

Chapter-III

JYOTIPRASAD AGARWALA AND ASSAMESE SOCIETY IN THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTYTH CENTURIES

This chapter deals with the transformation of Assamese society during the colonial period and the emergence of nationalist feelings among the Assamese people. Nineteenth century occupies a unique place in the history of India as well as in Assam. In this period India broke the isolation and had contact with the western World. It has special significance to Assam because the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) between the British and the Burmese brought to an end the six hundred years old Ahom monarchy in Assam and paved the way for the eventual establishment of the British rule. Since the annexation of Assam to the British Indian Empire, the Assamese society underwent different changes and the transformation continued till the 20th century.

The darkness which covering Assam from the outside Assam was gradually removed with the impact of the British rule Assam slowly came out of its isolation specially because of the introduction of new routs of communication. Due to the spread of English education the people of Assam began to feel the western impact and gradually gave up age old beliefs and prejudices. The Company introduced new administrative measures and they patronized the spread of western education and culture in the province. The introduction of Western education in India as well as in Assam was an event of great historical significance. It was no doubt a progressive act of the British rule. It brought forth revolutionary changes in the outlook of the Indian social, religious and political spheres.¹

It is known that British policy of modern education in India was to create a class who would be Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinion, morals and intellect. They had a notion that once the people were converted to a western mode of life, they would prove to be their most dependable and trusted subjects. From ancient time Assam has been a place of learning. In the 7th century, the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen

¹Mazumdar, R.C., *British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance* Vol- II, pp.95-96

Tsung found that the king of *Kamarupa* is fond of learning. In an inscription of king Ratnapala of the 11th century also described the capital of *Kamarupa* as “adorned by learned men.”² During the prosperity of the Ahom government, education of the respectable classes in Sanskrit knowledge always formed an object of social care and the attention of the state. In every important village there existed public schools to train up the youth in the knowledge of Sanskrit literature and science.

Thus, before the coming of the British, there were vernacular schools which taught mainly reading and writing and also imparted religious instruction to the students and thus it is argued that neither individuality nor a rationalist outlook could develop among the students in pre- British India. The indigenous system of education exist in Assam was in *satras*, *tols* and *pathsalas* where instructions imparted were mostly of religious nature leading to a pious life and not so much for any useful purpose or widening the mental horizon.³ It is argued that in pre- British schools of India neither individuality nor rationalist outlook was developed among the students. The only aim of education was to make the students staunch Hindus or Muslims. David Scott in 1826 A.D. established eleven schools mostly in lower Assam with the approval of the British Government in India to encourage the indigenous system of education.⁴ The only language thought was Sanskrit.

Until the early years of the nineteenth century, the attitude of the East- India Company towards education of the Indians was not so noteworthy. The Charter Act of 1813 however, made education a responsibility of the Company’s government and set apart for each year a lakh of rupees for the revival and improvement of education amongst the inhabitants of the British territories in India. From 1813 to 1854, (the year of Wood’s Despatch) this was the period when Assam was experiencing the beginning of a new phase of national life throw the contact with the West. Since the annexation of the province to the British empires, a certain numbers of Institution styled vernacular schools were established in the country. Instruction in these schools was imparted in a foreign language that is the Bengali.

²Bhuyan, A.C(ed.) 1999, *Political History of Assam Vol-II*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, p.54

³Barpujari, H.K., *Assam in the days of the Company*, Guwahati, p.86

⁴ Ibid. p.87

During the first half of the nineteenth century the condition of education in Bengal was bad enough, but in Assam was even worse. In 1835, the District Magistrate of Darrang reported that there were only three small public schools in the district and a few private schools. In 1847-48 A.D., there were eight primary schools in the district.⁵

The evolution of Indian nationalism might have been the result of Western modular influences in the same way as Benedict Anderson had thought, but the role of Western education was important nevertheless, as it produced a critical public discourse conducive to its growth. If this education was designed to colonise the mind of the Indian intelligentsia and raise in them a sense of loyalty, the latter also selectively appropriated and manipulated that knowledge of domination to craft their own critique of colonialism. The different growth of education impacted on the level of political activities in different regions. The educated Indians developed the same ideas to construct their own critique of an autocratic and arrogant colonial state, and mixed with an emotional patriotic belief in the superiority of Indian culture and civilization and this helped them to formulate conscious theories of nationalism.⁶

However, A. R. Desai argued that modern education was spread mainly by three agencies. They were the foreign Christian missionaries, the British Government and the progressive Indians.⁷ Amalendu Guha had indicated three types of influence on the formation of Assamese middle class intellectuals. Firstly, was the spread of British administration and its associated infrastructure, secondly, the cultural activities of the Christian missionaries particularly the American Baptists and thirdly, the direct and indirect impact of the Bengal Renaissance.⁸

In Assam, though initially the feudal nobility class regarded English not necessary for jobs but in due course with the changing needs, they too showed their keen interest in giving their descendants English education.⁹ A section of the gentry in the towns and villages have the tradition of teaching their children to read and write. But some of the village folk and the common people do not allow their children to

⁵ Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, P.214

⁶ Bandhopadyay., op. cit., P.210

⁷ Desai, A.R., 1948, *Social background of Indian nationalism*, popular prakashan, Mumbai, p.280

⁸ Guha, Amalendu, *Medieval and early colonial Assam*, p.207

⁹ Mills Report, 1984, p.23

learn. The Assamese elites, very few in numbers, were more interested to get themselves acquainted with the western education and new ideas of Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century so that they could be formed into a class to fight against their opponents for jobs. The primary motive of the Assamese youths for English education was the prospect of better jobs under the government.

In the district Gazetters Report B.C. Allen argued that both Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Ganga Govinda Phukan were the most trusted and loyal government officials amongst the emerging Assamese middle class in the middle of the Nineteenth century.¹⁰ Their administrative efficiency enabled the British to employ them in the administration.

Again, the introduction of the new system of administration, the monetized economy and the institutional education, played vital roles in giving a new shape to the Assamese society. The improve means of communication and transport also did help to break the isolation of the province and paved the way for an incursion of new ideas and thoughts. The British administration and the material foundation resulted in the destruction of old feudal classes in Assam and in the rise and growth of new social classes.¹¹

In the meantime, the introduction of English education created an enlightened class who attained the consciousness of modern self-entity and it led to the formation of a new liberal Assamese middle class with a strong faith in western education and rationalist thinking and their efforts led to the growth of modern ideas like rationalism, social reforms, national consciousness which was hitherto unidentified.

Community contains within itself the social classes. Social class is defined in terms of economic status of individual concerning property, role in the production and distribution, type of education and culture and in terms of accepted norms of relations between individuals and a sense of belonging to a particular group of people called

¹⁰Allen, 1905,Phukan and his brother Jagnoram, Maniram ,p.6

¹¹Goswami, Chandana, 2008,*Nationalism in Assam*,New Delhi,p.87

‘class’.¹² Social class is an economic expression and each social class has its own and varied economic status in the mode of social production and distribution.¹³

The basic division is, of course, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Those who own the means of production, do not themselves work but employ wage-labour; and those who do not own any means of production, do not themselves work but employ wage- labour, and those who do not own any means of production and must work as wage- labour, in between the two lies the middle class.¹⁴ Middle Class, therefore, is a group of people whose existence in society is in between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In another writing, Marx refers to the middle class as those “who stand between the workmen on the one hand and the capitalist and landlord on the other.”¹⁵

In the early British period, apart from the *Satradhikars* who were the owners of vast landed property, the nobility also occupied vast areas of land known as *lakhiraj* and *nisfkhiraj* respectively. It was from this class a section of people rose into prominence by opposing the British rule and it were they who paved the way for the later leaders who identified themselves as the precursors of the renaissance in Assam.¹⁶ Some notable personalities of the period were Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Kashinath Tamuli Sargharia Phukan, Ram Dutta Baruah, Radhanath and Janardan Barbaruah, Lambodar Barphukan, Dinanath Bezbaruah etc.

