

## **Educational Transformations of Women in Colonial Assam: An Overview**

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### **Abstract**

Education is the backbone of a nation; it plays an important role in the progress and development of a society. During the ancient and medieval period of India, education was provided to students through traditional institutions, such as 'tols', 'pathshalas', 'maktabs' and 'madrassas'. The traditional education system eventually came to an end with the arrival of the British, and modern education was started in India. The recommendations of the Woods Despatch, and Hunter Commission in the subsequent period were some of the remarkable steps for a radical change and development of Indian education. Some provisions of those acts also contributed towards the advancement of women education. However, it took a long time to realize the importance of female education. In the case of Assam, the women's education did not receive much attention in the conservative society of the state. During the colonial period, unprecedented reforms were introduced in the field of women's education in Assam. Gradually schools and colleges for women were established with the efforts of reformers. Women, who were once confined to the four walls, broke the barrier of conservative society and started a new era by pursuing modern education. However, despite the reforms, it is undeniable that the majority of women in colonial Assam were deprived of quality education, as evident from the female literacy rates of the time. This paper makes an attempt to study the Educational Transformations of Women in Colonial Assam.

**Keywords:-** Colonial Assam, Women Education, Christian Missionaries, Ahom administration

### **1. Introduction:-**

Before the establishment of colonial rule, women's education was severely limited in Assam, with little emphasis on its promotion. Formal education for women was nearly absent within the traditional educational institution of the time. Later, under the influence of New Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankardeva, women were allowed to participate in the namghar, even though only spiritual knowledge was imparted there. A few exceptional institutions, such as 'barrajar parhahali', founded by barraja Phuleshwari Konwari (wife of Swargadeo Shiva Singha) made efforts towards women's education during the Ahom period. However, apart from the upper class, majority of women were deprived of formal education at that time. The ahom administration, which was almost devastated by the Moamoria rebellion and the Burmese invasion, took no steps towards the development of women's education. In fact education became secondary at that time. This was followed by the advent of colonial rule and they seized political power in Assam. In order to serve their own interests, they try to emphasize the development and spread of modern education. In the later period, some measures were also taken for the development of women's education. However, it took a long time to break the grip of patriarchal norms and move towards the development of education for women in Assam.

## **2. Objectives of Study:**

The main objectives of the present paper are as follows:

1. To study the growth and development of women education in colonial Assam
2. To know the government initiative to the development of women education in colonial era
3. To reflect the role of Christian missionaries and progressive Assamese youth towards women education

## **3. Research Methodology:**

This study is purely descriptive in nature, and based on secondary sources, collected from books, journals, research articles etc.

## **4. Discussion and Results:-**

The British east India Company acquired the territory of Assam in 1826, which led to several socio-economic changes in the state. The impact of Bengal renaissance had already been observed in the social sphere of Assam. David Scott, the then representative of Governor General, took the initiative to develop the education sector of the state and established eleven schools, mostly in lower Assam (Barpujari, 1960, p.104). Subsequently with the efforts of British government, Christian missionaries and progressive youth, modern education gradually spread among Assamese women. This marked the beginning of a new era in the history of women's education in Assam.

### **• Role of Christian Missionaries:-**

The Christian Missionaries played the most important role in the spread of female education in Assam. The social status of women at that time deteriorated significantly due to the prevalence of many evil practices like polygamy, child marriage widowhood and other customs. The missionaries considered it a sacred duty to uplift the status of women from such a degraded position. Realizing that this position could only be changed through education they made efforts to educate the women's of the society (Goswami, 2012). "The American Baptist Missionary led by Oliver T. Cutter and Nathan Brown arrived in Sadia in 1836, within a few months they established a school there with separate classrooms for boys and girls. These missionaries were able to establish three school in Nagaon, five in Kamrup and fourteen in Sivasagar by 1845, with an average attendance of 347 students"(Baruah, 1985/2013). Following their footsteps women missionaries like Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cutter set up a girls' school at Sivasagar in 1840. Similarly Bronson and Barker established girls' school at Nagaon (1843) and Gauhati (1850) respectively, and making invaluable contribution to the field of women's education in Assam (Barpujari, 1960). In addition to their academic studies, girls students attending missionary schools were also instructed in sewing, knitting, spinning and other domestic skills (Barpujari, 1960).

Nevertheless, the women missionaries had to make considerable sacrifices to promote women's education in conservative society of Assam. Meanwhile very few women were

interested in studying, and some were opposed to going beyond the prevailing societal norms and pursuing formal education. "In such circumstances, missionary women's made an effort to educate women through "Zenana School", where lady teachers went from home to home to teach women"(Goswami, 2012).

