

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**



**TWENTYSIXTH SESSION
KOKRAJHAR CAMPUS, GAUHATI UNIVERSITY
KOKRAJHAR
2005**

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Preface

The Twenty sixth Annual Conference of the NEIHA was hosted by the Kokrajhar Campus, Gauhati University at Kokrajhar from 24th to 26th November, 2005. Sri Emmanuel Mushahary, President of the reception Committee welcomed the guests and delegates in the inaugural function, and Sri Hagrama Mahilary, Chief B.T.C., addressed the gathering as the Chief Guest. The 26th Session was inaugurated by Dr. R.N. Mushahary. The three days of the Conference was very well attended by historians and other social scientists from different parts of the region and also from other parts of the country and the academic sessions, the most important part of the Annual conference of NEIHA, saw the active participation of all NEIHA members present. We would like to record our thanks to the Joint Registrar, Kokrajhar Campus, Gauhati University for having hosted the Twenty Sixth Session of NEIHA and also our very sincere thanks to Dr. Sekhar Brahma, the Local Secretary, and his colleagues and students who worked untiringly to make the session a success.


This Volume is a collection of the papers presented in the various academic panels of the XXVIth Session and also the proceedings of the business meetings of the session.

The Association is grateful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the financial support advanced towards the publication of the Proceedings volume. Here we would again like to remind the esteemed members of NEIHA that they should take care to see that their papers follow the NEIHA style of referencing and also to ensure that the revised papers reach us within the last day announced in the business session. Without this co-operation from the members the work of the Editorial Board gets held up and it also becomes difficult to meet the deadlines of the press. It was mainly for these reasons and also of course for the considered opinion of the Panel Chairpersons, whose comments on every paper were clearly recorded and the deliberations of the Editorial Board, that a number of papers had to be abstracted or listed. The task of editing, proof reading etc. of such a large number of papers within a very limited period is very time consuming and we can do the work to the satisfaction of all NEIHA members only with the co-operation of all the paper presenters.

This volume also includes the papers which were presented in the symposium on "**Methods of Historical Research**" that was held during the XXVIth Session as per the decision in NEIHA that the year when there are no Endowment Lectures to be organized a symposium on some topic of historical significance would be organized.

Finally I would like to say a very special word of thanks to the members of the Editorial Board, Prof. J. B. Phattacharjee, Prof. Mignonette Momin and Prof. D.R.Syiemlieh who made my work much lighter by giving a lot of their time to sit through the Editorial Board meetings to decide on the status of the papers and not only editing the papers but also helping out with a lot of the proof reading of the papers. I would also like to thank Mr. Pradeep Shaha and his staff of Modern Offset for their interest in the work and getting the volume ready in time for release in the 27th session.

Shillong
10th August, 2006



(Manorama Sharma)

Contents

	Page No.
1. Presidential Address —Mrs. Shiela Bora ...	1 - 46
2. On Matters of Historical Method ... —Mignonette Momin	47 - 65
3. Comparative Methodology and the Writing of History : Relevance for North East India — Manorama Sharma	66 - 73
4. Studying Tribal political institutions ... — Apurba K Baruah	74 - 86
5. A Report on the Neolithic tools from Sohpet Bneng Hill of Ri-Bhoi District in Meghalaya (An Ethno Archaeological Study) — Marco Mitri	87 - 95
6. Some Coins of Assam with Mintmark "Di" ... — Nicholas Rhodes	96 - 99
7. Cultural Variations and Social Formation in Early Assam — Nirode Boruah	100 - 109
8. State, ideology and legitimacy in early Assam ... — Chandan Kumar Sarma	110 - 121
9. Aspects of Pre-Ahom Economy ... — Manash Mazumdar	122 - 127
10. Mughal-Koch Political Relations ... (1578 A.D.-1609 A.D.) — Md. Shah Noorur Rahman	128 - 133
11. The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of South Kamrup — Gajendra Adhikary	134 - 142
12. Administration of the Devottara, Brahmottara ... and Dharmottara Lands in Assam in the medieval period — Manju Gogoi Dhar	143 - 150
13. History of the Dimasa-Kachari Royal Dynasty : Fact and Fiction ... — S.K. Bose	151 - 156

14. Coin and Culture: A Study of Tripura Coinage (1464-1761 A.D.)	... 157 - 167	— <i>Sukhwinder Kalsi</i>
15. Mising-Ahom Relations : A Historical Analysis	... 168 - 173	— <i>S. Dutta & L.N. Pegu</i>
16. Revolt of Nawab Radharam (1786)*	... 174 - 182	— <i>J B Bhattacharjee</i>
17. The All Assam Ahom Association and Ahom Politics of Surendranath Buragohain	... 183 - 191	— <i>Romesh Buragohain</i>
18. Partition of Bengal (1905) : Its Impact on the Nationalist Upsurge in Assam	... 192 - 200	— <i>Sagar Boruah</i>
19. Nineteenth Century Santals Migration to Assam – Colonial State, Marginalisation and Christian Missionaries	... 201 - 210	— <i>Subhash Barman</i>
20. Silchar in the making : site for Muhammadan Hostel in the Govt. Boys School	... 211 - 213	— <i>Ratna Dey</i>
21. Revival of the Tai Language in the North-Eastern States in India	... 214 - 231	— <i>Jaya Buragohain</i>
22. Witchcraft and Witch Hunting in Assam in Historical Perspective with Reference to the Bodos	... 232 - 246	— <i>Jahnabi Gogoi Nath</i>
23. A Note on the History of the Tutsas of Barap Valley	... 247 - 259	— <i>Narayan Singh Rao</i>
24. Misnomer Phase of the Nyishi Nomenclature : A Historical Analysis	... 260 - 268	— <i>Tana Showren</i>
25. Rituals and Festivals of the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh	... 269 - 278	— <i>Leki Sitang</i>
26. Bon Among The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh	... 279 - 289	— <i>B Tripathy</i> — <i>S. Dutta</i>
27. Marriage System among the Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh	... 290 - 298	— <i>Ashan Riddi &</i> — <i>Karabi Bharali</i>
28. The Chakpa of Manipur : A Brief Historical Account	... 299 - 313	— <i>Kh. Rorendrajit</i>

29. Muslim Revivalism in Manipur ... 314 - 321
 — *Salam Irene*
30. Rev. Dr. Peter Fraser's Mission in Mizoram
 (1908-1912) : A Historical Perspective ... 322 - 333
 — *J.V. Hluna*
31. 'Perfecting the Women' : Some Aspects on the ... 334 - 345
 Ideas on Women, Crime and Sexuality in
 Early Colonial Assam: c.1840-c.1900
 — *Bipul Chaudhury*
32. Female Foeticide in India with Special Reference ... 346 - 355
 to the North East
 — *K. Ruhinikumar Sharma*
 — *Th. Jayantakumar & S. Sanatomba*
33. Political Relationship of the Meiteis with the ... 356 - 359
 Hill Tribes of Manipur before 1891 A.D.
 (A Historical Perspective) — *Moirangthem Ranjana*
34. A Note on Bodo Politics and Problems of ... 360 - 363
 Women Adjustment in Governance (1987-2005)
 — *Banabina Brahma*
35. A Note on the Education of the Bodos ... 364 - 368
 in the Present Perspective — *Pradip Kumar Patra*

Abstracts of papers - I

1. The First Nupilal (1904) of Manipur ... 369 - 369
 — *L. Basanti Devi*
2. Sri Surya - Ellora of North East India ... 369 - 370
 — *Yasavanta Ray*

Abstracts of papers - II

1. A Summary Note of Religious ... 370 - 371
 Development of Vishnupriya Manipuris
 — *Braja Gopal Sinha*
2. The Rengma Village Organization ... 371 - 372
 — *A. Nshoga Rengma*
3. The Phulaguri Uprising (1861) : ... 372 - 373
 The First Phase of Peasant Upheaval in Assam
 — *Chandana Goswami*

14. Coin and Culture: A Study of Tripura Coinage ... 157 - 167
(1464-1761 A.D.) — *Sukhwinder Kalsi*
15. Mising-Ahom Relations : A Historical Analysis ... 168 - 173
— *S. Dutta & L.N. Pegu*
16. Revolt of Nawab Radharam (1786)* ... 174 - 182
— *J B Bhattacharjee*
17. The All Assam Ahom Association and Ahom Politics ... 183 - 191
of Surendranath Buragohain — *Romesh Buragohain*
18. Partition of Bengal (1905) : Its Impact on the ... 192 - 200
Nationalist Upsurge in Assam — *Sagar Boruah*
19. Nineteenth Century Santals Migration to ... 201 - 210
Assam – Colonial State, Marginalisation and
Christian Missionaries — *Subhash Barman*
20. Silchar in the making : site for Muhammadan Hostel ... 211 - 213
in the Govt. Boys School — *Ratna Dey*
21. Revival of the Tai Language in the ... 214 - 231
North-Eastern States in India — *Jaya Buragohain*
22. Witchcraft and Witch Hunting in Assam in ... 232 - 246
Historical Perspective with Reference to the Bodos
— *Jahnabi Gogoi Nath*
23. A Note on the History of the Tutsas of ... 247 - 259
Barap Valley — *Narayan Singh Rao*
24. Misnomer Phase of the Nyishi Nomenclature : ... 260 - 268
A Historical Analysis — *Tana Showren*
25. Rituals and Festivals of the Khamtis of ... 269 - 278
Arunachal Pradesh — *Leki Sitang*
26. Bon Among The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh ... 279 - 289
— *B Tripathy*
— *S. Dutta*
27. Marriage System among the Tagins of ... 290 - 298
Arunachal Pradesh — *Ashan Riddi &*
— *Karabi Bharali*
28. The Chakpa of Manipur : A Brief Historical Account ... 299 - 313
— *Kh. Rorendrajit*

29. Muslim Revivalism in Manipur ... 314 - 321
 — *Salam Irene*
30. Rev. Dr. Peter Fraser's Mission in Mizoram
 (1908-1912) : A Historical Perspective ... 322 - 333
 — *J.V. Hluna*
31. 'Perfecting the Women' : Some Aspects on the ... 334 - 345
 Ideas on Women, Crime and Sexuality in
 Early Colonial Assam: c.1840-c.1900
 — *Bipul Chaudhury*
32. Female Foeticide in India with Special Reference ... 346 - 355
 to the North East
 — *K. Ruhinikumar Sharma*
 — *Th. Jayantakumar & S. Sanatomba*
33. Political Relationship of the Meiteis with the ... 356 - 359
 Hill Tribes of Manipur before 1891 A.D.
 (A Historical Perspective) — *Moirangthem Ranjana*
34. A Note on Bodo Politics and Problems of ... 360 - 363
 Women Adjustment in Governance (1987-2005)
 — *Banabina Brahma*
35. A Note on the Education of the Bodos ... 364 - 368
 in the Present Perspective — *Pradip Kumar Patra*

