

Lakshminath Bezbaroa and His Times:

Language, Literature and Modernity in Colonial Assam

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis titled “**Lakshminath Bezbaroa and His Times: Language, Literature and Modernity in Colonial Assam**” is the outcome of my own research carried out in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India, under the supervision of Arupjyoti Saikia in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India.

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Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis titled “**Lakshminath Bezbaroa and His Times: Language, Literature and Modernity in Colonial Assam**”, submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Gitashree Tamuly, student at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, embodies research work carried out under my supervision. The present thesis or any part thereof has not been submitted anywhere else for award of any degree or diploma.



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Abstract

The thesis is an attempt to write a biography of Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), an acknowledged writer of modern Assamese literature, situating him against the broader social history of the time. While exploring language, literature, religion, history, folklore, gender and all-pervading cultures of mundane life, from cooking to child-rearing, the study's prime focus is on the question of modernity in south Asia, particularly Assam. It tries to explore the real and psychological worlds of the modern intelligentsia of Assam in colonial time, who consciously chose to live their lives in particular ways, but always found themselves among certain dilemmas, contradictions, confusions, anxieties and doubts. Initiating its journey with Dinanath, the father of Lakshminath, a representative of pre-colonial gentry, who had to negotiate with the colonial time in its early days, the study's central concern is the changing panorama and perspectives of life in colonial modern situations.

It tries to understand the formation of the regional Assamese identity, and its complex relations with caste, ethnicity, language, religion and the emerging notion of a broader identity of being an Indian. The study tries to understand the cherished ideology of *matribhasa* and nationalism against the concrete situations of the life of a celebrated crusader of linguistic nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century- Assam, who fortuitously had to live a long expatriate life. Thus, it tries to examine and question such dominant ideologies of the time from within.

Rather than perceiving language and literature as disinterested activities of the nationalist intelligentsia of the time, the thesis explores the economic and political aspects of such seemingly apolitical ventures. Coming away from the simplistic notion of a self-conscious intelligentsia's concerted attempt to form an Assamese identity, the thesis examines

multitudinous components which became interactive in the field, and became crucial in shaping the intellectual- cultural activities of the time.

It explores the print world in Assamese as a gateway to modernity in colonial situation, and tries to concentrate on the issues like literary-historiographical mentalities, celebration of platonic love theme as a new version of *bhakti* or emotional attachment with God, experimentations and hybridization of existing and new genres, exploration of history as an inspirational force of assertion of identity and above all, emergence of a reading public, which subsequently came to form the public opinion. The study also examines the historical necessity and processes involved in it, by which, the society explores its heroes of different kinds, whether it be a religious *guru*, *mahapurush*, a great person, '*jatir janak*', a begetter of '*jati*' or an authorial figure, both from the past and the present. It examines the process of elevation of such celebrated figures, and focuses on the journey of an author like Lakshminath from an anonymous writer to a canonized, larger- than- life figure in the realm of the literary. Finally, the thesis explores the making of cultural symbols like singing a particular song in particular places and ways, as attestation of one's claim to the Assamese identity.

Notes

All necessary translations from Lakshminath Bezbaroa and other vernacular authors are of my own, unless otherwise indicated.

Though being conscious about the colonial legacy of the terms, I prefer to use Assam and Assamese, for their familiarity except in cases where *Asam* or *Asamiya* has become part of any nomenclature, like the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* or *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*. Similarly, Bengali rather than Bangla and Oriya rather than Odia are used.

Keeping in mind the settings of the times described here I am using old spellings like Calcutta, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Orissa etc. though the current spelling Guwahati is used to indicate my own location in the city at this moment. However, if it seems necessary, the old spelling Gauhati may also appear as part of bibliographic entry and citation.

To keep a unified spelling, I have chosen the spelling ‘Borooah’ for the whole text, except in bibliography and citation. However, for the title of the protagonist of the thesis, the spelling ‘Bezbaroa’ is preferred.

In this thesis the term ‘vernacular’ is used as a descriptive term and any derogative meaning or any normative association it may contain has nothing to do with it.

INTRODUCTION

Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), a versatile writer of modern Assamese literature, romantic¹ by spirit and nationalist by ideology, is the central concern of this study. Emerging in the last decade of the nineteenth and first four decades of the twentieth century as a chief publicist in Assamese literature, Lakshminath produced songs, poems, essays, comical and historical plays, short stories, novel, biographies, satirical compositions, cartoons, philosophical discussions, literary criticism and almost all such genres of literature of the time, apart from editing and publishing a periodical named *Banhi*. The *Banhi* became instrumental for him in participation and intervention in social, religious, literary, linguistic and political debates through which modernity, nationality and literary and intellectual lives of Assam of his time articulated and shaped themselves. Living his life as a true cosmopolitan and incorporating experiences from a vast panorama of life, nonetheless, he remained an Assamese nationalist, though without showing any contradiction with the growing sense of being an Indian at the same time. He, in his life-time emerged in the realm of Assamese public life as a triumphant figure and came to be taken as an animating force.

A study of his life essentially encapsulates an intermediary period between the nineteenth and the twentieth century India. He experienced the spectacular expansion of colonial rule in

¹The term 'romantic' is used here simply to indicate Lakshminath's belief in the indomitable and transforming power of imagination. Later, in various occasions, the thesis has discussed Lakshminath's engagement with the cult of past, idealization, folk narratives, love, feeling and patriotism, all having their associations with Romanticism as a literary and philosophical movement. As a matter of fact, Romantic themes, approach, forms and ideas were very much common in Assamese literature in the time of Lakshminath as a whole. Lakshminath, in his autobiography, harked back to the English Romantics like Shelly, Keats and Byron as his literary inspiration. [See Bezbaroa. Lakshminath, "Mor Jivan Sowaran", Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part I. Edited by Atulchandra Hazarika. Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 1968, pp. 50-51.] Though in Europe Romanticism developed partly as a response to Enlightenment Rationalism, it varies from country to country. In colonial situations of India, pressing social and cultural needs were sometimes creatively negotiated within the ideology of Romanticism. Adoption or adaptation of Romantic ideas or forms in Indian literature, and by Lakshminath may be an interesting story to be explored. Considering the wide range of responses of the intelligentsia towards Romanticism, it may be possible to think of an Indian version or several Indian versions of it. This study, however, has not focused on these aspects.

Assam, as well the emergence of an intelligentsia, who strikingly arose in the period to question and intervene the rule, and gradually acquired enough strength to articulate a resistant voice against it. Being celebrated as the key nationalist figure of Assam in the colonial period, an early biographical account of him focused on how “the mention of his name in gatherings of his countrymen is like running up the national flag.”²

The study is an attempt to write a biography of Lakshminath Bezbaroa as part of the social history of the time, focusing on the themes of colonialism, modernity, nationalism, language, literature, religion, caste, gender and history. It is critical to explore the history of Assamese nationality through the life and writings of a modern expatriate, who instead of staying away from his own land, liked to perceive himself as an Assamese. In brief, it will be a reading of a life within the larger framework of the society of which he remained a part and in making of which he was an influential actor. Lakshminath was both a representative and agent of his time.

Cultural Heroes and Writing Biography

Similar works earlier have taken different trajectories. Sudipta Kaviraj, for instance, in his study of Sibnath Shastri (born in 1847), a foremost Brahmo reformer from Bengal, and contemporary and familiar to Lakshminath, has said that what he is writing about is not “a single person, but a type, the modern individual, of whom he is an example.”³ Although Vasudha Dalmia’s remarkable study of Bharatendu Harischandra (born in 1850), an intellectual from Banaras focuses primarily on Harischandra, what we are given is “an overall picture of changing society in which everyone is an actor both influenced by and influencing everyone

² Barua, Hem. *Makers of Indian Literature Series: Lakshminath Bezbaroa*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1967.

³ Kaviraj, Sudipta. *Invention of Private Life: Literature and Ideas*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2014, p. 305.

else.”⁴ It is the same target, though relatively in smaller scope, this study tries to achieve in case of Lakshminath.

Such biographical studies have their own advantages and disadvantages. As a melting ground of personal and public, biography prompts to take personal as political. Emerging in his life as the key nationalist figure and the most prominent writer in Assamese, Lakshminath’s life and literary works have inspired to produce a vast body of literature on him. Most of them are either traditional life stories or literary evaluation of him, or mingling or blending of both. They could be broadly subsumed in two groups. The first one could be defined as heroic sagas, which mostly try to make a nationalist literary icon of him. They eventually explore a “nationalist voice” for Assam in him for his perceived “battle” in the realm of the literary to save the independent status of the mother tongue. It is his dedication to enrich the *jatiya sahitya*, for which he has been worshipped as the *Sahityarathi* or the warrior hero of Assamese literature. Another body of literature on him is being produced out of the need of the academy, which tries to explore his literary merits, ideas etc. with the help of various methodological instruments like genre criticism, stylistics, biography, textual criticism and such. Above all, his patriotic zeal, love and dedication to the mother tongue and its literature, despite his busy modern expatriate life are a frequently emphasized theme of all. This study however addresses other critical questions crucial for making a community and a region. It tries to explore the real and complex life of Lakshminath, with all contradictions and ambiguities inherent in his life. Drawing on insights from several disciplines, as a history of an individual’s life essentially demands, it seeks to be faithful towards its subject. It likes to contextualise Lakshminath, simultaneously trying to read his life as a shaping element of his milieu.

⁴ Francesca Orsini’s Foreword in Dalmia, Vasudha. *The Nationalization of Hindu Tradition: Bhāratendu Hariśchandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010, p. xvi.

Despite his status as an iconic saviour of a regional linguistic identity, Lakshminath's fame is largely confined to Assamese literature. The diverse and multitudinous regional history, culture and literature of India before colonialism grew separately, in most of the cases, without being conscious and concerned about each other. Colonialism, through its communication, educational and occupational networks and technology like print, created the situation, or at least the possibility for the people of one cultural- linguistic region to come into contact with other regions. However, regional literature like Assamese literature mostly remained isolated for the inhabitants of other linguistic cultural regions or readers of other literature. Within the eastern India, Bengali literature represented a far more advantageous stage, and hence was taken to be an ideal to imitate by other geographically adjoining and culturally nearer regional literatures. Rabindranath Tagore had earned an international reputation, and along with Bankimchandra enjoyed the recognition of being the writer of writers. This is not the case with other regional literature. For instance, leaving aside the distant South Indian or Punjabi or Gujarati literatures, Fakirmohan Senapati, a pioneering figure of modern Oriya literature was quite unknown in Assamese till recent date, except in a particular enclave of the academic world. This is instead of the fact that, at least, since the time of Sankardeva, the fifteenth- and sixteenth- century preacher of Vaishnavism in Assam, the Vaishnava cult of Jagannatha of Puri of Orissa remained popular in Assam.

Similar was the case with Lakshminath, who, although had spent his adult life in Calcutta, Howrah and Sambalpur, and was married to the famous Tagore family of Jorasanko, was a lesser-known person, and his death in 1938 was rarely mentioned in the newspaper or periodical outside Assam. In such a news item the Bombay Chronicle, published two days after his death, mentioned him as a “builder of modern Assamese literature”, who “contributed highest volumes of books in the past half century”, and creator of high-quality humorous

prose.⁵ It was in 1968, on the occasion of the birth centenary celebration of him, as a consequence of the concerted efforts of the Assamese public sphere organizations, Lakshminath was focused largely as a maker of modern Indian literature.⁶

The silence about Lakshminath in other linguistic-cultural regions was normal, because the bilingual intelligentsia of colonial South Asia, in addition to their own vernaculars was basically interested with English, the language that came with the ruler, and with colonialism which became the language of knowledge and social prestige.⁷ Instead of remaining part of the same administrative unit within colonial rule and after, for long, the Assamese intelligentsia has mostly ignored the Khasi language and literature.⁸ In spite of the fact that Khasi, as modern literature was quite developed one, it remained an isolated growth. Bengali, on the other hand, was in constant reference in relation to Assamese since colonial rule, which enjoyed a prestigious position after English in Assam.

Imbricating the biography of a cult figure with the social history of the time is the major challenge that the study has to meet with. Traditionally, biographical study in India was a hagiographical account of a person. With modernity, it was largely replaced by rationalistic and secular life stories of persons of social importance. Individualism came to be seen with the flourishing of modern narratives of life in forms of biography, autobiography etc. Carlylean notion of hero worship became a prominent trend of such life writings, and they in colonial time searched for the ideal for the future. Lakshminath, in Assam, was a trendsetter of such life writings, who endeavoured to write biographies of Sankardeva, as a search for a founding

⁵ “Loss to Assamese Literature”, *Bombay Chronicle*, 28 March, 1938, p. 12.

⁶ Barua, *Makers of Indian Literature Series*, 1967.

⁷ Goswami, Pratapchandra, *Jeevansmriti aru Kamrupi Samaj*. Gauhati: Pratul Goswami, 1971, p. 106.

⁸ Bhuyan, Suryya Kumar, *Studies in the Literature of Assam*. Gauhati: Lawyer’s Book Stall, 1962 (First Published in 1956).

father of the Assamese nationality in him. Afterwards, replicating what he made of Sankardeva, Lakshminath was installed by the intelligentsia as a heroic figure of modern Assam to hold a place after Sankardeva. Rather than making any evaluative report on Lakshminath and his literary creations, this study tries to explore the very process of conceiving a regional literary idol in him. It explores Lakshminath's contemporary time, as a background, and its effect on an individual as a shaping force, simultaneously concentrating on Lakshminath's engagement and alienation with it.

In spite of the fact that public-private divide was a major preoccupation of the nineteenth century literati, the distinction refused to obey such formulations and differentiation in toto. In colonial situations, getting public life almost entirely dominated by the Europeans, Indian men were left with home as the only space, where they could act with some sense of autonomy. Thus, the private emerged for them as a substitute for the outside world. Even, as Tanika Sarkar has argued, public spheres at this stage were integrally linked with domestic issues.⁹ The spatial practice of private and public is problematic to trace. Concentrating on the personal life of Sibnath Shastri, Sudipta Kaviraj has shown that it is a disjointed society, where the values of private or family life, as well as the outer societal life were constantly in challenge.¹⁰ Kaviraj has said,

“Family life, surprisingly was the theatre of some of greatest changes in early modern Bengal, and this was reflected in contests in the practices of family life and an intense intellectual disputation about the nature of institution of the family and the role of the family in the structure of social life.”¹¹

⁹ Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2013, p. 25.

¹⁰ Kaviraj, *The Invention of Private Life*, 2014.

¹¹ Kaviraj, *The Invention of Private Life*, 2014, pp. 314-315.

He further argues that all societies have some idea of what is “public” and what is “private”, whereas one of the most important aspects of modernity is how the concept of “private life” has been translated in Indian context. Kaviraj argues,

“Seeking to understand social history only through great literature can be misleading. Individuals who are not leading writers often play a determining role in shaping social norms and in the creation of a modern consciousness. Shastri belonged to the latter type.”¹²

Instead of reading the time through some outstanding intellectual figures, what Kaviraj has tried to explore is the time through an average person.¹³ Trying to explore the time largely concentrating on the life of Lakshminath, nonetheless, this study is somewhat different from Kaviraj’s reading of Sibnath Shastri in the sense that within the ambit of Assamese literature, Lakshminath’s place is far more central than Shastri’s place in Bengali. Lakshminath’s mundane personal life could be translatable as symptomatic of the colonial modern in Assam and India as a whole. His personal-familial ties and engagements are a concern of this study. In fact, the transition from the pre-modern to colonial modern was a complex phenomenon and it could not be reduced to a linear narrative either of conflicts between two generations, or binary frame of tradition versus modernity.¹⁴

Writing Colonial Modernity: Pre-modern and Modern

Modernity in Europe was generally defined as a linear process. It is the Renaissance which brought the middle- ages to an end and created a new world. Modernity was furthered by the

¹² Kaviraj, *The Invention of Private Life*, 2014.

¹³ More than a writer or reformer, Sivanath Shastri’s reputation rested on his fame as a man of high character, social reformer and a person who lived a moral life. Shastri was a heroic figure in the sense that he was an exemplar of the modern way of life in the nineteenth-century Calcutta.

¹⁴ Lakshminath’s letter to Aruna, 24 November, 1937 from Dibrugarh in Neog, Maheswar, ed. *Patralekha*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1968, p. 120.

enlightenment, which could be widely defined as the advance of thought, aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters.

“It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.”¹⁵

In the western version of modernity, autonomous individuals, instrumental rationality and freedom were the prime components, whereas in India the circumstances were quite different. For mapping this modernity with all complexity and dilemma inherent within it, we must take the particular situation of the region to account, for which an altogether different approach to modernity will be needed. Once the historians retrospectively called the phenomena occurred in the nineteenth-century India “Indian Renaissance”, a term they coined in analogy with European Renaissance.¹⁶ Significantly, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay used this analogue not to describe his own time but to denote the religious and cultural development in the sixteenth-century Bengal. Even Aurobindo, while using the term himself to denote the modernity in colonial India, felt that the term did not entirely represent the Indian situation.¹⁷

Using the terminology in Indian context, K. N. Panikkar, in his study on the Indian middle class, has argued that what the Renaissance and nationalism tried to achieve was a search for alternative modernity, which for Panikkar is a “creative phase of their struggle”; but born out of the colonial condition and intellectually and culturally influenced by Europe, the Indian middle class was unable to fulfil this historic rule.¹⁸

¹⁵ Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 1.

¹⁶ Aurobindo. *The Renaissance of India and Other Essays on India*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2002.

¹⁷ Aurobindo, *The Renaissance of India and Other Essays on India*, 2002.

¹⁸ Panikkar, K. N., *History as a Site of Struggle: Essays on History, Culture and Politics*. Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2013.

Indian modernity is not a replica of the European modernity, but a complex process of appropriation, adaptation and resistance.¹⁹ Partha Chatterjee has argued that there cannot be single modernity irrespective of geography, time, environment and social conditions.²⁰ The nineteenth century intelligentsia in India may have genuinely welcomed the ideas of reason and rationalities, and sometimes even considerable courage and enterprise were shown in seeking to modernize the customs and attitudes. But the subjection of a colonial country and the question of loyalty or appropriation to imperial power set a limit and certain fundamental forces of transformation were absent, for which what was meant to be modern became increasingly alienated from the mass of the people. He also has observed that the nation was not always secular and modern, and the popular and democratic quite often traditional and sometimes fanatically anti-modern. The intelligentsia of the nineteenth century felt at one and same time an urge for cosmopolitanism and to find out a distant but authentic cultural identity for nationality. They shared some presuppositions, which were not unambiguously modern nor unambiguously rational. Liberal, secular and rational attitudes were invariably compromised by concessions to canonical or scriptural authority or even more ignominiously by succumbing to pressures of conformity or to material enticement.²¹

Exploring the issue from another perspective, Dipesh Chakravarty has articulated the questions about how and in what sense European ideas that were seemingly universal, could not claim universal validity. He asks whether thought transcends the places of origin and affirms that concepts like right, democracy etc. are translatable from one place to another. He has further argued, in India, modernity could not be represented as “the liberation of the mind from the

¹⁹ Kaviraj, *Invention of Private Life*, 2014, p. 22.

²⁰ Chatterjee, Partha. *Empire and Nation: Essential Writings, 1985-2005*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010, pp. 136-152.

²¹ Ibid, p. 98.

blinding bondage to the superstitions and customs of the middle- ages.”²² The tendency to identify reason and rational arguments as a modernist weapon against ‘pre-modern’ superstitions end up overdrawing the boundary between the modern and the pre-modern.

In Indian situation, the framework of thought based on tradition as diametrically opposite to modernity does not work properly. In the modern/traditional framework of thought, modernity is represented as faith in reason, struggle against antiquated beliefs and practices of medieval society; it championed the cause of rationality, science and enlightenment against scripture, custom and faith. Most of the time modern is equalized with western, which in the long run leads to a positive assessment of the British rule, the grosser reality of imperial political and economic exploitations is tucked away in a corner. The subaltern group of historians argued,

“While there were elements of modernity in the new cultural and intellectual movements in the nineteenth-century India, these cannot be meaningful unless they are located in their relation on the one hand to the changing socio-economic structure, and on the other to the crucial context of power, that is to the colonial subjection”²³

Dependence on the foreign rulers and alienation from the masses were to remain for long the two cardinal limitations of our entire “renaissance intelligentsia.”²⁴ As a matter of fact, the critique of historians like Sumit Sarkar, Ranajit Guha and such in the 1970s seriously damaged the old structure of assumptions about what was named as Indian renaissance.²⁵ However, the historians did not altogether relinquish the analogy with European history as their basic structure of reference. The critique was possible only by reference to that analogue. The point

²² Chakravarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 236.

²³ Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation*, 2010, p. 95.

²⁴ Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern India, 1885-1947*. New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers, 2013, pp. 65-86.

²⁵ Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation*, 2010, pp.91-110.

of critique was that the “Indian renaissance” was partial, fragmentary and incomplete. To be modern, in a sense, meant increasingly becoming alienated from the masses.

One of the problematic aspects of the Renaissance analogue is that a highly elitist notion of history is implicit in it. It tends to reduce the history of a time to accounts of some outstanding figures and their activities. They represented a refined culture, which differentiated them from the masses, conceived as illiterate and superstitious. It is they who went in for western education through which they could get entry to the respectable liberal professions. On the other hand, a great number of people lived outside the allegedly modern society. Western education, which became the main key for social mobilization, remained dominantly an upper caste Hindu male domain. Gender and caste differentiation played heavily on it.

While studying Lakshminath, a leading figure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, one has to essentially deal with the question regarding the gap between the literary elite and the common people. According to Dipesh Chakravarty, Indian people are a split subject divided between the modernized elite and yet to be modernized masses, which has made Indian modernity far more problematic to deal with.²⁶

Historians like K. N. Panikkar believes that as an outcome of the British colonial intervention, the social world of nineteenth-century India drastically changed.

“Colonialism was a catalyst in many fields, not the least in the social and cultural.”²⁷

He has argued that socio-cultural changes were molecular and less apparent than the changes in the polity and economy. Though the nature of colonial intervention varied from region to region and sector to sector, it marked “a distinctive phase in the history of India.”²⁸ He pointed

²⁶ Chakravarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 2000.

²⁷ Panikkar, *History as a Site of Struggle*, 2013.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 20.

out that a displacement occurred in all systems of knowledge. It embraced both the “cultural common sense and intellectual makeup.”²⁹ It was the western educated section, which acted as the “actual carrier and disseminators of colonial culture”, introduced by the British in India.³⁰

Peter Robb, another historian of South Asia, without ignoring the active role of the Indians, has pointed out that what Indians created would have been different without colonialism.³¹ Robb has emphasized the role of the state, which for him is “the chief colonial institution and creation”.³² India existed before the British, and afterwards; but not the same India.³³ In the construction of Indian identity, Robb has pointed out two aspects of the process of state development as crucial- the creation of structures like geographic and institutional frame of boundaries and evolution of new idiom, consciousness, sense of community etc. Sunil Khilnani has written in the same spirit that for all its magnificent antiquity and historical depth, contemporary India is unequivocally a creation of the modern world. The fundamental agencies of modernity-European colonial expansion, the state, nationalism, democracy, economic development-all have shaped this modern India.³⁴

While problematizing our simplified notion of modernity, Ranajit Guha has offered an alternative model for our entry point to modernity in India. He interrogates the tradition/modern notion of thought and tries to replace it with the notion of “the three idioms”.³⁵ According to Guha, colonial rule in India never achieved absolute hegemony. The indigenous elements always retained measures of autonomy. The first idiom derived from the metropolitan political

²⁹ Panikkar, K. N., *Colonialism, Culture and Resistance*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 22.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Robb, Peter, *Liberalism, Modernity and the Nation*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 2.

³² Robb, *Liberalism, Modernity and the Nation*, 2007, p. 4.

³³ Robb, *Liberalism, Modernity and the Nation*, 2007, p. 4.

³⁴ Khilnani, Sunil. *The Idea of India*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004, pp. 1-13.

³⁵ Guha, Ranajit. *Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, pp. 318-332.

culture of the British, whereas the second idiom derived from the pre-colonial culture of Indians. The two idioms overlapped, crossed and subverted each other, in order to coalesce and flow in the third idiom, which was modern India. It is a new idiom, which contains within it the sign of struggle and unresolved tension.³⁶

Coming of Print and Making of Public Sphere

Print, as a new technology of tremendous political significance is a theme to be explored in this study. Having focused on print and print areas, Tithi Bhattacharyya argues that print formed an arena of practices whose sole register was their availability. Print, for her, is an agent of change, which brought out disjuncture on production and reception. It is no small coincidence that most of the prominent nineteenth-century figures were either connected with printing, publication, education or with all of them.³⁷

Focusing on the print world of Bengal, she has further shown that education, print and salaried jobs were fundamental to the constitution of the Bengali *Bhadralok*. In their own perception, they were above the lesser folk and below the aristocracy. But what distinguished them from either was a particular kind of education. It is almost impossible to call the *bhadralok* a class. In this background, she employs the word “intelligentsia” to refer to the social role played by the *bhadralok* as a social group.³⁸

This study uses the word “intelligentsia” to denote a social group in a wider sense to encompass any individual, who has got access to modern education. In Assam, such education was initially limited to a small section of Hindu upper caste men, mostly coming from the landed aristocratic

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bhattacharyya, Tithi. *The Sentinels of Culture, Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal (1848-85)*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 1-34.

³⁸ Ibid.

background of the pre-colonial regime.³⁹ It was they who showed their interest in modern profession, and who subsequently formed the core of the politically aspirant literary elite stratum of Assam. The intelligentsia, mostly comprising an urban professionalized section, initially was limited in size, and did not even include the poor rural section of the upper caste Hindu.⁴⁰ They showed their enthusiasm for some western ideas, though not coming away from the tradition altogether. They possessed, as it is observed by J. H. Broomfield, in the case of the Bengali *bhadralok*, a sense of social superiority.⁴¹ Towards the last two decades of the nineteenth century, they took initiatives to develop public sphere organizations for them to serve their interests. Being positioned against an educationally advanced Bengali intelligentsia in competition for profession, and a seemingly all-powerful European planter class, they focused on their language, literature and culture to form an identity around these, and tried to emerge as a political community. The intelligentsia identified print as a major tool of their assertion of identity, as well as their reformist activities. They, while showing their bond with traditional society, were enthusiastic about the liberal and egalitarian values, which they received through their western education.

Jurgen Habermas' frequently-cited concept of the public sphere could provide us a necessary theoretical framework to trace the literary, cultural and political activities of the concerned period. Habermas has shown that in the seventeenth- and eighteenth- century Europe, the private citizens came together as 'public' as an intermediary sphere of social institutions like

³⁹ Croft, Alfred. *Review of Education in India in 1886, With Special Reference to the Report of the Education Commission*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1888, p. 230. It gives us an idea about how education remained confined in some particular enclaves, caste being an important factor.

⁴⁰ Saikia, Arupjyoti. *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam Since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2013, pp. 1-29.

⁴¹ Broomfield, J. H. *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1968.

the clubs, journals and periodicals. They as public discussed matters of common interest and criticized them to put pressure on the absolutist state.⁴² However, the critics have pointed out that the bourgeois public sphere was an exclusively male domain, where opinion of a privileged section was being valorised as public opinion. Newspapers and periodicals were crucial for consolidation of a public sphere in India, as well as for the growth of vernacular literature.⁴³ These were the places from where the colonial intelligentsia, remaining outside the sphere of political power, addressed the issues, which they thought and propagated to be beneficial for the greater masses. Their acts of writing were acts of criticizing, opposing or supporting, inspiring and deploring. They claimed themselves to be the voice of an entire region or society as a whole, and represented the local opinions to the British ruler.⁴⁴ It was the readership of newspapers and periodicals, whose expectations and aspirations, the colonial state had to take with importance for its smooth running. It was for such significance of the periodicals even the rulers took them seriously, and kept close vigilance on them. With the growing anti-colonial wave in the air, in early twentieth century, they emerged as instruments of nationalistic ideology around land, language and religion. They also played a pivotal role in social reform movements of the time.

⁴² Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Massachusetts, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

⁴³ See “Return Relating to Publications in Bengali Language in 1857, to which is added a List of the Native Presses with the Books Printed at Each with their Price and Character with the Notice of their Past Condition and the Future Prospect of Vernacular Press of Bengal, and the Statistics of the Bombay and Madras Vernacular Presses” in Long, J. *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No. XXXII*. Calcutta: General Printing Department, 1859, p. ii.

⁴⁴ Letter from the Secretary of the Public Service Commission to the Secretary of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, No 4, Dated Lahore, 16 November, 1886, *Proceedings of the Public Service Commission, 1886-87, Vol. VI: Proceedings relating to Bengal including Assam*, Superintendent of Government Printing Office, Calcutta, 1888, p. 42.

In Assam, initially the *Arunodaya*, a missionary publication, provided a public platform to raise various issues including polemical writings on language. However, it was only towards the turn of the century Assam had its first newspaper in Assamese. According to a report compiled by F. Roddis, the superintendent of Police on special duty, it was largely read by the educated classes, and of “considerable influence” among them.⁴⁵ Another report of the following year noted that two English papers published in Assam were found “unobjectionable”.⁴⁶ The role of the journals, by the colonial government, was considered to be less important than newspapers, from the point of view of political impact. They were mostly overlooked as sites of discussions on socio-cultural topics. Another report even claimed that a large section among the educated classes was not interested in larger political issues. Concentrating on the newspapers, the report informed that as there was no daily newspaper in Assam, the provincial newspapers had “little influence”. It was the “Bengal Press from which the provincial papers mainly take their tone” and the Bengal press exercised influence on the local ones.⁴⁷

Thinking about Literary Modernity

Print enabled development of various modern vernacular literatures in India.⁴⁸ While considering technology’s impact on literary cultures of South Asia, Sheldon Pollock

⁴⁵ Letter to the Secretary to the Govt. of India, from the Chief Secretary to the Govt. of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Home Political-B, No. 83, January 1910, No. 8541-6. B. Dated Shillong, 20 October, 1909, Report of the Native owned English and Vernacular Newspapers, Political History of Assam File No. 83, 1910, Assam State Archives.

⁴⁶ Despite the government’s initial strategy of promoting the Indian vernaculars to a certain extent, which were thought to be the real mediums to deal with the people and form consent from them in favour of the colonial government, with the consolidation of a print public sphere all over India, English sphere proved to be relatively less detrimental than the vernacular spheres.

⁴⁷ *Reports on the Working of the Reformed Constitution, 1927*. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, Government of India, 1928, p. 520.

⁴⁸ Raman, Bhavani. *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 13.

underscores that in spite of interaction with print, for long, manuscript culture remained dominant as the medium of authentic knowledge. Pollock's other point is, though the broadly circulated journals played a significant role in development of literary modernity in South Asian vernaculars, access to printed books remained limited to a smaller section. For a greater section of readers, such accessibility to printed materials is still meant to be text books.⁴⁹ Sudipta Kaviraj has pointed out that emergence of a vernacular literature does not indicate an immediate change in the narrative or imaginative content of literary culture, a conscious rupture with the high culture.⁵⁰

David Shulman, in his biography of Tamil, has also tried to tell a different story of modernity and print.⁵¹ He has refused to take the metanarratives of colonial disjunction to literary cultural tradition, followed by a recovery and reconstitution of gradual appearance and republication of ancient Tamil classics, for granted. Concentrating on the history of Tamil prose, Shulman has emphasized on a growing dominance of prose in South India, which for him is "an indigenous and organic" development not to be explored in any external, non-Indian cultural practices.