The endeavors of female missionary resulted gradual increase in the number of girls school in Assam. "However, due to lack of qualified women teachers, they faced significant challenges in the field of teaching. Realizing that, Mary Carpenter, the prolific English reformer, who visited India from 1865 to 70, recommended the establishment of normal school. As a result, multiple Normal and Girls schools were subsequently established different parts of Assam."(Dahal, 2021)

The introduction of printing press by American Baptist Missionary, followed by the publication of newspapers and magazines, played a vital role in the emancipating Assamese women. The first Assamese magazine 'Orunodoi' published from Sivasagar mission press in 1846, made an important contribution towards the advancement of female education in Assam. The magazine was primarily published to spread Christianity, though it also played a role in shaping public opinion against major obstacles to female education, such as child marriage and polygamy. Some leading Assamese elites of the time, such as Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah and Hemchandra Baruah, created awareness by discussing the issues of women's liberation in the pages of Orunodoi and were actively involved in the advancement and promotion of female education.

Anandaram, the pioneer of female education in Assam did not end his responsibility only by merely writing about women's issues in Orunodoi, "He broke all the barriers of conservative society and sent his daughter, Padmavati, to receive formal education at the age of five" (Goswami, 2012). Neglecting prevailing customs, he personally taught his wife Mahindri Devi, at home. "He believed that women could be liberated only through education." (Guha, 1991). Following in his footsteps, "Gunabhiram Baruah also enrolled his 9 year old daughter Swarnalata, in Bethune school at Calcutta. Through Orunodoi he supported female education and pointed out that Shastras never discouraged female education and that the corrupt practices which had crept in at a later date had deprived Hindu women from acquiring education."(Goswami, 2012, p.211)

Haliram Dhekial Phukan, author of the 'Assam Buronji', "supported female education through his letter published anonymously in the missionary newspaper, Samachar Darpn", even before Orunodoi.(Guha 1991, p.208)

"Hemchandra Baruah, another exponent of female education in Assam, emphasized the importance of education for women liberation in his article titled 'stree siksha', published in Orunodai" (Sarma, 2019)."

These pioneers realized that uneducated women constituted the primary obstacle to the progress and development of a society. They believed that education was the key solution to this problem. Through newspapers and magazines of their time they created awareness to

revive the dignity of neglected Assamese women and made great efforts for the promotion, dissemination and development of women's education.

These leading elites were instrumental in spreading modern education among the women of Assam, leading to the emergence of many Assamese women writers during that period. Remarkably, a significant number of educated women during that period were constrained by patriarchal thinking. "They could never go beyond the patriarchal norms of the society. For example, the leading women writer of the time Padmavati Devi, daughter of Anandaram, expressed patriarchal views in her book 'Sudhamar Upakhyan'(1884), including the word like 'satidharma' and 'pativrata'."(Phukan, 2011). Vishnupriya Devi, another writer of the time wrote 'nitikatha', a moral book intended for children (Phukan, 2011). However, in contrast to the contribution of those progressive Assamese, it is surprising that some educated people of the time argued in magazines and newspapers against women's education. They wanted to deprive women from education and confined them to household chores."

In 1886, Balinarayan Bora published an article titled 'Tirotar Ban Ki' in Mou, in which he displayed a complete disinterest towards female education." (Sarma, 2019). "Later he wrote that educating the womenfolk was even more dangerous than the Burmese atrocities in Assam"(Goswami, 2012, p. 211). In the same way "Purnakanta Sharma also wrote women's education would pollute this beautiful world and that it was god's wish that women should always dependent on men"(Goswami,2012, p.212). Examples of contemptuous attitude towards women's education were evident in the pages of 'Assam Bandhu'. "In the article entitled 'Grihinar kartabya o stree siksha' of the magazine Ratneswar Mahanta, the author described giving birth, weaving and cooking as the primary duties of a housewife."(Phukan, 2011).

"Phanidhar Gogoi, expressed his views in 'Jonaki' stating that he is in favour of women's education but strongly opposes the prevailing system, which allows women to pass B.A and M.A examination and encourages them to compete with their husbands".(Phukan, 2011)l On the other hand "Lakshminath Bezbaruah in his book 'Rus Deshat Tini Rati', expressed the view that the purpose of women's education should be to become good mothers and wives rather than solely competing with men in the employment field." (Phukan, 2011). Such discriminatory comments published in newspapers and magazines by the educated men reflect the challenges that reformers of the time had to overcome in promoting education among the women of Assam. Despite all those obstacles, the development of women's education still progressed, but at a slow pace.

- **Government Initiative:-**

Women's education was gradually expanding in the state through the attempts made by missionaries and progressive youth but no specific steps were taken by the government for its development till 1854. The need for female education was first addressed in the woods despatch of 1854. "Following this despatch, government took the initiative to establish first girls' elementary school in Assam at Sivasagar in 1860-61, under Deputy Inspector of Schools Utsabananda Goswami."(Barpujari, 1960, p.129). Later, similar emphasis was given on establishing girls' schools in Guwahati and Nagaon. Thus in 1880's the number of elementary girls' school in Assam increased to 44.(Nath & Burhagohain, 2021, p. 220).