Abstracts of papers - I

1. The First Nupilal (1904) of Manipur ... 369 - 369
 — *L. Basanti Devi*
2. Sri Surya - Ellora of North East India ... 369 - 370
 — *Yasavanta Ray*

Abstracts of papers - II

1. A Summary Note of Religious , ... 370 - 371
 Development of Vishnupriya Manipuris ...
 — *Braja Gopal Sinha*
2. The Rengma Village Organization ... 371 - 372
 — *A. Nshoga Rengma*
3. The Phulaguri Uprising (1861) : ... 372 - 373
 The First Phase of Peasant Upheaval in Assam
 — *Chandana Goswami*

14. Coin and Culture: A Study of Tripura Coinage ... 157 - 167
(1464-1761 A.D.) — *Sukhwinder Kalsi*
15. Mising-Ahom Relations : A Historical Analysis ... 168 - 173
— *S. Dutta & L.N. Pegu*
16. Revolt of Nawab Radharam (1786)* ... 174 - 182
— *J B Bhattacharjee*
17. The All Assam Ahom Association and Ahom Politics ... 183 - 191
of Surendranath Buragohain — *Romesh Buragohain*
18. Partition of Bengal (1905) : Its Impact on the ... 192 - 200
Nationalist Upsurge in Assam — *Sagar Boruah*
19. Nineteenth Century Santals Migration to ... 201 - 210
Assam – Colonial State, Marginalisation and
Christian Missionaries — *Subhash Barman*
20. Silchar in the making : site for Muhammadan Hostel ... 211 - 213
in the Govt. Boys School — *Ratna Dey*
21. Revival of the Tai Language in the ... 214 - 231
North-Eastern States in India — *Jaya Buragohain*
22. Witchcraft and Witch Hunting in Assam in ... 232 - 246
Historical Perspective with Reference to the Bodos
— *Jahnabi Gogoi Nath*
23. A Note on the History of the Tutsas of ... 247 - 259
Barap Valley — *Narayan Singh Rao*
24. Misnomer Phase of the Nyishi Nomenclature : ... 260 - 268
A Historical Analysis — *Tana Showren*
25. Rituals and Festivals of the Khamtis of ... 269 - 278
Arunachal Pradesh — *Leki Sitang*
26. Bon Among The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh ... 279 - 289
— *B Tripathy*
— *S. Dutta*
27. Marriage System among the Tagins of ... 290 - 298
Arunachal Pradesh — *Ashan Riddi &*
— *Karabi Bharali*
28. The Chakpa of Manipur : A Brief Historical Account ... 299 - 313
— *Kh. Rorendrajit*

29. Muslim Revivalism in Manipur ... 314 - 321
— *Salam Irene*
30. Rev. Dr. Peter Fraser's Mission in Mizoram
(1908-1912) : A Historical Perspective ... 322 - 333
— *J.V. Hluna*
31. 'Perfecting the Women' : Some Aspects on the
Ideas on Women, Crime and Sexuality in
Early Colonial Assam: c.1840-c.1900 ... 334 - 345
— *Bipul Chaudhury*
32. Female Foeticide in India with Special Reference ... 346 - 355
to the North East — *K. Ruhinikumar Sharma*
— *Th. Jayantakumar & S. Sanatomba*
33. Political Relationship of the Meiteis with the ... 356 - 359
Hill Tribes of Manipur before 1891 A.D.
(A Historical Perspective) — *Moirangthem Ranjana*
34. A Note on Bodo Politics and Problems of ... 360 - 363
Women Adjustment in Governance (1987-2005)
— *Banabina Brahma*
35. A Note on the Education of the Bodos ... 364 - 368
in the Present Perspective — *Pradip Kumar Patra*

Abstracts of papers - I

1. The First Nupilal (1904) of Manipur ... 369 - 369
— *L. Basanti Devi*
2. Sri Surya - Ellora of North East India ... 369 - 370
— *Yasavanta Ray*

Abstracts of papers - II

1. A Summary Note of Religious ... 370 - 371
Development of Vishnupriya Manipuris ...
— *Braja Gopal Sinha*
2. The Rengma Village Organization ... 371 - 372
— *A. Nshoga Rengma*
3. The Phulaguri Uprising (1861) : ... 372 - 373
The First Phase of Peasant Upheaval in Assam
— *Chandana Goswami*

List of papers - III ... 373 - 373

The following papers were also presented in the
XXVIth Session of the North East India History Association

Symposium : ... 375 - 375

Methods of Historical Research In North East India

1. Social Sciences in North East India ... 377 - 386
and the Consequences of
Methodological Innocence* — *Apurba K Baruah*
2. The Use of Sources in Historical ... 387 - 394
Research with Particular Reference
to Pre-Modern Northeast India
— *Mignonette Momin*
3. Use of Archival Records and Missionary Sources ... 395 - 399
— *David R. Syiemlieh*
4. Methodology of Gender History ... 400 - 407
— *Manorama Sharma*

Appendix

- A. Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting of the ... 408 - 410
26th Session, NEIHA held on 28.10.2004 at NEHU
- B. Minutes of the Annual Business Meeting ... 411 - 416
- C. General Secretary's Report for 2003-2004 ... 417 - 420
- D. Treasurer's Report ... 421 - 430
- E. Life Members of the North East India ... 43 - 470
History Association (NEIHA)
- F. Life Members who are no longer with us ... 471 - 471
- G. Annual Members of NEIHA ... 472 - 472

Presidential Address *Prof. T. C. Sinha*

Mrs. Shiela Bora

Friends and Fellow Delegates,

I am deeply indebted to the Executive Committee and the members of North East India History Association for electing me to preside over the XXVI session of the Association. While I am overwhelmed by the honour bestowed on me, the galaxy of distinguished historians who have occupied this position in the past makes me acutely aware of my limitations and inadequacies. However, I shall endeavour to rise to the occasion and assure you that the honour extended to me by you all shall help sustain my interest in the pursuit of historical studies in general and the history of the Northeast in particular.

On this historic occasion of NEIHA meeting for the first time in this important town of Kokrajhar, home to the colourful Bodo community and the headquarter of the Bodoland Territorial Council, I consider it a great privilege to preside over this session. I seek the kind cooperation of all my learned friends in conducting the business of the conference.

In view of the ever-growing recognition of the importance of gender issues in development I wish to share with you my ideas on **“The Role of Education In Fashioning Women in the Brahmaputra Valley in The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century.”**

I

Despite major conceptual shifts made by policy makers and academicians in their approach towards gender issues, the impact of such changes remain elusive. Forgetting the long centuries that have elapsed before the rising tide of female emancipation, discussions relating to gender and development tend to focus on what development needs from women rather than what women need from development. Since policies today, continue to treat the symptoms rather than the causes of inequality and discrimination based on gender, far from fostering self-confidence and self-sufficiency, they succeed in reinforcing and even creating new gendered patterns of dependency. Most policy makers, failing to

realize that only an understanding of the past would help to explain and mould the present with a meaningful purpose, have formulated policies that remain unresponsive to the multifaceted needs of women, who continue to be in a state of powerless subordination. The UN Decade for Women (1975-85) was the first major step towards official recognition of the need to consider the relationship between development and gender more carefully. It emphasized that empowerment implies changed gender relations, such as greater control of women over household decision-making, greater physical security and greater reproductive control - issues that cannot be addressed in terms of economic self-sufficiency.

Undoubtedly one of the potent instruments for political and economic empowerment of women is the promotion of education. Unfortunately, the nature of education has, to a large extent, been determined by religion. Religion has always played an important part in the process of socialization and has therefore been a vital factor in determining the nature of women's education. Almost all religions of the world have glorified and perpetuated the wife/ mother syndrome for women since centuries and have confined her to the home and the family to such an extent that even after fifty-eight years of Independence, the large mass of Indian women are intellectually crippled and incapable of playing an active role in the affairs of the society and the polity. It is one of the strongest paradox of education that while on the one hand, it is hailed as one of the most important instruments of social change, capable of breaking rigid, social, cultural religious norms, establishing the individual status of the members of society, on the other hand, it has also been used as an important agent of socialization for reinforcing and perpetuating the norms of society, denying women all opportunity to learn their new roles. In this regard, the nineteenth century is of particular importance in India, as it witnessed the entry of girls into the formal system of education. I have therefore made a humble attempt to highlight the social prejudices and the biological, social and cultural construction of femininity and masculinity that determined the nature of women's education in the Brahmaputra valley in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An effort will be made to highlight the fact that it is the way in which men and women have located themselves within the gender system that has succeeded in nullifying the effects of numerous legislative measures adopted by the Government after 1947, in an effort to guarantee legal equality to women and ensure their integration in the process of development.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Assamese race and culture has retained its separate identity with regional characteristics, it cannot be denied that the culture of the Brahmaputra valley is fundamentally akin to that of India. Despite stiff opposition from the non-Aryans, the migration of Brahmanas in large numbers to Kamarupa, following the decline of the Imperial power of the Guptas in the latter part of the 5th century A.D, resulted in the propagation of the Aryan culture resting on the *Varnasrama Dharma*, accompanied by a steady growth of the *Smriti* literature.¹ The Brahmanas of Kamarupa were no exception and appeared to have lived in conformity with the canonical texts, a process inevitably leading to conditioning the status of women in the Brahmaputra valley, through the manipulation of the *Varnasrama Dharma*.²

With law books of great Hindu jurists like Manu, providing the general code of behaviour, social and individual, the position of Indian women reached its lowest ebb at a time when the injunctions of Manu restricted the study of the Vedas for women.³ Manu's injunctions witnessed the beginnings of a systematic deprivation of Indian women in matters of education and in a narrowing of their mental and intellectual horizon that facilitated the perpetration of social evils. In the words of Altekar, "denied the benefits of education, brought up in the authoritarian atmosphere, having no opportunities to develop their natural capacities and facilities, women became helpless, illiterate, narrow-minded and peevish, the theory of perpetual tutelage of women became more and more deep rooted in society."⁴ Commenting on the status of women in Assam in the 19th century, Robinson observed:

A state of dependence more humiliating than that to which the weaker sex is here subject, cannot easily be conceived. Like most women of India, they are denied even the least portion of education, and are excluded from every social circle. They are even accounted unworthy to partake of religious rites, except in conjunction with their husbands...

Females are not included within the pale of education; every ray of mental improvement is kept from the sex. As they are always confined to domestic duties, and excluded from the society of the other sex, the people see no necessity for their education. A woman's duties are comprised in 'pleasing her husband' and cherishing her children.⁵

The three pillars that pioneered the cause of female education in India and in the Brahmaputra valley and conditioned the minds and

attitude of the providers of education in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, were the British government, the missionaries and the Indian social reformers. Hence an attempt will be made to understand the motive and consequently the nature of female education encouraged by each of these providers and to examine the products of such education in the light of the emerging importance of gender studies today.