We know that ‘the term renaissance was first used in a specific European context, to describe the great era from about the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, when the entire socio cultural atmosphere of Europe underwent spectacular transformations. The original meaning of the term was associated with the literally movement in Italy in the fourteenth century which aimed at the revival of Greek and Latin learning. Though the word renaissance has definite European connotations, yet it happens to be the only word that term nearest to expressing the complex socio- economic and intellectual courage that swept through almost the whole of India during the second half of the

¹² Kalita, Ramesh Chandra., 2011, *Situating Assamese Middle Class the Colonial Period*, Bhabani Print, Guwahati, P. 2

¹³ Kalita., op. cit., P.2

¹⁴ Kalita, op. cit, Pp. 3-4

¹⁵ Kalita., op. cit., P.4

¹⁶ Ibid. p.55

nineteenth Century. The impact of these new ideas or renaissance was felt in Assam for the first time after the region came under British rule in 1826.’¹⁷

English educated Assamese people became the lover of Walter Scott, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Macaulay. They enjoyed the Shakespearean plays staged in modern theatres. Such plays were either in the original or in translated versions of Bengali. Nourished and nurtured in such situations the well-meaning people of the time wanted to enrich Assamese literature in similar lines. Sonnets, elegy, narrative poems, literary ballads and satirical verses on the lines of the English works began to be composed in Assam.¹⁸ These influences filtered through the writings of the prominent architects of the Bengal renaissance like Rammohan Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

Different forms of literature came to be in vogue. These literary expressions, already established in English literature, but hitherto unknown in Assamese, came to have a permanent place in Assamese novels, short stories, essays, modern social plays with new structure and contents came to be written in Assamese. Revolution of old values started with a big bang. People like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Padmanath Gohain Barua, and Lakshminath Bezbarua wanted to rebuild Assamese literature with new materials in a fresh format.

With the modern age, however, changes were noticed in all fields and particularly in the social life of the people. The western education had its effects and with it new ideas entered into the social life, as a result of which the mental horizon of the people became wider than before leading to a healthy social consciousness. ‘There was a persistent demand for the removal of social abuses and introduction of social reforms on modern lines.’¹⁹ Of the early English educated youths imbibing western culture who sought to regenerate the Assamese the name of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan is preeminent.

It is regarded that with the new ideas of western education, the new intelligentsia who were the driving force in propagating the ideas of nationalism was at an advantageous position compared to in the period following the Revolt of 1857, than

¹⁷ Ibid. p.60

¹⁸ Gohain(ed.), 2007, p.25

¹⁹ Mazumdar, op.cit. p.95

it was in the earliest part of the 19th century.²⁰ It was the educated elite class, belonging to various linguistic groups, who had infused new ideas of **regional** consciousness among the people of respective areas before they began to think in terms of a larger Indian consciousness. The strength and mobility of Indian nationalism became more and more strong and wider with the emergence and involvement of the 'new classes, off springs of the new economic structure and living under the same state regime.

From the time of establishment of British rule Assam was beginning to keep pace with other provinces of India in education and literary activity. Calcutta was the place from which Assamese student got influence as Calcutta was the premier seat of western education in eastern India. Thus the process of modernizing Assam in thought and culture began. The romantic poets of the *Jonaki* and post- *Jonaki* era were influenced to a great extent by their counterparts in Bengal viz Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Biharilal Chakravarti and Nabin Chandra Sen who were in turn influenced by Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats and others in their approach and attitude, subject and content and also style and diction.²¹

Like Shelley, Chandrakumar Agarwala was also a worshipper of beauty which is evidenced by his poems like *Sundar* (The Beautiful), *Saundarya* (Beauty) where he frankly admits 'Worship of the Beautiful is the play of life.' He also showed the paganism of Keats in such exquisite poems as *Madhuri* (Sweetness) and *Kisori* (The Maiden). His humanitarian and revolutionary spirit also clearly can be visible through his poems.

Another literary giant of Assam was Hemchandra Baruah (1835-96) who with his literary work tried to remove the social abuses from the Assamese society. He wrote for the Assamese pupils the *Adipath* and *Pathmala* at a time when text books were needed mostly. He has been rightly called the Assamese Johnson for his two monumental works– the *Grammar of the Assamese Language* (1856) and *Hem- Kosh* (1900), the earliest standard Anglo-Assamese Dictionary.

Gunabhiram Baruah heralded the dawn of a new era by the publication of the *Assam Buranji* (1880), the earliest comprehensive history of Assam on modern lines. He wrote the first Assamese modern drama *Ram Navami Natak* (1858) on widow

²⁰Misra, Tilottoma., 1987, *Literature and Society in Assam*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, p.144

²¹ Goswami, op.cit. p.83

remarriage. Anandaram Baruah (1850-91) was a leading Sanskrit scholar. Chandrakumar Agarwala (1867-1938), Lakshminath Bezbaruah (1868-1938) and Hemchandra Goswami (1872-1928) were the trinity of Jonaki era.

Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya (1854-1936) was the literary prophet of patriotism and nationalism. His intense patriotism found fluent expression in his poetical works *Chintanal* (1890), and *Chintatarangini* (1933). He also wrote about Assam's glorious past and appealed to the Assamese people to break away the shackles of bondage and come forward to create a new and beautiful Assam, a province which would make progress in every sphere. Satyanath Borah (1860-1925) was another great master of Assamese prose. Rajanikanta Bordoloi (1867-1939) is regarded as the founder of Assamese novel in general and historical novel in particular. His novels were mostly on the models of those of Walter Scott and Bankim Chandra of Bengal. His famous historical novels are *Manomati* (1900), *Dandua- Droh* (1909) etc. Padmanath Gohain Baruah (1871-1946) wrote school books named *Nitisiksa*, *Bhugol Darpan* and Assam Buranji. His dramas on historical themes were *Bhanumati*, *Gadadhar*, *Jaymati* etc. Benudhar Rajkhowa (1872-1956) devoted himself thoroughly for the development of Assamese literature. His monumental work is his *Asamiya Khanda Bakya Kosh* or the Dictionary of Assamese phrases and idioms explained in Assamese and English.

Ambikagiri Raichoudhury (1885-1967), a fiery writer also known as *Biplobi Kavi* (revolutionary poet), emerged as a crusader against social inequalities, oppression and exploitation that pervaded the Assamese society. Some of his poems were *Tumi* (1915), *Bina* (1916). He also played active role in the Non-cooperation Movement. He composed a number of patriotic songs which were later translated into English. Throughout his life he fought to regenerate the Assamese society and place it on a firm footing by re-asserting the identity of the Assamese people. His other poems were *Sthapon Kor*, *Sthapon Kar* (1958), *Bedonar Ulka* (1964), *Aji Bondo ki chandere*.

Undoubtedly, the impact of Bengal on the life and culture of the Assamese people was considerable. The process which began since the closing years of the Ahom rule continued without any break till the close of the nineteenth century. Stress was laid initially on unfolding of the rich heritage of the past by the collection and publication of materials, literary or otherwise lying scattered and uncared for in different parts of the province. The process begun by Nathan Brown and he was followed up by

Chandrakumar Agarwala, Kaliram Medhi and several others. Through the writings in *Assam Bandhu*, *Jonaki*, *Bijuli*, *Bahi* the Assamese intelligentsia threw light on the aspects of the history and culture of Assam.

