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## Locating Women in Colonial Assam

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### Abstract

History books are not explicit enough to highlight the role of women in society – gaps remained while recording the happenings of life and society. These are the gaps that involved women and the task remains to fill those gaps and provide a clear and unambiguous picture of a society where women too had their roles to play. Therefore, in order to study Indian women, it is very important to reckon with the colonial women who had their first encounter with the outside world. This was the time when they were first exposed to the new ideas of the western world with the advent of the British in India. In Assam too the rapidly changing scenario encouraged the women to awaken their consciousness and find their 'voice'. So, this paper is an exploration of women in colonial Assam who stood at the centre of many of these changes. These were the women negotiating the pull between tradition and modernity, domestic expectations and public engagement, silence and self-expression.

**Keywords:** Women, Assamese women, colonial, self-expression.

Whenever we talk of women in India reference is always made to the golden age of the past when women were supposed to be regarded as equal to the men in society. Such a picture of women enjoying freedom prompts some questions too with regard to the how and what freedom they were privileged with. Were the women ever asked what they wanted or what they wanted to do? Such questions still persist and therefore it needs to be studied as to how far we have recognized women and their voices. History books too are not explicit enough to highlight the role of women in society – gaps remained while recording the happenings of life and society. These are the gaps that involved women and the task remains to fill those gaps and provide a clear and unambiguous picture of a society where women too had their roles to play.

In order to study Indian women, it is very important to reckon with the colonial women who had their first encounter with the outside world. This was the time when they were first exposed to the new ideas of the western world with the advent of the British in India. In Assam too the rapidly changing scenario encouraged the women to awaken their consciousness and find their 'voice':

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Confined to the *zenana* (in the case of town women) or to a ceaseless round of household drudgery and childcare women did not have the time or energy to think or reflect on their condition, let alone find ways of self-expression. The denial of education has hampered their expression. Even when they had some access to some education and began writing, their early efforts came out distorted and confused, constrained by incomprehensible conventions set by men and restrictions on choice of subject. They invited ridicule and condescension or worse still, were ignored (Mahanta 6).

The emergence of the new woman was possible to a large extent because of the social reformers who envisioned a better society with educated women. The reformers had a western education in Calcutta which was an important site of the new awakening in pre-independent India. It was for their efforts that education was made accessible for women and that opened the doors of the world for them:

There would have been no women's movement in India if Indian men in the nineteenth century had not been concerned with modernizing women's roles. They focused their attention on certain issues: sati, child marriage, widow remarriage and, most important of all, female education. They saw the world through a particular caste/class lens and the net effect of their efforts was to bring women, especially women from their own families, into the new world created by colonial rule. The decisions made by these men meant that women, whether they wanted to or not, would become part of the new society (Forbes 252).

But it was no easy task. There were backlashes by those who held similar views like Bolinarayan Bora who wrote that "education for women will be more dangerous than the Burmese invasion" (7Trans. Mine). Such comments were uncalled for from a person like Bora who was educated abroad and whose wife played tennis in public.

Nevertheless, no one can deny the role of the American Baptist Missionaries in spreading education in Assam, especially for the girls. It was because of their sincere efforts that schools were established both for boys and girls. But there were constraints on their paths and had to endure a lot of opposition especially regarding the education of the women. Women during that time in Assam were kept secluded and were married off early in their childhood. Ignorance and chiefly illiteracy, even among the men, posed as deterrents to the uplift of women. They were forbidden to step out of their homes let alone speak to any man. Their seclusion made them ignorant of their own self and they themselves would never think of having a voice of their own. These made them hesitant of stepping out of their homes and get themselves educated. The Missionaries therefore had to face a lot of hardship and had to remain content with a handful of girls from the lower strata of the society. It was only after the emergence of the English educated social reformers, the products of the Bengal renaissance, that women in Assam from the elite class got the boost to get emancipated. But, most of the time, as Aparna Mahanta noted in her *Chandraprova Saikiani: Swadhinata Purbor Axomor Stree-Shiksha Aru Nari Jagaran (Chandraprova Saikiani: Women's Education and Women's Consciousness in Pre-Independent Assam)* - "the Hindu and Muslim parents withdrew their daughters from school once they reached puberty after two or three years of learning and married them off when they were of twelve years of age" (9). A girl student who had to leave her school in early twentieth century has written in her memoir *Atitok Xuwanru (Remembering the Past)*:

"When I was in Class VI of Nagaon Mission School my mother withdrew me from school as I reached puberty at the age of eleven. I was not allowed to go to school in spite of Miss Kirsten Berry's personal visit to make her (mother) understand. My father brought a few books in English and taught a little English at home. According to my mother what would a girl do by learning English? Would she go somewhere to work? Household chores, cooking, embroidery and weaving are what a girl needs to learn" (19Trans. Mine).