II

Why Emphasis on Women's Education

a) *The British Government*

The British Government was the first, not only to propagate the idea that many of the ills in the Indian society could be traced to the oppression of women, but also to advocate female education and emancipation as an essential step towards progress. Having read the translations of the *Manu Samhita* and other religious works, Mill concluded that, "nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women."⁶ Mill's formula was that, "Among rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted." He was of the opinion that as societies advanced, "the condition of the weaker sex is gradually improved, till they associate on equal terms with the men, and occupy the place of voluntary and useful coadjutors."⁷ Until recently therefore, many believed that the first salvation for Indian women came in the guise of European forms of governance, technology, and values. Convinced of the need for reform, the British government in India, extolled gender relations and initiated reforms of the upper-caste, Indian woman's life cycle. Attempts on the part of the government to introduce Western ideas and institutions may be considered a response of the Raj to legitimize its political rule as a devastating critique of Hindu womanhood.

Consequently the earliest historical accounts of Indian women, dating back to the 19th century, are a product of the colonial experience and contain two main characteristics. First, they describe an ancient age when women, held in high esteem, played an important part in the scholastic field. This was followed by a long period that witnessed a steady decline in their status due to their seclusion and non-education. They point out that though there was nothing inherent in the Hindu or Muslim religion which militates against the education of women, the

increasing rigidity of customs and misinterpretations of the Shastras led to a general reluctance to send girls to educational institutions.⁸ Talking about women's education prior to the coming of the British, W.W. Hunter writes:

Apart from Sanskrit traditions of women learning and literary merit in prehistoric and medieval times, there can be no doubt that when the British obtained possession of the country, a section of female population was educated upto the modest requirements of household life. In certain provinces little girls occasionally attended the indigenous village schools, and learned the same lessons as their brothers. Many women of the upper class had their mind stored with the legends of the Puranas and Epic poems, which supply impressive lessons in morality, and in India, form the substitute of history. Among the lower orders, the keeping of daily accounts fell, in some households, to the mother or chief female of the family.⁹

Secondly, these accounts often cited Indian texts on religion, law, politics and education that shared a uniform description of women across groups, essentially devoted to men and self-sacrificing, even though in case of men, they cited different pronouncements depending on caste, class, age and religious sect. They defined women by their biological characteristics and the subordinate, supportive roles they were destined to play, overshadowing their differences across groups. It is important to remember that as the "woman question" began to loom large and became a central issue in nineteenth century British India, it was based on such narratives, that the foreign rulers first introduced new ideas about women's roles and capabilities, ideas that were later adopted by enlightened Indians.

"The British wanted their civil servants to have educated wives to ensure their loyalty. Uneducated wives or wives who were educated only in the vernacular and traditional subjects, it was believed, would split the household into two worlds."¹⁰ They were also certain that rebellious plots were hatched and nurtured in inaccessible zenanas and that English-educated Indian women would raise their children to be anglophiles. As noted by Meredith Borthwick in her book, *The Changing Roles of Women in Bengal, 1849- 1905*, it was natural that women's education in the 19th century and well into the 20th had little to do with economic functions, needs or development of professional expertise amongst women. "Whereas

education for males was directly related to the pursuit of employment, female education had no economic function.”¹¹

The Educational Report of the Government of India for 1909 while discussing women’s curriculum stated :

In the lower primary stage of instruction the only subjects that can be taught are reading, writing, arithmetic and needlework, varied, enlivened and enforced by songs, games, kindergarten occupations and object lessons. The only differentiation between boys and girls in the lower primary stages is that girls learn needle-work and boys do not...Above the lower primary stage the curriculum for boys and girls shows a little more difference, the boys’ curriculum being adapted for girls by the omission of manual training, agriculture, patwari papers and science, and the relaxation of standards in mathematics instead of which the practice of needle-work and drawing is continued, and some attempt is made to introduce subjects of domestic economy and hygiene Lessons too, on the King-Emperor and his consort and family as well as on Queen Victoria, have not been forgotten. In the historical sections sketches of such heroines as Sita, Savitri, Mirabai, Chandbibi, Nurjehan are given. ¹²

The reason for formulating different curriculum for boys and girls is not far to seek. In a resolution on Education Policy, issued in 1913, while considering general principles behind education of girls the Government admitted that the immediate problem in the education of girls is one of social development. Recognising that the existing customs and ideas opposed to the education of girls would require different handling in different parts of the country, it laid down the following principles for general consideration :

- a) The education of girls should be practical with reference to the position they will fill in social life.
- b) It should not seek to imitate the education suitable for boys nor should it be dominated by examinations.
- c) Special attention should be paid to hygiene and the surroundings of school life.
- d) The services of women should be more freely enlisted for instruction and inspection.¹³

b) The Baptist Missionaries

Linked to the broader question of social reforms in the second half of the nineteenth century, the missionaries proved that they were not

only the helpmates of the imperialists, but were themselves the imperialists reacting the drama of the coloniser.¹⁴ Missionary activity in India had started as early as 1820, when prejudice against women's education was very strong, and evoked a defensive response among Indian social reformers. They were the first not only to report the rate of illiteracy among women, but also to highlight what they considered to be the ignorant and superstitious environment of an Indian woman's life during the first half of the nineteenth century. The early missionaries provided their supporters at home with first hand descriptions of social life among the 'heathens'. In the phase following the Civil war, there arose a growing interest amongst American women in similarities and dissimilarities in women's positions in other cultures of the world. American Protestant women used their ethnological descriptions of manners, family life and politics to articulate distinctions between Christians and 'heathens' in an attempt to define themselves in terms of what they were not. In essence the missionary ethnology encouraged a notion of "characteristic atrocities" and in the process revitalized cultural stereotypes that were sometimes dormant.¹⁵

Three general categories of reportage emerge from this literature: domestic oppression, sexual harassment and intellectual deprivation. In each category, there were specific social practices that received focus. For instance, zenanas were presented in a formulaic portrait that disregarded all distinctions between zenanas based on class, locale and religious tradition. The evangelicals never considered the zenana as a collective workforce but as a place of enforced female isolation, with serious consequences for the intellectual development of women. In another instance, pervasive and elaborate accounts of the joint family living arrangements sought to prove that there was a competitive rather than a cooperative spirit among the 'heathen' women, particularly between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, described as intrinsically hostile to one another. For the middle-class American women, among whom marriage usually meant a separate household of one's own, joint families raised enormous problems of home management. The use of women as beasts of burden in agricultural areas was another element of focus in the missionary ethnology. The absence of girlhood among the 'heathens' was used to highlight their intellectual deprivation as compared to the American middle-class experience.

Following the close of the First Burmese war when Assam became a part of the British dominions, Major Jenkins, the Commissioner of

Assam, invited the American Baptists of Burma in 1836 A.D. to enter Assam. These missionaries who accepted the offer, were swift to begin the transmission and influence of certain specifically Christian ideas into the socio-cultural life of the people of Assam, both in the hills and in the plains, comprising a population of eight million men, women and children of whom half were Hindus, one-fifth were Muslims and one-sixth animists.¹⁶ The “effort to lift womanhood to a higher social level among the people and the belief that women needed to be brought into the fold to make conversions permanent, appealed to the Christian constituency in America, who supported the missionary enterprise.”¹⁷

Thus at a time when the East India Company preferred to practice a policy of strict neutrality towards socio-religious problems, the missionaries vigorously pursued a programme of female education and were the first to start girls’ schools in Assam. The work of women missionaries in establishing schools for ‘heathen’ girls was touted as an important cultural advance. The establishment of a girls’ school was one of the first steps taken by the missionaries while establishing a new station. Thus within three months of their arrival at Sadiya in March 1836, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cutter, wives of first American Baptist missionaries to Assam, were teaching boys and girls and by 1837 Mrs. Brown had a girls’ school in operation at Sadiya. While starting the Nowgong Orphan Institute in 1843, the first co-educational institution in the Northeast, Miles Bronson, one of the pioneering American Baptists to Assam, explicitly stated that his purpose for starting the school was to, “introduce education of the female sex which is wholly neglected in this country.”¹⁸ As work for female education progressed, single lady missionaries were appointed to establish and superintend the education of indigenous girls.

However, while advocating a more prominent and dignified role for women, Christianity also identified women as one of the most prominent tools in the process of evangelization. Bronson understood that conversions often caused connections to be broken and though people were ready to hear and applaud the missionaries, they were not ready to sever their last links. To counteract the effect of caste and to replace its loss, he adopted a novel way of evangelization that revolved around the theme of a Christian community, which he believed was absolutely essential to counteract the effect of caste and to replace its loss.¹⁹ Bronson was not slow to understand that women, being primarily responsible for moulding the formative years of the young, were potential factors in removing the obstacles created by the impact of early socialization, on the inculcation of religion and caste. By tackling the women, the missionaries proposed

to counteract the whole force of all the home and social influences that surrounded the pupils while out of school. Hence education for women was imperative in order to instill Christian ideas and a new outlook in society. The subject matter of education, however, was to be modified by the customs of the people among whom they preached. Thus women were to be taught to submit to their husbands in love, and seek in education a means of becoming, not men, but better women.²⁰ The missionaries have admitted :

We try to have everything as near the village life as possible; so there is a home atmosphere to the place... The little girls sweep the cottages and the cookhouse and are now learning to carry water in very small buckets. The very small ones play with the babies and understand that it is their place to care for him and see that he does not get into mischief.²¹

Missionary schools prescribed a minimum schooling for girls where they were taught general subjects like reading, geography and history and were trained in the arts of singing, sewing, printing, and crochet work. Miles Bronson writes about the Nowgong Orphan School in 1847, "the orphan girls will receive a Christian education and a knowledge of such employments as will be of use to them in the humble stations they will occupy as wives of native Christians and assistants. It is also hoped that this school will tend in some small degree to convince the natives of the utility of educating their daughters.. ."²² Besides studies, the girls devoted their time to Bible lessons, cooking, cleaning and recreation. They were also taught to tailor and mend not only their own clothes, but also to help in stitching and keeping the boys' clothes in order. The curriculum for girls was confined strictly to the vernacular, though with a few exceptions, the more advanced among them were allowed to study Bengali.²³ In 1873 Miss Bronson of the Girls' School at Nowgong, wrote in a similar tone while reporting that girls of the school were being taught the common branches of study with singing, sewing, knitting and different kinds of fancy work.²⁴ Their handiwork, which was on display in the Jubilee celebrations of the school in 1925, indicated much interest in temperance and health charts, sewing and silk weaving.²⁵ With education in mind the example of Dobaki, a Garo girl, was touted as an example of an ideal educated girl for "she and her husband kept house almost in European style. They had a bathroom, bedstead, comfortable bedding, a fair supply of dishes, numerous books on shelves, boxes for clothing and all kept in good order."²⁶