Accordingly, the progressive winds coming from the west also now entered Assam through Bengal, which thereby enabled the region to emerge from the physical and cultural isolation. In many Assamese writings of the nineteenth and twentieth century Calcutta was reflected as the wonder and dazzle place.²² The zeal of nationalism in the nineteenth century's Bengal inspired the hearts of many Assamese intellectuals then living in Calcutta. The impact of Bengal on the life and culture of the Assamese was also not small. In spite of their animosity against linguistic domination, the intelligentsia was not slow in adopting Bengali dress, customs, usages and even food habits. Assamese students studying in Calcutta adopted Bengali dresses and the ladies from progressive families started wearing saris.²³ Musician, drummers, dancers began to add attraction to the festivals and marriage ceremonies of the well to do families.²⁴ Bengali influence can be noticed even in Assamese music and dramas.²⁵ The inspiring public speeches of the Bengali nationalist leaders had a powerful impact on the sensitive young minds of the Assamese students in Calcutta.²⁶ Such consciousness was elementary for the birth of a modern nationality, not on individual basis but collectively. The impact of the west replaced the blind faith on age long beliefs, customs and conventions by a spirit of rationalism. Orthodoxy though continued, but its rigidity gradually relaxed.²⁷

Meanwhile, the western education and ideas had brought about though slowly but profound changes in every aspect of Assamese life. Impact of the West was felt at first in Bengal, especially in Calcutta which spread into the adjoining provinces. The English literature also exercised considerable influence on the Assamese intelligentsia. The English educated youths not only adopted western ideas but also dress customs and manners. During the process of transition some English educated youths were carried

²²Bezbaruah, Lakshminath., 2013, *Mor Jiwan Sonwaran*, Guwahati, p.97

²³The Mau, *Bangalle Baboo*, 3rd Issue, Feb. 1887, p.127

²⁴Barpujari, H.K., op.cit. p.272

²⁵Gohain(ed.), op.cit, p.12

²⁶ Poddar, Arabinda., 1970, *Renaissance in Bengal: Quests and Confrontations 1800-1860*, Simla, Pp.144-45

²⁷Barpujari, H.K., op. cit. p.128

away in Assam the strong currents of western culture. They became Anglicized and adopted not only western ideas but also dresses, customs and manners.

Since his return from Calcutta in 1845, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan used trousers, hat and shoes whenever he visited Europeans or went for a walk. Even an orthodox family like that of Dinanath Bezbaruah, Lakshminath Bezbaruah the leading figure of Assamese literatures had to hatch at the new hair- cut ignoring time honoured customs of keeping a pig tail. Lakshminath frankly admitted in his autobiography that he dressed and behaved like a European and ignoring time honored customs of keeping a pig-tail, he connive at the new hair- cut.²⁸ However inspite of westernization they were not entirely allergic to indigenious customs and usages. Moreover the changes were confined to a limited number of families in the urban areas while in the interior the common man continued to follow the same customs.²⁹

However the enlarged province had distinct geographical and cultural divisions and the emerging middle class had to champion the socio- economic and cultural interests of the Assamese people. The British also followed a levelling policy, abolished discriminatory path and slave systems, and thus narrowed down the gap between high and low castes. Therefore, though orthodoxy could not be removed out completely but its rigidity was reduced to a great extent. As Gunnar Myrdal has pointed out that whenever education is considered from the point of view of development, its purpose must be to rationalize or modernize attitude as well to impart knowledge and skills.³⁰ Partha Chatterjee also pointed out that under adverse colonial conditions patriotic consciousness developed which would often lead to an ‘elitism of the intelligentsia’ and they rooted in the vision of a radical restoration of national culture.³¹ The western educated intellectuals were gradually developed by the national awareness and inspired to get organized in order to assert their identity. The adaptation of modern democratic ideas of the west by many nationalist leaders, with the help of modern education encouraged them to give the national movement a democratic form and aim. It also visualized for a free India, representative institutions based on democratic principles.

²⁸Bezbaruah, 2013, op. cit. p.108

²⁹Ibid. Pp. 109-110

³⁰ Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama*, p. 313

³¹Chatterjee, Partha., 1986, *Nationalist thought and the Colonial World*, p.79

Thus modern education, directly or indirectly gave a democratic direction to Indian nationalism.³²

One of the central issues raised by Nairn's analysis is the social composition of the ideological movement of nationalism. Some viewed nationalism as specifically a movement of the intellectuals, or more broadly, the intelligentsia.³³ They occupy a pivotal role in analyses of Ernest Gellner, Anthony D. Smith. According to them most nationalisms are led by intellectuals. Intellectuals furnish the basic definitions and characterisations of the nation. If it would scrutinise the origins and early development of nationalisms in central and Eastern Europe, North Africa, India, China and The Arab Middle East to see how intellectuals and professionals have acted as the midwives of the movements.³⁴

All modern political and social movements require well educated leaders if they are to make any impact on a world in which secular education, communications and rational bureaucracy have become the hallmarks of modernity.³⁵

Beyond the immediate needs of propaganda, advocacy and communications, the intellectuals and intelligentsia are the only strata with an abiding interest in the very idea of the nation. Only they can provide the social and cultural links with other strata which are necessary for the ideal of the nation to be translated into a practical programme with a popular following.³⁶

It is stated that from 1853CE., with the submission of the memorials to A.J. Moffat Mills (who had come to enquire into the condition of the province and to recommend) by Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829- 1859), the modern political consciousness can be visible in the Brahmaputra valley.³⁷ The new, English-educated, emerging middle class that were the product of the colonial society, foremost among them was the harbinger of the new age - Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. He was both a pioneer and a product of the modern age of enlightenment. Other intellectuals like Gunabhiram Barua, Hemchandra Goswami and many others had

³²Desai, A.R., op. cit. p.147

³³ Smith, Anthony D., 1998, *Nationalism and Modernism*, Routledge, London, P.55

³⁴ Ibid, P56

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid., P.57

³⁷Guha, Amalendu., *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, Tulika Prakashan, p.16

contributed a lot in the social formation of the Assamese society with their intellectual thinking.

Haribilash Agarwala in his text though referred to the Revolt of 1857 in Assam and the assassination of Maniram Dewan and his associates, he wrote that Assam was not affected by the nationalist flavour of 1857.³⁸ Actually, this was a period of emerging **Assamese linguistic nationalism** against Bengali domination. The importance of the movement for the distinctive identity of the Assamese people bears comparison with other famous movements in different parts of the country and the world at large, for instance the Irish freedom movement which was deeply rooted in the love for the national language.³⁹

Therefore, the Assamese elites, very few in numbers, were more interested to get themselves familiar with the western education and new ideas of Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century so that they could be formed into a class to fight against their opponents. It is regarded that with the new ideas of western education, the new intelligentsia who were the driving force in propagating the ideas of nationalism was at an advantageous position compared to in the period following the Revolt of 1857, than it was in the earliest part of the nineteenth century.⁴⁰

The British, when placed Assam under the Bengal presidency (1826 to 1873 CE) for political and economic suitability, it made Calcutta administrative headquarters of both Bengal and Assam. The people from neighbouring province of Bengal not only made the revenue and judicial departments their sole preserve, but their services became equally indispensable to the newly started British Government schools for dearth of local teachers specially to impart instructions in Bengali which had been made the medium of instruction.

Thus, together with the loss of political independence, Assam also lost the right to its own language. Bengali became the official language (1836- 1873 CE) adopted by the British for the administration of the Bengal Presidency and as it was the mother tongue of the Bengali clerks employed by the British in Assam, it was considered economically most beneficial by the British rulers to enforce Bengali as the medium of

³⁸ Agarwala, Haribilash, 1967, op. cit. p67

³⁹ Bora, Shila., *The Assam Chatra Sanmilan and nation- building(1916-30)*, Udayan Misra(ed.), Nation Building and Development, p.25

⁴⁰ Misra, op. cit. p.144

instruction in the vernacular schools of Assam. The autobiography of Haribilash Agarwala which emphasized on the growth of western education in Assam, had also informed that in 1856 there was only one English school in Sibsagar and the rest of the modern schools were run in Bengali medium. He has referred the name of such Assamese elites of the period as Ganga Govinda Phukan, Kirtinath Barua, Ruchinath Sarma who received modern western education through Bengali schools.⁴¹

In 1831 also Adam White with James Rae, a Christian missionary founded school at Guwahati where in addition to the existing courses of studies Bengali translation of English works on elementary science formed a part of the curriculum.⁴² In village schools' lessons were imparted generally in Bengali while at the *sadar* schools there were two independent departments- English and Bengali. The exception was in the Mission schools where Assamese was the medium.⁴³ The efforts of the American Baptist Missionaries in the spread of education among the masses and in the establishment of a vernacular press cleared the way for the development of a revitalize Assamese literature.

