Assam. The section has highlighted British colonialist's role in replacing Assamese language with Bengali and has also provided various scholars opinion on the same. The section has pointed out that the American Baptist Missionaries played a major role in the development of Assamese language which helped in re-establishing Assamese language. Another trajectory of language question in Assam has also been traced thorough the activities of British Missionaries. Though their mission was unsuccessful, they have also played a role in introducing Bengali in

the region. The second sub-section, “American Missionary and the Emergence of Journals in Assam” discussed how the arrival of American missionaries marked the beginning of print culture especially the emergence of journals in the region. The section has also provided the details of the journals selected for the study.

The Third sub-section, “Missionary Women: Ideal Wives or the “Saviours” of Native Women?” examined the role of women missionaries in the lives of Assamese women. The section has pointed out the contribution of women missionary hitherto unexplored. Missionary women like Mrs. Philips had the opinion that women missionaries should be ideal wives. As pointed out in the section, it can be seen as the nineteenth century idealism of Victorian womanhood. Though these women missionaries helped their husbands in their mission, it was considered only as the duty of an ideal wife. This in turn has undermined missionary women’s contribution in teaching, preaching and literary work as their own endeavour. The section has also provided an alternative view of this by examining the papers presented in the Mission Conference in Assam in 1886. It has pointed out that the missionaries’ wives did not take the mission as a profession and they were not paid for their work. The section argued that few of the missionaries’ wives played a vital role in the lives of the native women. The section has also argued that the missionary men most often used their women as tools for their mission and missionary women’s role was gendered. The anxiety of missionary wives forgetting their wifely duties while being part of the missionary activities was also expressed during the time. In short the section has explored the “saviour” image of missionary women/wives.

The fourth sub-section, “The Entry of Single Woman Missionaries: *Zenana*, Adoption and Education of Women, Child Marriage” has focused on the entry of single women missionaries and their contribution to mission as *zenana* work. It has also pointed out women missionaries

contribution to women's education, missionary activities of adoption and their intervention to stop evil customs like child marriage and widow marriage observed by native women. The section argued that though the American missionaries failed in their mission of conversion in large scale, analysis of the work of women missionaries, it is proved that they were able to impart education and also engage in the process of evangelization to a section of people who were neglected by the society.

The fifth sub-section, "Women Missionaries: Language and Literary Endeavors" has explored the contribution of missionary women to the development of language and literary endeavours in Assam. As we have seen the male missionaries took an active part in developing the Assamese language and publishing various books on Assamese language and grammar. The section unravels the contribution of women missionaries in the development of language and literature of Assam. Missionary women have also contributed to the genre of children's literature in Assam. The literary work, they produced as textbooks for the school are praise worthy. Their contribution in publishing books on Assamese language can be seen as contribution to developing the Assamese language which was banned from courts and schools in 1837.

The final sub-section, "Native Intellectuals Discourse on Women's Education, Child Marriage and Widow Marriage" has examined the native intellectuals discourse on 'women's question'. Through an analysis of the various writings by Assamese male writers in the journals *Orunodoi*, *Assam-Bandhu*, *Jonaki* and *Mou*, it tries to focus on their views on education, child marriage and widow marriage. It is noted that women's education has been the centre of discussion and debates in almost all the journals that were published during the period 1846 to 1927. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Rateshwar Mahanta, Purnakanta Sharma were some of the native intellectual that articulated on education in the magazines *Orunodoi*, *Assam-*

Bandhu, *Jonaki* and *Mou*. Phukan advocated girls education on the ground that that would enable them to become an ideal wife who will be able to manage the home and take care of their children and be an ideal companion to their husband. Though his idea of women's education was limited, it certainly has paved the development of women's education.