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The British encounter saw the emergence of Calcutta as the hub of British India's all administrative and trade affairs and envisaged it to be a centre for excellence. The English educated Indians that emerged out of this encounter saw themselves as the elite of the society and brought in a New Awakening. They saw themselves responding to the Western ideology and wanted changes in the society that they considered as deterrents to a tolerant 'modern' society. The proximity of Bengal to Assam saw the influx of the Assamese young men to Calcutta for education. They enabled the land to absorb the new ideas gradually and form a new Assam. The cause for women became an important part of the new ideas and it was in the hands of the social reformers that the task of elevating the status of women remained. In the 1980s feminist approaches of the reforms saw that "modern notions of gender rights in the public domain were premised on a public-private split whereby private disempowerment and the subordination of women were masked and reinforced by the bestowal of public rights" (Sarkar and Sarkar9). It was further argued that:

Colonial rule introduced a capitalist regime into India and produced a modern but dependent bourgeoisie. This class recast its women and its gender practices to align itself more closely with the domesticity of the colonial masters and the ways of modern capitalists. A new form of patriarchy thus evolved which provided the rationale for reforms, not seriously questioning, but merely 'recasting', male domination (Sarkar and Sarkar8).

The reformers indeed wanted the women to be educated, but not at the cost of their positions being challenged. For them, women need to be enlightened but they should always remain subservient to the male head of the household. This echoes what Rousseau says in his *Emile* (1762) about different education for men and women.

The American Baptist Missionaries had already infused new ideas in the region upon landing in Sadiya in 1836 with their printing press and printer. They had to overcome not only the illiteracy of the people, but also had to endure the mistrust of the indigenous people and played an important role in the struggle for a linguistic identity for the land. Nagen Saikia in his *Background of Modern Assamese Literature* (1984) says that the Missionaries for their involvement in religious activities were unable to reach the masses immediately, but worked out to establish schools to spread education, learn the local language and write books in that language (126). He informs further that most importantly, the Missionaries "involved themselves in the paper-war for the rehabilitation of the Assamese language in Assam" (126). Nanda Talukdar in his *Assam and the 19th Century* (2012) refers to the introduction to *Grammar* where Nathan Brown says - "The opinion that the present language of Bengal is the parent of Assamese is irreconcilable with facts. It is well known that there had been no influx of Bengalis into this province, prior to the Mohammedan invasion; at which time the language was established in its present form" (98). The effort of the Missionaries to educate the girls of the region is remarkable for an age when women were expected to remain indoors doing only the household chores. In this struggle the Missionary wives were more responsible in imparting education among the boys and girls of the region. Their journals and letters record their difficulties in educating the girls specifically, because of the belief impinged on women themselves that they are not fit for any kind of learning. In spite of their efforts, they were not able to bring in the girls from the upper-class families as they strictly adhered to social customs like child marriage and further, had reservations regarding the "motives of the white-skinned foreigners" (Mahanta9). They had to eventually change their strategy:

Frustrated with their attempts to get girls from upper class families to come to their schools, the missionaries eventually evolved the strategy of establishing girls' boarding schools where they gathered orphaned, destitute or abandoned girls whom they educated. In the boarding schools the girls were segregated from the social environment, and in any case, being orphans and outcasts, they succumbed easily to missionary influence and adopted Christianity (Mahanta9).

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It is important to note that these missionaries while imparting education to the girls they restricted the learning to only a basic vernacular education that included useful work like weaving, sewing, cutting and stitching. They wanted to groom these girls to be the wives of their native service providers like the gardeners or to be the “Bible-women” to assist them in spreading the word of God. The girls were not encouraged to strive for more than that. Their main thrust was on women’s education so that they become the “meet companions” for the native converts. But they were not able to reach out to the women of the upper classes who had reservations regarding their eagerness to impart education. In spite of the failure of the missionaries to reach all the sections of the society one cannot deny the consciousness they implanted on a new class of educated men who paved the way for a new beginning for the Assamese society.

The British in India pushed the woman’s question further by promoting the idea that husbands and wives should be friends or companions in marriage. It reflected the well-known Victorian patriarchal ideals of what Geraldine Forbes has termed as ‘companionate marriage’ which the British introduced in India in the nineteenth century and which most of the reformers embraced with great zeal. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) Ania Loomba has noted that the image of the ideal woman “fuses together older brahmanical notions of self-sacrifice and devotion with the Victorian ideal of the enlightened mother, devoted exclusively to the domestic sphere” (183). The trend-setter of Assamese “modernity” Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was keen on women’s education. This was recorded by his biographer Gunabhiram Barua who stated that Dhekial Phukan educated his wife himself. She was, in fact, the perfect companionate wife who could run the household smoothly and could ‘support’ the intellectual pursuits of her husband apart from providing the domestic comforts (Mahanta 11). Gunabhiram Barua went a step further by encouraging his wife as well as his daughter to write articles and even books to develop their intellectual pursuits.