As the urgent need for female teachers was realized the training of women as teachers, was another important direction of the missionary schools. At a cost of about Rs. 18,00/- the Government provided the Nowgong Mission Girls' School with suitable buildings to train girls as teachers.²⁷ Till 1916 the Nowgong Training center remained the only institute for women teachers for the whole of the Brahmaputra valley with its seven million people.²⁸ Gradually however, Teachers' Training schools for girls' were established at Nowgong, Gauhati, Tura, Impur and Golaghat, which produced trained teachers for the missionary as well as government schools. Talking about the need of training schools for girls W.F. Dowd opined that, "such training might well go hand in hand with the Bible work so that every preacher would be fitted to teach, and every teacher a preacher of the Gospel."²⁹

In the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, the demand for women medical professionals grew among the upper-class families, whose women wanted to avoid male doctors. From the missionaries' perspective, medical work helped to create a profound impression on the minds of the native people. It provided them an opportunity to demonstrate their 'civilising mission' through clinics, hospitals and dispensaries. As early as in 1886, one of the four girls who had passed the Government examination from the Nowgong Mission School was sent to Calcutta to take a medical course of study under the Lady Dufferin Fund, the first step towards educating women as physicians.³⁰ However, few parents wanted their daughters to become doctors. Moreover, most girls' schools omitted science courses as too rigorous for female minds, which made admission for girls into medical schools well nigh impossible.³¹ Even when women did study to be physicians, they remained true to their essential stereotype. For instance, Dr. Kadambini Ganguly (b. 1861), the first lady doctor in Bengal, used to knit laces sitting in the carriage while on her rounds to visit her patients.³² However, the training of nurses and midwives came to be looked upon as a definite part of missionary work and a new nurses' home, with accommodation for twelve nurses was set up at Gauhati by 1929.

c) *Indian Reformers and Attitude of the Assamese Intelligentsia*

Like the British government, the Indian reformers in the first half on the 19th century accepted the idea that society's ills could be traced to the oppressed condition of women, saw female education and emancipation as the first steps towards progress, extolled gender relations and were convinced of the need for reform. With the introduction of the

ideas of social utility, Bentham and Mill were greatly admired by most leaders of the reform movement. The liberal humanitarianism and rationalist ideas, spread through English education, 'unsettled' the minds of the Indian educated and raised controversies, starting the process of questioning traditionally accepted practices.³³ Indian male reformers began to seek explanations for the weakness that had led to their defeat and solutions to build up their strength. They found these in Mill's theory that the status of women was integrated to the level and strength of civilization. Thus they concluded that without substantial improvement in the status of women, regeneration of their strength seemed doomed to failure. Several Indian reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, impressed by the liberal ideas of the West, began to lend support to the establishment of schools for girls.³⁴

Though influenced by Western ideas, these reformers were also conversant with their own traditions. They argued that there had been a "golden age," when women were valued and occupied positions of high status, were educated, married only after they reached maturity, moved about freely, and participated in the social and political life of the time.³⁵ "In the hands of Vivekananda, worship of the Goddess, reverence for the Motherland, and a commitment to female education and improving the status of women became the triple vow of the modern man."³⁶ Therefore change, though essential, was not to be through reliance on Western guidance, continuous breast-beating about the evils of Hinduism or leadership by English-educated intellectuals, but was to come from the people, guided and educated by the Indian intelligentsia.

Thus the reform movement and consequently women's education, historically the upshot of a tussle between the colonial and the indigenous ideologies, resulted in a pull in two opposite directions, the Western model and the Indian ideal. Indian women were expected to combine in themselves the womanly qualities prized both, in the 'modern' West and in the 'ancient' East and hence be educated and modernized, yet bear all the traditional responsibilities of a respectable home and be dependent totally on the male head of the family.

The well-meaning supporters of women's schooling, only desired a kind of education that did not disturb the status quo not only in terms of class or caste hierarchy, but also in terms of gender relationships. Native gentlemen, advanced and enlightened enough in ordinary matters, appeared to be hampered by the dread that once the women of the country are educated and yearn for independence, harassing times would be in store for them. They concentrated on improving the status of women

within the family and not in the public world, which continued to remain the sole domain of men. In a note on female education in Bombay, the *Mahratta* had observed that, "Our *shastras* and customs require a girl to qualify herself for a married life and if our schools cannot give them the necessary training they are worse than useless. Nothing can be gained by anglicizing our girls or teaching them to ape the ways of men."³⁷. Schools must not create in girls, "aversion to our domestic life"; "in that case the High School will be attended only by low class girls." Thus it was felt that only those women should be educated who understood the value of fidelity and were willing to dedicate their lives in service of their husbands. Since it was considered important for women to realize that none else could ever be greater for them than their husbands, their education also must teach them to be good wives, and to gladly submit themselves to the strict discipline of their in-laws. Phanindranath Gogoi wrote in the *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."³⁸

The intelligentsia of nineteenth century Assam who lent their support to the British administration in the belief that it would lead to Assam's progress, were not slow to realize that a British education would open up avenues of employment and trade. The rise and fall of Mani Ram Dewan also reminded the Assamese middle class of the danger of alienating the British. At the same time the Assamese intelligentsia, like their counterparts in Bengal, were staunch supporters of traditional values. Till the establishment of the Cotton College at Gauhati in 1901, Calcutta was the only centre for higher education for the Assamese students. During their stay at Calcutta these students found their space amongst the *bhadroloks* of the port city whose houses they took on rent. The contribution of Calcutta's Assamese Mess in the construction of the attitude of the Assamese intelligentsia was overwhelming. In an article published in the *Jonaki*, Chandra Dhar Barua wrote :

Hindu scriptures are repeatedly advocating respect for women. In ancient Hindu societies women were not kept confined like today. On the contrary, there are proofs that women's education and widow remarriage were prevalent in society. From Hindu scriptures like the *Manusamhita* we find that in ancient Hindu

society women enjoyed a position which was much higher than that in today's Hindu society, if not higher than in modern European societies.³⁹

Towards the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, when the influence of Bengal Renaissance had started spreading to other parts of the country, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua emerged as the pioneers of Assamese literature. The trio represents the character and views of the emerging Assamese intelligentsia. The writings of educated Assamese men in periodicals like the *Orunodoi*, the *Jonaki*, the *Banhi* and the *Asam Bandhu* reflect the attitude of the Assamese intelligentsia towards women's education in the Brahmaputra valley. Though his close acquaintance with life in Calcutta had combined in Gunabhiram Barua a liberal attitude from the west with respect for wealth and education, his notion of cultural nationalism, specially in relation to the improvement in the status of women and their education, was influenced by the attitudes of the colonial rulers on the one hand and the Indian social reformers on the other.⁴⁰ While in Calcutta, Gunabhiram had been attracted towards the Brahmo religion and reforms, which he eventually adopted and sent his daughter, Swarnalata, to be educated in the Bethune school at Calcutta in 1871. On the contrary, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan educated his daughter, Padmawati Devi Phukanani, at home. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, a close exponent of the religion and philosophy of Sankaradeva, attempted to synthesize western humanism with the Vaishnavite philosophy and provide a distinctive direction to the intellectual life of Assam.

Though defensive and unaccustomed to sending their daughters to "schools", the intellectuals of Assam, influenced by the process of westernization, the work of the American Baptist missionaries and the attempts of the social reformers in Bengal, gradually began to recognize the need to educate women. As teaching the women at home proved to be expensive, cumbersome and largely ineffectual, they realized the necessity of sending the girls to school. Yet, establishing institutions for female education in the Brahmaputra Valley was no easy task as the debate on female education began to centre round questions regarding the nature of schools, the type of teachers, the content of the curriculum, the class and families that would choose to send their daughters to school and the desirable length of schooling. There also arose a debate as to whether a girl, if married before her puberty, should still be allowed to continue her education as a married woman. Such were the questions

that the Assamese society of 19th century found itself having to address, a task far more difficult than providing moral and material support.

The notion of a woman's primary duty being that of proving herself to be a good companion for the husband was a deciding factor about the nature of education to be imparted to a woman. Women were expected not only to help lighten the burden of their husbands by sharing their worries and anxieties, but also to make them happy. Since the wife is a man's lifelong companion in love as well as his greatest friend, it was argued :

Is it justifiable that we deprive such a companion from the benefits of education, keeping her forever in darkness and ignorance? Imagine what a good companion a wife can be if she is educated and knowledgeable! She can give us the right advice when we need. Why should we not try to give them education and add to our happiness? Even when we undertake a two- hour journey by train we seek a compartment where there are decent people. We loathe the idea of spending even two hours with uncivilized uneducated people, how uncomfortable a situation it would be if you have to spend your whole life in the company of an uneducated woman!⁴¹

Women, it was perceived, must be educated if society is to progress. Illiterate women, it was argued, could not be entrusted with the care of the future generation:

“The early education of a child is influenced to a greater extent by the mother with whom they spend more time, than by the father. In fact, the entire family, except the husband, learns from the mistress. Unlike the woman, the master of the household, busy throughout the day with work outdoors, is like a guest who has little time for household matters, but only returns home only to sleep. Entrusted with such a grave responsibility, it is necessary for the wife to even surpass her husband in education, for uneducated mothers may prejudice the young minds with harmful consequences for society. The lessons derived from a mother not only determines the future of the children but also the behavior of the servants in the house... In a nutshell, if the mistress of the house is educated, all, including the children and the servants, will be good and vice versa. Thus the main purpose of women's education is to enable them to discharge their domestic duties.”⁴²

The example of Queen Victoria, who had grown up with her widowed mother amidst great adversity, was cited as an example of a fatherless girl who could rise to the position of a queen of England only because of her educated mother. A mother's education, or women's education was the only way, they believed, to educate their children to become future leaders of the nation.⁴³

In lines similar to that of the British government and the Baptist missionaries, the Assamese intelligentsia held an equally strong set of beliefs that the nature of education imparted to women must necessarily be different from that imparted to men. Education, they held, should enable women to adapt themselves to the new demands made by educated men of their family without losing their cultural moorings and believed that the social apportioning of male and female roles was biologically conditioned. "In the animal world too, the male bird goes out to collect twigs etc. during the nesting season, while the female carefully places the twigs in a definite pattern to build the nest."⁴⁴

The children have grown up and need to go to school.. .the daughter has reached marriageable age... there is not enough milk in the house... a woman's clothes give way... children require clothes... servants have to be paid their salaries... the municipal tax is due, the man has handle these problems. But only women can handle matters when children fight, or the daughter is rude to the grand mother, or the servants complain about their food, or when it is necessary to arrange the Gamochas as Bihu approaches.