Like *karnams* in Tamil, development of secular prose combined with the temporal attitude to life, was noticed in the pre-modern *buranji* form of history-writing in Assam, and traced in the South-East Asian tradition. Exploration of these traditions by the nineteenth and early twentieth century intelligentsia posed questions regarding the exclusively western origin of literary modernity in South Asian vernaculars. In fact, English and western impact displacing

⁴⁹ Pollock, Sheldon. "Introduction." In *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, by Sheldon Pollock, 1-36. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, pp. 21-22.

⁵⁰ Kaviraj, Sudipta. "The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal." In *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, by Sheldon Pollock, 503-566. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, pp. 503-566.

⁵¹ David, Shulman. *Tamil: A Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016, see chapter "Beyond the Merely Modern", pp. 284-323.

everything else is a narrative, which pushes a great variety of indigenous and transitional literary cultures of the vernaculars into suppression. Such a clichéd narrative of western dominance in literary modernity ignores or marginalises stories of creative appropriation, for example, as evident as in the form of the novel genre. A. K. Ramanujan has justly and insightfully pointed out that a “deep-rooted intertextuality in which ‘others’ become ‘selves’ and where mirrors are windows is a fundamental trait of modern Indian literature.”⁵² To be sure, there is no singular modernity to deal with in this study.

Colonial Modern, Historiography and Philology

However, colonial modern is assumed to be a space where the new disciplinary practices of modern historiography emerged in South Asia. This space, as articulated by Partha Chatterjee, is a realm, characterized by institutions such as the university and the archive, publication media such as the professional historical journal and the academic monograph, writing conventions such as the footnote and the bibliography. It is the space where rational causation and scientific methodology are the dominant sentiments.⁵³

These modern practices, however, could not entirely replace the earlier ones. Instead, there evolved some plethora of historical writings which could be best described as hybrid writings. Simultaneously genres like poetry, novels, biographies etc. were to be deployed as conceiving, constructing, appropriating and writing histories. Modern literati of India were enthusiastic to embrace the rationalistic principles of European historiography, but they never accepted the history of India as it was written by the Europeans.

⁵² Ramanujan, A. K., *Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*. edited by Vinay Dharwadker, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 6-33.

⁵³ Chatterjee, Partha. “Introduction.” In *History in the Vernaculars*, by Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee (eds.). 1-24. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008, p. 9.

In this process of history writing, sometimes a tendency to glorify the Hindu past was obvious, which was in reality nothing but clinging to the tripartite model of history already made popular by the European historians. In Assam, as elsewhere in South Asia, the literati were concerned about the past. Their inclination towards the Romantic ideology could also be best explained in terms of its attachment with the cult of the pasts.

The mythical kingdoms of *Kamrupa* and *Pragjyotisha* were appropriated in history as Aryan settlements in Assam. Edward Gait, the Director of Ethnography of Assam, though published his "A History of Assam" in 1906, could not satisfy the intelligentsia of Assam for his lack of attention to the ancient past of Kamrup. In 1912 with the goal of unearthing the glorious past of Assam a body called the *Kamrup Anusandhan Samity* was formed. The antiquarian objective was obvious in its very nomenclature, where the commonly used word "Assam" was replaced by Kamrup.⁵⁴ Historians have pointed out,

"The attempt to establish alternative classical pasts were no innocent manners of choosing alternative time-frames or practices of memory. These choices involved alternative political and nationalist agenda."⁵⁵

Living in an age of nationalistic imagination, Lakshminath also showed his attraction towards the cult of past. He, for his interest in historical research, had been made the corresponding member of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, founded in 1928.⁵⁶

Philology remained instrumental in intelligentsia's exploration of their own national past. In the mid-nineteenth century a consensus was developed among the comparative philologists in Europe that the linguistic criteria were the most reliable for the determination of the

⁵⁴ *Assam Bandhav*, Part 7, Volume 7, 1917, pp. 267-271.

⁵⁵ Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation*, 2010, p. 33.

⁵⁶ Bhuyan, Suryya Kumar. *Bulletin No. 2*. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam, 1934, p. 39.

classification of the various races of mankind. Philology and ethnology became intimately connected.⁵⁷ The intelligentsia of colonial India was drawn towards philological knowledge chiefly for two reasons. First, the idea of the Indo-European language family by founding a common inheritance for the Hindu India and Europe provided a weapon to fight against the racial discriminations of colonialism, and second, it provided an epistemological base to share an Aryan privilege over the vast non-Aryan population of India. The Assamese-speaking intelligentsia of Assam, having its origin in upper caste Hindu tried to maintain distance from the non-Aryan communities who they thought as racially inferior and below in civilizational status. S. K. Bhuyan has expressed the psychology through an imagery of mind and body dualism,

“The vigour of our primitive tribes has served as a complement to the subtlety of the intellectual Aryans. The dwindling virility of the ease-loving plains-folk has been reinforced by the elemental energy of the hillmen, whose muscle and sinews are at our eternal command, whenever we project any enterprise of valour.”⁵⁸

In *Arunoday*, the first Assamese periodical, an Assamese person from Calcutta described some non-Aryan communities’ gradual adoption of Assamese in ambiguous terms, and called it a “*bikriti*”, deviation, which clearly indicated his paranoia about the harmful impact on the original purity of the Aryan Assamese language, which was, like Bengali claimed to be a descendent of Sanskrit.⁵⁹

The tension and contradictions remained unresolved, and with the emergence of an educated section in the various non-Aryan communities, it became apparent in early decades of the

⁵⁷ Trautman, Thomas. R., *Languages and Nations: Conversations in Colonial South India*. Berkley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 2006, p. 1.

⁵⁸ Bhuyan, *Bulletin No. 2*, 1934, see chapter “Historical Research in Assam”.

⁵⁹ Anonymous (One Assamese Person, Calcutta), “Asamiya Bhasa”, *Arunoday*, February, 1854, pp. 21-22.

twentieth century.⁶⁰ In the process, the upper caste Hindu intelligentsia, as already mentioned, had to negotiate with the idea of Assamese culture and a change took place in their perspective as exemplified in the case of Bihu, originally a fertility cult performed by the peasant communities. Efforts were made to cope it up with the modern sensibilities and make it a platform of unity.

In practice, such a phenomenon was not unique to Assam, and ubiquitous in all over India, by which a vast number of local and regional traditions were embedded in Hinduism. As shown by Vasudha Dalmia, it is in the newly forming public sphere the modern face of Hinduism took shape. The forming of the public sphere brought a challenge to the traditional authority of religion. It did not remain the exclusive domain of the religious gurus, instead public debates and discussions came to the fore through the nineteenth and early twentieth century periodicals. Public opinions were formed and reflected through these debates.⁶¹

Religion, as it was appropriated by the colonial intelligentsia, is another core area to explore in this study. Lakshminath, though a secular and rational person in his routine life, was not only a believer of God, but as we have already mentioned, also a propagator of spiritual attitude of life. He, in his perspective to tradition and Hinduism, was opposite to E. V. S. Ramasami of Tamil nationalism.⁶²

Vasudha Dalmia has observed that a number of factors converged in the late nineteenth century Banaras to favour the formation of the new Hindu culture, which was traditional and reformist

⁶⁰ “The Assam Plains Tribal League” formed in 1933, was apparently the manifestation of the political aspirations of the backward classes of Assam.

⁶¹ Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, 2010, pp. 222-337.

⁶² Ramasami, an atheist and professed rationalist, resisted any characterization of him after Hindu deity. Discussing his stand, Sumathi Ramaswami called him an 'anti-devotee'. Ramaswami, Sumathi, *Passions of the Tongue, Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles and London, 1997, pp. 233-242.

formulations. The nineteenth-century nationalist formation of Hindu tradition sought to propagate Hinduism as a core of national unity. Harischandra wrote,

“May sects be got rid of, may Bharat come into its own!”⁶³

The point to be noted is, it was exclusionist in the sense that it sought to reduce the multiplicity of the sub-continent and proposed a unitary tradition of the *Aryan-Hindu*. For our purpose, the formulations are of enormous value as entry points to the multitudinous religious cultural practices of the people, which resist coming under a definite structure of Hinduism.

Another distinctive attempt of the nineteenth century Hinduism was its attempt to propagate monotheism, Lakshminath, being a chief proponent of the monotheistic Vaishnava cult of Assam of the time. Vasudha Dalmia has argued that side by side with the exclusionist and restrictive role, the nineteenth century formulations of Hinduism also played some emancipatory functions, which allowed the articulation of an indigenous cultural and political resistance against the repressive and all-pervasive colonial power.

Thus, incorporating the insights of study of other regions of India, this study tries to focus on the early twentieth century Assamese intelligentsia's appropriation of Sankardeva, and the bhakti cult of Assam, commonly known as the *Mahapurushiya* sect of Assam. Lakshminath was a chief architect among them. Multiplicity of solidarities based on caste, religion, local difference and so forth were tried to sublimate under the rubric of an Assamese nationality. However, instead of propounding a Hindu nation, Lakshminath and his contemporaries in Assam, advocated for a broader nationality, which was ideationally secular, tolerant and liberal.

⁶³ Dalmia, *Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, 2010.

***Matribhasa*: Bilingual Intelligentsia as Saviour to Language**

The ideology of *matribhasa* is core to the perception of colonial modernity. Sumathi Ramaswami has argued that the approach to language as a means of communication is quite different from that of language as a mother tongue. The first attitude is rational-instrumental, whereas the second is related to emotion. She has traced the devotion in a conception of language as the very life and soul of Tamilians as opposed to the rationalist-instrumentalist concept of the state, in which language is perceived as a tool, a medium of communication.⁶⁴ In a similar argument, Lisa Mitchel also said that language as a medium is exclusively different from language as an explicit marker of shared identity.⁶⁵ The ideology of mother tongue believes that just as one is born to a mother or family, so is one born into a language, and carries it from “the mother’s knee to the grave”.⁶⁶ *Matribhasa*, a new coinage in Indian languages, conceptualizes language as a mother figure. The term, in Assamese, was constructed in homology with English “mother tongue”, and in Assamese, the first mention of *matribhasa*, with an effort to define it, was found in *Arunoday* in 1853.

“The language of the country where we are born and we live, and the language which we carry with us from the day of our birth to death, is called *matribhasa* or the *swadeshar bhasa*.”⁶⁷

Living at a crucial juncture of the time of colonial Assam, when the people’s lives were largely confined within the same place, the author unproblematically defined the *matribhasa* in unison with a language of a territory. Modernity has already brought change to this perception of one’s

⁶⁴ Ramaswami, *Passions of the Tongue*, 1997, p. 137.

⁶⁵ Mitchel, Lisa. *Language, Emotion and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009, pp. 69-73.

⁶⁶ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London & New York: Verso, 2016.

⁶⁷ Anonymous (A Friend Living in Calcutta). “Advantage to the Assamese of Learning Their Native Languages”, *Arunoday*, Volume VIII, No. 8, August, 1853, pp. 114-115.

clinging to the same place. Lakshminath's life was an example of the complex situation of colonial modernity, under which, despite his constant confirmation of identity as an Assamese, still had to spend the whole of his adult life outside Assam. Lakshminath's life itself provides a critique of the ideology of mother tongue, that he propagated, and for which, his life was dedicated.⁶⁸

The feminization of language is another significant aspect of the ideology of the mother tongue. As early as in the 1850s, Gunabhiram Borooah, then a student of Presidency College called the people of Assam to love and dedicate themselves for the development of *matribhasa*. In 1854 an article named "*Asamiya aru Bangali Bhasar Kathopakathan* " appeared in *Arunoday*. It presented *Asamiya bhasa* as a poor, forlorn, destitute, unhappy figure of a mother dressed in worn out clothes, abandoned by her children. The Assamese youths, educated through Bengali did not even recognize her as their mother. They became afraid of seeing her and called her an ogress. The mother tries to bring the children to awakening. Bengali, depicted as a prosperous mother, said to her that there was no reason to blame the youths, because even old, respectable and wealthier sons had already abandoned her. The mother Assamese replied that mere ungrateful ones had left, and her only hope rested on the younger section.⁶⁹ It was probably the first gendered image of language in Assamese, which later appeared frequently in the form of

⁶⁸ Pragati, Mahapatra. *The Making of a Cultural Identity: Language, Literature and Gender in Orissa in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1997, p. 178.

⁶⁹ Anonymous. "*Asamiya Bhasa* (On the Assamese Language)", *Arunoday*, Volume IX, No 2, February, 1854, pp. 21-22; Anonymous. "*Asamiya aru Bangali Bhasar Kathopakathan* ", *Arunoday*, Volume IX, No. 11, November, 1854, pp. 168-171.

bhasa janani.⁷⁰ It is here, we also get evidence of the newly acquired monolingual notion of language as a ready departure.⁷¹

In South Asia, language, imagined as a mother figure in its critical moment is frequently seen, and it is often done with strategic significance. Equating the plight of the language with that of the mother, sons are invoked as protectors or redeemers from this distress. The appeal to perform this duty with dedication and sincerity became a recurrent theme of the periodicals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Assam.

Linguistic nationalism, being the cognate of the ideology of *matribhasa*, celebrates language as natural and innate. Philology cleared the ground for the redefinition of language mainly by setting up normalizing and standardizing mechanisms through which Indian vernaculars acquired their modern forms. The colonial language policy had a decisive impact upon literary production, and print culture more broadly.⁷² The print public sphere became central in the formation of a collective identity around language, in its turn. Sudipta Kaviraj has made an important proposition that linguistic identity is not formed by the simple fact of some people having a common language. It lies in a deliberate choice to see this fact as the essential criterion of their existence.⁷³ The Assamese linguistic nationalism also articulated itself, in 1853, on the claims of individual status for Assamese.

⁷⁰ The anthem of *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, a premier literary organization of Assam eulogizes the *Bhasa Janani Asami* as eternal beloved mother.

⁷¹ Anonymous. “*Asamiya Bhasa*, (On the Assamese Language)”, *Arunoday*, February, 1854; “*Asamiya aru Bengali Bhasar Kathopakathan* ”, *Arunoday*, November, 1854.

⁷² King, Christopher Rolland. *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 54.

⁷³ Kaviraj, Sudipta. “Writing, Speaking, Being: Language and Historical Formation of Identities in India.” In *Language and Politics in India*, by Asha Sarangi (ed.). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 312-350.

It is the literary elite of the colonial time, who sought to standardize and modernize their own languages to make them fit vehicles for literature, and for creating a speech community. How to relate the nationalist intelligentsia's engagement with regional language and literature with the society at large? First of all, why did the intelligentsia become interested in these at all? Paul Brass' interesting study on language of South Asia may provide some key insights to us. He argues language movements, in initial and developing stages, are vehicles for the pursuit of economic advancement, social status, and political power by specific elites.⁷⁴ By doing so, they placed themselves in a mediating position, and built a constituency among their language speakers on whose behalf they might make a claim to speak.

Modernity introduced the conception of rigid territorial boundaries, also the mapped space. It is the spatial mentality of a modern era, which inspired the emerging intelligentsia to think in terms of strict territorial, linguistic and cultural boundaries. As early as in 1822, the Serampore Mission perceived Assamese as a distinct language and the linguistic map prepared by them showed it as a separate category. Locating a language in a map is a significant turn to present it as a coherent whole, also to relate it with a territorial limit.

However, entwining a language with a land never works properly. It was impossible to determine where a particular language ends and another begins. It was a world of transitions rather than of boundaries. Sheldon Pollock has written,

“If language comes to distinguish nations, it is in part because nations are made by turning languages into distinctive national markers.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Brass, Paul. “Elite Interests, Popular Passions, and Social Power in the Language Politics of India.” In *Language and Politics in India*, by Asha Sarangi (ed.). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 183-220.

⁷⁵ Pollock, “Introduction”, 2003, p. 11.

Neither nation, nor region is a natural entity. In tune with Pollock, we may say, no a priori answer to the meaning of Assam or India is ever possible. Both are historically produced, and so could be made and unmade again and again. Peter Robb argues that the state is an important agency in the construction of identity.⁷⁶ Focusing on the language-conflict of the eastern India, Sudipta Kaviraj shows that from the late eighteenth century, the British were prompt to define the territorial boundaries in India; but undermined the connection between the politically bounded territory and its cultural content. As new territories were included in the Bengal Presidency, Bengalis developed sub-imperialistic delusions about themselves and considered other groups of the Presidency as inferior to them.⁷⁷ Modern Assam also came into being as a site of contesting ground of various groups, who in the new situations sought to redefine themselves in relation to each other, and who were tried by the intelligentsia to cover under a new umbrella term of Assamese, itself a porous identity imagined ambiguously on basis of territoriality, religion and largely in terms of linguistic unity. However, nationalists' proposition of language as a uniting power is a half-truth. Language unites people, but it can divide as well. The process of formation of one linguistic identity generates a sense of differentiation from others. Equally important is the phenomenon in which language divides internally as well. People having allegedly the same language do not have the language the same way or to the same extent.⁷⁸

Towards the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the notions of *jati*, *jatiyata* and *jatiya bhasa* were constantly coming to be addressed in the emerging print public spheres of Assam. The intelligentsia initially used the term *jati* interchangeably to denote caste, language, religion, or ethnic group, and sometimes to represent the modern notion of nation. In the last sense of

⁷⁶ Robb, *Liberalism, Modernity and the Nation*, 2007, p. 134.

⁷⁷ Kaviraj, "The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal", 2003, p. 82.

⁷⁸ Kaviraj, "Writing, Speaking, Being", 2009, pp. 312-350.

the term, the *jati* encompassed both a broad-based Indian identity, and a regional identity confined mainly to the Brahmaputra valley districts. Writing about the nation, the colonial intelligentsia still thought largely in terms of its region. For an author like Lakshminath, this oscillation between two identities was his fate. The study tries to understand, in what sense Lakshminath himself perceived the notion of *jati*, and being a true cosmopolitan in his personal life, negotiated between the two. Growing consciousness towards India was also an issue at work. In the early 1890s, Lakshminath represented Assam in the Indian National Congress' platform.⁷⁹

Lakshminath conceptualized Assam not as a fragment, but as a unit of individual existence. There is no impediment for an Indian to retain his self-respect for the *swadesh* and *swajati*, without compromising his loyalty to India. He even firmly believed that it was only through paying one's homage to diverse regional linguistic identities the greater India will flourish to be a single nation. He visualized the emerging India as a vast united nation, a "*Bhasa-samrajya*", an empire of languages, formed of many smaller linguistic provinces, in which no smaller nation would have to sacrifice its life. He even believed that such was the intention of God, who created immense diversity in the world.⁸⁰

Organisation of the Thesis

The study is based on a number of primary and secondary sources, including personal letters, periodicals, newspapers, autobiographies, biographies, literary creations, a bulk of public

⁷⁹ *Report of the Eighth Indian National Congress held at Allahabad on the 28th, 29th, and 30th of December 1892*. Indian National Congress, 1892. See Delegate List, Appendix, p. x. It enlisted the names of Bholanth Borooah, Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Radhanath Changkakati of Assam, respectively in the serial number of 225, 226 and 227.

⁸⁰ "*Asamiya Bhasar Samparke Aru Duasarmen Katha*", *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 1909, Goswami, Jatindranath, ed. *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001, p. 1831, p. 49.

instruction reports, census reports, forest reports, legislative assembly and council debates, industrial reports, administrative reports, gazetteers, memorials, journals and diaries, proceedings, and even photographs, cartoons, advertisements etc. Documents are garnered from the Assam State Archives, and other local archives and libraries of Assam, also through visiting the various places of Assam, Calcutta, Howrah and Sambalpur, and through interviewing with a few individuals of his relation.

The first chapter of this thesis is an attempt to situate Lakshminath against his milieu. Starting with Dinanath Bezbaroa, Lakshminath's father, the chapter explores Lakshminath's childhood and adolescence years. Taking Dinanath's life as an entry point, the chapter intends to engage with the broader political and social landscape of Assam and India in the nineteenth century, while concentrating on the changes that took place in colonial rule as an aftermath of the introduction of a new regime of land tenure. It questions the supposed binary between tradition and modernity, problematizing both in relation to the responses of Dinanath and his generation to their disjointed times. The chapter focuses on highly valorised instances of English or western education as flagship of modernization projects and improvement propaganda of colonialism as limited and bilateral effort rather than an exclusive gift of colonialism to the so-called backward society. It also traces the childhood and adolescence of Lakshminath, trying to understand whether and how these formative years of his life became determinant in one or another way in shaping his ways of living and thinking.

Chapter two focuses on the long expatriate life of Lakshminath, starting in 1886, it continued till November, 1937. Being a business person, and later an employee of the Birds and Company, Lakshminath had to extensively travel all over India. The chapter tries to explore his business and conjugal life, keeping keen notice in his everyday encounter with a colonial modern metropolis, as well as of the mofussil life. It explores the emergence of an Assamese public sphere around Calcutta, and gradual formation of an Assamese identity. Lakshminath's

joint venture with Bholanath Borooah to establish themselves in the colonial business world, their confrontation with European racism, their adaptation of the business etiquette, and leaning towards the Indian National Congress-all these themes are tried to be imbricated in this chapter. The chapter focuses on colonial modern's appropriation of the inner domain, and experiences like child-bearing, mothering, cooking, house-building etc., and the making of the new modernity. Chapter three is proposed to explore Lakshminath's role as a chief exponent of Assamese linguistic nationalism. It intends to inquire how colonialism had brought changes to the perception of language, and became instrumental for a nationalistic ideology around language. It focuses on Lakshminath's careful handling of philological knowledge, which evidently augmented the growth of a nationalistic consciousness among the contemporary literati of Assam as a whole. However, an individual effort derives its meanings only in relation to the current paradigm of thought, the larger activities of a society in a particular time. Linguistic nationalism of the Assamese intelligentsia was a collective project, in which Lakshminath represented a prominent voice among many other voices. The chapter addresses how without giving the proper attention to the extensively multilingual world of Assam, the nationalist claims of Assamese as a *Jatiya Bhasa* were tried to be established. Questioning the idea of language as a closed entity, it proposes to address the variations of language use, including the fluidity of its boundary.

Chapter four explores the role of religion both in public and private lives of the emerging nationalist intelligentsia, as well as to understand their efforts to appropriate it in colonial modern situations. In a sense, it is partly an extension of and supplementary to the previous chapter on linguistic nationalism. As Paul Brass has put into words that in multicultural and multi-religious societies like India, language is not the central affiliation, symbol or basis for the political expression of nationalism, similarly, the chapter tries to show that religion played a role in such political motivation. It argues that in the twentieth century, the emergence of

political aspirations among the emerging elite belonged to the various ethnic groups and castes, and the colonial government's introduction of policy of community-wise political representation was a serious blow to the expectations of the Assamese nationalists. Already having suffered from a minority complex out of the government-induced immigration to the region of the Bengali speaking people, they had to negotiate with the tension. They tried to make Hinduism, and particularly the Vaishnavism of Assam an adjunct to linguistic identity, and thus tried to produce, what was called by Brass a "multi-symbol congruence". Alongside Vaishnavism, *Bihu*, a festival of the peasant community, was made to symbolize the people. The chapter tries to explore the appropriation of *bhakti* as resolution of the anxieties of the intelligentsia in colonial time both in personal and public life. Its central concern will be to examine the appropriation of Sankardeva, the religious preacher of Assam and the *Mahapurushiya* sect, founded by him by the colonial intelligentsia to serve their purpose of identity formation. It revisits the high caste Hindu intelligentsia's critique of the caste system intended to overcome caste prejudice as a barrier to nation formation. It will explore the Assamese intelligentsia's simultaneous attraction and aversion towards the Hindu reformist and revivalist ideology of mainland India, and their attempt to define a secular, inclusive regional nationalism on the basis of Sankardeva as a heroic icon.

Chapter five deals with literary modernity in Assamese. The intellectually enriched elite section of the society in vernaculars deployed print to address some issues, which they claimed to be of the general interests of the society as a whole, and by this act asserted themselves as a hegemonic group. Living larger parts of his adult life in Calcutta, Howrah and Sambalpur, it was the technology of print, through which Lakshminath was in constant relation with Assam and the Assamese language and literature. As modernity by its new communicational networks produced the provisions to experience a far more vast world than before, it also created the need to go away from one's homeland to live a life of an expatriate. While his intellectual make

up was shaped by certain ideological and literary currents of the time, which he received like other Indian writers of his generation both from the western world and of the own indigenous traditions being practiced either in Sanskrit or in vernaculars, his creative mind acquired its materials from a wide panorama of the whole of the eastern India. Enriching and transforming a literary tradition to cope up with the new demands of time was projected as a sacred duty towards the nation. It inquires about the process in which *sahitya* was defined to serve the new discourse of national unity and brotherhood.

Finally, the concluding chapter intends to concentrate on the process of making a hero of Lakshminath. It tries to understand the historical necessity of the society under which it explored a heroic figure, and explores how a literary persona has been constantly being made and unmade to serve the causes of the imagined life of a community, and elevated to the status of a hero. It also asks why Lakshminath was chosen for this purpose, emphasizing why a man of letters and a creative writer, rather than a contemporary politician, was chosen to represent a regional identity in Assam. It also tries to understand how a song composed by Lakshminath, without concern to its literary merit, came to signify the whole life of a nationality, and subsequently acquired a symbolic value. Being elevated, like the much-cited *Vande Mataram* song by Bankimchandra, in Assam, singing the particular song comes to be placed as a way of one's assertion of identity and engagement.

CHAPTER ONE

Lakshminath's Time and Place: The Backdrop (1813-1886)

Lakshminath's father Dinanath Bezbaroa belonged to that generation of the nobility, who witnessed the last days of the pre-colonial Ahom rule in Assam, as its gradual decay led to its ultimate surrender to the foreign rule in 1826. Being born in 1813, Dinanath saw Assam's early encounter with colonialism, himself being part of the process. His life encompassed almost the whole of the last three quarters of the nineteenth century (he died in 1895), which, in the terms of Tanika Sarkar in another context, was "a time of enormous changes, tribulations and possibilities."⁸¹ Taking his life as an entry point, the chapter intends to engage with the broader political and social landscape of Assam and India in the nineteenth century, while concentrating on the changes that took place in colonial rule as an aftermath of the introduction of a new regime of land tenure. It tries to explore the various aspects related to the declining Sanskrit and Ayurvedic knowledge in India, while dominant social practices like caste refuse to wane. It questions the supposed binary between tradition and modernity, problematizing both in relation to the responses of Dinanath and his generation to their disjointed times. The chapter focuses on highly valorised instances of English or western education as flagship of modernization projects and improvement propaganda of colonialism as limited and bilateral effort rather than an exclusive gift of colonialism to the so-called backward society. It also traces the childhood and adolescence of Lakshminath, trying to understand whether and how these formative years of his life became determinant in one or another way in shaping his ways of living and thinking.

⁸¹ Sarkar, Tanika. *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013, p. 18.

Exploring Assam

Assam, the easternmost territory of the British India, due to its peculiar topography, also for its diverse ethnography, once came to be reproduced as a fabulous land of sorcery and witchcraft. From pre-historic times, the fertile soil of the region attracted several streams of people both from the eastward and westward, who migrated to settle down the land crossing the allegedly impassable mountain paths, or the risky high altitude of the plateau or navigating the turbulent Brahmaputra. Nonetheless, the region, in the imagination of mainland India, mostly appeared to be an alien and remote territory, a *pratyanta desha*. In their consciousness as outsiders, the mountains, rivers, or regular flood on these appeared as hindrances, but for the inhabitants of the region these came to be assessed as nature's gifts to them rather than barriers, and they toiled to make these parts and parcels of their normal courses of life.⁸²

The region though now and then was partially occupied, at no point of time, came under the total and permanent dominance of the Moghul imperial power. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, it was mainly due to the gradual disintegration of the Ahom Kingdom of Assam, which could not effectively resist the aggressive Burmese army that it became compelled to open the doors to the British military power. At last, as the outcome of the first Anglo-Burmese war, in 1826, the Assam proper, which meant the entire Brahmaputra valley (except the Goalpara district), and most of its adjoining territories were possessed by the British. At first, a part of the Assam proper, or the entire Sibsagar and partially the Lakhimpur district was ruled through a tributary arrangement with the Raja Purandar of the former Ahom dynastic realm, but in 1838, was resumed to be ruled directly by the British.

⁸² Until the end of the eighteenth century, natural calamity like flood came to be perceived by the inhabitants of the land not only as nourishment of fertility but as a strategic weapon of war to the local kings against the external enemies.

Ethnologically and socially, the region from the remote past had exhibited far complex characters. It is a place where the South and South- East Asia overlapped and converged with one another, in a reciprocal process of transforming and being transformed, making the place a transitional space. Looking eastward to Assam from their firm foothold in Bengal, the British first saw it as a region of strategic importance.⁸³ They had an agony not only from imperial China and aggressive Burma, but also for the “unruly”, “barbarous” and “hostile” tribes of the region, which compelled them to undertake expeditions to these territories as a necessary condition of the existence of the empire. The missionary accounts of the time, on the other hand, expressed their eagerness to explore a route to China through Assam. Later, successful introduction of tea as commercial cultivation in the region, and exploration of coal and petroleum had altered the perspective, and Assam and the whole of North- East India, as the region was mentioned by the British, came to be perceived as a zone of profound economic importance. Either in backwardness or in development, the state of the province for the colonial administration always came to be noticed from the interests of tea. Hopkins, the Commissioner of Assam once clearly stated,

“The profits of tea cultivation should attract hundreds where ten now come, but the capitalist would not always be found who will venture his money in a country to which access is so difficult as it is to Assam.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Earlier accounts of the British officers emphasized on the strategic importance of Assam and its adjoining territories and described the region in terms of India’s North- East frontier. Even in the report of the census held as late as in 1891, Assam was described as a “frontier province”, which formed the north- eastern corner of the Indian empire. The same report also called Assam historically a “border land”, presumably “the most easterly acquisition of the early Aryan invaders of India”, with the declining power of whom, the numerous aboriginal tribes had come to possess the land. See Gait, E. A. *Census of India, 1891: Volume I, Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892, p. 51.

⁸⁴ *Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1874-75 and 1875-76*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1877, p. 167.

A report published in the Calcutta Monthly Journal and General Register of Occurrences in 1836 not only unmask for us the motives of the colonial rule in the province, but also tries to persuade its readers how grateful Assam should remain for the “blessing” done on it by the British rule,

“The province of Assam is worthy of attention, not only from the prospect which has recently opened up of its becoming a source of supply for the tea market, but also because of its extent and natural fertility, and of the character of the tribes which inhabit and surround it. It is also gratifying to find that Assam, like Aracan, furnishes an unequivocal instance of the British rule being a blessing to those who have been brought under it.”⁸⁵

The concept of Assam in the modern times was initially brought to the shapes by the imperial state, and its instruments like geographical explorations, survey, map making etc., was further consolidated by the agencies of modernity like expansion of western education among the people, nationalism, and such. Amalendu Guha has commented that though the British power in north east India was always in flux, right from the beginning to the end, nevertheless, the British Assam took its shape by 1873.⁸⁶ However, throughout the colonial period, in administrative parlance, Assam had been represented as formed of three distinct constituents, the Brahmaputra valley or the Assam proper, the Surma valley and the hilly tracts.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Anonymous (A Friend of India). "Assam." *Calcutta Monthly Journal and General Register of Occurrences Throughout the British Dominions in the East, An Epitome of Indian Press, In the Year 1836, Third Series, Volume II*. Calcutta: Samuel Smith and Company, 1837, pp. 86-95.

⁸⁶ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1988, p. 3.