To promote administrative efficiency and exploit the resources, the British opened tea gardens, developed transport and communication. Bengali clerks, lawyers and doctors were brought in large numbers to Assam and the members of the traditional aristocracy were gradually reduced to insignificance.⁴⁴ However, it was the economic impact than the cultural or linguistic domination which made the Bengalis the eye-sore of the upper classes for whom there was now no other means of livelihood except that of government service. This became a matter of threat for the Assamese people's identity.

It is stated that Maniram Dewan had raised his voice to protest against the British policy of employment of Bengali and Marwari people in the revenue department of Assam such as *Mauzadars* for which a number of respectable Assamese became unemployed.⁴⁵ The Assamese had to wage a regular war to establish the separate identity of their mother tongue.

⁴¹ Agarwala, Haribilash, 1967, op. cit. p29

⁴² Barpujari, A.C. & S.K. Bhuyan(ed.), 1999, *Political History of Assam*, Guwahati, p.105

⁴³ Barpujari(ed),1999, op. cit. p.108

⁴⁴ Goswami, 2008, op. cit., p.60

⁴⁵ Guha,1977, op. cit. p.16

The initial protest against the language policy of the British in Assam came from the educated Assamese elite. It was the educated elite class, who had infused new ideas of regional consciousness among the people of Assam before they began to think in terms of a larger Indian consciousness. Most of the Assamese intellectuals, who developed the group consciousness among the Assamese people in the nineteenth century, were also the spokesmen for the emerging Indian nationalism of the period.⁴⁶ The struggle for freedom was not merely anti-British in character, though it was very much that. Her bringer among them was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan championed the cause of the Assamese language and tried to convince the British of its (Assamese language) separate identity. Assamese language developed out of the Sanskrit language as early as in the 7th Century A.D. Its direct ancestor, nowever is Magadhi Apabhramsa, parent of Modern Bengali language.⁴⁷ Apart from his contribution to early nationalist ideology, Dhekial Phukan also gave flue to Assamese national pride. He was the product of an age in which the concept of Indian nationalism was yet in beginning. He reminded the government that the Assamese were in no way inferior in their intellectual capacities to any other Indian nation.⁴⁸ He was an ardent advocate of western education but at the same time he stress on the necessity of raising the standard of existing English schools and protest against the imposition of Bengali as the medium of instruction in the schools and pleaded for its replacement by Assamese language.

For more than ten years after the annexation of the province the Assamese was the language of the courts. The imposition of an alien language in place of the local vernacular came as a bar to the Assamese people and public opinion on the issue found expression through the writings of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and of the missionaries. Dhekial Phukan expressed that “Bengali bears no closer resemblance to the Assamese than it does to the Uria language and if the Courts of Orissa be allowed the privilege of using the language of the country then why the same benefit should have been not given to the Assamese.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Chandra, Sudhir., *Regional Consciousness in 19th Century India: A priliminary note*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol- VII, 1982, p.19

⁴⁷ Barua, Birinchi Kumar., 1964, *History of Assamese Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, Jayasree Press, Kolkata, P.1

⁴⁸ Mills, op. cit. p.5

⁴⁹ Phukan, A.D., *Observations on the administration of the Province of Assam*

The strongest support for Assamese came from the **Christian missionaries**. At this critical moment, the American Baptist Mission came and helped in rescuing the eternal mother tongue of the Assamese people. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was strongly supported by the American Baptist Missionaries who not only developed the Assamese language by printing several texts but also published the first Assamese journal- *Orunodoi* which was published from the American Baptist Mission Press at Sibsagar in 1846. American Baptist Missionaries established the first printing press in Assam in 1840A.D. From this press they issued not only numerous vernacular publications connected with the Propagation of the Gospel, but also the magazine *Orunodoi*. *Orunodoi* was discontinued in 1882 when the Mission was sold.⁵⁰ They not only supported Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59) and others in urging the government to restore Assamese to its rightful place as the language of the court and schools in Assam but also prepared the ground by producing a number of Assamese works on various subjects. Bronson remarked: “Assamese is the language usually spoken by the entire population of the Brahmaputra valley, and in most cases it is the only medium of intercourse with the bordering hill tribes. There is nothing which would show that Assamese race and their language have not existed in the valley from time immemorial and it is surprising that during the change of rulers, the oppression and misrule in which they have been subjected there are no trace of any material change in their language.” Bronson also wrote about the beauty of the Assamese language which had distinct characteristics.⁵¹

Among the missionaries **Nathan Brown** made noteworthy contributions towards the development of Assamese language and literature. Bronson, Brown and Nidhi Levi, a Hindu converts all they contributed in the foundation of the modern Assamese language. Another missionary A.H. Danforth wrote about the adverse effect of the use of Bengali in educational institutions of the province.⁵² The missionaries have introduced a new note into Assamese literature. It is a note hitherto unknown not only to Assamese literature but to other Indian literatures as well. This note belonged to the English literature which was brought from far across by the missionaries and taught to

⁵⁰ *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam* by E.A. Gait, Shillong, 1897, Appendix C, P.249

⁵¹ Goswami, 2008, op. cit., p.64

⁵² *Ibid.* p.65

the Indian people. It has now become the connecting link between the western and eastern civilization.

The Christian missionaries in Assam, particularly Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson were able to appreciate the racy qualities of pure Assamese and through their journal the *Orunodoi* and their translations of the Bible and other works into Assamese they sought to rehabilitate Assamese while it was neglected in the school and law courts. The work of the missionaries in Assam was patronized by the East India Company from the very beginning. Though their prime objective was spreading Christianity but their mouth piece *Orunodoi* found support among a large section of the Assamese society. The missionaries had realized that for the Assamese people, the most direct and successful medium in which the blessings of Science and true Religion could be conveyed was their own mother tongue.

The printing **press** brought by the missionaries was set up at Sibsagar. The press published for the first time a few Assamese books which was a landmark in the history of Assamese literature. The authorities in Calcutta, however, turned a deaf ear to this very vital issue under the impression that Assamese was only patois of the Bengali language and had no literature of its own.⁵³

When Mills came to Assam in 1853 to report on the administration of the province, he was highly impressed by the arguments in favour of Assamese and commented that "Assamese is described by Brown, the best scholar in the province, as a beautiful, simple language differing in more respects from than agreeing with the Bengali."

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan had his contribution towards the cause of the **restoration** of the Assamese language to its rightful place in local schools and courts. He urged the government to recognize the Assamese language and prohibit the opium habit of the people. In 1855 Anandaram Dhekial Phukan in his pamphlet pointed out that out of 287 words in an Assamese passage, 112 were entirely different from Bengali, 98 derived from Sanskrit and only 77 had some resemblance with the Bengali language. The appendix at the end consisting of sixty- two religious and over forty dramatic words proved beyond doubt that Assamese had a literature of their own.⁵⁴

⁵³Neog, D., *New Light on the History of Assamese Literature*, p347

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.350

He started the new literary movement in Assam. He was a reformer and a patriot at the same time for which he had been rightly called as the ‘Raja Ram Mohan Roy of Assam’.

In the early part of 1863 James Murray who was appointed the Inspector of Schools after Robinson sent a letter to the Education Council pointing out that Bengali was a totally different language and the people of this region were not at all inclined towards it.⁵⁵

The growth and development of the **press** or journalism in Assam was the outcome of the introduction of the printing press in the province in the forties of the nineteenth century. However, until the seventies of the nineteenth century no powerful press or any political organisation worth the name emerged in Assam proper which could voice the public opinion and bring home to the government the needs and aspirations of the people. Vernacular **papers** played a significant role in arousing public opinion and explaining the views on political, social and economic matters relating to Assam.