Gunabhiram Barua articulated that education for children is necessary for building them as responsible citizens. According to him education also helps in running the conjugal life smoothly. Problems among husbands and wives will reduce if both the partners are educated. He emphasises that the creator has given both man and woman the same thinking ability therefore education must be equal for both man and woman. Following them male writers like Ratneshwar Mahanta, Purnakanta Sharma, and Lambodar Bora anxiety on women's education has also been discussed in the section. They emphasised on the duties of wife and felt that the Western education and ideas were posing threat to the traditional Assamese society and women were influenced by these changes.

The native intellectuals have responded to the questions on child marriage and widow re-marriage too. Their writings also criticizes the Hindu religion for the sanctioning these evil customs. Gunabhiram Barua's *Ramnabami Natak* (1857) , the first Assamese social drama of the colonial period has been analysed in the section to point out how reformers like Barua addressed the issue of widowhood through the medium of drama. Through Mahanta's writings we get a glimpse into the marriage system of late nineteenth century Assam from a male perspective.

The second chapter titled "*Ghar-Jeuti* and *Joymoti Utsov*: Women's Writing and Public Sphere" has examined the women's journal, *Ghar-Jeuti* [Light of the House] and *Joymoti Utsov* [Joymoti Celebration] as agents which tried to bring about changes in the lives of women of Assam in the

early 20th century. Through the articles, short stories and poems appeared in *Ghar-Jeuti*, an attempt is made to understand how women articulated the question of widowhood and how it was different from the way men addressed it. Though the *Joymoti Utkas* valorises the ideal woman image of *sati* through the figure of *Joymoti*, the chapter argued that women made use of this as a platform to address issues concerning women as well as nation.

The first sub-section, “*Ghar-Jeuti: An Introduction*” provided an overview of the journal with a focus on women as editors of the journal. It has pointed out the challenges women faced as editors of the journal. Many Assamese journals disappeared from the literary scene after one or two years of its publications because of financial problem, lack of readership and articles. The editors were in constant pressure that if they do not get the public support the journal would not survive. The editors made an attempt to create awareness among the women community of Assam of what was happening in the national and international level among women community. This shows the editors’ effort in building consciousness among women to bring change and progress in their life like women from other places. The section pointed out that *Ghar-Jeuti* marks the beginning of Assamese women’s entry into the print world as editors.

The second sub-section, “The Journal: Issues and Concerns” along with an account of the contents in the journal, provided a note on the contributors and examined the politics involved in the careful choice of contributors. Most of the women writers were from the Assamese Hindu community. The editors have included male contributors and readers though it continuously reiterated that it was a women journal. It is argued that the contributors deliberately chose to involve men in their projects. The reason could be that to run the journal, to generate funds, they were dependent on men.

The third sub-section, “The Discourse on Widowhood in *Ghar-Jeuti*” examined the discourse on widowhood in *Ghar-Jeuti* and has articulated how Assamese women addressed the question. The section pointed out that the marginalised section of the women community i.e. the dalit women, the tribal women, the peasant women, the lower caste women, the muslim women etc finds no space in the grand narrative on the women question. The narrative that exclusively occupied the literary imagination on women was the Hindu wife, the child bride, the widow etc. The section argued that the discourse on widowhood might have got side-lined in the wake of Assamese language agitation and nationalism but the discourse on widowhood appeared *Ghar-jeuti* proves public concern on the subject. Instead of directly addressing the discourse on widowhood, the contributors adopted different forms like articles, short stories, historical narratives, poems etc. The section has also pointed out that the editors carefully selected a range of issues on widowhood by keeping in view the social, economic and cultural status of the widow. The section argues that the discourse on widowhood has always projected it as a homogenous category. The analysis of the texts suggests that it is a heterogeneous category. The various writings in *Ghar-Jeuti* on widowhood explored the condition of widows placed in diverse situation in society. The innumerable images of widowhood reflected in the writings are the wealthy widow, the poor widow, the child widow, the childless widow, widow with children, the educated widow, the illiterate widow and the rebellious etc. In short the section argues that the writings on widowhood cuts across class and caste and they do not homogeneous the identity of a widowhood as a single category.