Women should be gentle in nature, simple and soft at heart, not easy to provoke and soft spoken...

She should respect her parents-in-law like her own parents, ensure that her brother-in-law and sisters-in-law are provided with food when they are hungry and treat the servants well....

Among the Assamese people girls of good families can be educated only between the ages of 5/6 to 12/14 years, i.e., till she is married off. During this period she should learn to become adept at weaving, reading and writing, and cooking. Additionally, it is necessary to teach them about religion.⁴⁵

Consequently, the intelligentsia was strongly opposed to the idea of exposing women to formal western education. Here too, the influence of the Bengal Renaissance was evident. Brahmos led by Keshabchandra Sen, known for his radical views on social reform, and Umeshchandra

Dutta, editor of the influential *Bamabodhini Patrika*, were advocates of only a limited education for girls, and disapproved of a curriculum for girls that included some elementary knowledge about geometry.⁴⁶ On similar lines the Assamese intelligentsia also believed that the type of education that would enable a wife or a daughter to serve as an office assistant along with her husband or her father who might be working as clerk, was not definitely the ideal education for girls. While the purpose of a man's education was to equip him to generate income for supporting his family, the primary goal for educating a woman was to ensure the domestic well being of the family.⁴⁷

In *Rus Deshat Tini Rati*, Lakshminath Bezbaroa has clearly mentioned that the aim of women's education should be to produce good wives and mothers rather than rivals of men in the sphere of employment. Talking about the duties of an educated woman, Phanindranath Gogoi wrote in the *Jonaki*, that a woman's primary duty was to manage the household, to bring up the children and to provide them their initial training, as well as to provide companionship to the husband - all towards ensuring a peace in the household. To him it was only natural that a woman, imbued with the ideas of Mill and Bentham, would scarcely evince any interest in domestic chores. He referred to reports of educated women of the country abandoning their household duties because such work did not leave them sufficient time for political discourses. Therefore the general opinion among such men was that it was unnecessary for women to learn English and that they ought to be proficient only in the vernacular language and the necessary skills for running the household.⁴⁸

Most men of the age believed that education for a woman was synonymous not only with learning to sacrifice her own happiness, but in finding her own happiness in the happiness of others! To such men the true purpose of women's education was to teach her the duties of a wife, honest behaviour and restraint in her thoughts. One in soul and body with her husband, a woman must learn to worship her husband as God. If ever a woman considered herself to be independent of her husband and her own happiness to be above his, or if she considered herself to be equal to her husband and at par with her relatives and friends, she was not worthy to be called a good wife. It was nobler to remain a bachelor than to marry such a woman.⁴⁹

Ratneswar Mahanta, while arguing in the *Asam Bandhu* that the aim of women's education was neither to make them independent nor to equip them to exercise full control over the household, appealed to the youth not to abandon the values of traditional learning in favour of

a modern education, alien to our country. Sounding a note of caution, he warned the youth to be aware of such pitfalls and remain vigilant against fashioning their wives as despots in the name of freedom. He wrote,

The one who removes tiredness of life, one who feeds the hungry and offers water to the thirsty - how do I call her bonded? Were the Aryan women like Sita, Savitri and Shakuntala shackled? ... While the modern, educated woman considers her husband a companion of her life, a peasant woman considers her husband to be her lord,... One is mild and gentle, always speaking in a low tone, so as not to offend her parents-in-law, the other does not even consider them to be human beings... One considers the husband a thorn in the eye when he fails to satisfy her with gold ornaments, while for the other, the vermilion put on her forehead by the husband is her greatest wealth.

I am pained to see the type of freedom that is advocated for women today and feel that such freedom is tantamount to despotism. This explains why Manu, the great sage, had said, "No woman should be independent"(na stree swatantryamarhati) and that "the father must control a woman when she is a child and the husband must control her when she becomes a young woman"(pita rakhsati kaumarey bharta rakshati youbaney)⁵⁰

One of the main objections voiced against women's education was that an educated woman would be devoid of character. In an article entitled, *Tirotar Bon Ki*, (The duties of a woman) published in *Mou*, an Assamese periodical, it was stated that education for women could be even more dangerous for Assam than the Burmese invasions. Refuting such unwarranted fears however, Chandradhar Barua pointed out that the right type of education would only help to produce more Savitris and argued :

How strange it is to think that such can be the virtue of education! To those who hold such views, our reply is that those who believe that education leads to degradation of moral character are themselves an uneducated lot... To many people in our society women's education connotes the attainment of a level of literacy that enables them to read love letters. If such were to be the nature of education provided, there is no doubt that it would result in moral degradation... Give good advice to women, make them read good books and take all other steps

to ensure that they get a good education and you will find that good education will broaden their outlook and build their moral character leading to progress in Hindu society and once again there will be born in India many a noble woman like Savitri, devoted to her husband.”

Unfortunately, though women's education had become institutionalized by the end of the 19th century, the changes proposed by the male reformers could not resolve the “women question.” They had little understanding of women's lives beyond those of women in their own families. The historian Sumit Sarkar has argued that these reformers were concerned primarily with modifying relationships within their own families and sought only “limited and controlled emancipation” of their womenfolk.⁵² According to Partha Chatterjee, Indians pursued science, technology, rational economics, and Western political forms while regarding the home as the source of “true identity” that needed protection and strengthening, not transformation. These reformers were unwilling to relinquish the power of the patriarchy or redistribute wealth. They dreamt of a world where women would be educated and free from some of the worst customs of society like child marriage, *sati*, and polygamy. But at the same time, these new women would be devoted to home and family.

III

Spread of education

Initially wary about interfering in the socio-religious practices of the natives, a shift in the British government's policy towards female education was noticeable when Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India from 1848 to 1856, decided to lend his “frank and cordial support to the education of Indian women,” declaring that no single change was likely to produce more important and beneficial consequences than the introduction of education for female children.⁵³ Thereafter, Sir Charles Wood's Educational Despatch in 1854 detailed a shift in government policy by proclaiming :

The importance of female education in India cannot be overrated; and we have observed with pleasure the evidence which is now afforded of an increased desire on the part of many of the natives to give a good education to their daughters. By this means a far greater proportional impulse is imparted to the educational and moral tone of the people than by the education of men.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, this enthusiasm was greatly undermined by the uprising of 1857 and while reviewing the progress made since the Educational Despatch of 1854, the Secretary of State confessed in 1859 that, "little progress has been made with female education in India." In the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857, the British government gradually began to note the difficulties in the way of promoting female education, its effect being evident in the low scale of investments the government was either willing, or able to make in women's education.

The Government of Assam, in its effort to provide a 'frank and cordial support' for the spread of female education in the province, announced rewards in 1857 for teachers of the boys' primary schools who would form girls' classes in their schools. Utsabananda Goswami, the Deputy Inspector of Schools, Upper Assam, was the first in the Brahmaputra valley, to establish a primary school for girls in 1860-61, with twenty pupils. This was followed by the establishment of three more schools in the district of Sibsagar, by his brother, Chandra Mohan Goswami.⁵⁵ Within a span of fifteen years forty-four schools had been opened throughout the valley with an enrollment of 552.⁵⁶ Raja Futeh Singh, Extra Assistant Commissioner of Assam, Radha Mohan Goswami, the Munshi of Gauhati, Chandra Mohan Goswami, a Deputy Inspector of Schools and Gunabhiram Barua, a social reformer, evinced great interest in female education.⁵⁷ However, the Government's efforts remained half-hearted and the result was far from satisfactory. Even after a lapse of twenty years the total enrollment in girls' schools did not reach 900, largely due to the government's reluctance to spend more than a token amount. (Annexure -A for Government investment in Assam.) While commenting on the condition of female education in 1882, the Hunter Commission reported, "The proportion of girls attending schools to the entire female population is, for all India, 1 in 849. In Madras it is 1 in 403, but in Assam it is as low as 1 in 2236."⁵⁸

In line with the recommendations of the Hunter Commission of 1882, female education was provided its legitimate share of the local, municipal and provincial funds and within ten years the number of schools rose to 138 with 1,808 girls as against only 71 with 1,209 girls in 1881-82 (Annexure B & C). However, most of these schools were located in the urban areas and it was very difficult to induce the parents of the outlying villages to send their girls to schools. The knowledge imparted in the primary schools was disappointing and it was difficult to find even one female who was able to finish the middle school course. The Commissioner

of Assam, however, took the bold step of encouraging female education in the villages by granting to the *gurus* of the boys' *pathsalas* an additional amount of four annas monthly for each girl student to be brought to their schools. This plan introduced in 1885-86, had the effect of doubling the number of girls in boys' schools and by 1904 there were 21 Hindu girls and 1 Muslim girl studying in boys' secondary schools.⁵⁹ (Annexure- D)

However, the scheme of providing for higher education for girls in the province of Assam, by giving them scholarships to read in the Bethune school at Calcutta did not bear much fruit and till 1888 only one girl, having passed the upper primary scholarship at Nowgong, was reading in the Bethune school with a scholarship of Rs. 20/- per month.⁶⁰ Though four aided middle vernacular schools had been established by 1886-87, for diffusion of higher education to girls, the teachers in these schools were inferior in quality and insufficient in quantity.⁶¹ Thus for all practical purposes there was no higher education for women in Assam till this time and in fact the General Report for Public Instruction describes the closure of certain aided schools in Darrang and Sibsagar in 1888, due to the general apathy of the people towards education of girls.⁶² (Annexure-E) The Government of India, in its Report for the progress of Education in India between 1887-8 to 1891 -92 reported that, "The Northwestern Provinces and Assam show a decrease in the total number of girls under instruction; all other provinces show an increase."⁶³ The report further stated :

... in Assam the education of girls has not advanced beyond the primary stage; the return show two middle vernacular schools, but they have no pupils in the middle stage. All the rest of the schools are classed as lower primary, but a few of them contain one or two pupils who belong to higher classes. Taking all the schools together, and including girls in boy's schools, who form more than half the total number girls under instruction, there are only 5 in the middle and 30 in the upper primary stage out of a total of 5,100 in primary and secondary schools.⁶⁴

Though reports indicated an advance in female education in the next quinquennium, this was mainly due to the enterprise of the Welsh Mission in the Hills of Assam. The situation appeared to be dismal till 1886-97 with only three girls passing the middle school examination, 6 the upper primary and 35 the lower primary.⁶⁵ Of the total female

population in the province at the end of the nineteenth century which stood at more than 26 lakhs, only 4,034 received education, the average number of educated women for every thousand of the school-going age being 2.20.⁶⁶

By 1907 the percentage of girls attending schools to all those of school going age in the plains of Assam had fallen further to 1.41 %, with only one girl in four thousand reading above the lower primary level. The percentage of girls in schools, fell even to the point of zero amongst tribes where schools were yet to be started.⁶⁷ Even the missionaries, who considered educational activities to be their most important contribution to the region, realized that their measure of success in this field was not at all impressive and.. nothing but the sunny side has been presented in their communications home until the church was all deceived about this mission.⁶⁸ Things did not improve much till as late as late as 1925, when at the end of its Jubilee celebration the enrollment in the Nowgong Girls' School was only two hundred and fifty-three, including the kindergarten, the grammar school, a high school preparatory class and the teacher training class.⁶⁹ In Assam diffusion of higher education to girls remained practically stagnant until 1930 and only three middle vernacular schools were established, one each at Gauhati, Dhubri and Dibrugarh.⁷⁰ (Annexure-J)

The causes for the slow development in the progress of women's education were not far to seek. In his report on the State of Education in Bengal (1836) William Adam had written that, "A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write will soon after marriage become a widow". Adam also comments on the fear, shared by Hindus and Muslims, that "knowledge of letters" might facilitate female intrigue, a fear that haunted even the minds of the educated Assamese.⁷¹ There appeared to be concerns amongst the Assamese intelligentsia about harassing times if women were educated.