The *Orunodoi* focused on problems of common concern to the people and gave expression to their urge to restore Assamese language. The tone of the *Orunodoi* generally reflected a bias towards religion and it hardly published anything which might cause displeasure to the government even on matters affecting the interests of the *ryots*. For fear of incurring displeasure of the government the *Orunodoi* toyed with the idea that the British rule was a blessing to the Assamese and hardly published anything against the unjust measures of the government to the detriment of the interest of the people. There was hardly ever any mention of the political affairs of Assam. The *Orunodoi* set a new trend in Assamese literature which may be termed as a secular one.⁵⁶ Despite their religious views and prejudices, however, the American Baptists were generally sincere in their efforts to propound liberal and rational ideas of the west amongst the Assamese people. The collection and publication of the old *Buranjis* of Assam was a part of the missionary effort for the dissemination of ‘useful knowledge’ which was considered necessary for modern education.

⁵⁵Goswami, op. cit. p.65

⁵⁶The *Orunodoi*, June, 1853

Besides acting as a conveyer of news, the *Orunodoi* also served several other important functions in the socio- cultural life of Assam in the mid- nineteenth century. In many respects this journal may be considered as a pioneer in the field of mass education in Assam. It is because of this journal that for the first time an ordinary reader could view a written work critically and use his own discretion in accepting or rejecting its contents. The missionaries encouraged the growth of the spirit of enquiry among the people by publishing letters and comments sent by the readers of the *Orunodoi*. The fact that the journal was read enthusiastically by a large section of the Assamese people mostly those of whom were semi- literate proved that the paper received from remote corners of Assam. The British government was also aware of the role played by the Baptists in giving the natives ‘correct ideas of the English government.’⁵⁷

During the second half of the nineteenth century several journals of transitory life span were published in Assam. The second Assamese monthly the ‘*Assam Bilasini*’ was published from Majuli in 1870-71. The *Assam Bilasini* was a monthly vernacular paper issued in 1871, from Dharmaprakash Press of the Majuli in Sibsagar. It was mainly a religious paper and continued only a few items of general information. The paper continued for twelve years and ceased to exist in 1883A.D.⁵⁸

The weekly *Assam Mihir* (1872) and the *Assam Darpan* (1874) went out of circulation within a year. The Anglo- Assamese weekly the *Assam News* (1882), the first weekly to be published from Guwahati under the able editorship of Hemchandra Baruah raised the standard of journalism in Assam by circulating not only useful knowledge and information but also discussing problems of common interest with the object of creating a strong public opinion. The *Assam Bandhu* edited by Gunabhiram Baruah appeared in 1885 as a monthly journal from Nagaon. All sorts of problems were discussed in the *Assam Bandhu*. Bold opinion was also given regarding the need of women’s education. The *Mou* was propertied by Bolinarayan Bora and it was edited by Harinarayan Baruah.⁵⁹

On the other hand papers like *Som Prakash* continued to draw the attention of the government to vital matters attracting the interest of the people of Assam. In a

⁵⁷ Butler, J., *Travels and adventure in the Province of Assam*

⁵⁸ *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam* by E.A. Gait, Shillong, 1897, Appendix C, P.250

⁵⁹ Goswami, op. cit. p.64

number of its issues the paper pleaded for the need of administrative changes for the development of the province and also focused on important issues like reassessment of land revenue affecting the interest of the common man.

In keeping with the general trend of the renaissance spirit in Europe, the *Orunodoi* upheld the cause of modern scientific knowledge against ignorance and superstition. It was however not alone carried on by the missionaries but also the enlightened Assamese supported it that had got the ideas of Bengal renaissance.

Every literary movement, practically a worldwide phenomenon, received its life and momentum in the pages of contemporary journals. Every journal of every language had a galaxy of creative writers attached to it. These are supplement and complement to one another. Assamese literature developed and many journals like *Jonaki*, *Bijuli* etc. published which resulted in the creation of a literary climate. The national self-consciousness among the Assamese intelligentsia also led to the formation of many organizations like *Asomiya Bhasha Unnati sadhini*, *Asom chatra Sanmilan* in the early part of the 20th century. These organizations though primarily formed as a cultural organizations but it helped in developing consciousness among the Assamese intelligentsia and which later on played vital role in the national movement. Padmanath Gohain Baruah once declared that ‘political discussion should not remain outside the pale of student organisations.’ Intellectuals like Gunabhiram Barua, Hemchandra Goswami and many others had contributed a lot in the social formation of the Assamese society with their intellectual thinking.

Ultimately Assamese succeeded in exerting the necessary influence on the British government to revise its earlier language policy in Assam. Later on, the Assamese language became acknowledged by the British government as a distinct and separate identity, which is enriched by a literature of great antiquity, variation and vigour. It is also argued that the growing importance of Assam in the last decades of the nineteenth century as a principal tea- growing region probably acted as a further spur on the government to appease the Assamese intelligentsia and concede to their demands. In 1873 Assamese language was restored as the medium of instruction in the court and schools.⁶⁰

⁶⁰Ibid. p65

It is said that it is the credit of the Assamese people who inspite of Assamese being much closer to Bengali than Maithali or Magadhi or Bhojpuri or garhwali was to Hindi, there was a patriotic feeling for their language and protests against the use of Bengali and suppression of Assamese started almost immediately after the introduction of Bengali in Assam (1837).

However it is remarked that imperialist policy in Assam was to suppress the local language and set up artificial boundaries for the sake of a cheap and simplified administration. This policy affected the local middle class and by promoting difference between them and the immigrants served as an instrument that would help divide and rule and the Assamese chauvinists played into the hands of the colonial rulers.

Guha on the other hand explains that the British introduced Bengali in Assam as they believed that Assamese was merely a dailect of the Bengali language. It is true that under the impact of the French Revolution and earlier the English Revolution the British, when they started ruling India, introduced some elements of freedom of press, freedom of speech etc. But as colonialism proceeded, more and more efforts were made to curb them.

However, due to the strong roots in the feudal attitude, the middle class that emerged during the colonial period of Assam appeared to be loyal, compromising and obedient to the ruling class.⁶¹It was their belief right from the days of Haliram Dhekial Phukan to Lakshminath Bezbaruah that the country under the British rule made much progress and improvement and they wanted therefore the continuation of the British rule.⁶² Devabrata Sarma has critically analyzed that the Assamese intellectuals like Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Rajanikanta Bardaloi, Nilmoni Phukan and others though were nationalist, yet were very hesitant to refuse the British rule publicly. In the district Gazetters Report B.C. Allen argued that both Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Ganga Govinda Phukan were the most trusted and loyal government officials amongst the emerging Assamese middle class in the middle of the Nineteenth century.⁶³

⁶¹ Kalita, Ramesh Ch., 2011, *Situating Assamese Middle Class the Colonial Period*, Guwahati, Bhabani Printers, p.45

⁶² Kalita, op. cit. p.23

⁶³ Allen, 1905

In 1853A.D. Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan also wrote to Mr. Moffatt Mills that he acknowledged with feelings of gratitude, that the expectations which the Assamese had formed of the happy and beneficial results of the Government of England.⁶⁴

Surprisingly, the modern intellectuals adopted in the beginning a very positive approach towards colonial rule. They early realized the fact that India had come under the rule of the most advanced country in the world. They hoped that contact with Britain even though in a subordinate position, would help transform Assam also in Britain's image. Economically, they grasped the importance of the industrial revolution and were convinced that India as well as Assam with its immense natural and human resources would soon become a major industrial power. Politically, they were enthralled by the heady concepts of popular sovereignty, of democracy, of the freedom of the press. However, not industrialization but deindustrialization followed the consolidation of British rule. In place of a modern capitalist economy arose the colonial economy. The very period of the development of industrial capitalism in Britain witnessed the underdevelopment of India.