The fourth sub-section, “Women’s Participation in the Celebration of *Joymoti Utsov*”, has examined the history of *Joymoti Utsov*, and the politics behind the celebration of the same. The section argued that women made use of *Joymoti Utsov* as a platform to articulate their views on

various concerns. Joymoti's story became a cult of celebrating ideal womanhood. It was in fact men who took interest to celebrate the event. The main motive of organising Joymoti Utsov was to celebrate sacrifice of Joymoti Kuwari and celebrate the image of ideal womanhood. The section articulated the possibilities of locating this figure as a victim of political conspiracy and conflict and as the one who sacrificed her life for the nation. Though it was a celebration for woman, man participation was there since its birth. The section argues that the celebration gave women opportunity for the first time to come together at one place and engage in an activity that was different from their daily activity. They were main participants in remembering a woman who was the symbol of ideal womanhood. It gave women opportunity to develop the feeling of sisterhood and to celebrate womanhood. Women from different districts belonging to different class, community and religion assembled together breaking their difference to remember this iconic woman. *Joymoti Utsov* gave women an opportunity to express their creativity in form of writing speeches, songs and articles. It has also given them a space in the public sphere. The image of women as public speakers were almost rare during this period but *Joymoti Utsov* gave opportunity to women to deliver speeches on this iconic figure.

This third chapter, "*Assam Mahila Samity*, Chandraprabha Saikiani and Women's Question" examined the formation, functions and development of AMS. Beginning with a short description of the status of women's education in early 20th century Assam, the first sub-section of the chapter, "Social Reform Movement and Women's Organisation in India: An Overview" provided a short account of the establishment of women's organisations in India with focus on Assam and the factors facilitated it. The second section, "Making History: The Formation and Activities of AMS" beginning with a historical account of the formation of AMS, discussed the aims, objectives and activities of AMS. The section points out that Mahila Samity was born at a

juncture when few educated women felt that they did not have a space among the male organization. The section has also highlighted AMS's role in the implementation of Sarada bill. AMS has worked for the promotion of Women's Education, Abolition of Purdah system, Mother and Child Care, Literacy among Adult women, Fight against Child Marriage, Promotion of Khadi and cottage Industry (Kutir shilpa), Promotion of Inter-caste marriage, Service to Harijan, Shelter Homes for abandoned and removal of untouchability. The third sub-section "Chandraprabha Saikiani: A History of Doing" provided a short biographical sketch of Chandraprabha Saikiani, the forerunner of women's movement in Assam. Saikiani was the victim of gender inequality, child marriage and caste system. She has relentlessly worked for the emancipation of women in Assam. Her role as social and political activist has been highlighted in the section. The fourth sub-section, "Saikiani and AMS" has discussed Saikiani's role in the formation and activities of AMS. The fifth section, "The Question of Women in Saikiani's writings" has addressed the issues of gender and sexuality represented in the literary works of Chandraprabha Saikiani.

In the dissertation I have attempted to address the women's question in the context of Assam. My attempt is just a small step. There are many future possibilities in this area. While I was addressing the women question by the American women missionaries I have come across journals which have been written by missionary's wives while staying in Assam. This is a rich field which can be explored. Similarly, *Ghar-Jeuti* the women journal is a fertile area which has lot of research scope to be done. I have only highlighted only a few questions on women. Question on education, question on various regional Mahila Samity as found in the pages of the journal can be explored. The male writings on *Ghar-Jeuti* can also be studied in the future. Apart

from this attempts can be made to translate the writings in *Ghar-Jeuti* in other languages to reach a larger reader.

My work on Chandrabhabha Saikiani and AMS was based on limited primary materials. As I proceeded with my research work I have got to know she was more known as a social activist, her literary field has been less explored. This literary side of Saikiani, a less explored area has endless possibility of research work. Her works needs to be translated in order to reach to larger readership.

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