The fact that education of a female did not result in any economic benefit appears to have been one of the greatest obstacles to the spread of female education in the valley. The government assumed that since it was not likely that a large number of women in the country would obtain higher forms of remunerative occupation, female education had to rely much on the weaker stimulus supplied by the desire for education for its own sake and by comprehension of the value of intellectual culture.

Unlike education for males, education for females, did not automatically enhance the prestige and financial standing of the family. In fact, the opposite may have been true.

Notions of sex segregation and in some areas, of complete seclusion, deeply ingrained in people's minds, meant provision for female teachers and separate institutions in sufficient numbers. Moreover, the demands on women for food production and child rearing left little time for lessons and studying. In these circumstances, the educational facilities provided for women of Assam were availed only by a few enlightened families and by the so-called lower classes in society. To the rest of the population, domestic management was regarded as the sole objective of women's life. According to the observation of a district officer in Assam,

It is very difficult in the mufasil to get parents to educate their girls. They are too useful in the house, and parents think they will forget and despise ordinary household duties if they learn how to read and write. Girls thus qualified are said to be 'dushto', which I imagine, and means that they are less amendable to discipline and less likely to submit to their parents' choice of husbands.⁷²

Besides, the system of child marriage withdrew a large number of girls from school at a very early age, thereby preventing them from completing their education. The magnetic element at the core of all attraction to missionary schools appeared to have been the possibility of finding a good educated, husband. Often the missionaries have admitted that, "We have failed to appreciate the longing of the girls in our schools to get married; they care very little to whom so they may marry—only be married."⁷³ It was difficult to keep the girls long enough to give them more than the merest rudiments of education, as they were already quite grown up when they came and either they or their parents soon began to be anxious that they were married.

IV

Women's Education in the Nationalist Agenda

At a time when the 19th century contradictions regarding the nature of education to be imparted to women had not been resolved, new forces and influences were released in the 20th century to shape the contours of women's consciousness. Reform-minded Indian men, interested in developing a progressive society, envisioned women in charge of social

reform while men pursued politics at the national level. Educated women who left their ancestral homes and accompanied their husbands to their civil service postings, not only opened schools and entertained their husbands' colonial masters and friends, but also shouldered the task of social reform at a time when men were becoming obsessed with political action and were in fear of alienating the masses by pursuing social reforms.

Disillusioned by the intentions of the British Raj, the educated elite who had earlier collaborated with it chiefly in their own interests, but also with the hope that British rule would transform India on the pattern of Britain, now felt the urgent necessity to break the system of British monopoly capitalism. In their propaganda against the use of foreign goods, men sought women's help in the movement, taking care not to propagate a foreign model of womanhood. While appealing to the indigenous Indian concept of women as the embodiment and transmitter of tradition, the nationalist leaders subtly converted the socio-economic struggle against the British into a worship of the motherland, which was in turn transformed into a mother goddess. However, though nationalist politics had been feminized, election politics remained male dominated. Women had hoped that their consistent support of Congress in the Non-cooperation movement of 1920-21 and the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-32 would earn them political rewards. This did not happen. Even Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, great supporters of women's political activism, were lukewarm in their support of women's involvement in political affairs. While men feared education might cause women to "go too far," female educators promised to graduate as "professionalized housewives."

The ideological discrimination between genders on the issue of education engulfed the minds of even the highest and most influential nationalist thinkers of the country from the last decades of the nineteenth century. They showed unity in their criticism of the colonial educational policy, but looked askance at women's rights to the same education as men received. In 1897 Gopal Krishna Gokhale urged for the "Diffusion of female education" to combat "enforced ignorance and overdone religion." However, while introducing his compulsory Education Bill in the legislature in 1910 he added a rider and stated that, "I do not propose compulsion for the present for the girls, I propose compulsion only for boys. For girls, for the present and for some years to come, education will have to be on a voluntary basis" because of "the difficulties that surround the question."⁷⁴

Even British feminists like Annie Besant who had brought Indian women under the western feminist ideology, wrote in 1904,

“The national movement for girls’ education must be on national lines; it must accept the general Hindu conception of woman’s place in the national life, not the dwarfed modern view but the ancient ideal. It must see in the woman the mother and the wife, as in some cases, the learned and pious ascetic, the *Brahmavadini* of the older days... rather than girl graduates, educated for the learned professions.”⁷⁵

In her opinion,

“A sound literary knowledge of the vernacular should be given, both in reading and writing... If the Westernising, in a bad sense, of Indian men be undesirable, still more undesirable is such westernizing of Indian woman; the world cannot afford to lose the pure, lofty, tender and yet strong, type of Indian womanhood... Nothing is more necessary to the Indian wife and mother, ruler often of the Indian household that is a little village, than a knowledge of sanitary laws, of the value of food-stuffs, of nursing the sick, of simple medicines of 'first-aid' in accidents, of cookery of the more delicate kind, of household management, of keeping the accounts.”⁷⁶

Mahatma Gandhi undoubtedly played a pivotal role in changing the status of women in the early twentieth century. He believed that, “Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities... and she has the same right of liberty and freedom as he.”⁷⁷ However, he also treated women as a distinct biological category and displayed a tendency of fitting women into the pre-existing framework because of the important physical and biological differences that exist between men and women. The crucial biological difference, the fact that women bear children and nurse them, requires a different social role. While advocating equal status for women Gandhi went on to say :

Nevertheless there is no doubt that at some point there is bifurcation. Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in the form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence the vocation of the two must also be different. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities, which men need not possess. She is passive while he is active. He is the breadwinner;

she is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the caretaker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct.⁷⁸

Gandhi was an ardent supporter of compulsory education for girls. But he felt that educational curriculum should be adapted to the special need for girls in order to prepare them to be mothers and homemakers. Gandhi's insistence that women's education should prepare them for the real challenges of their daily lives was consistent with his attacks on the English system of education :

In framing any scheme of women's education, this cardinal truth must constantly be kept in mind. Man is supreme in the outward activities of a married couple and, therefore, it is in the fitness of things that he should have a greater knowledge thereof. On the other hand home life is entirely the sphere of women and, therefore, in domestic affairs, in upbringing and education of children, women ought to have more knowledge. Not that knowledge should be divided into watertight compartments, or that some branches of knowledge should be closed to anyone; but unless courses of instruction are based on a discriminating appreciation of these basic principles, the fullest life of man and woman cannot be developed.⁷⁹

Gandhi's attitude towards the issue of economic independence for women was complex. He was confident that the vast majority of women would follow the vocation of wife and mother. He advocated women entering professions such as teaching to serve society, rather than to gain access to an income that would lead to economic independence.⁸⁰ He believed that, "True, English is necessary for making a living and for active association in our political movements. I do not believe in women working for a living or undertaking commercial enterprises.. .To introduce English education in schools meant for women would only prolong our helplessness."⁸¹ However, he did support a larger role for women in public life. He believed that the women of India should have as much share in winning *Swaraj* as men, urging them to "Surrender the whole of your foreign clothing."⁸² However, Gandhi's instruction to women while asking them to participate in the political movement was to be like Sita. The British were the equivalent of Ravana, the demon, and the world would not be set right till the moral rule of Ram was restored. Such ideas appealed to his female audience, for many of whom Sita was a living legend.

The Viceroy, at the Conference of the Directors of Public Instruction held at Delhi in January 1917 admitted that, while, "It behoves to do all in our power to improve women's education, — not much can be affected without a gradual change in public opinion."⁸³ However, the Viceroy also noted that, "The cooperation of women is at least as important as the help of the enlightened men. It is they who know where the shoe pinches, and any purely man-made scheme is foredoomed to failure."⁸⁴

V

Educated women's self-view

Though it is difficult to impute motives to the women who vehemently opposed education, it cannot be denied that from the educated women's perspective, it was women, with whom women primarily interacted, who often enforced prohibition against female education. For most women, their survival depended on upholding the status quo and an educated stranger in their midst posed an obvious threat. Even if mothers were lenient with daughters, it was unlikely that mothers-in-law and other women in the father-in-law's home would be as kind. Subjects of a harsh patriarchal system, women were not in a position to oppose prevailing codes and a number of women who attended school before the 1870s were known to have hidden their knowledge from other women.⁸⁵ Those eager to learn had no recourse but to look to men who controlled their lives. For many women who emerged from the confines of the female world, their first teachers were fathers, brothers and husbands.

Educated women, at the receiving end of male patronage, reveal through their writings, the internalization of the male concepts of the new womanhood that inspired them to move forward to set up their own organizations and reorganize social reforms priorities. The self-view, which emerges, is a carefully tailored one, wherein women's call for their uplift was more in the nature of appeals to men to give them a chance to become enlightened life partners rather than making demands for women's rights. They declared that women should be able to read and write the vernacular language and preferably, some English to communicate with the ruling class, learn household skills and aspire to become good mothers and housewives.⁸⁶ They also believed that for the illiterate and uncivilised women it was perhaps better to live in forced confinement rather than exposing their true selves by clamouring for freedom. They did not think it appropriate to be self-willed because they themselves were

unable to distinguish between the good and the bad and therefore preferred to venture out only in the company of their husbands or elders.⁸⁷ Consequently, not all believed that gender relations needed modification and few really believed that total regeneration was possible.