⁸⁷ In 1874, when Assam with Sylhet were separated from Bengal with the status of a Chief Commissioner's Province, it was comprised of the Brahmaputra valley districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Kamrup, Darrang and Goalpara, the hilly tracts of the Naga, Khasi, Jaintia and Garo, and the Surma valley districts of Kachar and Sylhet. All three parts were always represented as having distinctive physical characteristics as well as diverse ethnological and social features. The report of the census of 1881 had shown that the Brahmaputra valley, consisted of the area of 21,414 square miles contained population of 2,249,185, whereas the Surma valley

Exploring Assam's geographical history in early modern times, since the second part of the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, David Ludden has pointed out that it has been decisively being shaped as an outcome of human mobility in all directions.⁸⁸ He has pointed out to the fact that national geographic history could not pay equal attention to all routes of mobility of the people to Assam, and exclusively focused on the routes that ran from the west to the east along the Gangetic basin. It was this perspective based on Bengal and Indian mainland, the British, followed by the dominant social groups of the region, focused on Assam's ethnic and cultural ties with the Aryan India, locating it as a "frontier", "a meeting point between savagery and civilization".⁸⁹

A Journey by Water

In 1864, Dinanath Bezbaroa, then a *munsif* of the British colonial office, having got his transfer in the job from Nowgong to Barpeta, made a tour with his family and entourage by boats. During their night stay at the sand of the river Brahmaputra, Lakshminath was born on a country boat. The birth though seems scary enough for a modern reader was not very uncommon in Assam then. But it can give us an indication of the material condition of the province, which was often represented by the colonial records as "impenetrable".⁹⁰ Instead of

with an area of 6,725 square miles had the population of 2,258,434 and the hill districts, with a population of 3,73,807 possessed 18,202 square miles of area. See Driberg, J.J.S., and C.A. Elliott. *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*. Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1883, p. 22.

⁸⁸ Ludden, David. "Where is Assam? Using Geographical History to Locate Current Social Realities." *CENISEAS Papers*. Guwahati: Centre of Northeast India and South and Southeast Asian Studies, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, 2003.

⁸⁹ Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History (A Paper Read at the Meeting of the American Historical Association)." Chicago, July 12, 1893.

⁹⁰ During the first part of the nineteenth century, a journey up the magnanimous Brahmaputra, 'the great highway,' which connected Assam with Bengal, by any boat of ordinary size was reported to be 'a very lengthy business'. A large boat took from six to seven weeks to come from Calcutta to Gauhati. See M'Cosh, John. *Topography of Assam*. Calcutta: G. H. Huttman, Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1837, pp. 6-7.

the frequent pronouncement of the term “improvement” as an ideology and its profound impact on the local nobles as a motivating force to celebrate the colonial regime, Assam had to wait for years to see the real investment of the colonial government for its development. In 1861, Colonel Hopkins, the Commissioner of Assam wrote to the Government of India that the “furious currents of the Brahmaputra” were still to be conquered and there was not a single road which was fit for wheeled carriage.⁹¹ It was the necessity of the tea industry, which ultimately provided the government an impetus to concentrate on its infrastructural needs.

Dinanath, a Brahman by caste, had two wives, of whom Lakshminath’s mother Thaneswari was the second. As polygamy for males was convention of the times, and frequently exercised both by the elite section of the society, as well as by the peasantry, so having two wives for a government official like Dinanath had nothing exceptional about it. Dinanath, from the sides of the two wives, already had several sons and daughters, and Lakshminath’s birth appeared to them as an ordinary occurrence which evoked little sense of importance. Within the period of 1864-1873, Dinanath served in Barpeta, Lakhimpur and Guwahati, where he lived with his family. Starting his career in 1838 as a *chirastadar* of the Dewani court of Sibsagar district in the office of the East India Company, Dinanath had served the colonial government until his superannuation from the post of Extra Assistant Commissioner of Kamrup in 1873.⁹² So, Lakshminath’s childhood was spent at several places in Assam. After retirement, Dinanath

⁹¹ *Report of the Administration of the Province of Assam for the Year 1905*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1905, p. 176. From 1884, a daily steamer of mail service between Dhubri of the western Assam to Dibrugarh of the east was introduced. It was towards the beginning of the twentieth century, two daily steamers with regularity and speed were plied between the places, which brought a change to the situation.

⁹² The Pension File of Dinanath Bezbaroa shows that since 1838, immediately after the resumption of the Upper Assam part from the Raja Purandar, Dinanath served as the shirastedar in the Dewani court at Sibsagar, subsequently placed in the Civil court in 1841, and served there until he was appointed as *munsif* of Nagaon in 1861. He superannuated from the post of Extra Assistant Commissioner of the Kamrup district in 1873. Correspondence Regarding Pension of Dinanath Sarma, Extra Assistant Commissioner, File No. 82/122, 1873, Govt. of Bengal Papers-2, Assam State Archives.

chose to permanently settle at Sibsagar, from where he once commenced his journey as service person of the colonial office.

The Lineage of Kalibar

The history of their lineage was claimed to have originated at Kannauj of mainland India. During the first part of the nineteenth century, it became commonplace for the respectable families of the literate castes of Assam to compose their *Bangshavali* or accounts of the lineages, which embodied their efforts to protect higher civilizational status for them. Living in a time, when the colonial administrators constantly recreated the image of “barbaric” and “semi barbaric” or “half civilized” tribes of Assam, it was an endeavour from the part of the upper caste Hindu gentry to differentiate themselves from such people of allegedly lower origin and status. Drawing upon certain mythological evidence in support of their claim on Assam’s perennial and deep cultural-linguistic ties with the Gangetic basin, they tried to write a larger regional history of Assam, which they simultaneously complemented and strengthened by producing kinds of smaller histories of their own lineages.

The historical accounts of Assam produced in the period by the upper caste Hindu historians had explored the legend of mythical king Narakasur as an instance of the Aryan settlement in Assam. The ancient Assam, or Pragjyotishpur or Kamrup, which they conceived as part of Aryavarta, the glorious Hindu civilization of ancient Bharatvarsha, was depicted as a sacred land, and from it the later history of Assam was shown as contamination and degradation.⁹³

⁹³ Gunabhiram Boroah, being a pioneer of the modern historiography in Assam, conceptualized Assam in terms of the ancient kingdoms of Kamrup, Sonitpur, Kundil, Hirimba, Jayantipur, Manipur etc., all of which told the stories of the Aryan expansion and relations with the land. He, in unison with the European representation of the period, referred to certain tribes of the region as the descent of the ‘uncivilized’, ‘Anarya’ or ‘Rakshas’ jatis. What appeared to him culturally the most significant was the union of the Brahmaputra with the Ganga near Dhaka and interpreted this union in allegorical terms as Assam’s freedom from parochialism, acquiring profundity and opening its journey towards the endless sea of ‘progress’. Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “Saumar Bhraman”, *Jonaki*,

The story of Naraka's migration from Videha to Assam was read as an archetype. Making its reverberations, the *vangshavalies* produced during the period also depicted similar narratives of migration of their forefathers to this land from the Mithila-Videha region.

Accordingly, an account of the Bezbaroa family of Assam, composed by Dinanath, claimed that their founder father Kalibar had migrated from Kannauj, to subsequently get an establishment in the Ahom kingdom of Assam. It was by dint of his expertise in the Ayurveda system of medicine, he obtained patronization of the Ahom monarch with a gift of 4000 Bighas of rent-free land, and some families of *das* and *dasi* to serve the family. The family, for several generations, had provided the *Swargadeos* their royal physicians, titled as *Bezbaroa*, a position that the family occupied until the British possession of Assam. In 1813, Dinanath was born at Jorhat, but due to the politically turbulent situation of the period soon had to leave the place. Being traditionally educated in Sanskrit and indigenous medicine, Dinanath started his professional career as an *adhyapak* of a *tol*, but after the British possession of the territory served the tributary king Purandar both as physician and revenue officer. In 1838, when the direct rule of the British in upper Assam was established, he shifted his loyalty to the British and adopted the life of a service man in the colonial office.

Volume 2, Issue 4, 1890 in Saikia, Nagen, ed. *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001, pp. 156-159. Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya, another personality of the time, regretted the depraved condition of Assam and called for a resurrection of the '*Bhrasta Arya*', the fallen Aryan inhabitants of the territory to the ancient and mythical time of glory. See "Paharani", *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 6, 1889 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 50-51. A hierarchical perception of racial development was charted to tell a teleological history of '*unnati*', which recognized the British supremacy, in stark opposite to the 'dark age' of the pre-colonial regime of the 'half- civilized' races like Chutiya, Barbhuyan and Ahom and such, whereas potentiality of redemption had been assigned solely to the Aryan legacy of the people. See "Asamiyar Unnati", *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 5, 1889 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 41-42.

Sibsagar

Making the decision from the part of Dinanath to dwell at the small town of Sibsagar seemed to be not out of significance. Sibsagar, being an eastern town of what had been called by the British as the Assam proper, was for long a seat of the Ahom monarch. Though the Burmese invasion had ravaged the place, compelling the inhabitants to leave the country, with the institution of the Company's rule soon the process of coming back began. It was a place where remnants of the monuments of the former dynastic realm were being scattered waiting to be explored to arouse the historical memory of the inhabitants in the near future.⁹⁴ Lakshminath's childhood and adolescence imagination had been inspired by the surrounding nature and historical monuments. Moreover, Sibsagar was the town where the American Baptist Mission Society of Assam had founded a station from where the first Assamese periodical was published. Explaining the attraction towards the town as new settlement and founding place of the Mission Press, the first of the kind in Assam, Nathan Brown, an early missionary to Assam had written in 1841,

"I have decided to remain at this place. The press, we trust ultimately will be located here, it being altogether the most central and important station in Assam proper, that is Assam above Guwahati".⁹⁵

⁹⁴ The palace of Gurgaon was described by a survey party of 1865-66 as 'a dark, dismal looking brick building nearly covered by jungle', enclosed by a brick wall, but the wall seemed firm. The report of 1867-68 stated that the Assam Company was allowed to bring away the bricks, and they had broken down the gates, a part of the palace and its boundary wall. See Hunter, W. W. *A Statistical Account of Assam: Volume 1*. London: Trubner and Company, 1879, pp. 247- 248. Already, in 1853, Justice Mills had regretted that the bricks of the historic monuments were allowed for lift to the Assam Company. See Mills, A. J. Moffatt. *Report on the Province of Assam*. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, 1984.

⁹⁵ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Vol. XXII, No. 9, September, 1842, p. 31.

Bernard Cohn has pointed out that the village-community or the allegedly unchanging village republic of pre-colonial India was held to be self-sufficient, which produced everything that they wanted and remained the same.

“It lasts where nothing else lasts.”⁹⁶

W. W. Hunter, the Director-General of Statistics to the Government of India, in “A Statistical Account of Assam” depicted the picture of a self-sufficient life in the Sibsagar district of Assam, where nearly all the people gained their livelihood from agriculture. It is a society without any change. The people, as delineated by the colonial administrators, lived the “primitive way as their forefathers”. Their food and clothing, all were as they had been fifty years ago.⁹⁷ They were disinclined to commerce and had no tendency to live in towns.⁹⁸

The people were represented as “contented and happy” with very limited and easily affordable wants, because paddy was cultivated, and all other eatables like leaves, roots, fruits, tubers and fishes were garnered from the jungles and streams.⁹⁹ Potatoes, carrots, cabbage, turnips, onions and so forth were grown by a section of the peasantry, but only to sell to the Europeans. Oil was seldom used by the poor, and butter and sugar by the wealthy section only. *Khar* or potash was prepared by burning plantain leaves to use as an alternative to oil.¹⁰⁰ Salt, one of the most essential things, was bartered for cotton. The houses were constructed of locally available materials like wood, bamboo, grass, thatch, and reed, as it was very much commonplace

⁹⁶ Cohn, Bernard S. "Structural Change in Indian Rural Society, 1596-1885." In *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, by Robert Eric Frykenberg, 53-122. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969, pp. 53-122.

⁹⁷ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 249.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 245.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 249. The people were represented even as having enough money in their hands as the colonial officers found that they had been ready to pay the fine over any trial in the criminal courts, or to bear the marriage expenses.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 251.

everywhere in Assam.¹⁰¹ But these were low, damp, and ill-ventilated, almost inaccessible to light and air, and constructed without any concern to the sanitary condition.¹⁰² Flooding was common in the district, and almost every village bordering on the Brahmaputra submerged during the rainy season, though drought was extremely rare.¹⁰³

The town of Sibsagar was little different from the nearby villages, which had barely 6000 of population.¹⁰⁴ Though it began to take a distinct shape, the urban settlements in Sibsagar still converged with the surrounding village hamlets, making it hard to define where the town ended, and the village began. The dwelling houses of the town during the rainy season remained in “dilapidated” condition. The bazaar, which ran along the river Dikhow, was a collection of grass huts.¹⁰⁵ The town, in its appearance seemed to the eyes of the Europeans, the same obnoxious features of a colonial town of south Asia, “backward”, “jungly”, drains filled with mud, and overgrown with weeds, without the proper arrangement for sewage and prone to endemic and contagious disease. However, the European quarter of the civil station was situated in the high embankment of the town surrounding the magnificent and historic tank of Sibsagar, and this part possessed good arrangement for drainage, sewage and road.¹⁰⁶ The town was surrounded by the adjoining hills inhabited by the Nagas, and they visited the town during the cold season, and bartered cotton and vegetables with salt, fish, poultry, cow, goat and so

¹⁰¹ The difference between the dwellings of the wealthier class from the ordinary section was that the former was larger and spacious, built on higher plinth and elaborately fenced in. Towards the last part of the century, iron roofs, in lieu of traditional houses of thatch roofs with mud-plastered wattled walls, began to be used in towns. See Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 56.

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 250.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 258.

¹⁰⁴ According to the census report of the district by C. F. Magrath the population of the town was 5278, Ibid, p. 245.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 257.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 286.

forth.¹⁰⁷ Thus, hills remained an inevitable part of the imagination of the inhabitants of the plains, both economically and politically.

The clothing of an ordinary peasant of Assam of the time consisted of a waistcloth and a cotton shawl with a cloth carelessly tied round the head as a turban.¹⁰⁸ The dress worn by a noble differed enormously though.¹⁰⁹ If dress is accepted as suggestive of the civilizational scale of a society, then it is to be noted that Lakshminath and his companions, until the age of 8/9 years were used to be almost naked at home, occasionally wearing a *churiya*, a cloth around the waist, a socially accepted practice of the time. It was at their first arrival at Sibsagar in 1873 Lakshminath felt ashamed of his nudity in an unfamiliar ambience and requested his mother to provide a few loin clothes to wear, which was immediately granted.

Shattering the image as an idyllic place of living, which they had constructed themselves, one of the colonial documents commented,

“The residences were surrounded by clumps of bamboo, plantain, betelnut, and sum tree, viewed from a distance ‘very picturesque’, but the ‘charm’ disappeared at close view for jungle around the house, and stagnant water and filth on all sides.”¹¹⁰

Masters, the Superintendent of the headquarters of the Assam Company at Nazira of Sibsagar district described in a letter the eerie landscape of the locality, and mentioned about the debris of the past that lies being scattered, simultaneously pointing out the economic potential that the soil kept within it to be exploited,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 258.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 249.

¹⁰⁹ The few Assamese, whose social status was above an ordinary peasant wore *muga* silk waistcoat, with jacket made of cotton, and a piece of silk cloth as headdress in the distinctive Assamese way. Very few, except the government servants, wore turbans, Ibid, p. 367.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 250.

“I have now been in this district, eighteen months, and know comparatively little about it, owing to the dense tree forest and coarse high grass jungle with which the land is all overrun, so that when travelling one can see nothing but what lies in his immediate route and I am continually finding fresh patches of ground occupied by the sites of former villages or gardens or temples or tanks of beautiful water or small patches of tea plants and immense tracts of waste land.”¹¹¹

In fact, what was recorded about Sibsagar of the time was representative of the other districts of the Assam valley too.

It is not surprising that in consonance with the colonial officers’ accounts, the preoccupation of a self-sufficient economy and changeless society got articulation in a note of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, one of the undisputed pioneers of modern life and thinking in the nineteenth-century Assam,

“The Assamese, one and all, from the poorest peasant to the nobility of the country, are devoted to agricultural pursuits.”¹¹²

They, as shown by him, cultivated rice, pulses, fruits, and vegetables to supply their table, mustard to light their houses, and silk or cotton to provide their garments.

In 1871-72, C. F. Magrath made a census of the district, from which an idea of the traditional occupations of the various castes then living could be conceived.¹¹³ However, in the meantime, most of them transformed themselves to agricultural class, or took it as their additional occupation. As Maniram Dewan has observed, by the 1850s, pre-colonial artisan classes had

¹¹¹ Mann, Harold H. *Early History of Tea Industry in North East India*. Calcutta: Calcutta Central Printing Company, 1918, p. 24.

¹¹² Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, p. 102.

¹¹³ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, pp. 236-238. Magrath’s list included trader classes, fisherman, gardener, labour, weaver, mat maker, palanquin bearers, washer man, barber, carpenter, oilman, cotton and silk weaver, makers of shell lime, salt maker, digger, boatman, shoemaker, brazier, stone cutter, lac workers, boat rider, flower seller, pan grower, gardener, silk weaver, distiller and as such.

largely disappeared.¹¹⁴ With the disruption of the Ahom polity and rule, for lack of patronization, most of the professional classes had to leave their former occupations and shifted to agriculture. Moreover, artisans and craftsmen had been gradually becoming workless challenged by the imported manufacturing goods.¹¹⁵

The change in the material aspects of the society on the way could be perceived from the list of imports to the district, which included salt, abkari opium, mustard oil, ghee, sugar, molasses, sugar candy, rice, wheat, dried fruits, tobacco, spices, jute, brass vessels, vermilion, saltpetre, coral beads, glass beads, gold and silver wire, shells, iron pot and spoon, stationery, umbrella, sandals, shoes, looking glasses, cutlery, soap, chairs, powder, books, English medicine, printed calico and woollen clothes, wax candles etc., whereas exports from the district were consisted of tea, gold, raw silk, mustard seed, ivory, lac, cotton, rhinoceros horns, silver and such.¹¹⁶ The imported items mostly came from Bengal.¹¹⁷ Modernity brought changes to the day-to-day consumption of the people in important ways, which in turn produced some new

¹¹⁴ Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, p. 620.

¹¹⁵ William Robinson showed that introduction of imported salt from Bengal had interrupted the salt-making from brine-water streams. See Robinson, William. *A Descriptive Account of Assam With a Sketch of the Local Geography and a Concise History of the Tea Plant of Assam To Which is Added a Short Account of the Neighbouring Tribes, Exhibiting Their History, Manners and Customs*. Calcutta: Ostell & Lepage, 1841, p. 226. Similarly, Hunter recorded that gold-washing of the pre-colonial time died out for the introduction of works for wage in the tea plantations. See Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 299. Christopher Bayly has called the process of change that took place in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century Indian society as homogenization or levelling of the earlier complex hierarchies or structure of the society. His Indian model, though does not fit adequately to the condition of Assam, can provide some light to comprehend the situation. See Bayly, C. A. *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire: Cambridge History of India, Volume II.1.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

¹¹⁶ Evidently a part of these imported goods was meant for the European inhabitants of the district, consisting of government and tea garden employees.

¹¹⁷ Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, Appendix- B, p. 526.

professions of trade, but few local people became involved in these.¹¹⁸ The intelligentsia of the district in the early twentieth century seemed not to be happy with what colonial rule had made to the place. Jatindranath Dowerah wrote to Lakshminath in a personal letter,

“It is very sad to see Sibsagar as entirely a deserted village, the government has destroyed the town.”¹¹⁹

Discourse of Progress

Edward Said has argued that the image of the Oriental societies as steady and unchanging acted as a ready justification for colonial domination.¹²⁰ It was in this background of stagnant village life the British could proclaim themselves as bearers of progress. As land revenue administration was the linchpin of both the economy and the rule, so nowhere but regards to the land system, the British immediately after the establishment of the direct rule in the territory introduced a structural change. Unlike the neighbouring Bengal, and a few other districts of Assam, the Assam valley districts were brought under a ryotwari system of land settlement, according to which the government was the proprietor of land. There remained “no class of people in the country who could be called landholders above the mere ryot and actual cultivator”.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Hunter showed that at the upper Assam town Jorhat, ‘Europe goods’ and furniture were sold at a few Muhammadan shops, while in some petty shops, grain, oil, onion etc. were found. See Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 248.

¹¹⁹ Jatindranath Dowerah’s letter to Lakshminath Bezbaroa on 28 January 1925 from Calcutta in Neog, Maheswar, ed. *Patralekha*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1968, pp. 258-259.

¹²⁰ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient*. London: Penguin Books, 1995. Ranajit Guha has noted that, ‘improvement was a political strategy to persuade the indigenous elite to ‘attach’ themselves to a colonial regime’, Guha, Ranajit. *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

¹²¹ Francis Jenkins’ Letter to Justice Mills, 23 May, 1853 in Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, Appendix B, p. 60.

As the British in the early nineteenth century found themselves in Assam in a “land-plenty” and “sparsely-populated” situation, the initial land settlements tried to attract the wandering cultivators to occupy land, which became partly successful. By the 1840s the population of the Sibsagar district was estimated to be more than 1,59,573, as people who left the district in the time of Burmese attack and afterwards, began to return to settle in the ancestral land.¹²² The discourse of progress was reiterated by Francis Jenkins immediately after the first settlement of land in the Upper Assam,

“Lieutenant Brodie has removed all the objections of the people, restored a degree of order throughout the country, which it has long been a stranger, and I hope laid the sure foundations of a very rapid improvement.”¹²³

It is in this background, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, envisaged through improvement of agriculture a prosperous future for the province and the people,

“The improvements in the art of agriculture are the only means which can increase the general resources of the country, ameliorate the condition of the people, raise them to wealth or affluence, advance manufactures, and commerce, and teach the Assamese the arts and luxuries of civilized life.”¹²⁴

Anandaram, as a representative of the emerging literary elite, while dreaming of “progressive improvement” in the region, pointed out to the exploitative element inherent in the permanent settlement of Bengal, and greeted the ryotwari system as a “boon”.¹²⁵ He advocated direct state

¹²² Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, Report on Sibsagar, p. 504.

¹²³ “Report on the First Settlement of the Upper Assam Division resumed from Raja Purandar, 1839-1840”, File No. 638 C. O. of 1840, General Department, Assam State Archives.

¹²⁴ “Observations on the Province of Assam by Baboo Anundoram Dakeal Phookun” in Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, Appendix J, pp. 102-103. Reading his arguments placed before Mills, it seems that a section of historians’ earlier projection of Anandaram solely as an advocate of linguistic nationalism or culturalism is misleading, which cannot make a proper assessment of his ideas.

¹²⁵ Questioning the colonial government’s alleged interest in allowing maximum freedom to the peasants as cultivators, Arupjyoti Saikia has pointed out that land-lordism grew at a faster pace. The pre-colonial landed

initiative for the development of the region. The British, as part of their idea of agrarian development of the region, tried in Assam to found commercial agriculture of tea as a profitable venture to check the expanding world market of China tea. To get access to the American market, they even took the initiative to produce green tea in Assam.¹²⁶

In the process, towards the second part of the nineteenth century, Sibsagar came to be known as a tea district, which underwent certain changes. It was these changes in his mind when Edward Gait, in 1891, claimed it to be “one of the most progressive districts in the province”.¹²⁷ But whether these changes involved the improvement of the region, or how and to what degree these improvements did make an impact on the lives of the inhabitants of the region, are relevant questions to be asked. In fact, colonial rule by no means helped in the formation of a wealthy industrialist or mercantilist class in Assam. Land at concession for the special cultivation of tea by the government was exclusively provided to the European planters.¹²⁸ Mills’ report has shown that in 1853, out of 3,782 *poorahs* of grants in waste tracts that were provided rent-free for 20 years, almost all except 108 *pooras* were allotted exclusively to the Assam Tea Company.¹²⁹ Trying to explain the situation, Hunter stated that, in the 1860s, a number of local speculators lost their money in the tea industry and then preferred to keep it hoarded.¹³⁰ It is imaginable that, as an outcome of the establishment of the tea industry, grain prices increased, and simultaneously, establishment of railways and steam shipping provided

interests were still in the picture, and in many cases, acquired sanction of the colonial state. See Saikia, Arupjyoti, *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam Since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2013, p. 8.

¹²⁶ “East India Tea Plantations” in Proceedings of the Government of Bengal in the Revenue Department, No. 7, 1857, See Enclosure 1.

¹²⁷ Gait, *Census of India, Assam*, 1892, p. 73.

¹²⁸ Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, 1988, p. 8.

¹²⁹ Order of the Government, 6 March, 1838, Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, p. 512.

¹³⁰ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 262.

the production of the interior with wider opportunities in the market, enabling easy subsistence both for labour and cultivators. But trading and banking business of the province were almost exclusively in the hands of the Marwaris from Rajasthan and the Mussalmans from Bengal. Similarly, though the tea gardens of Assam Company in 1853 employed 3000 persons, of whom only one-third were from the district, the remaining were either from Bengal or from the other districts of Assam.¹³¹ The colonial records repeatedly claimed that although the labour wage in Assam was seemingly high, due to the reluctance to work as hired labour and for indolence, no separate day-labouring class was developed in Assam.¹³²

Whither Progress

Contrary to the image of the allegedly “contented” peasantry of the district, an opposite picture in case of the pre-colonial nobility soon came to the fore.¹³³ Mills noted that the Sibsagar division was “peculiar” because the old Assam nobility were located in the district, a large section of whom were till then were out of employment, and found themselves in “utmost difficulty in meeting the present demands”.¹³⁴ Even Hunter had to comment that the “general prosperity” of the district was absent in the case of a few families belonging to “the better

¹³¹ Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, p. 513.

¹³² In a tea garden, an Assamese labour got Rs 5 as monthly wage. It was for the high wage in the tea gardens, colonial administrators complained, no labour to repair the public roads was easily available. See Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 256

¹³³ The discontent among the nobility was so deep that it often found expression through various mediums. As late as in the 1920s, Jatindranath Dowerah, a poet from the same Sibsagar locality, wrote in a personal letter to Lakshminath that “It is very sad to see Sibsagar, entirely as a ‘deserted village’, the government has destroyed the town.” Jatindranath Dowerah’s letter to Lakshminath on 28 January, 1925 from Calcutta, Neog, ed. *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 258-259. In another letter Jatindranath questioned the improvement of the place and expressed his anguish at the changing human scape of Sibsagar, “The Place will be full of bideshi. Though it will flourish.” Jatindra’s Letter to Lakshminath in 14 May, 1926 from Sibsagar, Neog, ed. *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 262-264.

¹³⁴ Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, Report on Sibsagar, p. 506.

class”, who considered themselves as above manual labour and could not cope up with the new system, becoming unable to keep the land in their possession. They found themselves in a difficult position to retain their social status.¹³⁵ The crisis was articulated by an utterly discontented section of the nobility of the time in their verbatim as “hopeless state of misery from the loss of their fame, honour, rank, caste, employment”, and as such.¹³⁶ Their condition was presented with an analogy of the state of being “in the belly of a tiger”. It was called degradation from the earlier “prosperity” to “distress”, as they found themselves in a compulsion to do the works like digging, ploughing, or carrying burdens, which their ancestors never had to do.¹³⁷

Maniram Dutt Baroah (Dewan), a contemporary of Dinanath, complained to Justice Mills,

“The upper and middle classes have seen their offices abolished, which were more suitable for them. Their lagwas and licksow taken away, and their male and female slaves set free.”¹³⁸

Justice Mills negated the fulmination of Maniram against the rule but reflecting on the impact of abolition of slavery in Assam, he in approving tone noted that sudden abolition of slavery had pushed the former gentry into the extreme distress, and “reduced the only men of substance in Assam to absolute poverty.”¹³⁹ He wrote,

¹³⁵ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 249.

¹³⁶ “Translated copy of Petition of Ghanakanta Juboraj presented by Maniram Dewan to Mills”, Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, Appendix K. B, p. 605.

¹³⁷ Ibid. Harakanta Barooah Sadaramin regretted that as an outcome of the abolition of slavery the upper caste Hindus like him had to suffer from a menace towards their caste and social status. Sharma, Harakanta Majundar Barooah. *Sadarminar Atmajivani*. edited by Kumudchandra Bordoloi, North Guwahati: Kumudchandra Bordoloi, 1960, p. 72. In the district of Kamrup, the British government initially compelled the Brahmans to do the works of ‘coolie’ in construction of roads, which produced revulsion among the caste. Ibid, p. 41.

¹³⁸ Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, p. 609.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 27.

“I cannot find that the circumstances of the slaveholders were made known to the Government when the Act V. of 1843 was passed, or that its effect upon the Assamese were considered.”¹⁴⁰

He advised the government to make a census of the slaves and to make assessment of the quantity of land tilled by the slaves and then to provide some compensation in the shape of remission of rent for the stated period for the slave-holding persons.¹⁴¹ The collector of the Sibsagar district had already informed the government,

“All the nobility of the country resides in this district, many of whom are very poor and unable to pay a large amount of revenue.”¹⁴²

Thus, colonialism initially produced a realm, in which possession of land became the sole criteria which placed the people in respectable and privileged positions.¹⁴³

The British soon came to the realization that they could not dismantle the pre-colonial system of land revenue arrangements altogether. They feared that by disturbing the bases of religious and customary authority, they might unleash revolt against their rule. Anandaram, though vocal in favour of ryot's rights on land, took his position in favour of the customs. He requested the government to take the same “liberal and lenient” policy in Assam in respect to such endowment grants made by the king to make them rent-free as it was the case in Bengal and

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 26.

¹⁴² Letter from Captain C. Holroyd, collector of Sibsagar to the Commissioner of Revenue, Assam on 10 June, 1852, in Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, Appendix C, p. 573.

¹⁴³ The deplorable condition of the nobility was constantly being reflected till the first years of the twentieth century. In 1909, a writer pointed out in the *Banhi*, a journal edited by Lakshminath that emancipation of slaves and introduction of the cash payment of revenue were mainly responsible for the deplorable conditions of the nobility and told that though initially the government provided pensions or services to them, later with the coming of the educated Bengalis to the province, their condition became grave. Borooah, Upendra Nath. “Asamiya Dangar Manuhar Avastha”, *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 5, 1910 in Goswami, Jatindranath, ed. *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001. pp. 143-146.

other parts of India instead of the prevalent half-rent tenure.¹⁴⁴ He wanted interference from the government in the management of the land grants made by the kings to the religious and other charitable institutions. Otherwise, he noticed, the revenue of the endowment grants was being misappropriated by the leading members associated with such grants.

David Ludden has argued,

“Settling with the Company did not diminish the old potency of ritual, dharma, kinship, credit, coercion, and social status: and the sarkar actually needed the powerful local allies to collect its revenue and maintain law and order locally.”¹⁴⁵

Caste was the most formidable traditional force with which the revenue administrators had to cope. It is through submission of petitions in courts, customary, hereditary and caste rights were claimed by the inhabitants. Persons of legal professions emerged as advocates of certain traditional rights. The government also recognized certain caste privileges.¹⁴⁶ Western culture gave precedence to writing or documentary evidence over oral or non-documentary. As a consequence, claims of the traditional literate castes, which possessed and could produce written documents of land, were validated by the colonial law, whereas some other claims, which lacked such documents, were rejected.¹⁴⁷ Thus, the elite status of the society came to be

¹⁴⁴ Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, p. 109. *Lakhiraj* tenure based on caste and heredity was the underpinnings of the traditional relations. Harakanta Barooah noted that after the abolition of slavery the Brahmans and nobles of Kamrup assembled at Aswaklanta after performing “*ajut Sivapuja*” and submitted one thousand applications to Jenkins praying for continuation of *devottar* grants. See Sharma, *Sadarminar Atmajivani*, 1960, pp. 40-41.

¹⁴⁵ Ludden, David. *An Agrarian History of South Asia (New Cambridge History of India, Volume IV, Part 4)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 170.