First to become aware of this contradiction were the middle- class and lower middle-class people. The absence of industrialization and the slow pace of the development of social and cultural facilities meant that the area of employment of these social classes was extremely and increasingly restricted. They could see that their economic and social salvation was tied up with the removal of the colonial incubus.⁶⁵

The Assamese elite had full faith on the justice and liberalism of the Englishmen and they regard some of the early administrators as great benefactors of Assam and the Assamese people. They therefore expressed their loyalty through articles also. They only wanted a good government which would improve the countrymen economically, culturally and politically. Their immediate objectives were, therefore, lowering of tax, replacement of Assamese for Bengali in courts and schools, opportunities of higher education and above all larger employment of the Assamese in the public offices and to attain those they carried on peaceful constitutional agitation through prayers, petitions, memorials and public organizations.

⁶⁴ Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, P.52

⁶⁵ Chandra, Bipan., Essays on Indian Nationalism, p. 47

The middle class played a compromising role because it had a stake in the British rule and was therefore not ready to oppose it to the extent that the peasants were ready to do. Thus after 1893, the peasant dominated *rāj- mels* were gradually replaced by the middle class dominated *ryot sabhas*.⁶⁶ Indian intellectuals such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Henry Derozio, Gopal Hari Deshmukh and Dadabhai Naoroji raised their voices against the destruction of Indian handicrafts, high land revenue demand, economic exploitation and the drain of wealth from India and the humiliation of political domination and racial discrimination. But they still, till about 1860, supported colonial rule as they expected it to rebuild India as a spit economic image of the metropolis.

The early middle class people's minds were free from the thought of freedom and independence and this same condition was prevailed in other parts of the country.⁶⁷ During the period of the peasant movements of 1836-94 the Middle class remained with the British Raj being itself as a part in the system of colonial exploitation. They on the other hand took **language as a tool** for their nationalistic propagations but they did not dare to write against the British Government. Prasenjit Choudhury viewed that in the nineteenth century there were few nationalists among the educated class.⁶⁸

Growing contact with western ideas coming through Bengal and the aspirations of the emerging Assamese middle classes for a greater share of jobs under the British led to the growth of a new sense of national awareness among the Assamese people. The increasing unemployment problem among the educated Assamese because of the appointment of a large number of non- Assamese into the government services and also the imposition of Bengali as the only recognized language during 1836-1873 CE, mutual territorial claims of the two neighbouring provinces, competition for jobs etc., were responsible for the genesis of nationalist feelings among the Assamese people. One of the major demands of the situation was the identification of the Assamese as Assamese and this identification could be primarily done only through the **attribution of a language** to them to project the unique and separate identity of themselves against others which grew regional consciousness among them. These were the main issues of

⁶⁶Goswami, op. cit. p.76

⁶⁷ Kalita, op. cit. p.35

⁶⁸Choudhury, Prasenjit., *Unyois Satika samaj Aru Sahitya*, p.56

writings during the second half of 19th century's intellectual thinking and therefore they were by and large the supporters of the British Raj.⁶⁹

Assamese became conscious about their own identity. Such consciousness was elementary for the birth of a modern **nationality**. This consciousness emerged as a result of the coercive imposition of an alien language on the Assamese. Though different social classes were affected differently but the sentiment of all the classes was the same. The sentiment that Assamese were not allowed using their own language which caused them immense hardship and hurt their sentiment. While western education inspired the intellectuals, the **national awareness** that gradually developed among the educated and enlightened sections of the people inspired them to get organized in order to assert their identity.

It is a common view though a wrong one, that it was British colonialism which introduced and made Indian people familiar with democracy and civil liberties. If that had democracy from the beginning, East Africa should also have had democracy from the beginning and Pakistan and Bangladesh should have had democracy and civil liberties. Again, one consequence of colonialism was the economic and political unification of the country. Common administration, laws and judicial structure and common system of education further contributed to the country's unification. The spread of modern ideas created a new intelligentsia imbued with a modern democratic, rational and national outlook. The rise of a powerful press played an important role in this respect. Politically, the existence of the common colonial ruler, which was, as we shall see, increasingly seen as a common enemy, was decisive.

This consciousness brought the feelings of various conflicting classes together making the **language** a supra class entity. Thus there emerged a collective linguistic patriotism among the Assamese people. The Assamese elites like the moderate Congressmen were the products of the age and therefore their ideas and methods were conditioned by the circumstances in which they were placed. The horrors of the Burmese invasions and the depredations of the neighbouring hill tribes were still fresh in their minds to think of any other rule than the British which alone stood for peace and order.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Podder, op. cit. p. 144

⁷⁰ Bhuyan(ed.), 1999, op. cit. p.128

Assamese patriotic literature, whether poetry, drama or fiction written during the last decades of the 19th century and the initial period of the 20th was mainly concerned with Assam or the eastern region of which Assam formed a major part. Lakshminath Bezbaruah, considered to be the greatest modern Assamese writer, wrote his famous song *Mor Desh* (my country) in 1940 which later became Assam's *jatiya Sangeet* (national song) his idea of mother-land was Assam only. It was not until 1921 when Mahatma Gandhi first visited Assam followed by the formation of a Pradesh Congress Committee that a nationalist upsurge of all India nature began to agitate the minds of the people of this part of the country.

After the restoration of Assamese as a recognized language, the Assamese intelligentsia became increasingly self-confident and self-expression through organized literary and political activities. Anandaram's work was carried on by Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua the confirmed humanist and young social reformers. A new generation of the Assamese literary man like Lakshminath Bezbarua, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Padmanath Gohain Barua, Hemchandra Goswami, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya and many others infused Assamese literature with the liberalism of the west and the glorious traditions of Assam's past and in twentieth century's literature, the ideal theme was nationalism.⁷¹ The new wave of romanticism emphasized amongst others love of nature, romantic love, and adoration of beauty, humanism, sympathy for common place, glorification of the past, patriotism and love of the country. Renaissance in Assamese literature which had its beginning with the American Baptists reached its culmination in the *Jonaki* Age.

Lakshminath Bezbaruah makes known as a patriot in his poems and songs- *Mor Desh*, *Bin Baragi* and *Amar Janmabhumi*. In his poetical works Ambikagiri Raychoudhury (1885-1967) not only emerges as a fighter for country's freedom but a crusader against social inequalities, oppression, exploitation, meanness, selfishness that contained the social life of the Assamese. He developed the standard of revolt in his poem *Moi Viplovi Moi tandavi* (I am a rebel, I am a revolutionary). His *Satadhar*, a revolutionary booklet was banned soon after a few copies of it were circulated while his dramatical work *Bandini Bharat* was seized by the police before it was sent to the

⁷¹ Devi, Archana., *Historical Women Characters in Assam Sandhya: Understanding their Historicity*, NEIHA, p.35

press.⁷² In his *Agnimantra*, Prasannalal Choudhury also carried forward revolution and in the words of Hem Baruah, “brightens the dying sparks of Ambikagiri Ray Choudhury with a passion.”⁷³

The Assamese intelligentsia well represented the province and with their true spirit helped in the formation of the Assamese society in every sphere. Most of the Assamese intellectuals, who developed the group consciousness among the Assamese people in the nineteenth century, were also the spokesmen for the emerging Indian nationalism of the period.⁷⁴ The Assamese people first developed a **provincial outlook** and motivated for the fulfilment of regional aspirations as like other parts of India. As till then very few were aware that they belonged to the same nation as men from Maharashtra and the people of central India or other province. Therefore the sentiment of regional patriotism had put together to the pan- Indian in the processes of nationalist awakening. They stressed on a regional identity and fought for the protection of regional interests which witnessed the propagation of new ideas, inspiring the growth of a modern political consciousness. It led to the initial formations of institutions for the growing national aspirations among the different sections of the people of Assam. They though cannot be called as nationalist in modern terms but they were deeply patriotic. For instance, even the Orunodoi hardly published anything offensive to the Government because of the fear of earning displeasure of the Government even on matters affecting the interests of the *ryots*. Its tone was generally religious and intolerant.⁷⁵

A band of educated young men were also attracted towards modern business in the last quarter of the nineteenth century which no doubt contributed in the eventual bourgeoisie formation in the Assamese society. In that period educated classes grew as well as Indian industries also rise and the industrial bourgeoisie came into existence which were later became the organizer of the national movement. Most of these businessmen were closely associated with the literary and political activities of their day and integrally connected with the rural peasant community at large and they made a united front with the proprietary peasants against the rulers on all common issues. The bourgeoisie stratum that was emerging was enlightened as well as enterprising, and it provided leadership to the Assamese society in every field.