Most women educators of the early twentieth century agreed with Gandhi that women's education must respond to the needs of their different social role. The All-India Women's Conference promoted the establishment of the Lady Irwin Home Science College in Delhi in November 1932, with the specific mission of training women teachers who could offer instruction suitable to girls. They argued that equality does not mean sameness, and to require women to follow the same curriculum as men would be to ignore the equal claim of women's special needs and thus would be, in effect, discriminatory.

The first women writings in Assamese were by the American Baptist missionary women who wrote in the *Orunodoi* and also published textbooks and tracts to be used in the girls' schools established by them. Women who studied in the missionary or the government schools in the nineteenth and twentieth century had begun to evince an interest in both social and political issues. Although most public facilities were not available to them in this regard, they did find a space now and then to write or speak. The content and quality of their work reveals the type of social subjectivity and agency that these women created for themselves. Not only the men but also educated women came to believe that,

Aryan women were independent but they were not self-willed. If ever we could attain such good qualities as they possessed, then we would also want to be independent. Consider how progressive the women of ancient times were! See how well educated Lilabati was! Was Khanawati not praised by her father-in-law because of her knowledge of astronomy? ... Education gives knowledge and noble thoughts... We know that women in olden days were experts in warfare as is seen in the case of Indra's wife Pramila, who on seeing her dear husband killed, did not hesitate to take up arms against Lord Rama. These examples affirm that women in ancient times not only excelled in literature, mathematics, astronomy, painting, warfare, horse-riding and many other arts, but were pious and possessed great qualities. They were able to distinguish clearly between the good and the evil ways. Therefore it behoved them to be independent. But we do not possess any of these qualities.

Without any virtue, without the right kind of education and without knowing rules and customs, should we venture out and expose ourselves?⁸⁸

Such was the general sentiment of educated women and girls in Assam, expressed through essays and speeches written by some schoolgirls and read at annual club meetings. One of the first Christian Assamese girls to receive a college degree, a strong-headed woman who had resisted social norms and had refused to marry, stated in a letter :

The education of women is the only way to preserve the life of our race. By the education of women we do not mean only that women shall know how to read books, write letters or pass examinations. The real meaning is to teach the women to carry on well her household and religious duties as well, and learn from the example of the great and glorious Joymoti.... First of all, a woman should learn obedience... Secondly, she should have knowledge of household arts... Thirdly, she should learn the care of children... An educated woman should not only be a partner in a man's religious life, but in everything else that interests him. ... A woman should know how to cook, weave, and sing as such accomplishments enhance her beauty...The garments needed by the family should be made by the women of the house. Girls seem to prefer crocheting and embroidering on canvas. But before these merely ornamental arts be learnt girls should be able to weave, to make their own and the families' garments, and how to darn and patch torn clothing. Think what a goddess of fortune a girl thus trained would be to her husband.⁸⁹

Kusum Kumari Devi, another schoolgirl of the Golaghat Mission School, writes:

In Assam there is an old saying, 'Buy land that is well watered, and marry a girl whose mother is good; then shall thou prosper. Men are always under the influence of women.

...we have Joymoti, who gave her life to save her lord, the brave Mula Gabharu who also sacrificed herself unto death for her motherland... There is no friend in this time of our need that can be compared to education.. Mothers present, educate your daughters... They will better help their husbands in all their activities if they are educated so they know what it is all about. These little girls will be housewives and mothers tomorrow.⁹⁰

Formal education and the development of publications intended for and written by women gave the first generation of educated Assamese women a voice. Bishnupriya Devi, Swarnalata Devi and Padmawati Devi Phukanani, wife, daughter and niece respectively of Gunabhiram Baruah were amongst the first women of Assam to write in journals and periodicals. The *Banhi* drew women contributors from the first group of educated women poets like Jamuneswari Khatoniar and Dharmeswari Devi. The *Ghar Jeuti*, the mouthpiece of the *Assam Mahila Samiti*, was the first woman's journal published from Sibsagar between 1928-31, under the joint editorship of Kanaklata Chaliha and Kamalalaya Kakati. Through their writings women communicated with each other and began to develop new social networks. Women also experienced increased opportunities for the expression of their individuality.

The second generation acted. Many educated women like Hemoprova Das, Amolprova Das, Rajabala Das and Chandraprova Saikiani were drawn into the political movement in 1921. Their campaign for women's education set in motion further attempts to establish institutions that would be supportive of a new generation of women leaders. The *Assam Mahila Samiti* formed in 1926 was the first All Assam women's organization of Assam with Chandraprova Saikiani as its organizing secretary. They articulated the needs of women, critiqued their society and the foreign rulers, and developed their own institutions. That these institutions were often as conservative as those designed by men should not be taken as a sign that these women wished to preserve the status quo. Rather it should be taken as evidence that they understood their subordinate position very well. Hemoprova Das, while addressing the Jubilee celebrations of the Nowgong Mission School in 1925, compared the status of girls fifty years back and now and regretted that, "I see no improvement or advancement; rather conditions are worse. The girls of today have no health. They are weak and can do no work. Being educated, they are too fond of clothes and showing off. Girls of fifty years ago were healthy and could work."⁹¹

Conclusion

Although there is little doubt that legislations in the 18th and 19th nineteenth centuries had considerably improved the status of women through the banning of practices like *sati*, child marriage and the legalization of widow remarriage, the social reformers of the period appeared to have little comprehension of the principles of organization, hierarchy and internal structures that characterized the exclusive, secluded

world of women. As male apprehensions of female power were translated into denigrations of this world as mystical, non-rational and unenlightened, all interventions for change based on their limited understanding of the reality lead to the ideal in keeping with the needs of male society. They advocated a type of education for women that aimed at providing the emerging middle class society with women cultured in Victorian values, thereby bringing them even more firmly within the ambit of the male world and value system. The perpetuation of this ideal has, in fact, resulted in the educational stereotyping of girls, the influence of which continues to the present day. Neither Gandhi nor contemporary leaders of the women's movement seem to have considered the possible negative consequences of sexual segregation in the professional world.

In spite of the fact that the provision of educational opportunities for women has continued to be an important part of the national endeavor in the field of education since India's Independence, occupational differentiation on the basis of sex has resulted in downgrading those professions that have a numerical predominance of women. One of the eight Millennium Development goals adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2000 was the promotion of gender equality, empowerment of women and the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary schooling, preferably by 2005 but no later than 2015.⁹²

Unfortunately, despite significant results produced by promotion of education, gender disparity persists with uncompromising tenacity, more so in the rural areas and among the disadvantaged communities. This is not only a matter of national anxiety and concern but also a matter of national conscience. To answer questions such as, how far has education succeeded in making women conscious of the gender asymmetry as enforced by the traditional framework or how far has the involvement of women in the process of education generated a new thought process and helped in the process of empowerment, one has only to look at the impact of women's empowerment in the State of Assam in recent times. Stressing on women's opportunities rather than capabilities, the Human Development Report captures gender inequality in three key areas :

1. Political participation and decision-making power, as measured by women and men's percentage shares of parliamentary seats.
- 2.. Economic participation and decision-making power as indicated by two indicators: women's and men's percentage shares of positions as legislators, senior officials and managers and women's and men's percentage shares of professional and technical positions.

3. Power over economic resources as measured by the estimated earned income of women and men.

Judging by the development of gender equality in these three areas the Millennium Development goal of the UN for gender equality, 2000, remains an illusion even today.

The importance of the nature of education imparted to women and its relevance to women's empowerment can be highlighted from the fact that although Assam has made great strides in women's education with a female literacy figure of 56.14% against the all India figure of 54.16% by 2001,⁹³ it has not translated into any significant progress in the empowerment of women in the absence of a change in the mindset, which is a sine-qua-non for women's emancipation.

Taking the case of political empowerment, while all political parties talk of giving 33% reservation to women candidates in the legislative bodies, the figures of women contestants in the May 10 Assembly election in Assam, held in 2001, present a sordid picture. The Assam Assembly that has a total of 126 members includes only 9 female members, a percentage of 7.1 %, a percentage that is lower than the percentage of female members in the Indian Parliament, which stands at 9.3%.⁹⁴ While evaluating the progress of gender equality in terms of employment of women in the organised sector of the State, the figure of 3,21,900 or 29.7% at the end of December 2002 indicates a decrease as compared to the 2001 figure, which stood at 3,62,000 or 32% of the total employment.⁹⁵

Therefore it may not be wrong to conclude that the education provided to women in the 19th and 20th centuries attempted to 'reform' women rather than to reform the social conditions, which oppressed them. Education in no way attempted to develop a strategy that would ensure the elimination of the whole web of psychosocial relations in which masculinity and femininity had been formed. The concept of spheres, which permeated through education provided in the nineteenth century, resulted in the association of certain values with the cult of true womanhood. Women, it was believed, are born to serve and be submissive, and are to be educated into becoming better wives and mothers to Western educated men. Despite the initial enthusiasm in breaking down traditional barriers, the movement for women's education hinged round the theme that women's main sphere of activity is the home because of the natural division of labour. Even today, women who believe that their job revolves round clearly defined tasks, seek occupational roles that stress the aspect of service and cooperation with men, not competition.

This limits her range of occupations to those, which are 'feminine' and compatible with the demands for her primary gender role of a housewife and a mother. As education sought to convince women that service to the husband is a woman's 'Dharma' not her slavery, all efforts to empower women in the last few decades have failed to show satisfactory results.

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- 76 *Ibid*, pp 316-17.
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- 79 *Harijan*, October 12, 1934, *The Role of Women*, pp.5-6.
- 80 M.S., Patel, *The Educational Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, Bombay, p. 282.
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- 83 Bhattacharya, et.al., ed., *op. cit.*, Report of the Calcutta University Commission 1919, Vol. IV, Part II, Chapter XXXVI, pp364-473.
- 84 *Ibid*.
- 85 Geraldine Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India, Women in Modern India*, *op. cit.*, p.33.
- 86 *Bamabodhini Patrika* is replete with such essays.

- ⁸⁷ Nagen Saikia, ed., *Asam Bandhu*, Guwahati, 2nd Reprint, *op. cit.*, Purna Kanta Sarma, *Narir Mukatawastha* (Bama Rachana, An article written in the name of a lady), p 225.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 226-27 .
- ⁸⁹ Elizabeth Vickland, *Women of Assam*, Philadelphia, 1928, pp 104-108.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid*, pp 109-118.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁹² *Human Development Report 2005*, New Delhi, 2005, p. 39.
- ⁹³ Census of India, 2001.
- ⁹⁴ *Human Development Report*, New Delhi, 2005, p. 301.
- ⁹⁵ Directorate of Employment and Craftsmen Training, Assam.
- ⁹⁶ Uma Shankar Jha & Premlata Pujari, ed., *Indian Women Today: Tradition, Modernity and Challenge*, Vol I, New Delhi, 1st edition 1996, 2nd edition, 1998, p.89.