¹⁴⁶ It was through the legal process of petition, the society presented itself as changeless, static, and traditional. Definition and protection of land rights went into the hands of the Anglo-Hindu law, which defined it in terms of precedent, hereditary succession, and caste hierarchy.

¹⁴⁷ A judgement on a dispute regarding the right of voting to elect the *Bura Satriya* of the Barpeta *satra*, tried to define the *samuha bhakat* of the *satra* based on a *phali* or slate, provided to the *satra* by the Ahom king, and told

mostly based on heredity and caste. However, compared to the other parts of India the Assamese nobles were economically not so powerful.¹⁴⁸ A farm of 12 acres for a single cultivator was held as excessively large, of two acres as small, and of five acres of land was held to be a comfortable holding in Assam.¹⁴⁹ Privileged rights to land, which were thought to be the gifts of the former kings, were exclusively in the possession of certain *satras* and other religious institutions.¹⁵⁰

The Bezbaroa family of Sibsagar was recipient of land grants in the first years of colonial rule.¹⁵¹ Lakshminath's father Dinanath was an example of that section of the nobles of Assam, who for generations had been serving the Ahom king, and enjoyed royal patronage,

that only the descendent of the *bhakats* whose names were being contained by the *phali* will constitute the *samuha bhakat*, and they will possess the exclusive rights of voting. On the grounds of the same logic, the *bhakats* of Nadiyal caste were excluded from the right. Appeal to the High Court regarding the Barpeta *satra* Dispute, File No. 134, 1920, Assam Commissioner's Office, Assam State Archives.

¹⁴⁸ Historians have argued that the British administration could never exercise direct control or authority on the Indian society. Its will was deflected, differed, and deviated by the local level power networks on which it was heavily dependent. In South India, the Brahman groups were in an extremely powerful position to influence the state in which they provided 'basic information about their society. In Madras presidency, the traditional society order was too strong to be ignored. See Mukherjee, Nilmani, and Robert Eric Frykenberg. "The Ryotwari System and Social Organization in the Madras Presidency." In *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, by Robert Eric Frykenberg, 217-226. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. Bernard Cohn's study on the Oudh Talukdars also tells that though 'certain old paths of power' were shut off for them to exercise the traditional position of dominance, 'other new ones opened up' under the British rule. Cohn, Bernard S. "British Land Policy in Oudh." In *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian Society*, by Robert Eric Frykenberg. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969, p. 159. Much has been said about the Permanent Settlement in Bengal, which had generated a permanent gap between landowners' access to peasant rent, which was elastic and the revenue that they had to pay to the state, which was fixed in perpetuity. In Bengal, proprietary rights to the zamindars helped enhance landlord capital.

¹⁴⁹ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 255.

¹⁵⁰ *Lakhiraj* land in the district of Sibsagar was mostly concentrated in the hands of the Auniati and Dakhinpat *satras* of Majuli.

¹⁵¹ From 14 December, 1840, Holiram Bezbaroa, Dinanath's elder brother received 6 *poorahs* 4 *kothas* and 14 *lechas* rent free land, also got Rs. 90 of the Company's rupee per annum, all as pension. See Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, Appendix F, Pension List, pp. 592-59.

but after the British possession of Assam rapidly changed their loyalty to the Company government.¹⁵² During the time of Justice Mills' visit to the Sibsagar district in 1852, Dinanath served there as the *Chirastadar* of the civil court.

Table [1].1

Status of Appointment in Subordinate Executive Service in Assam in the 1880s¹⁵³

Class/Caste	Extra Assistant Commissioner	Sub Deputy Collector	Tehshilder	Subordinate Judge and Munsif
European and Eurasian	3			
Mahomedan	3	2		1
Native Christian	2	2	1	
Khasi	1			
Brahman	12		3	4
Kayastha	5	7	3	5
Other Castes	2		3	
Baidya	1	3	2	
unknown caste				1

¹⁵² Moneeram Dutt Borwah Dewan's (Maniram Dewan) memorial to the Justice Mill of the Calcutta Sadar Court can give us an understanding of this class. Maniram's family for 300 years had been in service at the King's office as the *Changkakati*. His father, at the time of the British possession of the territory, was in the position of the *Barkakati*. Captain Neufville retained him, and "availed themselves of his knowledge of the revenue system that prevailed under the former rulers and ordered him to make a fresh *pecal* of the district, with the view of making a new settlement." See Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Appendix K.B, 1984, p. 603.

¹⁵³ *Proceedings of the Public Service Commission, 1886-87*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1888, p. 62.



Mills found that the *Chirastadars* of the criminal and civil courts of the district had been “persons of high character”. He even requested the government to increase their salaries.¹⁵⁴ Dinanath always remained loyal to the rulers he served, who he considered as God’s representative on earth and did not like any critique against them.¹⁵⁵ He often quoted *slokas* from Manu, the alleged law-giver of ancient India in support of his position. Good relations with the colonial office enabled him to get a certain amount of rent-free land in the district.¹⁵⁶ Though resistance to an extent was met initially by the foreign rule, slowly a substantial part of the key people aligned their ambition with it, and visualized the British as saviour of the region.¹⁵⁷ The sense of colonial expansionism notwithstanding, the local literati also believed

¹⁵⁴ Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, p. 523.

¹⁵⁵ Lakshminath recalled that his father never gave consent to any opinion against the government. See Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Dangariya Dinanath Bezbaroar Jivan Charit*, Howrah: Author, 1911. While serving at Nowgong, as a munsiff, a rebellion of the peasantry of Phulaguri area of the district against the British government’s taxation policy took place, but no reaction from the part of either Dinanath or his contemporaries were recorded by Lakshminath or the colonial intelligentsia of Assam on the occasion. In this revolt, Lieutenant Singer, the Assistant Commissioner of the district, had to lose his life. The concerned police official reported to the higher authority that when called upon to disperse, the crowd assembled replied that “to go to the Cutcherry to complain and hope to bring their grievances to the ears of the *Huzoor*, was out of the question, for if they attempted to enter the court-house they were thrust out by *peadahs* and fined.” *East India (Progress and Condition). Statement Exhibiting the Moral and Material Progress and Condition of India, During the Year 1861-62*. London: India Office., 1863, p. 314. Thus, the gap between the peasantry and the colonial bureaucracy of the period could be imaginable.

¹⁵⁶ A letter from G. F. Edmonstone, the Secretary to Govt. of India to A. R. Young, the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, shows that the colonial government after the mutiny of 1857 undertook a clear policy regarding land grants to the natives, either entirely or in part free of rent. The Governor General had sent directives to the concerned authorities that such grants should be made to persons who had aided the government through “their good services” during the time of “disturbances” either for perpetuity or a term of years. It was told to ascertain through making written deeds that the continuance of the grant would depend on “the good conduct of the grantee and his successors”, the holding being liable to resumption in case of any violation of the condition. It was also advised to insert a condition on the deed to legalize the confiscation of the any rent-free holdings on proof of the misbehaviour of them. True copy of the letter dated Allahabad, 8 June 1858, signed by Thomas Jones, Register, Bengal Secretariat, and printed at Alipore Jail Press, Jorhat D. C. Office Files, Assam State Archives.

¹⁵⁷ F. Jenkins, the Commissioner of Revenue of Assam wrote to Captain H. Vetch, the Officiating Collector of Luckimpore (Lakhimpur) that Ensign Brodie in the south bank of the Brahmaputra had to encounter ‘great

and clearly stated that only for making good to *Bharatbarish*, the British lord had come to rule them.¹⁵⁸ The literary elites of the nineteenth century, to an extent, had a faith in the rationality and impartiality of English law and in the good intentions of colonial law. Never did it occur to these sections that despite their fondness for justice and liberty, the legitimacy of the British colonial rule in India might be called into question. Instead, the existence of British power in India is regarded by them as the final and most secure guarantee against lawlessness, superstition, and despotism.

The British also knew that without the participation of indigenous knowledge and skill, it would not be so smooth for the Company to establish a regime in its newly occupied territory, and so they chose to become tactful enough in handling the section with the intention to find them as collaborators of the rule.¹⁵⁹ A section of them were offered services in the colonial offices.¹⁶⁰ But Captain Brodie wrote that the persons holding revenue charges at the district of Sibsagar were numerous. They were 'importunate' to get employment under the new system. Considering their claims, he made "smaller divisions" under compulsion, to avoid further

difficulties' in making to the 'very numerous gentry' the land tax acceptable, who made their objections on assessment on any other land other than the *roopeet*. The colonial administration tried to create 'some degree of contentment among the population' by settling a lower rate for the time being. See Jenkins letter no. 213, dated 14 August 1839, File No. 638 C. O. of 1840, General Department, Assam State Archives.

¹⁵⁸ Anonymous (*Ghi*), "*Vidyavanta Hoboloi Ejan Asamiyar Nibedan* (Plea of an Assamese for Education)", *Arunoday*, October, 1855, pp. 149-150.

¹⁵⁹ The reciprocity of the situation and the policy of the colonial government could be best understood from what was placed by Maniram about the initial days of the British rule in Assam to the Justice Mill of the Calcutta Sadar Court in 1853. He stated that, "all respectable people were maintained in honour and affluences", and they got "a decent livelihood" and upholding "rank and responsibility".

¹⁶⁰ Like Dinanath, Maniram also was appointed in the settlement process as '*Sheristadar* and *Tehsildar*' of Sibsagar, which means his cooperation in the initial process of land revenue settlement of the district. In fact, Maniram was an active assistant of the Company government, who was consulted about the internal resources of the region, and who acted as supplier of labour to the Engineering and *rasads* to the military establishments of the Company. He even claimed that he enabled the Company to extract enough revenue from the region.

“discontentment” among them.¹⁶¹ However, while providing employment or remission to the former nobility, the administration was selective enough.¹⁶² Historians have shown that in Assam the persons coming from the middle order of the precolonial nobility, by dint of their competence for clerical works, also for the *shastric* and professional knowledge had enjoyed certain privileges to get employment, whereas the first order gentry, basically the warrior class did not get such opportunity and had to meet immediate poverty.¹⁶³

Life at the Crossroads

Though the colonial archives usually referred to Dinanath as a *babu*,¹⁶⁴ which was commonplace to refer to any Indian service person in the colonial office of Bengal and Assam, Lakshminath preferred to mention him as *dangariya*, by which his status as a part of the pre-

¹⁶¹ Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, pp. 504-505. Brodie suggested a rebate of taxes for the people who paid taxes between Rupees ten to twenty, or more than that. Jenkins, the commissioner of Assam also gave his consent to this special measure, taking it for consideration that the district was the seat of the ancient Assam nobility and though a portion of them had got pension or employment, a large part remained out of employ, and unable to meet their present needs. See Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, p. 506.

¹⁶² Remission of revenue was intended only for the ‘better classes, whose hands were thrown out of cultivation by the *lixos* and slaves’, but, in practice, what Holroyd found was “majority of holders were fiscal officers, *ryots*, and holders.” See Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, 1984, p. 572.

¹⁶³ Sharma, Jayeeta. *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012, p. 131. Hunter noticed that though one-third of the inhabitants of the district were Ahom, the former ruling community, the nobles among them had then sunk to the level of ‘*poor cultivators*.’ Censuses in 1881 and 1891 showed that in Assam’s servile persons of the colonial offices mostly came from the castes like Brahman, Kayastha, Ganak and Kalita, whereas all other pre-colonial profession groups transformed themselves to agriculturalist populations.

¹⁶⁴ Lakshminath in an essay disapproved of the use of the term ‘*Babu*’ to mention an Assamese person and expressed his opinions in favour of the word ‘*Shrijut*’. However, his disagreement with the term was grounded on his will to differentiate an Assamese from Bengal and had nothing to do with the new way of life. See *Jonaki*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 1897, pp. 859-866. However, the colonial administration agreed to use the term ‘*Srijut*’ instead of ‘*babu*’ as prefix, because the archival files of Assam show that since the turn of the century Assamese persons were prefixed by ‘*Srijut*’.

colonial nobility and his attachment with the traditional ways of life was suggested. Lakshminath in a biographical sketch of his father, commented,

“With the demise of the dangariya Dinanath Bezbaroa, the traditional society of Assam also disrupted.”¹⁶⁵

A gaze at the mundane aspects of the life of Dinanath, which necessarily included the childhood and adolescence of Lakshminath could help us to understand the society’s encounter with new ways of life.

Dinanath’s residence at Sibsagar with a *batchora* in the front of the compound and a public *Namghar* for performing religious chants was kind of a miniature *satra*, the traditional religious centre of the Vaishnavism in Assam. A hard-core devotee of Vaishnavism in Assam customarily had to perform fourteen distinctive rituals in a day one after other. Even while he served in the government office, Dinanath tried to perform these religious duties without any fail. A clock, symbol of mechanistic time of the modern age, got a place in the house, but the family routine ran according to the Vaishnava ritualistic time. Sumit Sarkar has shown that colonialism introduced discipline, punctuality, and routine to the life of the emerging educated section of India. Clock-time became instrumental for a change in the daily course of the life of a government or company employee or the students of the western educational institutions.¹⁶⁶ But in the case of Dinanath, both office time and the mechanistic clock time was appropriated with the Vaishnava ritualistic time. Depicting the routine life of his father, Lakshminath wrote that in the morning, Dinanath taught his sons the Ayurveda shastra, and then read newspapers or assigned others to read aloud for him and wrote necessary letters. At 10 o’clock in the morning he entered the *Gosainghar*, the place of worship for a Vaishnava, to perform the

¹⁶⁵ Bezbaroa, *Dangariya Dinanath Bezbaroar Jivan Charit*, 1911.

¹⁶⁶ Sarkar, Sumit. *Writing Social History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

morning sessions, had tea, supervised the preparation of medicine, and then only went to the *Cachari*, his office. Accordingly, the daily routine of the children was also molded. They, in the morning had to collect flowers for the offerings to the gods, then after studying had to bathe, clean the *Gosainghar*, the family worshiping place, along with utensils, and had to prepare sandal paste for the *puja*, because a non-Brahman servant was never allowed to enter the sacred place. Emphases were given for their reading of *shastras* at night. After retirement, Dinanth founded a *shastra satra* in the house, where he read and interpreted the *Bhagavadgita* before an audience. Religious sessions, which started in the evening, continued until midnight.

Explicitly, from storytelling to *nam-prasanga*, performing of devotional songs, from interpretation of the *dharma shastra* to teaching of the Ayurvedic knowledge, a deeply-embedded oral culture was part of the daily course of the family. Orality remained so much implanted in the lives of the traditional literati of the nineteenth-century Assam that a part of them was not quite at ease with the modern culture of printing. Dinanath represented this section, and had shown his aversion to print a *gurucharit*, the hagiographical account of the Vaishnava saints composed by him. Instead, he prepared a few manuscripts of it through the employment of professional scribes and deposited the copies in a few major *satras* of Majuli, the famous Vaishnava shrine and the river-island of the Brahmaputra, for preservation and circulation. After a long wait as manuscript, the book came to be published in 1984 with the title *Barcharit*.¹⁶⁷ It seems, like many of his contemporaries, Dinanath was ambivalent about the new technology of print, which he considered profane in character and not suitable for a sacred religious text. Going against the current in an age of proliferation of prose narrative, he chose to compose the hagiography in traditional verse form. Lakshminath recalled that his father Dinanth was a repository of historical knowledge about the last part of the Ahom

¹⁶⁷ Bezbaroa, Dinanath. *Barcharit*. Edited by Dimbeswar Dayal Sarma. Jorhat, 1984.

dynastic realm, which remained circulated within the oral-auditory sphere of the local society. Later, though he planned to write a *buranji*, and collected materials, it never came to be realized.

Lakshminath's early life was spent in a joint family of patriarchal structure, surrounded by mother, one stepmother, several brothers, their wives and children, domestic servants, their families, and other distant relatives, all forming a bigger family. Several families of *bandha* and *bandi* also "voluntarily" remained to live with them even after the abolition of slavery in Assam. Being associated with the service of colonial administration, Dinanath had to change his dwelling places from time to time accompanied by his family. But in the case of Dinanath, the tie with the older institution of the joint family was still without any crack in it. Apart from his own family, many of his near and distant relatives took refuge in the vast compound of his house, being economically dependent on him. Many poverty-ridden Brahman students of his relation depended on his patronage for their study.¹⁶⁸ Like many notables of the time, he offered shelter and food and clothes to the *bhakats* of the Kamalabari Satra of Majuli.

The Dharma Sabha and Balyashram

All *Brahmanic* caste rituals and customs including some food taboos about fish and meat eating were strictly followed in the Bezbaroa family.¹⁶⁹ At the beginning of the twentieth century, B. C. Allen made a comparison between Assam and Bengal, in which relatively liberal society of Assam regards to caste hierarchies had been focused,

¹⁶⁸ Sharma, Krishnanath. *Krishna Sharmar Diary*. Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 1972, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ According to the Census Report of Assam in 1911, regarding meat-eating, domestic fowls and pigs were forbidden, but there was no restriction against male goats, drakes, or pigeons. Certain kinds of fishes were also avoided by the higher caste. See McSwiney, J. *Census of India, 1911, Vol. III: Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press Printing, 1912, p. 117.

“Hinduism in general and caste in particular are less rigid in Assam than in Bengal.”¹⁷⁰

However, the same author, in the Census report of Assam in 1901 presented a complex scenario of customary practices related to caste,

“In the Brahmaputra valley, generally no caste will take water from an inferior caste, but strictness of this rule seems to be relaxing. A vessel containing water touched by a person of inferior caste must be broken if it is earthen, but if of metal, it need only be washed. Water in medicine is taken from anyone, even from non-Hindus. ---Mere proximity does not cause pollution but being touched by a person from whose water cannot be taken so, though it is the most orthodox who will bathe after such an occurrence.”¹⁷¹

Being written more than sixty years back, William Robinson’s account of Assam provided a different picture. Robinson categorically said that the people of Assam offered no hospitality to the people outside their own caste.¹⁷² In 1881, when Ramkumar Vidyaratna, a Brahmo reformer of Bengal, visited Assam, he also experienced that the people refused to give him water to drink. Instead, they advised him to go to the river. Taboos related to food and water were so deep that it was stated by a subaltern Assamese officer of the colonial office that he had refused to take pickle from the *mem* of the Deputy collector, as it might be proved

¹⁷⁰ Allen, B. C. *Provincial Gazetteer Of Assam*. Shillong: The Eastern Bengal & Assam Secretariat Printing Press, 1906, p. 30.

¹⁷¹ Allen, B. C. *Census of India, 1901. Vol. IV: Assam. Part I*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1902, pp. 117-118. In the report of the Census of 1921, G. T. Llyod presented a different picture, “Although there has been a good deal of discussions, largely in connection with recent political movements, about the levelling up of lower castes and brotherhood of all from the religious and human standpoints, it appears to be still in the domain of talk and not of practice”. McSwiney, *Census of India, Assam*, 1912, p. 51.

¹⁷² Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, 1841. However, the journals written in the 1840s by the Baptist missionaries like Nathan Brown, Miles Bronson etc., who during the period undertook extensive travel in the Assam proper, from one place to another, show that the people offered them shelter in the public *Namghar*, or in the attic or any outer shade of their houses. “Assam- Journal of Brown”, *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Volume XXIV, No. 10, October, 1844, p. 202.

vulnerable for preservation of his *jat*.¹⁷³ Earlier when the boys of the Brahman families of Assam went to Calcutta for study, local Brahman cooks accompanied them. The traditional society devised the way to ascertain avoiding food from any allegedly lower castes. Gobinda and Golapchandra, two elder brothers of Lakshminath, while making their sojourn to Calcutta in the 1870s, also had to be attended by a Brahman cook from Assam.

With passing time, liberal education certainly brought some changes to society. Gobinda Bezbaroa, one of the elder sons of Dinanath, who had pursued college education at Calcutta openly declared that he purchased breads made by mussalman in the bakeries for eating, ate eggs laid by hen and had the habit of drinking whisky and brandy. Gobinda, one of the early entrepreneurs in education in Assam came to be assessed by the contemporary society as a *chahab*, in the day-to-day parlance of the time the term in addition to the original meaning of a European, derogatorily referred to an anglicized native of India. “I am a chahab, but not a non-Hindu” referring to his performing of the *shraddha* ritual of the father, he tried to confirm his attachment to the customs and traditions.¹⁷⁴ Earlier, when Gobinda and one of his brothers, at their encounter with Calcutta as college students, cut their *shikha*, tuft of hair, marker of a Brahman caste, it produced a heated atmosphere within the family, also causing intense rage in their father Dinanath.

Throughout his life, Dinanath patronized Hindu religious institutions and traditional social customs. Sibsagar in the 1870s and the 1880s, with its colonial administrative offices, presence of the European tea planters in its surrounding localities, several modern educational institutions, a missionary station and gradually increasing population of persons of modern profession, already transformed itself to a typical colonial town. The concept and formation of

¹⁷³ Sharma, *Sadaraminar Atmajivani*, 1960.

¹⁷⁴ Sharma, Benudhar. *Benudhar Sharma Rachanavali, Pratham Khanda*,. edited by Nagen Saikia, Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 2014, p. 169.

patty or *para* in religious, caste or professional lines could provide us a keen insight into the presence of tradition that was a crucial feature of the urbanization process of the colonial towns. It was a time when *amola* or the clerical class of the colonial offices consolidated in an area to form a *patty* named after them, whereas a “Ganakpatty”, residential block of the *ganak* caste of precolonial times, in the adjacent area continued to exist, still nourishing a vibrant Vaishnava oral-performative culture of Assam around it.

Caste, being a dominant traditional element in Indian society, also can serve as a yardstick through which one can assess the mobility and change of a society. Being the dwelling place of the precolonial nobility, the society of Sibsagar essentially had to face certain tensions between the tradition and coming changes. The nobility, as we have already shown, although not as wealthy and powerful as its counterparts in Indian towns or some other parts to effectively control the economy and polity of the society, tried its best to exercise its social control. They exercised their control over the society through keen vigilance on caste rules and other social customs, as well as implementing the practices of excommunication. Dinanath played a significant role in such exercises of social restriction. His dogmatic and orthodox view on religion could be best understood through an incident narrated by Lakshminath in his later life. Towards the last years of the 1870s, Ramkumar Vidyaratna, also known as Udashin Satyashrava, a preacher of the reformist Brahmo religious movement from Bengal, visited the town. He was offered a shelter in the town by Gopal Chandra Ghosh, a teacher of the Sibsagar High School from Bengal and provided the space to deliver a speech before a small gathering of the town, consisting mostly of the Bengali inhabitants. Ramkumar’s rational critique of tradition and reformist ideology, along with his deliverance of the titillating speech had caused quite a stir among the youths of the small town. Srinath, one of the sons of Dinanath, probably out of such excitement, and partly out of curiosity, tried to overhear the speech from a distance. In the atmosphere of a small town like Sibsagar the incident got immediate and wide

circulation. Dinanth, while he was reported about his son's misdeed, felt insulted, and without any delay and hesitation exercised corporal punishment on his son, who already had attained his adulthood.

The reaction did not remain confined within what had immediately happened, and the nobility of Sibsagar subsequently became organized against the threat or challenge that they considered being emanated from modernity against the traditional values. It seems, the Assamese nobility of the period was aware of the ideological war and pamphlet battles that came to the fore among the traditionalist and reformist circles of Bengal in Calcutta in the 1880s. It was possible because not only the literate section of the nobility used to be regular consumers of the Bengali periodicals and books, but the Bengali service class of colonial Assam also acted as immediate bearer of these debates and ideas to Assam. This time it was Sashadhar Tarka Churamoni, an advocate of conservative ideas, also from Bengal, who towards the last decades of the nineteenth century visited Assam to preach the *sanatana* ideology of Hinduism. Jadunath Sarkar has noted that Tarka Churamoni was associated with the cult of "aggressive Hinduism", who, as preacher undertook an extensive tour all over India, and launched an open war against the reformist ideology of the time to check and strengthen the conservative forces of the society. Dinanath and a section of the Assamese gentry got in his discourse an acceptable answer to the immediate social crisis. They came to form a Dharma Sabha with the ulterior motive of conserving the caste ethos and social discipline of the ancient order. Taking into consideration the records of the colonial archives that listed the active public sphere organizations of Assam in the period, it is evident that the Dharma Sabha of Sibsagar, which remained unlisted in such records, had a completely different orientation and motive. Whereas these organizations had allegedly worked to disseminate modern knowledge and rationalistic thinking, the Dharma Sabha was operative with a different agenda. When traditional institutions like *satras* had

gradually lost their social impact in Assam, such local bodies were formed with the idea of holding a power over the emerging urban space and the educated new generation.

In 1889, with the foundation of a *Balyashram* at Sibsagar, the idea acquired an articulation. Dinanth possessed a vast plot of land in his compound, in which he had already established a public Namghar. The place, with a pond and a spectacular garden around it, had seemed to be planned in the image of an ashram of ancient Indian seers. The *Balyashram* was conceived as a place of educating the children, which on every Sunday held a congregation to inculcate the younger generation with the Hindu values. The session, necessarily a male public arena, was held at the Namghar, where students had to take their seats like the *bhakats* of the Vaishnava congregation of Assam, and it was initiated with a Sanskrit *mangalacharan*, followed by recitation of the *Bhagavat puran* and interpretation of the Indian epics. The participation of students was inspired to debate on various social issues, on which the elders also commented. There remained a president or *adhyaksha* to conduct the session. Thus, it seems, the Balyashram of Sibsagar was a quasi-modern space, where the elder generation of the society had tried to inculcate some values within the students. The ashram criticized western social codes, and certain social changes, as for example, acting by students was thought to be an evil, whereas they were encouraged to wear headdress or *paguri*.¹⁷⁵ A section of the nobility of the time found them amidst unavoidable quandary. Presumably, out of such inner tension, Dinanth searched for his spiritual solace. At the last days of his life, he left his home and family altogether, and chose to live at the Kamalabari *satra* of Majuli, which had been his spiritual resort for the entire life. It was here he died in 1895. With the death of Dinanath, the *ashram* started to decline, and after 1912, it became extinct forever.

¹⁷⁵ Sharma, Benudhar Sharma *Rachanavali*, Pratham Khanda, 2014, pp. 151-158.

Table [1]. 2

**Scientific and Literary Society Recorded in the Report of Assam Administration for the
year of 1874-75 and 1875-76¹⁷⁶**

Name	Objects	Members or visitors	Year of Establishment
Hita Sadhini Sabha	To promote public welfare	24	August, 1874
Subha Sadhini Sabha	To do public good	25	February, 1872
Eloquent Society	To improve the speaking of the English Language	12	September, 1872
Gyana Pradayini Sabha	General Improvement	10	June, 1874

Sanskrit in the Crossroads

In our understanding of colonial modernity in South Asia, a range of complexity has been involved regarding Sanskrit. It was challenged by the recent research that Sanskrit and Islamic knowledge became dead and fossilized corpus as they failed to generate anything new, already being devoid of productivity. Contrary to the common perception, recently historians of early modern and late medieval period claim that the eighteenth century was a period of experimentation, not of decline. Sheldon Pollock has shown that it was wrong to think that

¹⁷⁶ “Statistical Returns” in *Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the Years 1874-75 and 1875-76*, 1877, p. XCI.

Sanskrit had an inclination towards perpetuity and ancient over newness. Instead, the Sanskritic system in precolonial time incorporated certain types of newness showing signs of cognitive renewal and innovation.¹⁷⁷ In his provocative study, Pollock has shaken the nearly undisputed idea related to the advent of modernity in India.¹⁷⁸ He has further shown that early modern consciousness in India was multilingual, in which Sanskrit, Persian and vernaculars- all were read and practised together. It was not the increasing ignorance of the Sanskrit language, for which the vernaculars came to be placed in importance, because the promoters of the vernaculars exhibited their erudition in Sanskrit.¹⁷⁹

The biographies of the intelligentsia of Assam in the first part of the nineteenth century show that almost all of them were multilingual. Sanskrit was part of their linguistic universe, which they acquired through conventional knowledge systems. The linguistic situation of the time in Assam could be comprehended through an example. Hemchandra Borooah, a distinguished personality of the nineteenth- century Assam, who was a descendent of the same lineage of Kalibor, acquired his Sanskrit education first from his father Muktaram Barooah, who by profession was a mouzadar in the British revenue office and then in a Sanskrit *tol* at Sibsagar, run by Urbidhar Borooah.¹⁸⁰ Hemchandra's father taught him *sabda sadhan* and *dhatu sadhan*

¹⁷⁷ Pollock, Sheldon. "The Death of Sanskrit." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2001: 392-422.

¹⁷⁸ Drawing on the argument from a different perspective, Sudipta Kaviraj has questioned, if it be true, then, whether a proto-modernity before the advent of colonialism could be imagined on the basis of such innovative Sanskritic knowledge. See Kaviraj, Sudipta. "Sudden Death of Sanskrit Knowledge." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2005).

¹⁷⁹ Pollock, *Death of Sanskrit*, 2001. The nineteenth- century situation of India does not seem to be similar with that of the early centuries of the second millennium. During the nineteenth century, both Sanskrit and Sanskritic knowledge were posited against a great variety of challenges, and the emerging intelligentsia of the period did not get impetus to pursue their studies. It could be noted that Lakshminath failed in Sanskrit in his first attempt of the Entrance examination, which does not seem to be out of relevance in the context.

¹⁸⁰ Sharma, Borooah, Hemchandra. "Atmajibancharit", *Jonaki*, Volume 4, Issue 2, 1892 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 435-440.

of Sanskrit. He also had to read Assamese *puthis* like *Dronaparva*, *Karna parva* etc. and moral and entertainment books in Bengali. He learnt letter writing in Bengali. After the sudden death of his father, he had to join the court as a novice, but simultaneously continued to learn Bengali and Sanskrit to read and write. He learnt from Captain Brodie, the revenue in-charge of the East India Company office at Sibsagar the Devanagari script and Hindi and Braj Bhasha. Getting hindrance from the guardian for acquisition of the English language, every Sunday he secretly learnt English from him, but secrecy exposed, and he had to quit the venture. Afterwards, at the age of twenty, with the help and encouragement from a friend, he acquired English through self-efforts. He even approached the missionaries of the Baptist Mission Society stationed at Sibsagar with the purpose.

Hemchandra was not an exceptional case. Like Hemchandra, most of the service gentry of the nineteenth century were polyglot, and apart from the *matribhasa*, acquired different levels of knowledge on Sanskrit, Persian, Pali, Braj Bhasha, Bengali etc. In spite of the nineteenth-century understanding of a certain group as speakers of a particular language, or the tendency to define communities in terms of language, what in reality prevailed in India was a far more complex language situation.¹⁸¹ It is erroneous to think that English, being the language of the rulers in colonial India immediately replaced Sanskrit-Persian traditions prevalent till then. Sanskrit, though gradually lost its significance, was still assessed as a language of social prestige and the Brahmanical identity rested around it. Many religious practices of Hinduism were inconceivable without the application of Sanskrit. Apart from the *tois*, among the upper caste Hindu, Sanskrit knowledge was circulated in the family networks. Similarly, within a

¹⁸¹ David Shulman, in his biography of the Tamil language, has mapped a complex linguistic scenario of the subcontinent. He has argued that in medieval times, every Sanskrit word was a potential Tamil word. See Shulman, David. *Tamil: A Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 24. He has also pointed out that there are domains of experience where Sanskrit vocabulary seems more natural, or even inevitable than the vernacular or any other language. Ibid, p. 14

limited circle of devotees, the Vaishnava *satras* of Assam served for dissemination of Sanskrit knowledge.¹⁸² Dinanath got his education in a Sanskrit *tol* run by Jadu *Adhyapak* at Jorhat, which got patronization from the Ahom king. He acquired sound knowledge on *vyakaran*, *kavya* and *alankara shastra*, and even could compose a little in Sanskrit. Subsequently, after completion of education he served as the second *adhyapak* of the *tol*. He even translated *Utkala Khanda*, part of a puranic composition from Sanskrit to Assamese. In the traditional education system of Sanskrit, prominent roles were played by orality and memorializing. Lakshminath recalled his father's ability to memorialize puranic, religious and Ayurvedic *shastras*, which he could easily quote within the day-to-day conversations, whenever he felt them necessary, to elucidate or emphasize his points or opinion.