⁷² Bezbaruah, op. cit. p.45

⁷³ Bhuyan, 1999, op. cit. p.128

⁷⁴ Chandra, Saidur., op. cit.

⁷⁵ Bezbaruah, op. cit. p. 78

Finally, the intelligentsia took the initiative in the formation of **regional organizations** for the socio- economic and cultural development of the province and heralded an era of reawakening. The socio- political consciousness of the people found expression through the regional organizations like the *raij- mels*, Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha and protested against the unjustified and harsh imposition of duties and tolls. The Phulaguri Uprising which was basically a peasant uprising, had received the support and sympathy of all other sections of the people like the educated and the well-to-do middle class. They had a very crucial links with the rural life of Assam. This was because directly or indirectly the Assamese middle class had links with the agrarian sector. The middle class had their roots in the *mauzadar* families and the *satra* institution, and was a creation of the British *raj*, as many Assamese well-to-do persons of the nineteenth century had enough of resources to afford a western education for their sons and to help to take advantage of the avenues of employment which British rule had opened up in Assam.⁷⁶

The involvement of Maniram Dewan in the Revolt of 1857C.E., and of the intellectuals in the modernist and deliberately collaborationist politics of the last quarter of the nineteenth century indicate Assam's early identification with the then **mainstream of Indian nationalism**. It was in the wake of these local associations that the Assamese people began to act in terms of a valley- wide political organization- the Assam Association. A new phase of constitutional agitation in Assam was ushered in thereby. Among the leaders of the new age were Jagannath Barua, Manikchandra Barua, Bholanath Barua, Balinarayan Bora, Kaliprasad Chaliha, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Ghanashyam Barua and many others. There is Beyond that, during the period the Assamese attained the consciousness of modern self-entity in all aspects of literature, art and culture also. This culture was however not inspired by any national spirit which did not exist in that period.⁷⁷

The Assamese peasantry, on the other hand came into conflict with the British Raj because of the increasing land revenue and they were less concerned with the problems of language, culture and employment.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Bhuyan, op. cit. p.150

⁷⁷ Desai, A.R., op. cit. p.20

⁷⁸ Dutta, K.N., 1969, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam*, Pp. 32-36

The early Indian National Congress sessions created an enthusiasm among the Assamese people throughout Assam. As Indian **National Congress** in 1885 was a response of the Indian intellectuals to the new national awakening so also the Assamese people no exception as they reacted similarly. With the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, which was a milestone in the history of the national movement in India, the political consciousness of the Assamese intelligentsia received a definite orientation.

The foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was not merely the handiwork of a few British and Indians but it was also the response of the Indian middle classes which accelerated the process of new national awakening. The Assamese middle classes were also no exception as they responded similarly. State Reorganisation Commission reported that the national movement which achieved India's independence was built up by harnessing the forces of regionalism.⁷⁹

The growing consciousness of the Assamese people showed itself clearly as Jagannath Baruah in his address of the welcome speech to Curzon at Tezpur, he asked for privilege of representation of the Assamese in the Legislative Council of India. The condition of the Assamese ryots was also highlighted and hoped measure would take for the improvement of the position of the peasantry. The rise of **political consciousness** and political integration on modern lines was essentially the products of the western impact. People gradually became politically conscious to ventilate their grievances. Thus the need for establishing political associations and organizations to express people's grievances and sufferings on constitutional lines of agitation through appeals, memorials and public meetings was increased. They started publishing journals and newspapers to serve as vehicles of popular feelings. Some of those organizations were literary and cultural organizations devoted to the advancement of Assamese language, literature and art. Formation of the national mind and rousing of political consciousness were the main achievements of some of these organizations. Journalism in Assamese and English on modern lines also had its birth and newspapers and periodicals which made their appearance contributed their share in developing the national mind.

⁷⁹ Goswami, op. cit. p.137

The intelligentsia not only initiated the national movement, it also led it in all its phases till 1947. In fact, the leadership of the left movement and of the organizations of the peasants and workers was also provided by the intelligentsia. Nor was this accidental, historically it is the intelligentsia which has provided the initial leadership and acted as the motive force in bringing about systemic changes all over the world. In India it was the intelligentsia which made a scientific analysis of the basic character of colonialism and evolved viable strategies and tactics as well as the organizational structures necessary for the overthrow of colonialism.

The point is that our movement never denigrated the diversity of the nation and that is why the linguistic diversity was from the very beginning embraced and so was the notion of linguistic provinces, of each language coming into its own and that administration, education, culture be based on the languages of the people. This was accepted from the beginning of the century.⁸⁰

On the other hand, towards the period of 1914-18 CE, there started to emerge a new thinking among the Youngers against the elders of the middle class people. There emerged a new leadership comprising the youths of the valley and they, with the help of a section of the middle class, led the political movements in Assam against imperialism. There was a change in the pattern of attitudes among the intelligentsia towards the British imperialism.⁸¹ And thus the middle class leadership of the tea planting class came to be challenged for the first time for the cause of *swaraj* of the country.⁸² ‘The intellectual attitudes in the years were marked on the one hand by hatred to the blind anglophiles of the earlier years and on the other by a rationalism which refused to yield to the forces of religious orthodox. This dual character of the new generation of intellectuals led to the development of a kind of ‘cultural nationalism’ that made them turn against the **imperialism**.’⁸³

Jyotiprasad Agarwala was born in 1903 C.E., a period of transition which showed a new era in every aspect of Assam. His life span is a time of transitions of Assamese society to a modern era which is marked by the nineteenth century. Assamese renaissance had its rays in Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s life and being a product of early

⁸⁰(Chandra B. , p. 35)

⁸¹(Misra, 1987, p. 183)

⁸²(Kalita, 2011, p. 21)

⁸³(Misra, 1987, p. 191)

twentyth century, his social ideas were remolded with the changing needs of the Assamese society with a strong faith in western education and rationalist thinking. In such an atmosphere Jyotiprasad Agarwala had stepped forward from his nineteenth century predecessors locating the central theme of his intellectual thinking on humanity, culture and nation. He developed a deep sense of humanity and realized the fundamental unity of human culture. He linked his vision of a beautiful and humane world with peoples' striving to free themselves from injustice, oppression and subjugation. In which time a man follow the real sense of nationalism and devoted to it, the Assamese intelligentsia except their language knows nothing about nationalism.

He added a new colour and a new dimension to his nationalist feelings by adopted Assamese culture as a major tool to mobilize the Assamese masses. An important element in Jyotiprasad Agarwala's political ideology is his association of politics with culture. Jyotiprasad before leaving for England had been associated with the leading youth organisation of Assam, The Asom Chatra Sanmilian. In its 1929's session at Tezpur under the presidentship of Tarun Ram Phukan, Jyotiprasad compose lyrics especially for that session.

The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) had been formed in 1948 A.D. at an all India level. It was as association of intellectuals, musicians, artists and film-personalities with the objective of bringing about social transformation through a cultural revival. This, precisely being Jyotiprasad's objective, he harbored a strong affinity towards the ideals of the movement. The IPTA itself came to him, knowing his symbolic value request him to become the President of The Assam branch. As he could not travel, the head office of the IPTA was set up at Dibrugarh. People closely associated with the organisation were such as Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Hemanga Biswas, Nagen Kakati etc. aware of Jyotiprasad's symbolic value.