Women’s education no doubt gained momentum, but it still had a long way to go in terms of emancipation of women. “While very often colonial education for women in India, and particularly, colonial reforms, are seen as a simple function of mimicry, of what has been called ‘aspiration towards Victorian gentility’, they also point to the double servitude that the reformed educated woman came under in terms of her husband’s acquired needs for a more sympathetic wife and companion, and western Victorian standards of patriarchy” (Moral 16). Sunity Devi, the Maharani of Cooch Behar and daughter of Keshov Chandra Sen, had the freedom to dance with male partners and even had her hand being kissed by a member of the royalty while she was in England because her husband thought it was proper to do so, but back in India rules had to be different (Misra 109). It is no wonder that the social reformers in colonial Assam wanted to flaunt their educated wives while working on the project of reforming the society. The figure of the modern woman was seen as “the mother of the race, the companion and partner of the husband in fulfilling his social, spiritual and soon, as nationalism comes to the fore, political duties as his *ardhangini*” (Moral16). She delivered all these duties unconditionally and was never expected to relate any opinion. The rise of nationalism further enhanced this condition of women as the new Indian intelligentsia with western education, stepped forward to defend the domestic sphere considered the last bastion left to the colonised Hindu (Sarkar 99). Assam in the nineteenth century saw the advent of the American Baptist Missionaries before the British came in. They brought along with them the printing machine that saw the publication of the first periodical, *Orunodoi*, in Assamese in 1846. Dealing extensively with women’s issues along with other articles the pages of the journal today are an important source for history of the nineteenth century. It carries the call for social reforms made by the missionaries and through its pages we come to know of the lone case of attempted *sati* in Assam. This is the only and the first recorded case that took place in Kalugaon in Sibsagar. As recorded, the widow of the elder brother of Lambodar Mauzadar was ready to be a *sati* at the death of her husband, but it was averted in time by the then *daroga* (police inspector). *Orunodoi* also saw the publication of articles on widow remarriage, supposed to be written by Gunabhiram Barua

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whose *Ramnavami Natak* (1870) was also serialized in fifteen issues of the periodical in 1858. *Ramnavami* is considered to be the first Assamese social drama that upheld widow remarriage.

It was also because of the efforts of American Baptist Missionaries that the issue of women's education gained momentum during this period. The Missionaries, especially the Missionary wives, worked zealously for the education of the girls. Schools were set up, but had to face a lot of opposition and criticism from the society. The *Orunodoi* speaks of the kind of attitude the Assamese people had on hearing about women's education. In *Orunodoi* a missionary writer states that "the main barriers to women's education were the women's own belief, imposed upon them from birth, in their ignorance and inability to learn; and the ridicule they faced if they ever tried to do so" (Mahanta8). Their objective in educating the girls was to enable them to read the Bible and the scriptures in their own language as translated by the missionaries themselves. Such "plain education" along with sewing and weaving were considered sufficient for the girls to qualify them to become the "meet companions" of the native brethren. But they failed in reaching out to the women of the Assamese upper classes as remarked by Orell Keeler in 1886: "We could only gain access to many of the higher castes by teaching some kind of needle work. Now we are usually made welcome and get a hearing, most opposition from higher castes, Brahmins, Mussalmans, though there!" (Barpujari202)

The debate on women's education in Assam took place mainly in the pages of *Assam Bandhu* (1885-86), *Mou* (1886-87) and *Jonaki* (1889-1906). *Assam Bandhu* in its short span of sixteen years published many writings on women's education that includes two contributions by women writers – one by Padmawati Devi Phukanani and the other by Swarnalata. In spite of their feeble voices, it is significant that they were the voices of women who were never expected to speak their views. In contrast to them the opposing voices of Ratneswar Mahanta, Purnakanta Sharma and Lamboodar Bora in the pages of *Assam Bandhu* were very strong and they vehemently opposed women's education. In their own different ways, they all saw women's education as a threat to the sanctity of Assamese society. The fear loomed large in their writings that the spread of western ideas in regard to women's education would take its toll on the female moral character. Mahanta and Sharma were of the view that if women were educated, they would not only avoid the household chores, but would also neglect their wifely duties and head for a moral degradation. They held the view that while boys could be trusted with the *bot-tala* (locality in Kolkata) books, girls were not to be trusted being weaker in minds. Aparna Mahanta informs that Lamboodar Bora in his satirical dictionary gives a definition of "*stri-swadhinata*" (woman's independence) as a woman who rides on the male by stepping on him (24). He also gives a meaning of "*Bharjya*" as a woman who shows off her husband's wealth (25).