Instead of gradual acceptance of English by the nineteenth century nobility of Assam, both as a language of power and of pragmatic interest, a section of Sanskrit *tols* continued to exist. According to the Statistical Account of Assam, in the 1870s, there were two Sanskrit *tols* in Goalpara district, attended by 30 students exclusively from the Brahman caste. One was supported by the Raja of Bijni and the other by the zamindar of Gauripur. In both, Sanskrit *vyakaran* and *smriti* were taught.¹⁸³ In some portions of the province, where there was no such wealthier section to offer their financial patronization to the *tols*, collective initiative was taken through *Chaita phura* practice for gaining people's support for running of the Sanskrit *tols*.¹⁸⁴

Towards the second half of the nineteenth century, Orientalist research had aroused a new consciousness towards the dimensions of Sanskrit learning. Although, it was accepted by a greater section of the literati that after the great upheaval of Sanskrit knowledge in the first

¹⁸² Sharma, Tirthanath. *Auniati Satrar Buranji*. Auniatiati, Assam: Auniatiati Satra, 1975.

¹⁸³ Hunter, W.W. *A Statistical Account of Assam: Volume 2*. London: Trubner and Company, 1879, p. 99.

¹⁸⁴ Goswami, Saratchandra. *Bhasan*. Lecture Delivered in 1939, Nalbari: Assam Ayurveda Mahasabha, 1948, pp. 110-111.

millennium, it began to decay in the next, and so it was naturally overthrown by the western knowledge, simultaneously, it was counter-claimed on basis of rich repository of the texts in Sanskrit that India contributed in the past towards diverse fields of higher knowledge. In the 1850s, *Arunoday*, the first periodical in Assamese published in the missionary initiative, drawing on the opinions of the Orientalists like William Jones, expressed in laudatory tone desirability of diffusion of Sanskrit knowledge. Ga, a regular writer of the *Arunoday* in the 1850s expressed his deep longing for regeneration of Sanskrit learning in Assam. He simultaneously insisted on the appropriation of the method and curriculum of such education, because teaching *vyakaran* for around fifteen years, he argued, necessarily might prevent the students from acquiring the more useful Sanskrit knowledge of *anka*, *jyotish*, *dharmashastra*, *purabritta* etc.¹⁸⁵ It is probable that in the late nineteenth century, Sanskrit never remained confined to the elite sphere consisted of the upper caste Hindus, but percolated to the folk knowledge and performative art,¹⁸⁶ as it was noticed by Saratchandra Goswami in case of the *Khuliya-bhawariya* performance of the district of Darrang, in which illiterate performers had occasionally recited Sanskrit *slokas*, known as Sanskrit ‘*diya*’.¹⁸⁷ Though like Bengal, in Assam, no census of the Sanskrit pundits was held, it is imaginable that with the pressure of

¹⁸⁵ Anonymous (Ga). “*Kalikatar Para Aha Patra* (Letter from Calcutta)”, *Arunoday*, Volume 9, Issue 10, October 1854, pp. 154-155.

¹⁸⁶ Francesca Orsini, on the other hand, concentrating on the aspects of amnesia to the pre- colonial intellectual tradition has commented that as the people came away from Sanskrit and Persian towards the vernaculars, for a lot of ordinarily educated North-Indians the knowledge traditions in languages like Sanskrit and Persian became more distant and less accessible. See Orsini, Francesca. "Whose Amnesia? Literary Modernity in Multilingual South Asia." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 262-272.

¹⁸⁷ Goswami, *Bhasan*, 1948, pp. 110-111.

the time they had to either like Dinanath change their profession,¹⁸⁸ or had to meet hard days ahead of them.

Bezbaroas and the Decline of Indigenous Medicine

The history of the Bezbaroa family can provide us some suggestions on displacement of the indigenous medicinal knowledge of a society, and its gradual acceptance of the new medicine. Western medicine in India was initially introduced for the benefit of the Europeans and was later made accessible to the Indian population. Religious prejudices prevented a large section of Indians from taking to the new system, while some others were influenced by rumours. But gradually the literate section of the society overcame the initial hesitation and scepticism and began to welcome it.

“It was looked upon as a means of embracing the modern and defying the old, and thus becoming a part of the new cultural world.”¹⁸⁹

How indigenous knowledge on medicine was strategically replaced by colonialism with the western knowledge as part of its “modernizing” project could be best perceived in the following quote from a report of the Calcutta Review in 1853 on the indigenous healing system, written on basis of the memoir of the Late David Scott and the account of William Robinson:

“Next to the moral and religious education of the people, there is no point in which assistance is more urgently needed than in teaching them some better methods of treating and relieving sickness. -----The country produces many medicinal plants and shrubs, as Creton and Madar whose virtues are extracted and prepared among their own Bej or physicians. Some of these are still remaining, the relics of the

¹⁸⁸ Missionary projects on the vernacular edition of the Bible were assisted by Sanskrit Pundits, who got employment for the tasks. A. K. Gurney, a missionary of the Assam Mission of the Baptist Mission Society of America wrote in 1841 that he had been assisted by two or three pundits in his revisionary works on the Bible. Gurney, A. K. "Sibsagor - 1841." *The Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Vol. LXXVII, July 1897: 312-314.

¹⁸⁹ Panikkar, K. N. *Colonialism, Culture and Resistance*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 170.

former native court; and the late Raja's former Bez-barua (Bezbaroa) visits Gowahatty (Guwahati) every two years bringing with him from Jorehatt (Jorhat) a copious supply of medicine for sale."¹⁹⁰

In pre-colonial Assam, the post of Bezbaroa was held to be the top post for a royal physician. Lakshminath's forefather's attachment with the royal court as well as the status of nobles was acquired through their expertise in the treatment of illness through Ayurvedic medicine. The family, it was said, since the seventeenth century, for many generations enjoyed the position of serving the Ahom king. In the early nineteenth century, both Dinanath, and his elder brother Haliram were assigned the duty of serving the tributary Raja Purandar, who as physicians proved to be trustworthy and reliable to the king.

Ayurvedic medicine in India was largely practiced by the Brahmans and the knowledge had been transmitted hereditarily.¹⁹¹ Dinanath learnt the knowledge from his father and the elder brother, who, in his turn, tried to teach his sons. Mukhtaram of the same lineage, though a mauzadar by profession met his death of the same contagious disease, while he tried to cure some persons suffering from cholera, which spread as an epidemic in his locality. It was believed that the cholera had been produced by an ogress named *Bishusika*, who sucked one's blood through its needle-shaped mouth. Lakshminath reminiscenced that there remained a *dawaikhana* in their house at Sibsagar, and in their adolescence, all of them had to practice the preparation of medicine. Every morning they were taught by their father on the *nidan* and other *shastras*. Preparation of medicine and copying the texts of *nidan*, both were still a part of the family routine. Dinanath, himself, never left the practice of medicine preparation and treatment of illness. The youths of the family also had to learn the art of preparing *sanchipat* and then to

¹⁹⁰ *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XIX, January-June 1853, pp. 237-238; White, Adam (Ed.). *A Memoir of the Late David Scott*. Compiled by S. K. Bhuyan, Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, 1988 (First Published in 1938), Appendix B.

¹⁹¹ In Assam, as reported by Hunter, besides the regular practitioners, Brahmans and sweepers practiced medicine. See Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 168.

copy the *shastras* or *nidans* of traditional medicine over the *sanchi* leaves. But instead of such sincere efforts from the father, they had little eagerness to practice the knowledge, which caused utter dissatisfaction and frustration in Dinanath.

Recently scholarships have paid enough attention to read the history of indigenous medicine in India afresh. Against what had been claimed by the British in the nineteenth century, the recent scholarships have expressed their doubt on the acceptability of the western medical science and technology as a tool to the proclaimed civilizing mission of the British and proposed to see it as a tool to the empire. Initiating the debate, David Arnold has questioned how far independent the introduction of western medicine was from the British colonial interests in India. He has shown that in the eighteenth century when the medical profession was introduced in India it was adjunct to the British military power, and the relationship remained intact in the nineteenth century.¹⁹² They like to see the cognitive rupture that took place in case of medicinal knowledge in relation to the political rupture of the period. They argue that the Ayurveda was replaced by modern western science because it was abandoned by the colonial authorities and the elite, not for its inherent weakness or ineffectiveness as a system.¹⁹³ They even questioned the validity of the notion of the civilizing or modernizing project of the British, and made their contesting claims that India possessed diverse scientific traditions of its own, which the British wanted to repress.¹⁹⁴ It was through the reports of the British officers doubts were implanted in the minds

¹⁹² Arnold, David. "Medical Priorities and Practice in Nineteenth-Century British India." *South Asia Research* 5, no. 2 (1985): 167-83

¹⁹³ It was argued that, prior to 1830 the European medical men in India did not dismiss indigenous medical approaches. Although Indian and European medicines were not granted the same privileges, it was believed that survival in the tropics required adoption of some native conventions of living.

¹⁹⁴ There are varieties of oral and textual traditions which India long became heir to, both of exogenous contacts and indigenous roots. It was in the mid-nineteenth century, the cultural validity of science and western medicine and authorization of the elite as agents of modernity and progress attained dominance.

of the rising intelligentsia.¹⁹⁵ Hunter in his statistical account, showed that in the district of Sibsagar, there were many practicing *vaidyas* or *kavirajes*, who treated their patients according to the Hindu *shastra*. Their pharmacopoeia was “defective” and “*nostrums*” they administered were “extremely complex”.¹⁹⁶ He further commented that of surgery, they were quite unknown. They usually prepared large pills or boluses which contained ingredients possessing different and sometimes of “antagonistic” properties.¹⁹⁷ Though he listed the names of thirteen and twenty four different herbs respectively having been used in Sibsagar and Kamrup districts of Assam as medicines, Hunter’s account put a significant question on the nature of traditional healing system, because it, as alleged by him was tendentiously coalesced with the “religious ceremonies” and “imaginary remedies”.¹⁹⁸ Even mercurials and cow’s urine were largely to be used in their methods of treatment.¹⁹⁹

Dinanth considered the western education as the prime responsibility for the negligence of the younger generation towards the hereditary possession of medical knowledge. Making his presumption a firm belief, Golapchandra, one of his sons, in financial support of Srinath, another son to him, secretly pursued education of western medical science first in Calcutta and then in Europe, which was a grave strike to his parental pride. He not only exterminated

¹⁹⁵ The western knowledge disqualified Sanskrit knowledge. Was it because the traditional system ossified and ripe for replacement? The western rationalistic science not only possesses a system of knowledge but also a process of verification by which individual propositions are either recognized or rejected. But in colonial context, traditional knowledge was rejected wholesale without going through the process of verification. Sudipta Kaviraj has called this death of the Sanskrit knowledge System an epistemological break or paradigm shift, borrowing the terminology from Thomas Kuhn. See Kaviraj, “Sudden Death of Sanskrit Knowledge”, 2005.

¹⁹⁶ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1879, p. 184.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 185.

¹⁹⁸ Of the district of Kamrup, Hunter reported, *kaviraj* or the native medical practitioners had a list of numerous drugs in their pharmacopoeia, but most of the treatments generally consisted “rather in religious ceremonies and imaginary remedies rather than in the use of any medical agents.” Ibid, p. 100.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 168.

Golapchandra from the family, but iron-mindedly deprived Lakshman, one of the younger brothers of Lakshminath, of pursuing the western education. Instead, Lakshman, under his own supervision was trained in the Ayurvedic system of knowledge through which Dinanath dreamt of sustaining the family possession as living knowledge. To his satisfaction and high hope, Lakshman also exhibited his dedication and expertise in knowledge and practice. But like a bolt without a cloud, in 1891, Lakshman met an untimely death in Calcutta. It was such a shocking experience for Dinanath that he lost all his previous constraints on himself and burst into tears. Lakshman's *dah-sanskar* was performed at the Nimtala *ghat* of Calcutta. The death can be read as symbolic for the future of the Ayurvedic system of knowledge within the Bezbaroa family, whose very identity and status was embarked on the exploration of the traditional medical science in India.

For Dinanath, Ayurvedic medicine was a passion, and after retirement he even tried to establish an enterprise and employed a few persons as his assistants. But instead of his good reputation as a physician among the people, it was for the lack of professional attitude of him to modernize it as an occupation, he had to fail. Nevertheless, the Ayurvedic *dawaikhana* of Dinanath contributed a certain additional income to the family.²⁰⁰ In fact, at no point of time, the western medical science was able to completely eradicate the indigenous healing systems of India. The literati of Assam in the nineteenth century alternately used western, *deshi*, Ayurvedic or Unani medicines. As the public system of the British India had covered a little section of the population, so naturally, the majority of the people had no choice but to go after cheaper indigenous medicine.

The study and practice of the Ayurvedic medicines continued in the nineteenth century, at least, some segments continued to be circulated and practiced as living traditions. According to

²⁰⁰ Bezbaroa, *Dangariya Dinanath Bezbaroar Jivancharit*, 1911.

Sudipta Kaviraj, many of the traditional ideas retreated into the sheltered space of religious ideas. Both Aurvedic and Unani medicine remained popular with people in general. But because of the loss of support for the indigenous medicines from the colonial government, it started to decline. A Descriptive Catalogue of vernacular manuscripts in the possession of the Asiatic Society of Bengal prepared by Prafulla Chandra Pal enlisted ten manuscripts in the Assamese category, of which four were in medicine.²⁰¹ Another catalogue of the British Library prepared in 1905 listed a series of medical prescription and *mantra*, which was a manuscript dated 1810 A, D, (1732 Saka) and written in Assamese though “interspersed with Sanskrit”.²⁰² Saratchandra Goswami, almost contemporary to Lakshminath, told in 1939 at a speech delivered at the Assam Ayurveda Mahasabha that among several manuscripts based on the Ayurvedic knowledge a few rare books like *Rajballabha* and *Baidya Kalpataru* were being preserved by the Ayurveda tradition of Assam. Both were first to be printed in the initiative of Taranath Chakravarty of Dibrugarh in the twentieth century.²⁰³ The Vaishnava satras also served as the repository of the medicinal books. According to the family source of Lakshminath, a manuscript of enormous importance named the *Rajnidan*, originally possessed by the family was transferred to the Natun Kamalabari *Satra* of Majuli, and still became a part of its manuscript repository.

²⁰¹ Pal, Prafulla Chandra. *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Vernacular Manuscripts in the Collection of the Asiatic Society, Vol. IX, Supplementary*. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1952. The Catalogue has listed the *Cikitsa Grantha*, a work on country medicine and mystical incantation for curing disease, *Vaidyavati*, a work of prose on medicine and *Vyadhi Guchibar Katha*. All were presumably written or at least copied in the nineteenth century.

²⁰² Blumhardt, J. F. *A Catalogue of Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Pashto and Sindhi Manuscripts in the Library of the British Museum*. London: British Museum, 1905, p. 4.

²⁰³ Goswami, *Bhasan*, 1948, p 82.

Educating the People

In colonial situations, modernization mostly meant acceptance and dissemination of the western ideas and practices. So, education in India was usually perceived as the British introduction, part and parcel of the colonial government's modernizing project. In fact, pre-modern cultures possessed its own ways of educating the people, though it was confined within some social enclaves. The colonial reports, despite their attempts to depict the inhabitants of the region as barbaric and backward people, recognized that among the followers of Vaishnavism in Assam, the reading and hearing of their religious books formed part of their lives, and it was associated with the very nature of their forms of worship, and their religious and social observances. An officer in his report on public instruction noted that on his visit to the Kamalabari *satra* of Majuli, he found 60 to 70 boys learning to read and write. The figure, it was expected, would be larger in the Auniati and Dakhinpat *satras*.²⁰⁴ He commented,

“It is not surprising to see shopkeepers, chasas, and even manzhis, reading their sacred books at intervals of their works.”²⁰⁵

An indigenous education system had been long prevalent among the Brahman and other literate castes, which was later tried to be appropriated with the British education system. The Deputy Inspector of Nowgong district reported that generally a *mahanta* taught his son to read *puthis* and a *mauzadar* taught his son reading, writing and arithmetic, in which sometimes some neighbourhood boys also joined. It was a kind of family school.²⁰⁶ The ancient system of

²⁰⁴ *General Report of Public Instruction in Bengal for 1872-73*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1874, p. 62.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, Appendix A, District Reports: Assam Circle, Kamrup, p. 33.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, Appendix A, District Reports: Assam Circle, Nowgong, p. 53. He wrote that there were rare instances of a *Kakati* teaching a few boys and receiving rice, fish, milk etc. in compensation or employing their labour in his plough fields.

teacher and disciple withered away, and father or elder brother or other relatives undertook the duty of educating the younger generation.

Education in colonial India was often focused as an instrument of enlightenment, but instead of giving emphasis on the intellectual development of the people, the British rulers conceived and designed it in a particular way in Assam. The famous principle of “downward filtration”, or education as way of indoctrination in western ideas notwithstanding, the British administration in Assam, right from the beginning concentrated on the primary education,²⁰⁷ and until the end of the nineteenth century found out ways to deter any pressure from the indigenous elite to establish a higher education institution in Assam. The government policy on education in Assam was seemingly in tune with the interests of the tea planters, the dominant class of the region, who had exhibited a utilitarian approach and advocated education of handicraft rather than instruction in reading and writing, which they thought would best serve their purpose.²⁰⁸ They even demonstrated little willingness to radically alter the existing curriculum of primary education, and supported through a grant-in-aid system the religious courses of the schools already in vogue. The schools were directed only to slightly change their courses by introducing a textbook of secular character in addition to the *shastras*.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Reckoning by population, the Assam Division spent most money upon it, every lakh of inhabitants costing Rs. 2548 a year, that is, each person cost 6 pence a year for education. See *General Report of Public Instruction in Bengal for 1872-73*, 1874, p. 59.

²⁰⁸ *General Report on Public Instruction Bengal for 1871-72 with Appendices*. Calcutta: Calcutta Central Press Company, 1873.

²⁰⁹ Official correspondences show that in the 1850s, the vernacular schools of Assam taught subjects like writing, reading, arithmetic, religious and moral teachings, and the books they chose to study were *Ratnamala*, *Amarkosh*, *Kirtan*, *Gunamala*, *Bhagavat*, *Bhimcharit* etc. *Extracts from General Report of the Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency for 1855-56*. Calcutta: Calcutta Gazette Office, 1856. pp. 357-359.

The Public Instruction of the period initially showed that the general people's response towards the colonial education programme was lukewarm. Robinson reported in 1855-56,

“They were content to live and die in ignorance as their fathers had done before them.”

He called the people “ignorant” and “superstitious”, who noticed every effort to disseminate instruction among them as “dubious”. Robinson, while feeling the “gigantic deficiency” to impart education to a greater part of the population, simultaneously considered that the burden, if it was taken by the government, will produce an “unhealthy” state of feeling in respect to education. The government policy of the period was to encourage the establishment of indigenous or self-supporting institutions, towards which the people's response was held to be of “stolid indifference”, though not of “opposition”.²¹⁰ It was complained by the officers that people frequently requested to bear the expenses by the government. Martin, the Inspector of Schools wrote that as there was no zamindar, “landed or moneyed aristocracy” in the province, the grant-in-system was a failure in Assam; and must continue to be so in future.²¹¹

However, the prime hurdle in diffusion of education in the region was the agriculturalist life of the people. The colonial report often pointed out that people could not spare their children from their agricultural labourers, producing its impact on the school attendance of the harvesting season, and leading in most cases to “ephemeral existence” of the schools.²¹² But gradually increased demand for education was felt, so much so that, to quote Colonel Jenkins' words,

²¹⁰ *Extracts from General Report of the Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency for 1855-56*, 1856, p. 29.

²¹¹ *General Report of Public Instruction in Bengal 1872-73, 1874*, Appendix A, p. 4.

²¹² See Report of William Robinson, Inspector of Schools, Assam and North Bengal, for the Quarter Ending October, 1855 in *Extracts from General Report of the Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency for 1855-56*, 1856, Appendix A, p. 30.

“such a diffusion of instruction among these hitherto unlettered people that now it is felt to be a disgrace even to the lowest classes not to read and write”.²¹³

Education: Whether a Gift from the Colonizer

In fact, education in colonial times was hardly altogether a gift of the British. It was the inclination of the local nobles, even the peasantry, which contributed towards its extension. Records show that it was Dutiram Bar Bhandar Baruwa (Borooah) and Dinanath Sharma Bez Barwa (Bezbaroa), who provided respectively one *pura* good land and money in cash monthly to run the Madrasa where Persian, Bengali and Urdu were taught.²¹⁴ It was at the demand of several ‘respectable natives’ of Nowgong, who subscribed Rs 35 monthly, and the same amount as monthly donation, the officiating Deputy Commissioner of the district sent a proposal to the Officiating Commissioner of Assam to set up an English school at Nowgong.²¹⁵ S. Endle, in the 1870s, noticed that Assam was almost purely and simply an agricultural country and the pupils were scarcely any exceptions, most of them were sons of *ryot* and small cultivators. He in commiserate tone portrayed the state of the pupils,

“In every case the pupils are required to purchase their own school materials and repair their own school-houses; and in this way some progress is made in the direction of self-support.”²¹⁶

²¹³ Atkinson, V. S. *General Report on Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1860-61*. Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1862, p. 20.

²¹⁴ See extract from a Letter from William Robinson, Inspector of Schools, North-East Bengal and Assam, No. 295, dated the 5 March, forwarded by Gordon Young, Director of Public Instruction to W. Grey, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, vide Letter No. 853 dated 28 April, 1856, Education Despatch of 19 July 1854 in *Extracts from General Report of the Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency for 1855-56*, 1856, pp. 357-358.

²¹⁵ Letter dated 16 October, 1862 from the Extra Assistant Commissioner, Nowgong to Major J. B. Haughton, the Officiating Commissioner of Assam, File No 21/9, Assam State Archives.

²¹⁶ *General Report of Public Instruction in Bengal for 1872-73*, 1874, p. 418.

Instead of the initial apathy for English as an alien language which might be proved vulnerable towards the dharma and *jat* of the gentry, towards the second half of the nineteenth century, the peoples', and especially the gentry's approach towards western education began to change. The public Instruction of 1860-61 noted in a satisfactory tone,

"It was natural that natives employed in the service of the Government should be first to recognize the value of an English education, but it is satisfactory to find that appreciation of the advantages conferred by it is widely and rapidly extending among other classes."²¹⁷

Dinanath, though once sternly opposed to English education later could understand its importance and changed his mind, and already sent two of his elder sons to carry on their study in Calcutta.²¹⁸ As there was no English school at Lakhimpur town, Dinanath, while serving as an Extra Assistant Commissioner there, took the initiative to establish one and constructed the house for it. A distant relative of Dinanath was appointed as a teacher and he was arranged to stay with the family of the benefactor. He endeavoured to acquire essentials of English through his own effort, which was not very uncommon among the servile section of Assam then. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Bezbaroa family emerged as the entrepreneur of school education in the entire Sibsagar district.

From the outset, people's eagerness for English education lay in their aspirations to get employment in government offices.²¹⁹ W. Robinson, the Inspector of School of North-East

²¹⁷ Ibid, p. 19.

²¹⁸ By the 1880s, the Bezbaroa family emerged as the pioneer of education in Assam, who initiated three high schools excluding a few other educational institutions in different places of the Sibsagar district. Reviewing the educational scenario of the Bengal Presidency Sir Alfred Croft, the Director of Public Instruction in Bengal wrote that private contribution in Assam reached a higher percentage than in other provinces except Bengal, Madras and Bombay. Croft, Alfred. *Review of Education in India in 1886, With Special Reference to the Report of the Education Commission*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1888, p. 111.

²¹⁹ In Tezpur, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh there had been considerable increase in the number of pupils, on account of 'the many opportunities for employment' provided by the surrounding tea gardens to the young

Bengal and Assam deplored the pragmatic concern of people towards learning English in his report. He noted that the performance of the English schools of Assam were far from “satisfactory”, because these were primarily considered by the people as “stepping-stones to employment under Government”.²²⁰ Another colonial report, interpreting the tendency from a different perspective, tried to tell a success story of their education project in Assam,

“The progress of education in Assam is further illustrated by the fact that in 1862, we could hardly get a clerk from among the natives of the province, at present the superintendent of the Judicial Commissioner’s Office and several of the District Officers’ chief clerks are Assamese.”²²¹

The discourse of enlightenment notwithstanding, the people’s acceptance of English and western education was propelled by their material concerns of getting respectable livelihood. Mahamomahopadhyay Padmanath Bhattacharyya, a scholarly personality of the early twentieth century, articulated the tendency explicitly in the words as follows,

“Education is desired nowadays for material and consequently for social advancement. Money is the only thing now cared for, and that comes from education.”²²²

Lakshminath at School

At Lakhimpur, Lakshminath’s education began at home with a Bengali book “*Shisushiksha*” written by Madanmohan Tarkalankar. Like others, his learning and writing tools, like papers

men of proficiency in English. *Report on Administration of Province of Assam for the year 1878-79*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1880, p. 198.

²²⁰ Report of W. Robinson, Inspector of Schools, North-East Bengal and Assam, to V. S. Atkinson, Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, in Atkinson, *General Report on Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1860-61, 1862*, p. 103.

²²¹ *General Report of Public Instruction in Bengal for 1872-73, 1874*, Appendix A, p. 25.

²²² Lloyd, G. T. *Census of India, 1921. Vol. III: Assam, Part I*. Shillong: The Government Press, Assam, 1923, p. 110. Expressing an opposite view, Pandit G. D. Misra of Sibsagar said that people of different social strata sought education with different concerns. For example, villagers wanted education to enable them to read the government notices and circulars, as well as the religious books. Ibid.

were made of locally available materials like reed, plantain or banana leaf, inkpot was made of bamboo, and ink was prepared from cow urine and ashes. A few years later, his formal education began at an *Adarsha Banga Bidyalay* of Sibsagar, a Bengali medium primary school. Both the head Pundit and the second teacher in the school were from Bengal, though the other teachers were from Assam.²²³

The high school at Sibsagar, where Lakshminath studied was one of the earliest of its kind in Assam, being the second in the entire Assam valley. In 1856, when the Anglo-vernacular school at Guwahati was upgraded to the level of a zilla school, the people of neighbouring districts also showed their “anxiousness” for extension of the same privilege to them.²²⁴ The Sibsagar district of upper Assam, as reported, was found to be “extremely anxious” to get one.²²⁵ As a consequence, in the following decade, Assam possessed two government English schools and one aided School in the Brahmaputra valley, apart from 22 government and government-aided vernacular schools in the province, as well as some indigenous schools which got subsidies from the government. By 1871, every district in Assam, except the hill districts had one zilla school to provide education up to the level of the entrance examination of the Calcutta University.

The Headmaster of the Sibsagar High school was a domiciled Bengali. Contrary to his satisfaction with the high school situated at Guwahati from the perspective of the “numerical strength” of the students, and “internal efficiency”, Robinson, in 1862, noticed no “great addition” to the numerical strength of the school of Sibsagar. It constituted 42 students against

²²³ Getting teachers in Assam remained a problem, and it had got frequent reflections in the public instruction reports of the time.

²²⁴ Report of William Robinson, Inspector of Schools for North- Bengal and Assam, for the Quarter Ending January, 1856 in *Extracts from General Report of the Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency for 1855-56*, Appendix A, 1856, p. 53.

²²⁵ Ibid.

two teachers, which he ascribed to the high fees imposed upon the students by the committee. Given the fact that no other means to acquire the knowledge of English was available in the district, Robinson advocated a compassionate attitude from the committee.²²⁶ But the situation did not alter much.

Table [1]. 3

Situation of Students in Government High Schools of Assam in 1860 & 1861²²⁷

Name of Schools	Numbers in Rolls		Number of average Daily Attendance	
	1860	1861	1860	1861
Guwahati School	104	118	81	97
Sibsagar School	39	42	37	32
Goalpara School	172	180	104	116

Lakshminath was critical of the methods of education. School for him was like a jail, which, and especially the teachers with batons in their hands, aroused fear, and anxiety in him. Most of the teachers were strict disciplinarians. In his own assessment, he always was a student of mediocre ability. In 1886, when he passed the Entrance Examination, that was his second attempt.²²⁸ In fact, he studied for three years in the same class. The Entrance examination

²²⁶ Report of William Robinson, Inspector of Schools, North-East Bengal and Assam in August, 1861 to W. S. Atkinson, Director of Public Instruction in Bengal in Atkinson, *General Report on Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1860-61, 1862*, Appendix A, pp. 106-107.

²²⁷ *General Report of Public Instruction, Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency, 1860-61, 1862*, Appendix A, pp. 106-107.

²²⁸ In 1871, in the city of Calcutta one Entrance candidate was found for the population of 2528, whereas in the Lakhimpur District of Assam one person appeared in the same examination among 82,086 persons. See *General*

conducted by the Calcutta University was highly esteemed by the people of Assam. The Officiating Director of Public Instruction in Bengal defined this examination as “the lowest standard indicating a serviceable amount of general knowledge, with a useful acquaintance with the English language”, held to make “comparison for the several zillas”. By the 1880s, appearing in the Entrance examination in Assam was considered as a kind of qualification, which contributed towards one’s social status. An official report claimed that there were pressures from the parents to allow the students to appear in the Entrance examination. Because writing “failed Entrance candidate” after the name became a certificate to a boy when seeking a wife.²²⁹

Considering the background, Lakshminath’s success in the examination produced hope and confidence in him. A door was opened to pursue higher studies, and as there was no college in the entire province, he intended to go to Calcutta. Instead of the high caste gentry’s growing attraction for western education, the conservative section among them had suffered from anxiety towards Calcutta. They considered that it was because of the afflicting influence of Calcutta, the society had been going through an undesirable path. Lakshminath’s two elder brothers already had obtained college education in Calcutta, but the father was not willing to

Report of Public Instruction in Bengal for 1872-73, 1874, p. 18. In 1878, 45 candidates from the high schools appeared in the University Entrance Examination, of whom 15 passed the examination. See Report on Administration of Province of Assam for the year 1878-79, 1880, p. 160.

²²⁹ The Officiating Director of Public Instruction in Bengal defined this examination as ‘the lowest standard indicating a serviceable amount of general knowledge, with a useful acquaintance with the English language’, held to make ‘comparison for the several zillas’. In 1871, in the city of Calcutta one Entrance candidate was found for a population of 2528, whereas in the Lakhimpur District of Assam one among 82086 persons. *General Report of Public Instruction in Bengal for 1872-73, 1874, p. 18.* By the 1880s, appearing in the Entrance examination in Assam became a kind of qualification, which contributed towards one’s social status, as it had been reflected in the official report, which claimed that there were pressures from the part of the parents to allow the students to appear in the Entrance examination. Writing ‘failed Entrance candidate’ after the name became a certificate to a boy when seeking a wife. See Croft, *Review of Education in India in 1886, 1888, p. 59.*

send him for higher education. Western education was celebrated by the gentry as a gateway for entry into the government job but acts and attitudes of the newly educated section were not acceptable to them.

However, after some interim uncertainties about the sponsorship and consent from his father, at last he set out on the journey to Calcutta.