Prasenjit Choudhury argued that the image of Jyotiprasad Agarwala has been portrayaed by the modern writers by placing him on a pedestal on the basis of his ideas about nationalism. Infact, Jyotiprasad Agarwala never compromised with his ideology and ethics. He never supported anything which was against his beliefs. As he was not a

supporter of any ideology of political party, he felt culture to be the best way for him to unite with the common people.⁸⁴

His regards for the ancient Indian heritage got expressed in his writings and beliefs and in most of his writings universal human spirit finds place. He represented the new Assamese youth as I am Hindu, I am Muslim, I am new youth. (*Axomiya Dekar Ukti*- the pronouncement of the Assamese Youth). Some of the middle class families sent their youngsters to outside for higher education, inspite of their preconceive notion regarding religion and culture. But Jyotiprasad Agarwala had departed from the mainstream linguistic nationalism and accepted a broader perspective by accepting different cultural traits like folk songs (*lok geet, biya geet*), traditional dance and ballads and poured nationalist flavour in it by composing songs and poems himself. He himself referred the scenario of the contemporary plays of the time in the preface of his play *Sonit Konwari*. He referred the plays of Padmanath Gohain Barua and Lakshminath Bezbarua. According to him Gohain Barua's language was not understandable to most of the audience, while those of Lakshminath Bezbararua were committed playwrights. They were inspired people. Patriotic feelings for their own land people made them passionate playwrights. But those passions often overpowered their commitment to the stage. However, he argued that the patriotism of *Sonit Konwari* does not lay in its presentation. During the period Assamese theatres were almost addicted to Bengali yatras. Such plays were less Assamese and more non- Assamese. Music played and songs sung therein had nothing Assamese in them. Jyotiprasad wanted to make his play hundred percent Assamese. Story content has the local theme, although drawn on Bhagawat purana. But the music content is pure Assamese, drawn on the folk treasures of the Assamese society.⁸⁵

Jyotiprasad was also a scion of the romantic movement of the time. The poetry during his time was essentially romantic. It was an age of Chandrakumar Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Jotindranath Duara, Ganesh Gogoi, Raghunath Choudhury and other romantics. The influence of Chandrakumar Agarwala, his uncle was profound on the poetic sensibility off him.⁸⁶ Jyotiprasad received inspiration from poets like Ganesh Gogoi, Jotindranath Duara, Rabindranath Tagore and Raghunath Choudhury. He

⁸⁴Choudhury, Prasenjit, op. cit. p.146

⁸⁵(Gohain(ed.), 2007)

⁸⁶Jyotiprasad Rachanavali, p.64

acknowledges the larges he received from his predecessors. He wrote four poems on each of these poets and in those poems he declares his love and passion for them.

His best prose writings include three important biographies on Mahatma Gandhi, Lakshminath Bezbaruah and Chandrakumar Agarwala. While writing about Gandhiji Jyotiprasad is passionate and emotional. He bows his head in reverence to this great soul, with an appeal to the Assamese people to rise up and to exploit all the energies latent within them. About Lakshminath Bezbarua Jyotiprasad is equally passionate. His love and respect for Bezbarua was numerous. For him Lakshminath Bezbarua was a saviour of the Assamese society from the onslaught of colonial mindset. After his death he became a living force for the moribund Assamese society, an inspiration for the posterity. He brought hope in Assamese mind at the times of identity crisis. Jyotiprasad called Bezbarua a national dramatist. Bezbarua enlivened the history of Assam and resurrected some of the immortal historical personalities in the pages of his plays. Patriotism in Assamese mind found a sense of direction through his historical characters. This sense of patriotism helped us to search for freedom from the colonial governance. Even as a piece of art play like *Jaymati* created some of the immortal characters. Dalimi is one of such lovable characters. Her depiction was undoubtedly a great creation of Bezbarua. Through her character Bezbarua sought to elevate womanhood to new heights. Sankardeva, the great neo- vaishnavite saint of Assam, was practically confined within the pages of history until Bezbarua came forward to resurrect from oblivion. He interpreted the ideals of the saint to the Assamese society. Thus he created history.

Jyotiprasad pointed out about Chandrakumar Agarwala in his biography. The former left an indelible mark on the creative personality of Jyotiprasad. Chandrakumar is said to be the maker of a new era in Assamese literature, especially through *Jonaki*, a literary journal published from Calcutta from 1889A.D. under his editorship *Jonaki* was the output of a collective effort of a group of young writers. The journal heralded the beginning of modernity in Assamese literature covering all the forms of literary expressions. Jyotiprasad always treated Chandrakumar Agarwala as a role model for him. His love and respect for his uncle was boundless. He described how people like Lakshminath Bezbarua, Hemchandra Goswami and Rajanikanta Bordoloi tried their best to realize the dreams of Chandrakumar. In the process of modernization of Assamese poetry the role of Chandrakumar is stated to be substantial. Jyotiprasad

viewed that total devotion to literary exercise does not mean dislocation from the real life. Even remaining within the dirt and dins of family life one can be a true poet. Chandrakumar was a responsible man while at the same time he did proper justice to poetry. Jyotiprasad viewed that dreaming of a flower is not enough it requires a laborious gardener, dedicated to his job. Thus like, according to Jyotiprasad a poet need not always be a dreamer. A true poet cannot realize his vision through an escape route from down-to-earth realities which was the conviction of Chandrakumar. Weakness for man is stated to be one of the dominating features of Chandrakumar's personality. He is stated to be the worshiper of man. Jyotiprasad cited a poem of Chandrakumar:

“Manuhei deb, manuhei seb

Manuh bine nai keb...”(Man is the Godhead. Do service to man. Nobody is superior to man. Worship him.)

His passion for the Assamese language is projected in his poem *Asamiya Bhasar Karone Kavir Parthana* (Prayer of a poet for the Assamese language). He praised the Assamese language:

“Asamiya Bhasa mor kota maramar

Jalanta sadhana mor kota janamar...” (Assamese is a language that I love most. It is the result of my deep meditation spread over several lives)

Art and culture reflects the socio- economic condition of the society and as a result of that it also joined with the emotions of the deprived class and he join hand with them to rescue them from the shadow of capitalism.

One of his counterparts Bishnu Prasad Rabha- both were staunch anti-imperialists, and both were popular leaders of the Assamese people. Both were devoted to the welfare of the exploited masses without being committed to a distinct social ideology. But Rabha became communist in his later period. But the historical role they performed was very important. Rabha was an inspirer and darling of young people, a militant agitator, and a very good organizer. Jyotiprasad Agarwala and his contemporary Bishnu Prasad Rabha had similarities in their visions and nationalist activities. The only difference was that Rabha had joined the Communist Party and propagated his ideas living with the common people. He was a revolutionary activist.

On the other hand Jyotiprasad Agarwala was not within any banner but propagated his views for the common people.

Jyotiprasad was above all acquired his place as the organiser, mobiliser and inspirer of great popular mass movements. He brought the mass of Assamese people into political motion. Moreover, unlike Rabha, he was also the strategist of the anti-imperialist struggle.

Rabha wanted a change in the strategy of national struggle or the style of the struggle. He wanted the people to accept his call for the launching of an immediate struggle.

Hemanga Biswas viewed that the feelings of humanity, nationality, liberty which were flowed with the renaissance by Assamese intelligentsia like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Chandrakumar Agarwala etc. among the Assamese people was continued alone by Jyotiprasad Agarwala in his age with his new ideas and works. Hiren Gohain also argued him as the pioneer architect of modern Assam after Lakshminath Bezbaruah.

Thus there was an atmosphere of a rich harvest of rationalistic ideas, nationalistic ideas and nationalistic feelings before Jyotiprasad Agarwala came to the limelight and he departed his ideas from his predecessors with his vision of humanity.