Annexure-A
Expenditure on Female Education in British India in 1881-82

Provinces	*Expenditure from Provincial Funds	Expenditure from Local or Municipal Funds	Expenditure from fees	Expenditure from other sources	*Total expenditure on female education	#Total expenditure on education from Public funds (Provincial, Local and Municipal)	Percentage of expenditure in columns 2 and 3 to total expenditure on education from Public Funds	Percentage of Provincial expenditure in columns 2 to total expenditure on education from Provincial Funds	Percentage of expenditure in columns 6 to total expenditure on education	Remarks	
	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	8	9	10	11	12
Madras	51,211	8,636	12,693	1,53,629	2,26,169	16,32,345	3.66	22.64	5.22	6.52	
Bombay	49,780	51,619	9,518	67,790	1,78,707	19,82,535	5.11	27.86	4.37	5.21	
Bengal	76,819	2,540	17,772	1,26,637	2,23,768	26,80,510	2.96	34.33	2.90	3.56	
North-Western Provinces and Oudh	32,856	5,752	1,601	38,873	79,082	15,77,695	2.44	41.54	3.54	3.84	
Punjab	32,825	21,985	2,931	47,187	1,04,928	12,31,047	4.45	31.28	5.21	6.44	
Central Provinces	6,879	14,150	-	4,930	25,959	5,28,802	3.98	26.46	1.90	3.85	
Assam	643	1,698	24	3,239	5,604	2,05,076	1.14	11.47	.45	1.80	
Coorg	120	-	-	110	230	20,293	.59	52.17	.91	1.01	
Hyderabad Assigned Districts	1,745	1,509	-	270	3,524	3,24,381	1.00	49.51	.74	.99	
Total For India a	2,52,878	1,07,889	44,539	4,42,665	8,47,971b	1,01,82,684	3.54	29.82	3.57	4.65	

* Excluding expenditure on Schools for Europeans and Eurasians.
Including expenditure on Professional and Technical Institutions and on Schools for Europeans and Eurasians.

a. Excluding British Burma and all Native States that administer their own system of education.

Source: W.W.Hunter, Report of the Indian Education Commission, Calcutta, 1884.

Annexure-B
Female Education in Assam in 1882

	Government Institutions			Other Institutions, Aided and Unaided (under inspection)			Mixed Schools	Total	Total Expenditure
	Normal Schools	Secondary Schools	Primary Schools	Normal Schools	Secondary Schools	Primary Schools			
Number of Institution	-	-	-	-	-	71	Unknown	71	Rs. 5,604
Number of Pupils	-	-	-	-	-	1,209	468	1,677	-

Source: W. W. Hunter, Report of the Indian Education Commission, Calcutta, 1884.

Annexure-C
Results of the Examination in Girls' Schools, 1881-82

Provinces	Class of Institutions	Number of pupils on the rolls on March 31st, 1882 ††	Total number examined in departmental or other prescribed examination	Number passed	Percentage of successful scholars to those presented for examination	Number of trained mistresses who passed for certificates in 1881-82
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
North-Western Provinces & Oudh	Secondary	66	66	31	46.97	-
	Primary	8,726	984	520	52.84	-
	Normal	89	-	-	-	7
	Total	8,883	1,050 †	551	52.48	7
Punjab	Secondary	8	-	-	-	-
	Primary	9,207	171	51	29.82	-
	Normal	138	-	-	-	-
	Total	9,353	171	51	29.82	-
Central Provinces	Secondary	-	-	-	-	-
	Primary	3,208	527	270	51.23	-
	Normal	17	7	2	28.57	2
	Total	3,225	534	272	50.93	2
Assam	Primary	1,209	1	1	100	-
	Normal	-	-	-	-	-
	Total	1,209	1	1	100	-

Source: W.W.Hunter, Report of the Indian Education Commission, Calcutta, 1884.

Annexure-D
Number of Girls in Boys' Schools For Each District

Number of girls in boys schools	Secondary	Primary	Special	Total
Cachar	1	151	—	152
Sylhet	—	766	—	766
Khasi Hills	48	553	9	610
Garo Hills	—	16	—	16
Goalpara	1	172	—	173
Kamrup	—	331	—	331
Darrang	—	15	—	15
Nowgong	—	87	—	87
Sibsagar	—	282	—	282
Lakhimpur	—	30	—	30
Total	50	2,403	9	2,462
Corresponding numbers last year	37	1,850	10	1,897

Source: J. Wilson, General Report on Public Instruction in Assam for the year 1887

Annexure- E
Table showing closure of certain aided schools in Darrang and Sibsaagar District, 1888

	1885-86			1886-87		
	Schools	Pupils	Average Number to each School	Schools	Pupils	Average number to each school
Aided Middle Vernacular	3	87	29	4	123	30
Local Fund Upper Primary	1	23	23	1	26	26
Aided ditto ditto	1	36	36	1	24	24 ¹
Lower Primary- Departmental	1	26	26	1	29	29
Local Fund	104	1,537	14	104	1,609	15
Aided	42	848	20	47	1,025	21.
Unaided	26	328	12	12	182	15
Total	178	2,885	16	170	3,018	17

Source: J. Wilson, General Report on Public Instruction in Assam for the year 1887.

Annexure -F
Percentage of Female Scholars in relation to Female Population,
1886-87 and 1891-92

Provinces	1886-87		1891-92	
	1	2	3	4
	Total female scholars in public institutions	Percentage of column(1) to the female population of school-going age (census 1881)	Total female scholars in public institutions	Percentage of column(3) to the female population, of school-going age (census 1891)
Madras	64,635	2.76	93,905	3.47
Bombay	47,300	2.81	67,432	3.46
Bengal	81,592	1.58	88,731	1.61
North-Western Provinces and Oudh	11,358	.35	10,938	.32
Punjab	11,070	.85	12,002	.83
Central Provinces	5,678	.66	7,833	.80
Upper Burma	—	—	4,420	1.90
Lower Burma	12,852	4.90	14,246	4.32
Assam	5,184	1.45	5,136	1.29
Coorg	486	4.16	725	6.2
Hyderabad Assigned Districts	1,413	.72	2,020	.95

Source: Progress of Education in India, 1887-88 to 1891-92.

Annexure - G
Proportion of Girls in Public Institution, 1886-87, 1891-92 and 1896-97

Province	1886-87		1891-92		1896-97	
	Total	Percentage of Total School Age	Total	Percentage of Total School Age	Total	Percentage of School Age
Madras	64,635	2.76	93,905	3.47	107,465	3.98
Bomay	47,300	2.81	67,432	3.46	71,053	3.63
Bengal	81,592	1.58	88,731	1.61	105,919	1.93
N.W.P. and Oudh	11,358	.35	10,938	.32	12,114	.36
Punjab	11,070	.85	12,002	.83	13,489	.94
Central Provinces	5,678	.66	7,833	.80	10,797	1.11
Burma	12,852	4.90	18,666	3.33	26,409	4.67
Assam	5,184	1.45	5,136	1.29	8,276	2.09
Coorg	486	4.16	725	6.20	775	6.80
Berar	1,413	.72	2,020	.95	3,709	1.76
Total	241,568	1.58	307,388	1.80	360,006	2.10

Source: Progress of Education in India, 1892-93 to 1896-97, Chapter IX, pp. 282-313.

Annexure-H
Girls in Colleges and Special Schools, 1896-97

Province	Arts Colleges	Professional Colleges	Training Schools	Arts Schools	Medical Schools	Other Special Schools
Madras	16	2	320	30	25	518
Bombay	18	20	162	19	1	5
Bengal	33	14	475	-	44	4
N.W.P. and Oudh	15		83	-	-	54
Punjab	-	7	-	-	4	237
Central Provinces	-	-	23	-	-	-
Burma	5	-	87	-	-	171
Assam	-	-	18	-	-	10
Coorg	-	-	-	-	-	-
Berar	-	-	2	-	-	-
Total	87	43	1,170	49	74	999
Total for 1891-92	45	31	819	51	87	323

Source: Progress of Education in India, 1892-93 to 1896-97 Chapter IX, pp. 282-313.

Annexure I
Table showing the number of girls in the Nowgong Station School who appeared and passed in the examinations in 1900

Examination and Year	Number that appeared in the examination	Number that passed the examination
Upper Primary-1898-99	1	1
1899-1900	2	1
Lower Primary-1898-99	3	3
1899-1900	-	-

Source : Report of the sixth session of the Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union Conference, Gauhati, 1900, Report from the Nowgong Field.

Annexure - J
Girls in Public Art Colleges, Secondary and Primary Schools and in Boys' School in 1915-1916, as compared to Indian Figures

	1881-82		1886-87		1891-92		1896-97		1901-02		1906-07		1911-12		1915-16	
	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India
Girls in Public Arts College	-	6	-	5	-	44	-	87	-	177	-	160	-	279	-	489
Girls in Public Secondary Schools			173	25,75 9	92	35,242	95	40,023	380	41,582	-	61,237	-	63,411	2,55 1	93,505
Girls in Public Primary Schools	1,59 3	125,8 38	4,991	179,4 18	5,008	270,802	8,153	317,561	8,007	348,510	-	513,248	-	785,511	24,73 0	993,198
Girls in Boys' School															14,38 3	450,950

Source: C/f Sabyachachi Bhattacharya, Joseph Bara, Chinna Rao Yagati, B.M. Sankhder, ed., *Development of Women's Education in India, 1850-1920*, Government of India, Resolution in the Education Department on the Secretary of State's Despatch, No. 191, (Public), 5 November 1915, Education department, Proceedings, October 1917, Figures collected from Tables 9,10,11 & 12, pp. 546-49.

Annexure - K

**Table showing the percentage of Female Candidates contesting
the Election to the Assam Assembly in 2001**

Name of Party	Total No. of Candidates	No. of Female Candidates	Percentage
Congress	126	15	11.9
Assam Gana Parishad	75	4	5.33
BJP	46	1	2.17
CPI(M)	22	1	4.54
CPI	19	1	5.26
Total	288	22	8

Source: Sentinel, May 5, 2001, p. 3

Annexure - L

**Table showing Employment of Women in Organised Sector in
the State of Assam**

Year	Public Sector		Private Sector		Public & Private Sector		Percentage share in Organised Sector
	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	
1998	71,100	5,29,100	2,48,500	5,22,600	3,19,600	10,52,100	30.9
1999	75,800	5,34,000	2,78,600	5,47,400	3,54,400	10,81,400	32.7
2000	78,900	5,35,100	2,74,200	5,75,800	3,53,100	11,10,900	31.8
2001	75,400	5,25,900	2,86,600	6,05,000	3,62,000	11,31,000	32.0
2002(P)	77,400	5,30,400	2,44,500	5,53,700	3,21,900	10,84,100	29.7