Away from Home to Calcutta

The Assamese gentry's early contact with Calcutta, the colonial city, began during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Being shattered by the external attack and internal strife, a part of the nobles of the former Ahom kingdom took temporary refuge in Calcutta, with their entourage.²³⁰ With the coming of print, the city was often depicted by the intelligentsia of Assam as a miracle city, embodiment of colonial rule which was glorified as a harbinger of progress, security and good governance.²³¹ But while eulogizing the city as a colonial creation and symbol of *unnati*, the Assamese intelligentsia perceived the Bengali people as an alien and demoralized race.²³² A public letter, written from Calcutta by an Assamese person, for

²³⁰ Though no firsthand account of such a visit is available, in 1915, Lakshminath, in a historical play, dramatized such early experience of the city in the setting of Pathuriaghata of Calcutta. Here the city was presented from the viewpoint of Dhani lagua, a servant of Badan, an Ahom noble, which showed the city as alien and thronged; its streets were congested with vehicles and spaces were densely occupied by buildings, full of garbage, dingy and busy. Calcutta, in customs and habits, was presented as a cultural other, an embodiment of *kali kal*, incarnation of morally degraded time, soon destined to be doomed. See Bezbaroa, Lakshminath, *Belimar*. Howrah: Author, 1915.

²³¹ Gunabhiram Borooah, the first biographer of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan wrote that when Anandaram had to tell anybody about Calcutta, he frequently pronounced 'you would be amazed to see'. In 1854, reporting the establishment of railway from Howrah to western India and of the introduction of telegraph, someone named as Ga wrote that the new system, by expediting speed and enabling smooth movement of people, provided the British the opportunity of occupying the whole country. It seems that the 'Ga' represented Gunabhiram Borooah, a student of the Hindu College then.

²³² The Assamese intelligentsia's representation of the Bengalis as a degenerate and effeminate race has been discussed in chapter Four.

instance, warned against the pernicious moral impact of colonial modernity on the people of Assam.²³³ According to him, before colonial rule, drinking, prostitution, false case, forged crime and so forth were quite unknown to the people of Assam, which prevailed with the coming of the Bengalis to Assam under the influence of them.

Dinanath, like many of his contemporaries in Assam being prejudiced against the western liberal education, made it chiefly responsible for the “misconduct” of two of his elder sons. Golapchandra, the younger had secretly pursued the medical science in Calcutta and ultimately left for abroad,²³⁴ and the elder Gobinda, allegedly lived a far more westernized life in Assam, ignoring the ethos and customs of a Brahman and Vaishnavite. As the patriarch of his extended family, they for him were “lost” sons. However, after a period of conflict and discussions among the family circle, ultimately Lakshminath was allowed to go to Calcutta with an arrangement of staying in a Bengali Brahman family as a paying guest, so that he would not have to stay at the Assamese Students’ mess at Calcutta, which may be vulnerable for his *jat* or caste as a Brahman.²³⁵ Lakshminath was strictly advised by his father to observe the daily rituals of a Brahman, like *Gangasnan*, *sandhya*, *ahnik*, and to perform *nam-prasanga*, the duty of a Vaishnavite.

²³³ Anonymous (*Kalikata Nagarat Thaka Tomalokar Bandhu Ejan Asamiya Lok*). “*Asam Deshar Loksakalar Prati dutiya Nibedan Patra* (Second Letter from an Assamese in Calcutta)”, *Arunoday*, Volume 8, Issue 7, July 1853, pp. 104-105.

²³⁴ In 1881, G. C. Bezbaroa (Golab Chandra Bezbaroa) passed the M. B. examination from the University of Glasgow. See “Personal Intelligence.” *Journal of the National Indian Association*, 1881, p. 747.

²³⁵ In earlier instances, Brahman students from Assam went to Calcutta with local cooks, evidently Brahman, to avoid the food from the Bengali, which was thought to be vulnerable for the caste identity of the Brahmans of Assam. Anandaram and Durgaram, who ventured in the 1840s to study in Calcutta, were accompanied by one Brahman cook and three servants each. Later Anandaram kept a Bengali Brahman cook for him. Borooah, Gunabhiram. *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jivan Charit*. Guwahati: Asam Prakasan Parishad, 1992, p. 35. Gunabhiram Borooah, a Brahmo by his faith, in the 1890s shifted to Calcutta, and he also kept Brahman cooks until his death.

Lakshminath, studying in the Ripon College, situated at Mirzapur Street, every day had to go there from his dwelling place at Kalighat by horse-drawn tram. It was not easy for him to adapt to a situation of an alien city at first, where everything from language to food seemed to be foreign for him.²³⁶ So, within a month he decided to leave his studies and return to Assam.²³⁷ Instead of being disappointed and angry, Lakshminath's father was pleased, and thanked his god for returning him, an almost 'lost' son. But soon being repentant at his hasty decision, Lakshminath returned to Calcutta to pursue his study. This time he barely managed to get a seat in the City College and commenced to stay in a mess of the College Street with Ramakanta Barkakati, serving there as the Assamese Translator of the Calcutta High Court.

Sumit Sarkar has shown that during the first decade of the twentieth-century, Calcutta was imagined as predominantly Bengali city (implicitly high caste Hindu), in culture, if not in statistics of the population or in terms of economic success.²³⁸ Being both the administrative

²³⁶ How crucial foodways were for one's perception of alienation in Calcutta could be perceived in Lakshminath's reminiscence of his initial contact with Calcutta. Despite getting good care from the Halder family of Kalighat, with whom he lived as a paying guest, his apathy was described in terms of daily food provided to him in the family, rather than in terms of language. In fact, in respect of food, Bengal and Assam have far more similarity than difference, because '*bhat*' or boiled rice is used as the staple food in both places. However, it seems that more than the Bengali way of cooking and foodways in general, it was the food offered in the lower middle-class family which was mostly hinted by him in his complaint. His contention was not only for the way of cooking and the taste ('hot and spicy') but also for the contents ('a little piece of fish, with some vegetables' and 'a spoonful of *dal*') of the meals, which allegedly made him sick.

²³⁷ He returned by train from Sealdah through Jatrapur to Dhubri. Then, he proceeded through *dak-jahaj* to Dichangmukh of Sibsagar. He had to walk a few miles from the ferry *ghat* to arrive at home, because in those days, no other way to travel that distance but on walk except horse or elephant was present.

²³⁸ Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 1999, p. 167. Interestingly, Lakshminath on the basis of various census operations had raised questions on defining Calcutta as a Bengali city, pointing out its metropolitan character, diversity of its population with regards to religion, language and dominance or power exercised by the different groups of population. The Report of the Census of 1901 recorded a total 57 languages spoken in Calcutta, among which 41 were Asiatic and 16 were non-Asiatic. The mother tongue of the greater part of the population was shown as either Bengali or Hindustani. Other three major languages spoken were Oriya, English and Urdu. See Allen, *Census of India, Assam*, 1902, p. 246.

centre, and colonial heartland of industrial capital, Calcutta attracted a large number of persons from the surrounding rural areas either from Bengal, or from Bihar, Orissa or the Central Provinces, as men of professions and labour power. Apart from the non-Bengali manual labour, the Marwari merchant community from Rajasthan and some other trader communities from Gujarat contributed to this change of human landscape in the city. Delineating the process of change in demographic pattern, Pradip Sinha has argued that as an indication of the process of transition, the “outgoing Bengali-speaking elements” were gradually “replaced by Hindi-speaking population”.²³⁹ Assam remained an exception. It was the sparse population of the region, with availability of cultivable land, which prevented any pressure in the existing population of Assam to transform itself to a labouring class. Moreover, compared to Bengal, the educated section remained far behind to compete in any job with the advantageously situated aspirant Bengali professional class in this respect. Instead, it was Assam, which opened its doors to large scale immigration of the labouring people from the neighbouring states to its newly explored area of tea, coal, petroleum and railway, preceded by a section of professional men from Bengal as associates of the colonial administration and teachers in schools.²⁴⁰

It was the avenues of western education, which attracted a small section of Assam to Calcutta, which enabled them to get a job either in the colonial or in company offices. Though Anandaram Dhekial Phukan’s entry into the Hindu School of Calcutta in 1841, is a much referred instance of what was called by Jayeeta Sharma, after Benedict Anderson, as a “secular

²³⁹ Sinha, Pradip. *Calcutta in Urban History*. Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978, p. 241.

²⁴⁰ Making the census according to the birthplace, the Report of the 1881 census showed that out of the total population of 48,81,426 in Assam, 46,0076 were ‘home born’, whereas 2,80,710 were shown as ‘immigrants’ against 41,038 ‘emigrant’ population. *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, 1883, p. 217. Accordingly, 849 for every 1,00,000 population of Assam were immigrants, and the census superintendent observed that, ‘Bengal sends one third of its emigrants to Assam’. Ibid, p. 220.

pilgrimage”²⁴¹, which she read as an essential component of the broader historical changes by enabling “momentous encounters with modernity for Assam and India through British colonial rule”, he was not the first to step in the city for getting western education.²⁴² By the 1860s, within a few years of the establishment of the Calcutta University, youngsters from Assam made distinctive earmarks with their brilliance and perseverance. These successes were individual.²⁴³ However, they attempted to get their own space in the city, and for a part of them Calcutta became their intellectual home. But most of the students from Assam were neither desirous nor ambitious enough to live there as permanent residents, except the few, who could prove themselves as competent enough to establish themselves as professional men there.

²⁴¹ Sharma, *Empire’s Garden, Assam and the Making of India*, 2012, p. 1.

²⁴² Anandaram met several students from Assam in Calcutta, including a few, who went with intention to study western medical science there, but later were shocked to come to know that they had to dissect dead bodies for the study, and left the venture. Borooah, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jivan Charit*, 1992, pp. 33-34.

²⁴³ After introduction of the Gilchrist Scholarship, which included 100 Pounds each tenable for five years to the recipient along with 100 pounds extra as travelling allowance to and from London, in 1869, Anandaram Burua (Borooah) and in 1872, Balai Narayan Das, called also Burua received the scholarship. “Two out of the eight scholarships open to all India should have been won by students from the sparsely inhabited and educationally backward valley of Assam, is a phenomenon that defies explanation.” See “Report of the Officiating Director of Public Instruction of Bengal for 1872” in *General Report of Public Instruction in Bengal for 1872-73*, 1874, pp. 30-31.

Table [1].3

Positions of Assam Students in Arts Colleges of Calcutta in 1894-95²⁴⁴

First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year	Total
56	86	27	30	199

In 1894-95, a total of 37 students from Assam passed the F. A. and 7 passed the B. A. examination of Calcutta University.²⁴⁵

By the 1890s, apart from the students, who were hardly 200 in numbers, Calcutta housed a few respectable families from Assam, who dwelled there either in temporary abodes or in their own houses to carry on their professional activities there.²⁴⁶ A Lesser-known section of migrants from Assam was the people who accompanied the wealthy class as servants, cooks or servile persons remained mostly unrepresented.²⁴⁷ It is in the subsequent chapter I shall try to explore his expatriate life in the colonial city of Calcutta.

²⁴⁴ J. Wilson. *General Report of Public Instruction in Assam for the Year 1894-95*, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1895, p. 98.

²⁴⁵ Wilson, J. *General Report of Public Instruction in Assam for the Year 1894-95*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1895, p. 98.

²⁴⁶ During the 1890s, the family of Gangagobinda Phukan, originally from Sibsagar, Gunabhram Borooah and a few others were living there. In the meantime, though a small section of well-to-do families from Assam of elite background shifted to Calcutta for living there in business or other professional connections, or for the allurements of the city as an intellectual-cultural heartland of the whole of the eastern India, soon the process of retreating began.

²⁴⁷ Harinath, younger brother of Lakshminath with his family, lived there for quite a few years. Similarly, a few of Bholanth Borooah's family relations also shifted to the city to work in his trading farms. They, as allied to their owner or wealthy kinsmen, had no independent existence, and returned to Assam after a short interval, or met their death there.

CHAPTER TWO

The Life of an Expatriate (1886-1937)

In 1886, Lakshminath left his home to pursue his college education in Calcutta. Since then, whether voluntarily or under certain circumstances of life, he had to spend more than five decades of his adult life, either in Calcutta, or in Howrah or Sambalpur. That was a long expatriate life, only to return to Assam in 1937, which proved to be his last journey to his motherland. Towards the conclusion of the nineteenth century, Calcutta became crucial for the emergence of an Assamese public and print arena. Being a businessman, and later an employee of a European company, Lakshminath extensively travelled all over India. The chapter tries to focus on his business and conjugal life, keeping keen notice in his everyday encounter with a colonial modern metropolis, as well as of the mofussil life. It explores the emergence of an Assamese public sphere around Calcutta as well as the new consciousness of regional identity. Lakshminath's joint venture with Bholanath to establish themselves in the colonial business world, their confrontation with European racism, their adaptation of the business etiquette, and leaning towards the Indian National Congress-all these themes are tried to be imbricated in this chapter. The chapter focuses more on the mundane aspects of things, and tries to explore the colonial modern's appropriation or transformation of the inner domain, and experiences like child- bearing, mothering, cooking, house- building etc.

Calcutta: Begetting a Public Sphere

Lakshminath recalled that during his stay in Calcutta as a student, he attended almost all the public places of serious discussion there, and shared thoughts with his friends later. Similar

experiences were recollected and shared by a few other contemporaries of his from Assam.²⁴⁸ Calcutta became instrumental for begetting a public sphere in Assam. By the 1870s, students from Assam residing in Calcutta became organized in the umbrella of a literary body named the Assamese Students' Literary (ASL) club, which remained active until the subsequent century, followed by the formation of another body in 1888, named as the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*. The emergent voluntary associations, with their individual memberships, constitutions, recording of minutes, publication of proceedings were modern forms, and differed from the pre-colonial religious, social or village communities. Sumit Sarkar has observed that partly as consequence of an "institutional changes in Indian society", and partly as "mimesis of the political parlance of the British", in the late nineteenth century, terms like "public" and "public opinion" came to be used.²⁴⁹ In this context, he pointed out the forms and channels of sociability, developed around the new educational-professional and print-cultural networks. The University of Calcutta in the late nineteenth century attracted students from all of eastern India. A rational and liberal attitude to life was implanted in the youths both by the curriculum and the existing intellectual atmosphere of the University.

In the 1880s, on the occasion of the Public Service Commission's consultations with the public opinion of Assam, the Chief Commissioner of Assam informed to the Secretary of the Commission that no association, society, editors of the newspapers or members of the general public were present in Assam, with who the Chief Commissioner could recommend the Commission to discuss.²⁵⁰ Similarly, in 1886, commenting on the Indian Education Commission's suggestion for bifurcation of the study in the secondary level for the students

²⁴⁸ Rajkhowa, Benudhar. *Mor Jibanar Dapon*. Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parisha, 1969 (Published Posthumously).

²⁴⁹ Sarkar, Sumit. *Writing Social History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 175.

²⁵⁰ *Proceedings of the Public Service Commission, Vol. VI: Proceedings Relating to the Lower Provinces of Bengal (Including Assam)*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1887, p. 52

who were intended for the pursuits in commerce or any practical venture, the Chief Commissioner of Assam demurred the proposal in the same vein on the ground that Assam had not “any considerable class whose intellectual activity” was not “satisfied” by the existing literature-dominant course.²⁵¹ Being constantly projected as a “backward” province, Assam was reduced to the status of intellectually or psychologically dependent on Bengal. The impression was circulated that unless experiments were made in Bengal or other advanced provinces, no efforts would be made in Assam on its own initiative. Aggravating the situation, the emerging intelligentsia of Assam further had to negotiate with the more powerful group of the European tea planters. They, for their racial affinity with the rulers, also for their buoyant economic condition, were always in a dominant position, and assumed to represent the interests of the province. Paradoxically, when no local person or group from Assam were found to qualify to witness in the Public Service Commission, the Chief Commissioner suggested the Commission to take oral evidence of the “large” and “influential” non-official tea-planter community of the province, thereby effectively causing to call of evidence from the part of the Assam Company and other planters.²⁵²

In this instance, how the intelligentsia, largely a product of the Calcutta-based educational networks, negotiated with the unwillingness of the government to incorporate them in the process of decision making seems to be a matter of curiosity. It is evident from the course of events that they refused to remain totally unrepresented and made a way out to participate in the process. The report of the Commission shows that it included two persons from Assam who voluntarily gave their evidence, without getting any invitation from the government. They were Brajanath Bezbaroa, representing the *Sarbajanik Sabha* of Jorhat and the other was Gobinda

²⁵¹ Croft, Alfred. *Review of Education in India in 1886, With Special Reference to the Report of the Education Commission*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1888, p. 183.

²⁵² *Proceedings of the Public Service Commission, Vol. VI, 1887, p. 2.*

Bezbaroa, representing *Jnan Pradayini Sabha* from Golaghat. Interestingly, they came from the same Dinanath Bezbaroa lineage and were elder brothers of Lakshminath. On the other hand, a news item published in the *Hindu Patriot* shows that in 1882, a body named Assam Association was formed at Sibsagar to make endeavour “to ameliorate the condition of the people of Assam”, in which Dinanath was elected as the president.²⁵³

Trying to make alternate spaces for them, the Assamese students in Calcutta initially assembled on every Saturday evening at a tea party, formed in the model of European Coffee House, only for getting together, which gradually emerged as a platform of their discussion on various topics related to Assam’s improvement. Some records of the activities of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* could be traced from the contemporary journals in Assamese, which involved reading sessions, discussion, speech through appointed speakers on relevant topics, singing, performing plays and as such. Trying to form a socio-political bond among the Assamese, the intelligentsia tried to appropriate the western customs of offering an ovation on special occasions, condolence meetings, farewell meetings and so forth. What the intelligentsia initiated in Calcutta subsequently was imitated in the mofussils of Assam.²⁵⁴

Thus, an Assamese public sphere in the last decade of the nineteenth century came into existence in Calcutta largely using public spaces already developed by the Bengali *bhadralok*. The ASL club and the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* had no fixed meeting place in the

²⁵³ *Hindu Patriot*, 13 March, 1882.

²⁵⁴ In 1902, when Jagannath Borooah, a tea planter and one of the earliest graduates of Assam from the Calcutta University visited England on occasion of the Darbar of the King Edward VII, he was formally made farewell at the Jorhat station, by offering a garland and a recitation of a poem. *Jonaki, Natun Khanda*, Volume 1, Issue 4, 1902 in Saikia, Nagen ed. *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001, pp. 945-946. When he arrived at Calcutta in September of the same year, the Assamese residents of Calcutta greeted him at the Howrah station, arranging a meal in the India club on the occasion. *Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s Diaries*, Digital Archive, Centre for Assamese Studies, Tezpur University (Henceforth, *Diaries*, Tezpur University). Similarly, students going to England or returning after completion of their study were publicly greeted.

city.²⁵⁵ *Jonaki*, the print organ of the Sabha had to frequently change its office address, with the shift of the temporary boarding places of the students. At first, it used the address of the Armenian Street, then it was transferred to the Bhavanicharan Dutta Lane, and in the fourth year, it was published from the Assamese Mess situated at Amherst Street. Apart from the literary circles and print arena beget by them, the Assamese intelligentsia gradually tried to emerge as a public, who represented and spoke for the greater interest of Assam and the Assamese community per se. They even memorialized and demanded the colonial government, and thus tried to emerge as a public group to create pressure on the government.

Lakshminath against Abolition of the Jury System

In the 1890s, when the India government was considering the abolition of the jury system in Assam with some other parts of India, with its presumption that the jury system “in some degree favoured the escape of the criminals”, it could not ignore the public opinion altogether.²⁵⁶ Preparing a report for the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the subject, Lutmann-Johnson, the Chief Session Judge of the Assam Valley districts gave substantial places to the opinions of a few representatives of Assam, which reflected a tone of division.²⁵⁷ Jagannath Borooah, introduced in the Report as an honorary magistrate and tea planter, presented the local people’s participation in the jury as “a highly valued right”, thus articulating the issue of the rights of

²⁵⁵ Barkakati, Ramakanta. “*Astam Bacharar Karyyabibaran*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 9, 1896 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 744-748.

²⁵⁶ In Assam, the jury system was operative only in the Assam valley districts, and the trial by jury covered merely the cases ‘in which death is caused’. Letter from H. Lutmann- Jonson, Esq., C. S. Judge of the Assam Valley Districts, to the Secretary of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, no. 1271, dated 17 November, 1890, “Report on the System of Trial by Jury” in *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department*. No. CCCLXVI. Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1899, pp. 125-134.

²⁵⁷ It seems that the opinions thus quoted reflected the individual opinions of the persons rather than the opinions of any associations or public bodies. However, we may take them as representative views of the literary elite section of Assam.

the indigenous people. Proposing for improvement of the system, rather than abolishing it, he advocated for the strengthening of the “public opinion”, and recognition of the right long exercised by the people.

Reacting immediately to the “unexpected” move of the government to restrain the jury system, a public meeting was held in Calcutta, and subsequently, on 23 December a memorial on behalf of the inhabitants of Bengal and its suburbs was submitted on basis of the resolution of the meeting, to the Secretary of State for India in council. The memorial clearly stated that the system acted as a “shield between the rights and privileges of individuals’ and was looked upon as ‘a safeguard of the liberty of the subject’”.²⁵⁸

Lakshminath was vocal on the issue. Apart from addressing it in the *Jonaki*, edited by Lakshminath in 1892, through an anonymously published article,²⁵⁹ he, for the first time on behalf of “the people of Assam” took part in the discussion of the business session of the annual conference of the Indian National Congress in 1892 held at Allahabad, in which Lakshminath, with Bholanth participated as delegates from Assam.²⁶⁰ Lakshminath argued that being a non-Regulation province, remaining amidst of “darkness”, far more backward in civilizational scale, and the people poor and ignorant, the jury system, which Assam enjoyed from its possession by the British was against “miscarriage of justice”. He even pointed out the crucial role the print arena was to play in the colonial rule, and regretted at the lack of any newspaper in Assam,

²⁵⁸ “Report on the System of Trial by Jury” in *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department. No. CCCLXVI*, 1899, pp. 171-174.

²⁵⁹ “*Juri Pratha*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 4, Issue 9, 1892 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 521-523.

²⁶⁰ Lakshminath’s Speech, *Report of the Eighth Indian National Congress held at Allahabad on the 28th, 29th, and 30th of December 1892*. Indian National Congress, 1892, p. 78.

“... raw and inexperienced civilians are generally imported into Assam, who not only administer justice in a lawless manner, but tyrannise over the people, and often do things which you will be surprised to hear of, but not nine-tenth of which are ventilated in the columns of newspapers.”²⁶¹

Newspapers and periodicals were crucial for consolidation of a public sphere in India, as well as for the growth of vernacular literature.²⁶² These were the places from where the colonial intelligentsia, remaining outside the sphere of political power, addressed the issues, which they thought and propagated to be beneficial for the greater masses. Their acts of writing were acts of criticizing, opposing, or supporting, inspiring and deploring.

The readership of newspapers and periodicals in the colonial situation was focused by the literate society as the public, whose expectations and aspirations, the colonial state had to take with importance for its smooth running. In representation and formation of public opinion, periodicals played pivotal roles, much more significant than the literary societies of the period. It was for such significance of the periodicals, both the ruler, and the emerging intelligentsia of the time took them seriously.²⁶³ However, it was only towards the turn of the century Assam had its first newspaper in Assamese. According to a report compiled by F. Roddis, the

²⁶¹ *Report of the Eighth Indian National Congress*, 1892, pp. 78-79.

²⁶² Reporting in 1859, about the publications of the native owned presses of Bengal, James Long outlined the increased role the government was to play in the area of vernacular literature. The native presses were described in terms of the exponents of the native minds. If its sound part was encouraged by the government, it will become an instrument of good. But left out to the ignorant minds of the native people, it will produce evil. See “Returns Relating to Publications in the Bengali Language, in 1857, to which is added a List of the Native Presses, with the Books printed at each, Their Price and Character; with a Notice of the Past Conditions and Future Prospects, of the Vernacular Press of Bengal, and the Statistics of the Bombay and Madras Vernacular Presses” in Long, J. *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government*, No. XXXII. Calcutta: General Printing Department, 1859, p. 7.

²⁶³ As early as in 1873, when there were only two journals in Assam, both of ‘religious’ nature, A. C. Campbell, the deputy commissioner of Sibsagar district, keeping close watch on both, stated, “The higher classes of Assamese chiefly read these papers. I do not think that either publication has much effect on the people who read them, but what it may.” “The Public Press” in Campbell’s letter dated 21 May 1873, Jorhat DC Files, Assam State Archives.

superintendent of Police on special duty, newspapers and periodicals were largely read by the educated classes, and of “considerable influence” among them.

Towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, the presence of the Assamese intelligentsia in the Congress sessions gradually became more visible. At the turn of the century, Calcutta held three annual conferences of the Indian National Congress, consecutively in 1896, 1901 and 1906, all having their impact in shaping political alertness among the educated youths. After Lakshminath, in 1896, his elder brother Golapchandra Bezbaroa was elected as a member of the subject committee of the Congress from Assam, who deplored Assam’s remaining deprived in relation to advantages of education, and particularly for absence of a college in the whole province, which the people of Bengal had been enjoying. He said that though the colonial government was being asked in various ways, only “a deaf ear has always been turned to our appeals”. He asked for assistance from the “great” Congress to remedy this evil.²⁶⁴

The literary elite wanted to prove them as the representatives of the people in general. In the Congress platforms, they even criticized the rulers to a degree, but simultaneously wanted they would not fall out of favour with the imperial authorities whose policies they criticized. So, they often had to speak double-speak. Their ambiguous position was reflected in the immediate regional nationalist agenda which often exhibited a more hostile attitude towards the Bengali nationalism, while showing reluctance to critique colonial rule in the same spirit and intensity.

Emergence of Assamese Regional Consciousness

Parallel development of various regional linguistic consciousnesses among the intelligentsia was enabled by the Calcutta University by facilitating the students and others for meeting and

²⁶⁴ *Report of the Twelfth Indian National Congress Held at Calcutta on 28, 29, 30 & 31 December, 1896*. Calcutta: Star Press, 1897, p. 100.

sharing thoughts. Pradip Sinha has argued that in the early twentieth- century the University of Calcutta, being the focal point of higher education throughout the eastern region, provided its space for the communication between the middle-class Bengali and the similar classes from Bihar, Orissa, and Assam. The Bengali *bhadralok*, *already* emerging as an advanced community of India, was admired by them for their modernizing initiatives simultaneously and was observed with distrust.²⁶⁵

The Assamese students in Calcutta were concerned about their identity as a group, evident from the expression like “Assamese students’ Mess” used by them to indicate their location in the city.²⁶⁶ There was even less possibility of meeting and knowing each other in Assam prior to their going to Calcutta. In fact, taking the distant locations in Assam from where they migrated to Calcutta for their educational pursuit into consideration, obviously it was their situation and meeting in an alien city far away from home, which largely contributed towards formation of a regional linguistic identity there. Initially, such arrangements of students’ housing facilitated them with a kind of security in a foreign land, as well as to retain a distinctive cultural identity. The name chosen by the Assamese students to describe their own location, suggested their ambivalent relation with the city as an outer place, a temporary abode, where they tried to retain their own regional and cultural identity intact.

It was this encounter with the city as an outsider, as alien to it, which enabled the Assam’s intelligentsia to question the bond of broader linguistic-cultural identity proposed by a section of the Bengali nationalists for the whole of the eastern India, which the intelligentsia of Assam claimed as imposition upon them from the outside, making them vulnerable. If in earlier imagination, Calcutta was presented as an intellectual abode, a symbol of modernity, towards

²⁶⁵ Sinha, Pradip. *Calcutta in Urban History*. Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978, p. 252.

²⁶⁶ Lakshminath mentioned the existence of an exclusively Assamese students’ mess at the Pratap Chatterjee Lane. Another mess of the time was located at Mirzapur Street.

the end of the nineteenth- century, the city came to be imagined as cultural other, alien place, the development and prosperity of which had been readily contrasted with the material condition of the own motherland.

Marriage: Wife as Companion

On 11th March of 1891, Lakshminath married Prajnasundari, the daughter of Hemendranath and Neepamoyee, and grand- daughter of Debendranath Tagore of Jorasanko. The marriage, though to an extent was “unconventional” in the sense that it was decided solely at Lakshminath’s will, and without the consent of his parents, was still arranged on a proposal come through a *ghatak* or mediator, who approached him with a photograph of the bride. Nor did they meet one another before the marriage had been celebrated. The marriage was held according to the customs of the Adi Brahmo Samaj, a reformist Hindu cult of the times in India, of which Debendranath Tagore, the *Karta* of the Tagore family himself was the founder. The system, according to Lakshminath was similar with the Hindu marriage system except that no *hom* was performed in it.²⁶⁷

It was in the moment of the first exchange of ritualistic *shubhodristi* between both, covered under a *chadar*, they gazed at each other. Explaining the situation, under which his consent to the proposal was given, Lakshminath later wrote that marriage between two persons was not a union of two bodies, but a spiritual union, and like many of his compatriots he also believed that marriage happened according to the will of God. He heard from reliable sources of the bride as *sundari*, *suchila* and *dharmapravana*, and that was sufficient for him to decide for the marriage. Whatever explanation he had provided in favour of his decision, obviously it was the new notion of a companionate wife, which inspired Lakshminath for such a marriage.

²⁶⁷ Lakshminath stated that in relation to the traditional Hinduism, the Adi Brahmo Samaj had 15 Ana affinity with the Arya Samaj, though slightly differed in its reluctance to the Vedic ritual and critical stand on the Veda.

Otherwise, it was doubtful whether in the situation of Assam, to have an educated and cultured woman like Prajnasundari, as life mate would be possible or not. In fact, modernity brought with it the idea of a wife as a companion, who at least to some extent could share the husband's emotional and intellectual universe. Ironically, the society at large was still conservative on the education of women, and marriage at an early age remained conventionally preferable. In most parts of India, including Assam, *balyabibah* was the convention of the time.²⁶⁸

By the time of the appearance of the *Jonaki* in 1889, debate regarding the age of consent for consummation for Indian girls emerged as a heated topic in the Indian intellectual world, to which, the intelligentsia of Assam also reacted. Ratneswar Mahanta, a writer of the period argued that the change of consent of marriage for girls from 5-7 years to 10-12 years was a pleasing situation. Equally celebratory was the change of perception regarding marriage, which gradually came to be considered as physical and spiritual relation between the husband and wife.²⁶⁹ Participating in the discussion, Kamalchandra Sharma, who served as the secretary of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, noted that civilization could not be transferred from one place to another as it was in the original land. Change comes one after another, in a gradual process. He advocated that it was only after being 16-17 years of age, a married wife should be sent to the husband's place, so that she may be a good companion to the husband. It is only by that age, a woman becomes fit for conjugal life, and she could best discharge her *pati bhakti*

²⁶⁸ The Provincial Gazetteer of Assam reported that child marriage was common among the Hindus and Mussalmans in the Surma valley and the district of Goalpara. However, in Assam proper, only the Brahmans and *Ganaks* adhere rigidly to the rule, and the other classes usually deferred marriage until the girl was of an age to be able to enter in her duty as wife and mother. Allen, B. C. *Provincial Gazetteer Of Assam*. Shillong: The Eastern Bengal & Assam Secretariat Printing Press, 1906, p. 29.