In contrast to such degrading comments, the writings by Padmawati Devi Phukanani and Swarnalata come as a whiff of fresh air with endearing views regarding a woman's individual self. In her "*Narir Muktabastha*" (Women's Free State), Phukanani extols the dexterity of ancient Aryan women like Chitrlekha who upheld their right to freedom (226). Swarnalata too, in spite of being a mere schoolgirl, is able to air her view regarding the *pardah* system prevailing at that time in her "*Prakrita Laaj Ki?*" (What is True Shame?) (537). Her technique of driving home the point by using dialogues between two girls is engrossing and thought-provoking. In the article the two girls come to the point that the sense of shame does not depend on the veil or *pardah*, but depends on the state of the mind, whether the thoughts are pure or impure. This is also evident of the young writer's awareness of the need for women's education.

Soon after, another periodical *Mou* (1886-87) was published which too did not survive for long. In spite of the four published issues only, the periodical provides a definite male-centric view regarding women's education. The stance taken by its editor Bolinarayan Bora, authoring most of the articles, comes as a surprise because he was educated abroad and had an educated wife who moved freely in the social circles. Bora saw women's education as more dangerous than the Burmese invasion and saw women becoming doctors or lawyers as a transgression of gender roles thereby losing their feminine

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character. He preferred girls to be imparted the rudiments of education at home in order to make them efficient in the affairs of the home.

The periodical *Jonaki* (1889-1916) followed with the tune a bit changed. Now the debate went on as to have the women educated in order to procure a companionate wife who would be a good listener of the husband's intellectual pursuits. It is best echoed in what Phanindranath Gogoi had to say in the pages of *Jonaki* –

“While I am in favour of women's education, I do not support the present system. I am totally against a type of education for women that would enable them to pass their B. A. or M. A. examinations, and encourage them to compete with their husbands. I do not see the necessity for a woman to be educated like a man, since such education causes more harm than good” (Mahanta<sup>32</sup>).

Women's education was accepted as a medium to produce educated children who would become the future leaders of the country. Queen Victoria was presented as the role model for being a queen in spite of the absence of her father: it was because of her educated mother that she was able to sit on the throne and reign.

After *Jonaki* ceased to publish, other publications came into being like *Usha* (1906), *Alochani* (1909) and *Banhi* (1909). They too carried on the debate regarding the contemporary social issues and saw an increasing number of women contributors. The common theme that ran through them was a support for women's education that would make them more compatible to the inner confines of the home and not to the outer world. It has to be noted that it was the voice of a woman, Dr. Durgabashini Das, who pointed out clearly in *Alochani* that women need to be educated for the welfare of the country. She made a direct appeal to the educated that instead of doing all the talking they should be resolute to spread women's education. It is also surprising that Lakshminath Bezbarua, who was one of those who vehemently protested against Bolinrayan Bora's *Mou* and was all praise for the progress women showed in Dibrugarh and Golaghat, too called for an education that would enable women to be the ideal wife and not someone 'useless' and 'unfit' for work through *Banhi*.

The year 1927 saw the publication of Assam's first women's journal *Ghar-Jeuti* by the Sibsagar Mahila Samiti and edited by two women, Kanaklata Chaliha and Kamalalaya Chaliha. It provided a platform for the women to present their voice and also reflected the participation of Assamese women in the political and social movements of the time. No doubt it performed the role of mouthpiece for Assam Mahila Samity, but no one can deny its distinct identity as a woman's magazine. Its main objective was to bring the women of Assam together to initiate an effective education for them and ensure their development. *Ghar-Jeuti* paved the way for many emerging women writers and a few of them went to become well-known like Nalinibala Devi and Alaka Patangia. It also kept abreast the Assamese women about the happenings around the world and also about women in other countries. What is noteworthy is to come across the diverse views by the contributors regarding women's education. The contradictions of the nationalist view on women's role at that time are also evident in writers like Chandraprova Das, Punyaprova Das, Durbasundari Gogoi and Dipeswari Gohain. While talking about the women in the villages and asserting that women should be educated to assist the men folk Dipeswari Gohain makes a point that apart from reading and writing the women in the towns do nothing when compared to the village women (334-338). There were also writers like Labanyaprova Borbora who supported women's education and their visibility outside their homes for a better society, but noted at the same time that education for boys and girls should be different (623-627).

These journals provide us an insight into the contemporary attitude of the colonized in Assam which need to be deliberated upon in order to understand the status of the colonial women. The dire need and struggles for emancipation of women can be traced in these writings; the intelligentsia of colonial Assam had mixed feelings, but the fact that women took to writing is a proof enough of their

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repressed desires for equality. The reminder is always there that the Assamese women yearned for respect and freedom. Gillian Beer argues in her essay "Re-presenting Women: Re-presenting the Past" that, "Things mean differently at different historical moments, and different things need to be asserted at different times" (83). Their history needs to be revisited and reorganized in order to conform to a more acceptable one for the women today to move forward from the point of achievement the colonial women acquired.

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