The Hunter Commission of 1882 strongly recommended taking necessary steps to promote female education. In this context, there was an emphasis on establishing secondary school in Assam. "In 1884 a girls M.E school was set up in Shillong, and in the next year, the first girls M.V school was established in Dibrugarh"(Nath and Burhagohain, 2021, p. 220). Despite the efforts made by the government, missionaries and leading elite of the time the development of women's education progressed slowly.

From the beginning of the 20th century, the number of institutes of higher education for women had gradually increased. "In her PhD. Thesis 'Women and Education in Colonial Assam' Manjula Phukan noted that prior to 1912 there was no girls' high school in Assam. In 1913, The Welsh Missionary opened first girls' high school at Silchar. By 1936- 37 the number of girls high school increased to thirteen and with an enrollment of 3664 students". (Phukan, 2011)

The most important addition of the history of women's education in Assam was the establishment of Cotton College at Guwahati in 1901. However, nearly two decades of its establishment, the rate of women enrolment was very low. Leela Devi was the first female student to enroll in Cotton college in 1930(Phukan, 2011). In 1935 Lady Keane College was established at Shillong. This was followed by establishment of 3 girls college, namely St.mary's college at Shillong, Handique Girls College at Gauhati in 1939 and Sylhet Women College, which played a vital role in educating the women during colonial period. (Phukan, 2011).

During the freedom struggle of India Mahatma Gandhi emphasized on the promotion of female education. Inspired by Gandhi's idea many women of the time interested to pursue education. S.L.Baruah in her "A Comprehensive History Of Assam "mentioned that "Under the influence of the teaching of Gandhiji, even the mothers were only to eager to send their daughters to schools"(Baruah, 1985/2013, p. 627). Gradually the number of girls student in the colleges and schools began to increase.

Later many Assamese girls went to Calcutta for their studies. "Hemoprabha Dutta was the first Assamese girls, who passed F.A from Bethune College of Calcutta. She also served as the headmistress of the Model girls' school in Dibrugarh, which was established in 1898. Similarly Sudhalata Baruah and Sukhalata Baruah were the first women Graduates and M.A degree holder from Assam". (Nath and Burhagohain, 2021, p.221). It was Indira Miri who pursued her education in England and later became the principal of Jorhat B.T College.

Many educated Assamese women endeavored to enhance the social status of women through education. Among them, "Chandraprabha Saikiani from Kamrup district established a girl's school in Akaya village at the age of thirteen. Later she participated in the national movement. In 1926 Chandraprabha formed "Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity", which dealt with major issues of the society and focused on women's education. Chandraprabha's sister Rajaniprabha was the first lady doctor of Assam (Chandraprabha Saikiani n.d.). "Rajabala Das was another pioneering figure in female education in Assam. She was the founding principal of "Handique Girls College "established in the year 1939. Rajabala's valuable efforts enabled the college to obtain affiliation with Calcutta University. After the establishment of Gauhati University the college came under it".(Gayan, 2016).During that time many Assamese women

were more actively involved in the health sector also. "Lakhiprobha Bora worked as a lady doctor in Dhubri. Similarly, Durgabasini Das was employed in a government hospital. Notably, Sachibrata Roy was the first Assamese women to join the civil service."(Phukan, 2011). Therefore, it can be seen that the social status of Assamese women changes significantly after getting education.

**Female Literacy Rate in Assam (In Percentage)**

C/Y	Persons	Males	Females	Gender gap
1901	4.20	7.50	0.60	6.90
1911	5.60	10.00	0.80	9.20
1921	7.10	12.20	1.40	10.80
1931	8.60	14.40	1.90	12.50
1941	13.10	20.80	4.40	16.40
1951	18.20	27.40	7.90	19.50
1961	32.58	44.28	18.61	25.67
1971	33.32	42.96	22.31	20.65
1981	–	–	–	–
1991	53.42	62.34	43.70	18.64
2001	64.28	71.93	56.03	15.90
2011	73.18	78.81	67.27	11.54

*(Census of India, as cited in Konwar, 2015)*

The above table displays the literacy rate of women from 1901 to 2011. The data indicates that the literacy rate of women increased slowly during the colonial period. It gradually improved after independence. However, the literacy rate of women in Assam remains lower than that of men.

**5. Conclusion:**

From the above discussion, we come to know that, despite the conservative societal barriers of Colonial Assam, women's education gradually spread throughout the state, with the efforts of British Government, Missionaries and the Leading Elite of the time. Nevertheless, its development was slow and occurred quite late. During the colonial period, some educated women went beyond the grip of patriarchal society and made efforts to improve the status of women. After Independence, the government of Assam implemented numerous initiatives aim at educating the women of the state. The establishment of Gauhati University in 1948 brought

new impetus to the field of higher education in Assam. Many schemes have also been launched by the government of Assam to remove the obstacles to women's emancipation. However, in many areas of Assam, the literacy rate among women is still relatively low, as compared to that of men due to lack of awareness. The progress of the state will only be possible if we eliminate societal inequalities and provide equal opportunity to every gender with regards of education.

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