²⁶⁹ "Bivah", *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 6, 1889 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 54-56; "Bivah", *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 8, 1889 in Ibid, pp. 67-69; "Bivah", *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 9, 1889 in Ibid, pp. 78-80.

and *prem* to the husband.²⁷⁰ Lakshminath did not participate in the debate then, but immediately after the Age of Consent Act had come into force in 1891, he published a short story entitled ‘*Seuti*’, in which he depicted the grievous aspect of the child marriage, where a woman falls passive victim of the social arrangement.²⁷¹

The Indian men had to marry brides of younger age, and in most cases without any education. Lakshminath portrayed a few humorous sketches on contemporary life, highlighting how the romantic notion of love cherished by the educated males was instantly shattered at their marriages with females either illiterate or ignorant of the new ideas of love beyond the physical desire. Initially, the educated male tried to adjust with the situation by educating their wives in the households. In a society which perceived women’s reading and writing as amoral, a wife was not easily allowed to be a companion of her husband’s pursuit of knowledge. Lakshminath recalled in his memoir that one of his sisters-in-law, wife of his elder brother knew how to read and write, but it was not even possible for her to write a letter to her husband dwelling away from their joint family at Sibsagar, because such an act might raise question on her moral character. Forms like personal letters, though regularly practiced by educated males for exchange of opinions, feelings, and emotions among them, were strictly restricted for women. She, on her part, managed to secretly write letters to her husband, and posted through

²⁷⁰ “*Pratibad*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 10, 1889 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, Guwahati, 2001, pp. 92-94; “*Pratibad*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issues 11-12, 1889 in Ibid, pp. 78-80.

²⁷¹ “*Seuti*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 4, Issue 4, 1892 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 471-473. Mrinalini Sinha argued that though the Indian males had no such stronger opposition on the fixation of the age for marriage, they felt that through the introduction of conception of marital rape, Indian males were denied the lawful rights to their wives. She has pointed out it was largely the males who participated in the debates, while, except for one instance of endorsement of the Bill by a number of women, women’s participation in the debate was almost absent. The women’s magazines of the period also maintained silence on the issue. Sinha, Mrinalini. *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.

Lakshminath, who was still a minor. Literacy for women was sought to be restricted in the reading of the *dharmaputhi* or puranic tales.

Prajnasundari had proved her cultural taste and intellectual richness through her editing of the *Punya*, one of the journals of the Tagore family.²⁷² Being brought up in the cultural intellectual ambience of the Tagores of Jorasanko, one of the highly illustrious families of the times in India, she developed her tastes for art and literature. A generation earlier, the Tagore households were not radical enough on the issues of women's education. *Puratani*, the memoir of Jnanadasundari Devi, the wife of Satyendranath Tagore, an ICS of the British India and one of the sons of Debendranath Tagore, reveals that being married at an early age, she was deficient in education. While her husband went to Europe, he requested his brother Hemendranath, the father of Prajnasundari, to teach her at home, and it was through the effort of Hemendranath, she became able to consume the Bengali literature even as complex as the compositions of Michael Madhusudan Dutta.²⁷³ With lapse of time, the Tagore households had produced women like Sarala Devi and Indira Devi, both of whom were referred by Lakshminath as contemporary graduates to him from the Calcutta University.

Lakshminath's conjugal life became enriched with shared tastes, which enabled them to use their bedroom for reading Shakespeare's *Tempest* together. It is evident from the letters exchanged between the two that their relationship was based on love and affection, which became the ideal in imaginings of the modern conjugal lives. Though ideal, the relationship

²⁷² *Punya*, meaning virtues, was originally a household magazine of the Tagore family, which, since the autumn of 1304-05 Bangabda, that was 1887 A. D., came to appear in printed form. It concentrated on science, music, archaeology, literature, and food. See *Punya*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1304-1305 Bangabda (1887-88). From 1897 onwards, Prajnasundari, apart from making regular contributions, edited the magazine.

²⁷³ Devi Chaudhurani, Indira. *Puratani*. Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Company Ltd, 1957, p. 27

based on love was nourished by most of the Indian educated men of the time, in rare incidents, it was materialized as it happened in their lives.²⁷⁴

However, Indian men's imaginings of their wives certainly involved certain aspects of the tradition, which became contradictory, but indivisible parts of modernity. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, while Indian men had discussed and debated much on the topic of women's education, they formed an opinion in favour of education for women, but with a difference. Women's education should emphasize on the development of true womanly virtues and management of family through the impact of their warmth of love and affection to the husband and children. It should involve the curriculum on maintaining cleanliness and hygiene within the household, preparing good and relishing food, upholding moral character and showing socially gratified conduct. Cooking was defined as the most important of all domestic activities since it produced food. The intelligentsia, consisting of men, advocated female education with the thought that education would make women better mothers and better wives and equip them better for housework. Emphasis was given that the new women would be different from the western women, and it was blamed that educated women were not adept in cooking, and inattentive in their domestic works.

In 1891, discussing the topic, an anonymous person wrote in the *Jonaki* that although a supporter of women's education, he could not recommend the prevalent ways of imparting education to women. Women's education, he stated, should aim at making women worthy of

²⁷⁴ Most of the contemporaries of Lakshminath in Assam had to marry according to their father's will, without even seeing the bride. Chandrakumar wrote to Lakshminath about his wife, "She was a *lajjvashila*, shy creature, how can I make her up to the times, I do not know." Letter of Chandrakumar to Lakshminath on 25 July, 1902, in Neog, Maheswar, ed. *Patralekha*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1968, pp. 173-174. In the turn of the century, when Padmanath Gohain Borooah married for the second time, after the demise of the first wife, he exchanged love letters with the bride, and later reminisced that episode of '*purbarag*' as a memorable part of his life. Gohainborooah, Padmanath. *Mor Sowarani*. Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 1987, pp. 132-134.

the real wives, by promoting in them the efficiency for house works and the quality of 'satitva'.²⁷⁵ In 1919, Lakshminath argued in his own magazine *Banhi*, as the difference between men and women was essential and natural, so to construct them in the same system of education was against the inherent nature of them. Instead of producing some "males in women", women's education should promote the virtues of mother and wife. He urged for women a special curriculum to be introduced, which would include cooking, chemistry, health science, child rearing, keeping accounts for home, home economics, household management, house sanitation, weaving, painting, art and design, vegetable gardening, nature study, along with compulsory course in reading Assamese books, particularly the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, though a little knowledge in English would be sufficient.²⁷⁶ His ambiguity towards women's question was reflected when he openly supported the equal rights of women as citizens, even the rights of voting and offering candidature for representing the public. It becomes evident that Indian males, at this juncture, were mostly suffering from the anxiety of keeping peace and order within the family.

Complicacy with the Paternal Home

Towards the second part of the nineteenth century, getting western mode of education was largely accepted or even aspired for, but making one's decision for marriage was still hard to obtain. In the Hindu upper caste family of Assam, it was expected that a son would obey his father, even after attaining his adulthood.²⁷⁷ It was the father, or family, who were to decide

²⁷⁵ "Tente No Amar Upai Ki", *Jonaki*, Volume 3, Issue 3, 1891 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 277-279.

²⁷⁶ "Sampadakar Chora", *Banhi*, Volume 9, Issue 2, 1831 Saka, 1918, pp. 33-35.

²⁷⁷ Despite the presence of the paternal authority in many aspects of the joint family structure, marriage according to the choice was very common among the allegedly lower castes and other ethnic groups of Assam. Pre-marital courtship was prevalent, and socially acceptable to them, for which the upper caste Hindu society called them morally depraved people.

when and who their sons would marry. Sometimes such marriages were arranged even without witnessing the bride. Lakshminath's marriage was an exception, a kind of revolt against his father's authority, which necessarily led to his separation from the parental home at Sibsagar, and as consequence of it, unlike most of contemporaries, who returned to Assam to marry according to their guardians, he had to start a unique journey in the metropolis. Immediately after the marriage, Lakshminath visited his hometown at Assam, but was not received as a family member. On 30 May 1891, Lakshminath wrote a letter to Prajnasundari from Sibsagar,

"You have inquired about my reception here by my parents and other members."

He wrote that it was "cool" one, and though he wrote to Sudhindra Nath Tagore, Prajnasundari's elder brother that he had been "pardoned" by his father, it was not true. "They treat me as an outcaste." They did not refuse him to provide "temporary shelter" at home, but was received with tears and sighs, and held as already "lost" to the family. He argued that it was the "Hindu religious and social institution", which had made them "conservative and narrow-minded", and the fault was with the institutions, not of theirs.²⁷⁸ He did not assess his visit to convince his family as a total failure, because that visit to the parental house would dispel some rumours circulated all around. Much smoke was produced in family and friend circles of Lakshminath on his marriage with a wealthy family of Bengal.²⁷⁹ For Dinanath, it was a direct blow to his paternal authority, also to the orthodox Hindu *sanskara*, because in their consideration, the reformist religious cult of the Brahmo was equal to atheism, against

²⁷⁸ Letter of Lakshminath to Prajnasundari, 30 May, 1891 from Sibsagar, Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 87-88.

²⁷⁹ In fact, in the late nineteenth-century, it was not the single instance for an Assamese youth to marry an educated Bengali woman. In the 1880s Balinarayan Borah, an engineer from Assam married Bimala, one of the daughters of R. C. Dutta, ICS, the famous historian, and nationalist leader of Bengal. Living with his husband in a Mofussil town of Assam, Bimala studied French, looked after the vegetable garden and orchard, practiced music, and walked in the evening. Letter of R. C. Dutta to Bimala, 9 November, 1883, from Barisal, Bengal, Gupta, *Life and Work of Romesh Chunder Dutt*, 1911, pp. 185-186. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Jnadabhiram Borooah, son of Gunabhiram, a Brahmo married Latika, another daughter of the extended Tagore family.

which, as we have already seen, he commenced a propaganda war in his hometown. Moreover, it was presumed by his friends and family that Lakshminath will be a *gharjoai* to his father-in-law's family, and nothing could be more degradable and insulting in a Hindu upper caste family than one's status as a *gharjoai*, a son-in-law who depended, and stayed with his father in laws. The presumption was supported by the fact that once it had been almost a convention for the sons-in-laws of the Tagore family of Jorasanko to dwell with the family of their spouses.²⁸⁰ After three days of the marriage, Lakshminath, still without any income, returned to the shared rented house of him in the Bhabani Charan Dutta Lane, leaving his newly-wed spouse in her parental home at Jorasanko. Whether any economic prospect remained inherent in the marriage was denied by Lakshminath in his reminiscence. He stated that dowry gifts to the groom were very common in the Bengali society in those days and was in vogue with the Tagores.²⁸¹ Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, the Karta of the family, proposed to him to endow money in *joutuk*, dowry, which he rejected outright to accept, since he claimed that such convention was obsolete in Assam.²⁸²

Though physically remained at a distance, Lakshminath's relation with his parents and the family never ceased to exist. Besides keeping relations with his elder brothers through letters,

²⁸⁰ It was customary for the sons-in-laws of the family to dwell with the family of the father-in-law. According to Sarala Devi, it was her father J. Ghosal, a veteran Congress leader of the time, who after marrying a daughter from the family first refused to stay with them. Sarala Devi reminisces that though they lived in a separate house, they frequently visited the Jorasanko house, and during her father's travel to Europe, they shifted there. See Devi, Sarala. *Jibaner Jharapata*. Calcutta: Sahitya Sansad, 1957 (1879 Saka), pp. 1-78.

²⁸¹ Lakshminath cited the tragic event of self-immolation of Snehalata in 1914, which as per report of the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* was due to the helplessness of her father to satisfy the groom in dowry claims for her marriage. The incident was followed by many other incidents of alleged suicides out of dowry.

²⁸² Lakshminath's diary shows that until August of 1895, he got a monthly allowance of Rs. 50 from a source not clearly mentioned by him in the diary. While he became engaged in business and a bit successful, his allowance stopped, for which he was "thankful and glad. Since today, I am free. Self-help, Independence." He wrote in his diary of 20 August, 1895. On the other hand, Prajnasundari also received a monthly allowance of Rs 100 from her mother, which ceased to come in September of 1896. See *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

he on several occasions visited his house and tried to keep the emotional bondage of the family intact. In 1895, Golapchandra returned to India and took temporary shelter at the Gopikrista Lane house of them. With the lapse of time, when Dinanath's anger and dissatisfaction on the marriage gradually came to wane, she sent to him through Lakshminath a portrait, which she had drawn by studying a photograph of him.²⁸³ Dinanath accepted the exceptional gift from his daughter-in-law open-mindedly and placed it in their *baithakhana* as his recognition to her.

In 1905, when Prajnasundari, for the first time visited Assam, she got a hearty welcome from the family members, also from the friends, and was offered various gifts as a token of their acceptance and love for her. Lakshminath witnessed both his father and mother at their death beds though could not be present at the moment of their death. Apart from financially contributing for their *shraddha*, he separately performed the customary rituals at his residence, in which he got emotional support from his wife's family.

Prajnasundsari: Cooking to Writing

The modern family life of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India was grounded on sexual division of labour, in which, the husband earned for the family, and the wife was scheduled as housewife or *grihalakshmi*. She was assigned the duty of cooking, nurturing, cleaning etcetera. Lakshminath's choice for Prajnasundari clearly was an indication of his inclination for a virtuous wife. Indian men of the time had already made a consensus on the issue of virtuous wife as priority. Tanika Sarkar has argued that, by the late nineteenth century, the pure Hindu wife was regarded as the "last unconquered space" in a world increasingly

²⁸³ The portrait has been presently preserved in the Assam State Museum, Guwahati. According to Lakshminath, Prajnasundari drew portraits of Bholanath, Lakshminath and Dinanath.

dominated by the western values.²⁸⁴ Lakshminath's stand on women partly reflects the preoccupation and anguish of the Hindu upper caste males of the time in India. Apart from possessing good cooking ability and socially permissible moral conduct (*suchila* and *dharmapravana*), she was articulate in artistic pursuits, which made their family appear more modern and cultured.

An instance from their conjugal life, though apparently insignificant, can help us to understand how in the domain of interiority, in the world of intimate relations, the authority of patriarchal fathers contested the emerging notion of equality and consent. The Tagore house had developed the practice of household theatre, in which members of their extended family took part. On one such occasion, Prajnasundari, then living at Jorasanko, acted in a role. Being already married to him, Lakshminath's permission for her participation was asked, and he also consented. Later, their daughters were also allowed to act in the Tagore family's household theatre. Considering the social taboo against women's acting or appearance in any public platform, Lakshminath's open-mindedness to such ventures may be read as liberal values within him, though simultaneously problematizing it with another issue regarding formation of consent.²⁸⁵ Years later, while arranging his elder daughter's marriage with Satyabrata Mukherjea, a highly

²⁸⁴ Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2013, p. 313.

²⁸⁵ Later it was Ratna, the second daughter of Lakshminath, who after her marriage with a liberal Assamese tea planter acted in the third Assamese film *Manomati*, produced and acted by her husband. Paradoxically, Ritha Devi, the granddaughter of Lakshminath and renowned classical dancer of the Odissi form of India, who worked for the promotion of the dance around the world, recalled that being a wife and mother of an upper caste Brahman family in India, it was not easy for her to get sanction and support for practicing a dance form which was once allegedly performed by temple girls. To carry on her pursuit, she had to make herself deprived of her conjugal life altogether. She ultimately met her death in utter desolation. See Padanani, Amisha. "Ritha Devi-Indian Classical Dancer & Teacher Dies at 92." *New York Times*, September 22, 2017.

educated Bengali Brahman who served in the native kingdom of Baroda, Lakshminath asked for her consent.²⁸⁶

Modernity transformed the concept and components of cooking to an influential degree. In traditional life, although cooking was perceived to be an activity of women, it was not considered as the sole work of the woman.²⁸⁷ Utsa Roy has shown that in the nineteenth century Bengal, a discursive space was constructed wherein women were situated as loving cooks solely responsible for cooking.²⁸⁸ Cooking was defined in aesthetic terms. The Bengali bhadralok valorized women's cooking as an act of love. They glorified each, and every act of cooking as well as the kitchen space to make this idealization concrete. To be a good wife, one must be a good cook. How deeply embedded the ideology of cooking and serving food as manifestation of love and responsibility of the woman towards her husband could be read in a few lines of Lakshminath to his wife, written on occasion of her staying outside their home at the Dobson Road for a few days, in which he wrote,

‘To be alone in a house with a big compound having neither a darling baby nor a loving wife to soothe is a bad job after all. Oh, the dinner table is a dreadful thing for me every day. I sit down to eat and try to finish the grub as soon as I sit. Ah, where are my little daughter and fairy to cheer me up for eating sumptuously and insist on eating this small delicacy and that delicacy!’²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ In fact, it was Satyabrata who wanted to let her speak out her mind on the proposed marriage, and she then gave her consent. See Lakshminath's diary, 21 September, 1920, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

²⁸⁷ In the Vaishnava religious functions of Assam, cooking was, and it still has been confined exclusively to the domain of male *bhakats*, female being extraneous to such performance.

²⁸⁸ Ray, Utsa. *Culture of Food in Colonial Bengal*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, College of Liberal Arts, Pennsylvania State University, 2009.

²⁸⁹ Lakshminath's letter to Prajnasundari, 9 June, 1900, from Howrah, Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 45-46.

The notable aspect of the lines is how the expression of deep emotional bond between the husband and wife soon transformed to pleasure of eating associated with food cooked and served by the wife.

Contesting the notion of women's cooking as unpaid labour, Utsa Roy further shows that the domestic space was a quasi-professional space, but soon women began to employ their expertise in cooking for their own purpose in the public realm, which became evident in the cookbooks and the recipe columns in the journals written by women. Print enabled in a way to blur the distinction between public and private.²⁹⁰ If cookbooks are about the transformation of the monotonous domestic work to a pleasurable experience, Prajnasundari pioneered it in Bengal through her recipe column in the *Punya*. She was not only a regular contributor to the magazine, but innovator of various dishes. *Kavi Sangbardhana Barfi*, made of cauliflower was a sweet preparation of Prajnasundari, invented to commemorate the 50th birthday of Rabindranath Tagore. She named a sweet of her own making as *Surabhi* after their already dead first-born daughter.²⁹¹ It was said that she had introduced the menu card in Bengali cuisine with the word *Kromoni*.

Later she published a book *Amis-O-Niramis*, which brought immediate recognition to her.²⁹² The *Bijnapan* published in the *Amis-O-Niramis* tells us several aspects of writing a culinary book in Bengali.²⁹³ Being one of the pioneering books on the subject, the book claimed introduction of systematic approaches to the subject. It was written with the aim of informing the public on the gastronomic pleasure of food, as well as food preparation with economy. The book, though initially describes the measurement of ingredients in spoons, later shifted to the

²⁹⁰ Ray, 2009.

²⁹¹ “*Surabhi*”, *Punya*, Volume 3, Issue 7, 1307 Bangabda (1911), p. 314.

²⁹² The first volume of this seminal work on Bengali vegetarian cuisine was published without any date and year.

²⁹³ Devi, Prajnasundari. *Amis-O-Niramis*. Calcutta, 1902.

measure of ‘*tola*’, considering the limited use of spoons in the Bengali household, thus making it appreciable to the lower middle stratum of the society. The book gained success in the market and became popular enough bringing for Prajnasundari fame as a writer. One of their daughters recollected that they were used to tease their father Lakshminath that nonetheless in Assam he was revered as a formidable literary personality, within Bengal, by dint of a small recipe book, he was merely known as Prajnasundari’s husband.²⁹⁴ Several editions of the book were published throughout her lifetime, followed by another book on pickle or preservations of fruits. Later in 1928, Prajnasundari published a recipe book in Assamese entitled *Randha-Barha*, which she dedicated to her second daughter Ratna for her marital relationship with Assam.²⁹⁵

Towards Business

We have seen that the students from Assam, entered the city only as temporary sojourner to pursue higher education as a means of getting a respectable way of livelihood, and after completion of their studies, or in the midway, returned to Assam, whereas Lakshminath, unlike his other compatriots after being graduated from the Calcutta University, in the last decade of the nineteenth century tried to permanently settle there. In the early nineties, already being married in Calcutta at his own will, and without the consent of his parents at Sibsagar, he found himself in a compulsion of making a settlement in the city. In the meantime, he failed in B.L. and M.A. final examination. To fail in B. L. meant the end of his earlier expectation of earning income from the legal profession. At this juncture, being inspired by Bholanath Borooah (popularly known as B. Borooah), also from Assam, who went to Calcutta with the exclusive

²⁹⁴ Dipika, “Lakshminath Bezbaroa: The Man and Father” in Neog, Maheswar, ed. *Lakshminath Bezbaroa: the Sahityarathi of Assam*. Gauhati: Gauhati University, 1972, p. 240.

²⁹⁵ Devi, Prajnasundari. *Randha-Barha*. Sambalpur, 1928 (1850 Saka).

motto of doing business there, Lakshminath decided to join his business as a novice. Exactly at what point of time Lakshminath commenced his career as businessman was not known to us, but his diaries available since 1895 give us certain hints about the area and nature of their business activities.²⁹⁶



²⁹⁶ Probably in the first part of the year of 1895 he joined the business, because it was recorded by him in the diary of the year that in June he informed ‘Mejda’, one of the elder brothers of Prajnasundari about his joining in a partnership business.

Table [2].1

Occupation of English-educated Class of Assam in 1911²⁹⁷

Category of Profession	Numbers
Arts and Profession	5,149
Agents etc. of estates	4,452
Cultivators	4,362
Landlords	2,659
Boat etc. owners	2,219
Public Administration	2,170
Trade	1,558

In fact, despite the assessment of commerce and industry by the emerging educated elite as an essential component of the *unnati* of a region and the community life, few people went to pursue commerce in real life. The Report of the Indian Industrial Commission, the first of the sort in India,²⁹⁸ pointed out to the literary education provided in the country as one of the crucial factors debarring Indian people to venture into industry and commerce.²⁹⁹ It said that failure of the more intellectual classes to take advantage of the new prospects was especially marked in Bengal, where it contrasted with the success of the European enterprises. Like Bengal, in most

²⁹⁷ McSwiney, J. *Census of India, 1911, Vol. III: Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press Printing, 1912, Chapter XII, p. 162.

²⁹⁸ The Commission was appointed by the Government of India by order conveyed in Resolution No. 3403 (Industries), dated 21 May, 1916, in the Department of Commerce and Industry. The Commission consisted of both European and Indian members and Sir T. H. Holland, the President of the Institution of Mining Engineers, served as the President of the Commission. The Indian Industrial Commission. *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission, 1916-18*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1919.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 65.

parts of India, the report noted, “these classes grasped eagerly at the prospects of professional, governmental or clerical employment.”³⁰⁰ What was told of Bengal seemed to be true of Assam. As per records of the colonial government, trade in Assam was already captured by the Marwari traders of mainland India or Mussalman traders of Dhaka. The administrative report had recorded in the 1870s,

“Trade of Assam proper is almost entirely in the hands of the Marwari merchants. These merchants import piece-goods, salt, metal utensils, spices, iron, ghee, tobacco, dal, oil, sugar, & c. They have agencies all over the interior, and they buy up and export nearly all the wax, rubber, silk, seeds, cotton, lac and ivory. The bulk of the goods are carried by the river steamer companies trading to Assam.”³⁰¹

On the other hand, new arenas of trade and industry were mostly being controlled by the European companies. The Assam Mineral Oil Company was provided with a lease of rights to dig for petroleum, as well as grant of a concession of land. The Messrs. Shaw, Finlayson, & Co., while working in the project of Dibru-Sadiya Railway, applied for monopoly of the right to work in the extensive coal-beds of Makum and Joypur.³⁰² By the 1850s, the Assam tea could effectively challenge the China tea in the international market.³⁰³ By 1915-16, the value of

³⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 64.

³⁰¹ *Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1874-75 and 1875-76*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1877, p. 14.

³⁰² *Report of the Administration on the Province of Assam, 1879-80*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1880, p. 93.

³⁰³ The Industrial Commission Report said that though the first sample of Assam made tea was sent to England in 1838, the real beginning of Indian could be dated from 1852, when it was proved that Indian tea could be put on the market to compete with the China product. See The Indian Industrial Commission. *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission, 1916-18, 1919*, p. 23.

Indian tea-export was assessed at £13,320,715, but the tea industry in Assam was dominated by the European enterprises.³⁰⁴

Inspired by the success of the tea industry, since the 1870s, a few indigenous persons came forward to establish tea gardens, but they could hardly compete with the European enterprises. The elite section of Assam continuously reacted against the Government's attitude towards the local entrepreneurs, and stated that the long-term leasehold tenure at low rate of rent especially framed to encourage the tea industry had benefited the financially sound European industrialists only.³⁰⁵ The *Jonaki*, the mouthpiece of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, is though frequently referred as a literary journal, and mentioned for the pivotal role it played in championing the Assamese linguistic nationality from its very inception, had an undertone of economy and commerce. Not only that the journal regularly articulated its high concerns on the economic improvement of the region, but it first came to be conceived, sponsored, and

³⁰⁴ In 1851, while there were only 51 tea gardens in Assam, with the spectacular rise of the industry in 1862 the number increased to 160 gardens, all owned by 5 public companies and 57 private individuals or companies, all the British. See Griffiths, Percival. *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967, pp. 70-75.

³⁰⁵ Evidence given to the Indian Industrial Commission complained that the existing land rules for providing land at concession for special cultivation like tea mostly benefited the European planters. The big tea companies floated in England received vast areas of 3 to 4 thousand acres of land, while not more than one third of the area had been brought under cultivation. Prasanna Kumar Borooah, a tea planter of Dibrugarh informed the Commission, "The present law is that whoever wants land for any special cultivation should apply to the Deputy Commissioner. That must not be more than 600 acres. Along with the application he must deposit the survey fees of 8 anna per acre. He has also to clean the jungles, pay forest valuation of the timber, and other things. He had to spend a lot without knowing whether he would get the land. Then it is advertised, anyone can get the land." Bisturam Borooah, another tea planter, said that raising funds was a main obstacle for the Assamese for any industrial venture. The banks and financial institutes of Calcutta refused to lend money to the people of Assam, and Assam did not possess any financial institution as such. The people were extremely dependent on the Marwari bankers for loan, which claimed interest at the rate of 2-5 per cent.

edited by Chandrakumar Agarwala, a youth from a business family of Assam.³⁰⁶ In the first issue of the *Jonaki*, education and enterprise in commerce were focused as two top priorities to achieve *jatiya unnati*.³⁰⁷ Another article of the same year has expressed its regret that the progress of commerce in Assam was ‘very little’.³⁰⁸ The article reprimanded the Assamese people’s lack of “patience and entrepreneurship” in business as crucial for this backwardness, and regretted that the foreigners were being rich with the extraction of the wealth and fertility of the soil of Assam.³⁰⁹

In 1891, when Lakshminath was the editor of the *Jonaki*, an article pointed out the lack of capital, scarcity of labour and indolence as main causes of backwardness of the province. Citing direct experience of the Assamese tea planters in the tea business, the article argued that due to the lack of capital the indigenous enterprises had to go to the European merchants, who then demanded a high rate of interest, in addition to other commissions.³¹⁰ Whether the indigenous tea planter’s general condition was reflected in the article or not, it was true that in the 1890s, while the tea industry had been suffering from depression, Haribilas, who owned a tea garden

³⁰⁶Chandrakumar’s father Haribilas Agarwala, son of a Marwari father and Assamese mother, was among the three or four persons from Assam, who, in the last part of the nineteenth century, tried to settle in Calcutta exclusively for pursuit of business. In the 1860s, he obtained high profit from the rubber in Assam and started the banking business in Calcutta in 1875. The next year, he purchased a house in the Armenian Street of Calcutta and used it as his station of business there. It was from that house that *Jonaki* was initially edited and published by Chandrakumar, then studying for his B. A. degree. Haribilas even went to Gangpur, a feudatory state, to purchase an iron ore there, but could not succeed to come to a contract with the local ‘*raja*’, who owned the ore.

³⁰⁷ “*Jatiya Unnati*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1889 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 4-6.

³⁰⁸ “*Asamiyar Unnati*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 5, 1889 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 41-42.

³⁰⁹ The census of 1891 showed that in Assam the commercial class consisted of 11,086 persons, 26 per cent of the population, and the class was entirely constituted of the persons from the immigrant *bania* castes. See *Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the Year 1895-96*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Press, 1896, p. 202.

³¹⁰ “*Asamat Utpanna Baniya-Bastu*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 3, Issues 9-12, 1891 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001.

in Assam, had to sell his Armenian Street house to repay his debt.³¹¹ Archival sources have shown that during the decade, a major portion of the literary elite, whose presence in the emerging Calcutta-based Assamese public arena was frequently visible, had applied to the government for the land in concession under the Wasteland Grant Rules for tea cultivation.³¹²

Citing a familial experience of opening a tea garden, Lakshminath wrote that their family possessed a vast area of land known as the Singduar grant.³¹³ The land was covered by bamboo and cane, and the soil was not fit for tea. Still Brajanath, one of his elder brothers toiled to make it suitable for a tea garden. The colonial archive located the garden at 4 miles away from the mofussil town Sibsagar.³¹⁴ It comprised 130 acres of land, but no record of the area under plantation was mentioned.³¹⁵ In 1892, Brajanath appealed in the revenue court about the deficiency of 34 acres of land from the grant and appealed for adjustment of the area. The Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar pointed out that if granted, it would indicate a loss of revenue to the government, and his appeal was subsequently rejected by the Chief Commissioner of Assam.³¹⁶

³¹¹ The house, which was also used as the office of the *Jonaki* for the first year, was purchased in 1876 at the price of Rs 18000, and in 1892, was sold at Rs 70000. See Agarwala, Haribilas. *Dangariya Haribilas Agarwalar Atmajivani*. Gauhati: New Press, 1968.

³¹² Among them were Chandrakumar Agarwala, Ghanashyam Borooah, Jagannath Borooah, Devicharan Borooah, Gopinath Bardoloi, Bisturam Borooah and so forth. Gangagobinda Phukan, on the other hand, applied for exclusive rights to extract sand and boulders from the rivers of the Sibsagar district.

³¹³ In some places, Lakshminath mentioned two tea gardens of his father, Singduar and Rajabari.

³¹⁴ Friel, R. *Assam District Gazetteer: Supplement to Volume VII, Sibsagar*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1915, Statement A, List of Tea Gardens, pp. 10-25.

³¹⁵ Measurement taken in December, 1911. An official letter of the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar shown that the Singduar fee sample grant no 4, included 335 acres of *patta* land, from which 3 acres would have to be reduced for the road reservation. Two other *dag* nos. 481 and 483, were occupied by the grantee on decennial lease and they consisted of *faringati* land containing a few *Som* and bamboo trees. File No. 32 of 1892 & File No. 50 1894, Assam Commissioner's Office, Assam State Archive.

³¹⁶ Vide his order dated 15 May, 1894, File No. 50, 1894, Assam Commissioner's Office, Assam State Archive.

The Assamese entrepreneurs of the period complained that the land rules for providing land for special cultivation of tea in concession in Assam was so framed that the local planters with lesser capital could hardly be able to receive land from the government. Not only were they suffering from the absence of any bank or financial institutions in Assam.³¹⁷ They, thus, were compelled to raise funds from the European agency or Marwari bankers at a higher rate of interest. They also had to depend on the European agency for the sale of tea to the brokers. They also complained about the lack of any favourable action from the government to inspire the local interests in business and industry. During 1911-12, a person, who studied agriculture and agricultural chemistry in Japan and trained in sugar manufacturing in Formosa, initiated the process with the Raja of Gauripur, a local zamindar as patron to float a company and commenced planting sugarcane on a small scale.³¹⁸ But it was the tea planters, who made oppositions on “securing land on easy terms” for sugarcane, and afterwards some conditions were imposed on him from the part of the government, which seemed so drastic that he had to leave the project in the budding stage and join government service.

In the World of Timber Trade: B. Borooah & Company and Beyond

Instead of trying the most common venture of the Assamese elite of the time for tea cultivation, Bholanath and Lakshminath intended to enter the competitive world of commerce in Calcutta. Bholanath Borooah, who by the first decade of the twentieth century came to be assessed in

³¹⁷ Syed M. Sadulla, a member of the Assam Legislative Council proposed to establish an industrial bank in Assam. He even proposed that the European planters who deposited their money in Calcutta Banks should divert the money to Assam. See East India (Industrial Commission, 1916-18). *Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Indian Industrial Commission, 1916-18: Vol. V. Punjab, Assam, Burma, and General*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1919, p. 448-454.

³¹⁸ Describing his ‘*bad experience*’ of raising capital for a sugar mill of a modest scale, he said that there was no capitalist in Assam, and the Marwari bankers were not willing to invest in any industrial enterprise on joint-stock principle. Evidence of L. Barthakur, Ibid, pp. 440-448.

Assam as an ideal for his success in commerce was among a few persons of Assam, who tried to settle in Calcutta exclusively for getting an engagement in trade. By the 1890s, initiating his journey as a small trader, he lived in a shared rented house with Haribilas Agarwala of Assam, and both were engaged in the business of rubber, financed by McLeod & Company, a principal managing agency of British India.³¹⁹ According to Lakshminath, Bholanath started a small business of tea and timber at Asansol, and then took a government wood at lease, and began to supply slippers at small scale in the Bengal Nagpur Railway. With the opening of the railway line in 1887, new demand for slippers had come, which was followed by the enhancement of the economic value of timber.

The intelligentsia in Assam did not remain unaware of the new prospects in the timber business.³²⁰ They saw that the Bengali and Marwari merchants had already earned high profit in exporting timber from Assam and Burma, which largely went to Dhaka, whereas timber to Calcutta came from Nepal, and the Garjat area. The native rajas of the Garjat princely states, coming to know about the commercial value of timber, already opened the large tracts of the Sal tree forests for the operations of the timber contractors, and tried to earn substantial revenue from it. They often sold the forest at an inadequate price, and to obtain maximum profit out of their cupidity, the contractors never hesitated to cut the immature trees. In practice, timber trade in the region was monopolized by two or three European companies, the Bengal Timber Trading Company (BTTC) being one, which possessed the monopoly rights to exploit the forest resources of the several princely states of the Garjat region, including large forest

³¹⁹ Agarwala, *Dangariya Haribilas Agarwalar Atmajivani*, 1968.

³²⁰ *Jonaki*, Volume 3, Issues 11-12, 1891 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 400-401. Concentrating on the commercial products of Assam, the article described that though Assam produced timbers like Sal, Gamari, Nahar, Azar etc., they were mainly sold at Dhaka and Chirajgang, and profit went to the Bengali and Marwari merchants, while it expressed hope that extension of railways would help the merchants to reap more profit from the slipper business.

concessions over an extensive area, near Panposh of the Gangpur princely state. Their rights included extraction of Sal for the making of railway sleepers.³²¹

Whatever eulogy of commerce as an independent venture was produced by the colonial elite, glorifying it as free from all constraints of the government service, in practice, the smaller traders to what extent could exercise the freedom in colonial India is a matter of doubt. According to H. E. A. Cotton, a large part of the traders in Calcutta of the time who introduced themselves as merchants were in real sense the commission agents.³²² For Indian enterprises of any sort of business or industry, the main obstacle was the lack of capital.³²³ In most cases the Indian entrepreneurs had to depend on the European houses for finance.

Commencing their business as timber contractors in the Bengal Nagpur Railway, Bholanath and Lakshminath had to become sub-contractor under the BTTC, which was managed by the Jardine, Skinner & Company,³²⁴ one of the largest agency houses of India.³²⁵ Soon after

³²¹ The company also dealt with the exported timbers such as teak, pine etc. The BTTC was registered in 1897, by acquisition of the old company of the same name, and it had The Messrs. Jardine, Skinner & Company. See Somerset, Plyne, JW Bond, and Arnold Wright. *Bengal & Assam, Behar & Orissa: Their History, People, Commerce and Industry*. London: Foreign & Colonial Compiling & Publishing Co., 1917, p. 131.

³²² Cotton, H. E. A. *Calcutta Old and New: A Historical & Descriptive Handbook to the City*. Calcutta: W. Newman & Co, 1907, p. 251.

³²³ The article in *Jonaki* categorically mentioned three obstacles of trade in Assam-lack of capital, scarcity of labour and indolence of the people. To meet the capital indigenous enterprises had to borrow from the European merchants at a high rate of interest, the article demanded. See *Jonaki*, Volume 3, Issues 11-12, 1891 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 400-401.

³²⁴ David Jardine, the founder of the company initially commenced his career as a general merchant and commission agent, eventually came to found in 1845 with Charles Binny Skinner the company named as Messrs. Jardine, Skinner & Company.

³²⁵ The Messrs. Jardine, Skinner & Company was one of the richest managing companies of India, which, commencing with jute, extended its activities to a varied fields, and in the middle of the first World War, acted as the managing agents for eight tea companies, three coal companies, a timber producing and trading company, two jute mill companies, and apart from several insurance companies and shipping lines operating in the Pacific, another between India and China, imported Manchester piece goods to India, and exported tea.

reconstitution of the firm in 1845, the company had the capital of around £100,000, which by 1890 rose to £1.3 million.³²⁶ The amount necessarily can give us an idea of the wealth of the Company. The report of the Indian Industrial Commission formed in 1916, appointing T. H. Holland, as the President, categorically pointed out the presence of large European agency firms in all business centres of colonial India, except in Bombay as a characteristic feature of Indian industry and commerce.³²⁷ Arguing in favour of the system, the report said that though criticized for the inclination to commerce rather than industries, and thus, had been criticized as less “helpful” than expected for the industrial development, the managing agency system in India originated and had been continuing “owing to the ability of these houses to furnish financial help”.³²⁸ Bholanath and Lakshminath, as subcontractors to the Bengal Timber Trading Company, got their finances from the Company, and they in turn, employed several others as their timber suppliers under them, who worked in the forests, and supplied slippers to them. Then they supplied these slippers to the Bengal-Nagpur Railway on behalf of the Bengal Timber Trading Company. The system involved layers of intermediaries in its process of working who earned their profits from the timber trade.

There existed a division of labour between Lakshminath and Bholanath. Bholanath, with his competency to socialize with different sections of people, sharp business insights and immense capacity to work, worked in the Bengal Nagpur Railway, and passed his days and nights travelling from one station to another or one place to another, exploring the possibilities and new avenues of the business. He was the real decision maker of the business. Lakshminath, mostly staying in Calcutta had to see the affairs of Calcutta, kept the accounts, communicated with the Jardine, Skinner or the Bengal Timber Trading Company head office, deposited or

³²⁶ Somerset et al, *Bengal & Assam, Behar & Orissa*, 1917, p. 126

³²⁷ The Indian Industrial Commission. *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission, 1916-18*, 1919, pp. 8-9.

³²⁸ Ibid, pp. 9-10.

withdrew cheque or draft, and had to prepare the drafts of the business letter, although occasionally he also had to make extensive travel on business. Initially they had neither a peon nor any other employee, but subsequently, to look after the various aspects of his business, persons of family ties or kinsmen from Assam were imported by Bholanath. They had no vehicles of their own and travelled in the city either by tram or on foot; even part of their residences was used as a business office. Bholanath and Lakshminath's struggle in Calcutta was typical of such struggles of the indigenous traders of smaller resources against the adverse situation of the racially inclined business world of colonial Calcutta to get a way out.

However, Bholanath managed to purchase a jungle of Sal trees from the Raja of Gangpur, a native kingdom, which since the opening of the BNR line, opened its valuable forests for timber extraction.³²⁹ As no laws regarding the extraction of timber were present in the princely states, the forests on all sides were so “recklessly exploited” by the timber contractors that in 1910 a colonial officer openly stated that ‘little or no timber of any size’ was “left”.³³⁰ Commenting on the exploitative components of timber extractions, Biswamoy Pati has pointed out that besides the obvious drain of resources to Britain, colonial capitalism also meant internal drain and exploitation, with indigenous exploitation being involved.³³¹ Pati has further shown that the component of modernity saw the construction of communication networks, roads and railways, irrigations, mines, jails, education and health services, which were undertaken by the native rajas as ways to demonstrate to the colonial administrations and the middle classes that the progress along western lines were made. But as always, modernity involved a component

³²⁹ Timber being one of the main sources of the revenue of the State provided Rs. 28,018 to the total income of the state.

³³⁰ Cobden-Ramsay, L. E. B. *Bengal Gazetteers: Feudatory States of Orissa*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1910, p. 186.

³³¹ Pati, Biswamoy. “The Order of Legitimacy, Princely Orissa, 1850-1947”. In *India's Princely States, People, Princes and Colonialism*, by Ernst Waltraud and Biswamoy Pati, 85-98. New Delhi: Primus Books, 2010, p. 94

of exploitation in the enterprises. They were based on the forced labour and devastation of the forest.³³²

In the first few years of the twentieth century, Messrs B. Borooah & Company made a contact with the native ruler of the Mayurbhanj state to finance the construction of a light railway line from Baripada to Talabandh at 3.5 percent of annual profit on the condition that he would be given thirty years of monopoly lease of the Simlipal forests in the same terms and conditions of an existing deed made in 1906, which had proposed a lease for ten years. The railway line, mostly used for transportation of timber, enabled further exploitation of wealth in the region. The Company wanted a guarantee of a minimum of five to seven lakh cubic feet of sawn timber annually, to make the running of the railway profitable. It further wanted a thirty years lease of myrobalans and some other forest products for collection and export. He also wanted a prospecting licence for three years, later convertible to a thirty years mining lease for minerals except those already given to the Tatas.³³³ He proposed to add a clause in the agreement that in the event of not being to secure five lakh cubic feet of timber any year during the period of the lease from timber of six feet girth, the state must grant him to cut any timber not below five feet in girth for the year to compensate for the deficit.

Though in 1907, the Maharaja of Mayurbhanj in a letter agreed upon the monopoly lease of the Simlipal forests, it came to be executed in February of 1916 and continued till 1946.³³⁴ Inspecting the working of the forests a forest officer reported that in the process of conversion from log to timber, more than 75 per cent wastage was observed. The quantum of wastage was undermined by the lessee. In 1906, Bholanath took forests at lease in Keonjhar, but disposed of his rights to the Bengal Timber Trading Company for operation, which started work in 1910.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ TISCO, or Tata Iron and Steel Company was founded on the basis of the iron-ores available in the region.

³³⁴ In the meantime, in 1912 the Maharaja met with an accidental death, followed by Bholanath's death in 1923.

The lease did not contain any clause regarding proper management of forests; no limit was set to the number of trees to be felled each year or during the period of contact, though the exploitable girth was limited at 5 feet. Whether the contractors really cared about the girth of the trees is not beyond doubt. Lakshminath's diaries show that on many occasions he had to make "special efforts" for passing the timbers from being rejected by the buyers.³³⁵

Whether a Fish out of Water

Amiya P. Bagchi has shown that British businessmen had some initial advantages in all the areas of industry, because they were in touch with the world's pioneer industrializing country. They were additionally privileged by their control on external trade. But it was nothing but the government patronage, which helped them to make the Indian tradesmen their unequal partners. The initial advantages were systematically maintained by erecting some barriers for entry of Indians. The racial and political affinity of the European businessman with the administrators and their shared prejudices against the Indians placed the Indian businessman at disadvantage. In a few cases, in which the government helped some pioneering industries like iron or aluminum-ware manufacturing, the benefits went to the European business community. The senior administrative personnel in public services, banks and railways were almost exclusively British. A "mystic bond" of racial affinity with the rulers provided the British businessmen effective advantage upon the indigenous rivals, and this social discrimination was supported and reinforced by a whole set of political, economic, administrative, and financial arrangements which afforded European businessmen a substantial and systematic advantage over the Indian rivals.³³⁶

³³⁵ *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³³⁶ Bagchi, Amiya Kumar. *Private Investment in India, 1900-1939*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 166.

Both Bholanath and Lakshminath saw the invisible tie between the European business community and the European ruling class from very close. The office of the Jardine, Skinner & Company was the site, where Lakshminath directly experienced the operations of the European mercantile company, came to the contacts of the Indian merchants and business community of Calcutta, and saw from the near the advantage of being British, or disadvantage of being an Indian. Did Lakshminath become satisfied with his profession as a timber contractor and the sorts of works he had to perform between them generated curiosity.

On 24 July of 1895, he scribbled in his diary, “passed a restless night”. That night he wrote the story *Kanya Noir Parat* or on the riverbank of Kanya. The story is composed on the background of a Kol village situated in the interior of an Orissa-forest, which he witnessed during his work as a timber contractor. The story presented a character of a timber contractor, whose exclusive concern was to extract profit from a tree, contrasted with his friend, imagined as the contractor’s alter-ego, who likes to explore the beauty of the forest. The story told his own conflict of the time became evident from the letter that he wrote to Bholanath in the next day complaining about his “disgust at clerical work.”³³⁷

Such moments were occasional. But there remained another painful aspect of timber trade which might cause exasperation in a person with self-respect. Lakshminath recalled that at the turn of the century they achieved such a degree of success in the business that among the Bengalis in the timber trade no one could equal them. The statement easily lets us see who in Calcutta were perceived by them to be the immediate competitors in business. A section of them became associates with them, while another section kept friendly cooperation in business. It was the period for the Marwari business community to show phenomenal success in the

³³⁷ *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

business life of Calcutta, as well as to occupy a prominent space in the city.³³⁸ No mention of any competition with the Marwari business community was ever made by Lakshminath except his occasional comments such as the timber business of Bhagwandas Bagla, who during the Burmese war amassed enormous money to become a “crorepati” was already in wane.

With the European capital, upon which their survival in business largely depended, in contrast, their policy was at any rate to make them pleased. Mentioning Bholanath's competency of diplomacy, Lakshminath wrote,

“Bholanath could easily impress people to get favours from them.”³³⁹

For smooth running of the business, they had to establish good relations with F. D. Whiffin, the forest manager of the Bengal Timber Trading Company, also acting as the Honorary Magistrate of Panposh, who possessed the power of a first class magistrate in the kingdom of Gangpur including the exclusive judicial power for the Bamra zamindari area of the state, and all other European employees of it along with those of the Jardine, Skinner and Company's Calcutta office and the Bengal Nagpur Railway. They had to render some services and offer gifts to them. Lakshminath, staying in Calcutta purchased the boxes of gifts, which included fruits, vegetables, sweets, cakes etc. in the New Market, and packed and booked at the Howrah railway station to the destination. Lakshminath's apathy for such works could be read in a piece of writing that he wrote in the *Banhi*, his own magazine in the form of an imaginary diary of an unknown person,

“24 December. One thing I can never understand. Why does a part of non-Christian Indians, particularly the business and mercantile class, have to dispatch cakes, flowers, fruits and wine as Christmas gifts to the Europeans? Do they reciprocate the same in our festivals like Bihu or Puja? Or whether it is done

³³⁸ They in 1898 formed the Marwari Association followed by the Marwari Chamber of Commerce in 1900.

³³⁹ Bezbaroa. Lakshminath, “*Mor Jivan Sowaran*”, *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part I*. Edited by Atulchandra Hazarika. Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 1968, p. 79.

exclusively for getting favour or benefit from the persons belonging to the race of the rulers. If the Indian clerks had to bribe the European officers not to die of hunger, the same was done by the allegedly independent business class to maximize their profits. Is it not a reflection of the slave mentality of Indians of which so much has been told by Mahatma Gandhi?'³⁴⁰

Not only for the Europeans, but they also had to arrange everything for the lodging of the Gangpur Maharaja and Tikayet,³⁴¹ the prince, while they occasionally visited Calcutta.³⁴² Lakshminath's diary shows that he bought fruits, gold, and other things for gift-making.³⁴³ He had even to purchase police uniforms for Gangpur Raja, and arranged to send them to Jharsuguda.³⁴⁴

Economic Swadeshi

According to C. A. Bayly, the professional classes who were prominent in the Indian National Congress were representatives of the rich but unsophisticated local magnates, both landed and commercial, who could not themselves play a role in the sophisticated constitutional dialogue with the British. They lacked the English political idiom to articulate their own needs, and therefore patronized lawyers, journalists and teachers who were best in the sort of

³⁴⁰ *Banhi*, Volume 21, Issue 10, 1932 (1854 saka).

³⁴¹ Tikayet was the eldest son of the Raja, who exercised power equivalent to a first-class magistrate except the power of whipping. With the renovation of the Police in the British line, he became the Superintendent of Police. It consisted of 1 Inspector, 10 Sub-inspector, 12 head Constables and 120 constables.

³⁴² On 30 July, 1897, Lakshminath wrote in his diary, 'Hired a house for Tikayet and Maharaja of Gangpore at 53 Doorgoch Mitter Street for Rs 40 on 29th July. Hired furniture from Smith and Co. of Dhurramtolla for the same.' Several instances of such service to Raja and Tikayet were found in his diary. See *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁴³ On 19 March, 1897, Lakshminath recorded in his diary, 'Sent 200 Police coats and 98 belts with badges of Gangpur Raja to Jharsuguda per Kedar Babu'. See *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁴⁴ As part of the modernizing project of the Police Department, the department was organized in the lines of British India, which followed rules and procedures of the Bengal Police Code. The department consisted of one inspector, 10 sub-inspector, 12 head constables, and 120 constables, while Tikayet acted as the superintendent. The annual maintenance cost was fixed at Rs 18000. Cobden-Ramsay, L. E. B. *Bengal Gazetteers: Feudatory States of Orissa*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1910, p. 156.

articulation.³⁴⁵ Taking this into account, from 1892 to 1906, Bholanath and Lakshminath joint presence in several annual conferences of the Indian National Congress seems significant. Whether the growing inclination they exhibited in the decade towards a pan-Indian body had any connection with their interest as traders is a noteworthy point. Though any direct documentary evidence in support of such an assumption is hard to find, nonetheless we can make an idea on the mindset of contemporary intelligentsia in general.

The *Jonaki*, mouthpiece of the Calcutta-based Assamese intelligentsia, published a report on the annual session of the Indian National Congress to be held in 1897 in Madras, which discussed the growing impact of the Congress on the larger public. The report said that the Congress for long had been contending the rigidity of the forest laws, which effectively resulted in Lord Elgin having made some rules flexible, for which it offered its gratitude both to Lord Elgin and the *Jatiya Mahasamiti*.³⁴⁶ The report evidently reflected the reporter's interest in forest-related trade. In 1906, Lakshminath wrote an essay in the *Usha* with the title of *Swadeshi aru Boycott*.³⁴⁷ Supporting the idea of economic swadeshi and boycott of the foreign commodity, the writer warned that without keeping the foreign goods out of the way through boycott for sake of the development of the swadeshi enterprises, the Indian could not come to equal with the foreign goods. Criticizing the stance in favour of foreign good as quality and cheaper products, Lakshminath argued that when the revenue and taxes were increased, these critics of boycott did not feel any pain for the suffering of the poor peasants, who had to sell

³⁴⁵ Bayly, C. A. *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad, 1880-1920*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

³⁴⁶ “*Bibidh Toka-Jatiya Mahasamiti*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 1896-97 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, p. 587.

³⁴⁷ The essay was published under his pseudonym Kripabar. “*Swadeshi Aru Boycott*”, *Usha*, Volume 1, Issue 6, 1906 in Tamuly, Lakshminath, ed. *Usha Collection*. Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 2005, pp. 132-135.

their land and other wealth for the loan repayment or to pay the burden of tax or had to die out of starvation.

He also pointed out another sort of “boycott” operative in India from the part of the white Europeans in denying access to certain arenas of the public sphere and offering contracts under them or getting equal pay with the whites. But he clarified that the boycott should be for survival, not for revenge, and violence should be promptly avoided. He wrote that in practice everything foreign was impossible to avoid, and one cannot expect immediate results but must have to look forward to the distant future. It was his experiences in the world of trade as insiders, what he spoke about in the article. In practical life it was hard for them to voice against every injustice made upon them by the European businessmen. His diary shows that on 12 April, 1907, a European officer of the Jardine, Skinner & Company commented him as ‘impertinent’, which he felt as a serious insult towards him, but despite his rage to the official he had to restrain himself for the probable harmful impact on their business.³⁴⁸

Manu Goswami has argued that the myriad of practices affected by the post 1856 colonial state, which included formation and regulation of a centralized monetary system, uniform taxation system, tariff and customs policy, massive networks of railways and communication policy, unified internal market, integrated administrative system, the annually published report of moral and material progress of India³⁴⁹-all became crucial for the development of a territorially

³⁴⁸ Lakshminath wrote in the diary, “I had a row with Mr. Dickson of Messers J. S. & Co at their office. He called me impertinent. I stopped retaliating only thinking Mr. B. B. would think it would go against his business interest. Or else I would have given the rude, ungentlemanly Scotchman a good dose for his impertinence rather.” *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁴⁹ It provides information regarding population, price, property value, bank asset, circulation of money, industrial output, railway traffic, export and import in local, provincial, and all-India basis and so forth.

delimited national economy.³⁵⁰ As many historians have shown, the Swadeshi movement in the first decade of the twentieth century was the first distinctive effort of the English educated class, particularly of Bengal to develop industrial capital, which due to lack of capital and marketing networks could not succeed.

Despite the critical stand from the part of the Assamese intelligentsia towards the agitation against the division of Bengal, they became allies in the nationalist agenda of the economic Swadeshi and being a part of the rising merchant community of the East India Bholanath showed his attraction towards the movement. On 17 February, 1907, he offered a feast in the place of an industrial exhibition held in Calcutta to popularize the Swadeshi products. Bhupendranath Bose, a champion of the Swadeshi ideology of Bengal along with others gave their speeches there. The feast was offered in European style with toast and lectures were delivered in English.³⁵¹

Life in a Metropolis: Calcutta and Howrah

We have already seen that modernity gradually disrupts the joint family structure, based on agricultural production. New occupations compelled the individuals to dwell in the working place, changing places from time to time, mostly away from the parental home. It was their mental universe, and the demand of the time they had to take their wives and children with them.

Lakshminath was not the first in his family to live in a separate house away from his parental one. Being associated with the service of colonial administration, Dinanth, Lakshminath's father also had to change his dwelling places from time to time, and lived in several towns of

³⁵⁰ Goswami, Manu. "From Swadeshi to Swaraj: Nation, Economy, Territory in Colonial South Asia, 1870-1907." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 4 (October 1998): 609-636.

³⁵¹ *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

Assam, with his family. But in the case of Dinanath, the tie with the older institution of the joint family was still without any crack in it. Apart from his own family, many of his near and distant relatives, and former slaves took refuge in the vast compound of his house, being economically dependent on him. Many poverty-ridden Brahman students of his relation depended on his patronage for their study.³⁵² Like many notables of the time, he often offered shelter and food and clothes to the *bhakats* of the Kamalabari Satra, a religious shrine of Majuli, of which Dinanath was a disciple.

Lakshminath's life in Calcutta was seemingly quite opposite to it. Living far away from original home, without any hope to return in the future, he had no connection with the income from the land possessed by his family in Assam. On the other hand, the life of the metropolis made him used to mobility, speed and change, both became crucial in shaping his life and attitudes.³⁵³ His real struggle in Calcutta began in the shared rented house of the Gopikrista Lane of Calcutta, where Prajnasundari for the first time came to stay with him from their Jorasanko house. The house had two parts and they had to adjust by dividing it between them, one part was used by Bholanath and his kinsmen, and the other was for Lakshminath and Prajnasundari. There was a common kitchen for them, where a professional cook prepared their food with the help of Prajnasundari. Problematizing the so-called outer/inner divide between professional life and domestic space, now and then, she even had to cook to serve the business-related guests in the house. There were instances when she remained the whole day in the kitchen preparing

³⁵² Sharma, Krishnanath. *Krishna Sharmar Diary*. Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 1972, pp. 1-2.

³⁵³ Standing on mercantile activity without any connection with the income from the inherited land meant growing dependency on money income, which involved a certain degree of uncertainty and challenge. Lakshminath believed more in circulation of money than in blocking it in immovable property. He once wrote in a letter to one of his married daughters debarring her for investment on land, because it was very hard to immediately get such money back when one was in urgent need, though persons with enormous income may have that choice. It seems the letter speaks the heart of a trader of a moderate income who saw many ups and downs in his life. See Lakshminath's letter to Aruna, 4 December, 1932, from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 113.

food for the guests. Lakshminath hinted in his autobiography that in the beginning Prajnasundari's special cooking for the guests had a share in influencing their business. As there was no office for their business at that time, the residence was also being used as an office.

In March, 1900, they all shifted to a house in the Dobson Road of Howrah. Though Bholanth Borooah was the official proprietor of the house, it was conceived by Lakshminath as "own", and it was his personal efforts, which transformed the original house to a pleasant and enticing *ghar*. That emerged for them as a *ramyapuri*, borrowing Lakshminath's own parlance. It was initially a single-storey building with two and a half acres of land and was purchased from a lady named Mrs. Dickson at the price of Rs 12000, but after its renovation and modification, for which Lakshminath had employed his imagination and supervision, in his assessment its market value increased to nearly Rs one lakh. The house was improvised to a duplex building with boundary walls, large gate, garage to keep horse-drawn vehicles, quarters for working staff, flower garden and orchard, lawn tennis court, spacious courtyard with marble benches, and even an extra house for playing billiards. The house was decorated with furniture and all modern accessories available at that time.

In his lifetime, Lakshminath later owned three other houses, but the Dobson Road- house had for him a unique value, because it was not just a house to live but through it his dream for possession of a house was realized. He felt that every corner and wall of the house had borne the imprints of his hands, which it would do until its demolition or ultimate decay. Apart from emotional attachment with the house, Lakshminath carefully recorded every detail of the renovating process of the house, like, on which date the foundation stone was laid, or the brick structure was constructed, where from the bricks were purchased at what rate, how many masons, helpers and carpenters worked for certain purpose, how many daily wages provided to them, on which date the house was registered, when he applied in the Howrah municipality

office for necessary permission to build the boundary walls, on which date the municipality office measured the land for water connection in the campus, how a big palm tree had to be cut and a pond was filled up with the purpose of getting a spacious compound, all were recorded in tiny details, which give us a key to reconstruct the story remained in the background of possession of a house. Leaving the house for good, Lakshminath wrote in his diary on the 17 June, 1904:

“After 13 year’s stay with B.B. I leave him today. May God bless me! I felt mortified to leave the 38 Dobson Road- house, a thing I built with so much labour, energy and taste!”

Choosing to live in Howrah was not out of significance.³⁵⁴ Being associated with the business of timber and coal, Lakshminath often visits Howrah. Howrah, though a separate town, by the twentieth century came to form a part of Calcutta in practical and commercial terms. According to the 1901 census, its population was 1,57,594, and two thirds of its inhabitants were immigrants, coming largely from Bihar, United Provinces, Orissa, and the adjoining districts of Bengal. Being the terminus for the Eastern Railways and Bengal-Nagpur Railways, two of the largest railway networks in India of the times, it steadily developed to an industrial centre, and housed lines of factories in its side of the river Hooghly. Cotton mills, jute mills, jute press, engineering works, foundry of iron, railway workshops, dockyards, properties, timber yards etcetera contributed to its busy industrial scenario.³⁵⁵ Howrah provided Lakshminath the honour of serving as a juror, and as a member of the Howrah municipality,³⁵⁶ and friendships

³⁵⁴ Since the construction of the Hooghly Bridge and extension of the tramlines, there has been a growing tendency to have days and earn a livelihood in the metropolis and have their homes in Howrah. See O’Mally, L. S. S., and Manmohan Chakravarty. *Bengal District Gazetteer: Howrah*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1909, p. 31.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, pp. 31, 97.

³⁵⁶ Howrah in the early twentieth- century was mostly referred to as a ‘coolie town’ or ‘town of the poor’. Its municipality area was divided into 10 wards. There were 30 commissioners, 20 were elected, and 10 nominated including 4 ex-officio members.’ Ibid, p. 137.

with many notables of the area. Even his elder brother Golapchandra, since 1904, served in the Howrah Municipality as a health inspector, and lived very near to him.³⁵⁷

Calcutta provided Lakshminath and his class with new amusements like public theatre, magic show, circus, cinema, orchid show, horse race, football, and hockey match, and even the horse race and so forth, where his presence, with his friends and family members were frequently visible. These new experiences of city life expectedly got their places in his diaries. On 16 May, 1906, his house at the Rosemary Lane of Howrah was connected with electric light and fan, with power supply provided by the Messrs Kilburn & Company at a cost of Rs 600, and connectivity was done by K. L. Mukherjee & Company at the fitting cost of Rs 66. Expressing his satisfaction and zeal at the new experience of comfort, an enthusiastic Lakshminath wrote in his diary, if more money was asked for, perhaps he would not refuse to pay, thus a transitory moment of the mundane life was construed as an experience which made the life more attractive. The city provided him with spaces and companions to regularly play billiards, particularly, in the first years of the twentieth century, when due to the schism with Bholanath he was suffering from great anxiety. Even he planned to establish a billiard table in the residence at Dobson Road, and made arrangements for it. During this period, various types of parties, like birthday party, garden party, evening party, tea party, dinner party etc. in western models were arranged among them for getting together and entertainment. Similarly, some negative but unavoidable aspects of the city dweller's life also got reflected in his diary. In September of 1900, from 19 to 22 there was incessant rain in Calcutta, and the normal life became interrupted. On 20 September of the year, he wrote in his diary,

³⁵⁷ In 1904, Dr. Bezbaroa got an appointment as food inspector of Howrah municipality. See *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

“Calcutta specially the native portion under water. Choudhury’s compound is a big lake. Harrison Road, College Street, Chitpore Road looked like canals. I could return home with much difficulty. Only Bowbazar Street is not under water.”

The earthquake of 1897 also got mentioned but despite heavy disaster causing ruin of several big buildings their normal business activities were not interrupted.

The India Club

During the late nineteenth century, simultaneously glorifying the home as a sweet resort of peace and comfort, the upper stratum of Indian society developed their social clubs as an extension of home, and metropolises were pioneering the process. Clublife, introduced in India by the Europeans initially maintained a strict white-only policy on the ground that Indians were not clubbable. The Bengal Club relaxed its rules about guests on nights in 1872, by which members were enabled to invite guests. After the failure of the idea of several ‘mixed’ social clubs with both European and Indian members, in 1882, India Club was established under the patronage of the Maharaja of Coochbehar, one of the most durable along these lines. Soon it became a model of several ‘native’ clubs that were set up by Indians in the mofussil.³⁵⁸ The entrance fee for the India club initially was five rupees as compared to 200 rupees at the Bengal club. In 1890, it had 450 members. It was founded with the idea of providing a space for the gentlemen irrespective of their social, political and religious differences to mix freely. But in reality, it was not a very popular place among Europeans.

³⁵⁸ Commenting on club life, Mrinalini Sinha argues that the contours of the colonial public sphere could be reduced neither to a history of imperial Britain nor to an indigenous India. Sinha, Mrinalini. “Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India”. *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (October 2001): 489-521.

Lakshminath and a section of his friends, both Assamese and Bengali attended the club. The outer world, where Lakshminath visited from the morning to night, was a man-only domain, where he socialized with males of various stratus. Living in Howrah, and spending most of the day-time in various places of Calcutta in business works, the place, where he regularly retired in the day time was the now-extinct India Club situated at the Hastings Road. Lakshminth regularly visited the club, read books, newspapers, and magazines, took meals in day- time, wrote letters, socialized with friends, assembled for conversations, made business talk and played with friends. The club in real sense became a home outside home for him. During his business conflict with Bholanath Borooah, he went to the club, and regularly played billiards there, ending mostly being defeated. His business conflict was resolved in a discussion in the club. Lakshminath once offered his nomination for the club's executive membership but failed, though until 1912, he remained a registered member of the club.

The Inner Domain

In colonial situations, particularly in Bengal, the *bhadralok* life has been often defined in terms of independence from menial labour. Apart from the laboring population employed in the industrial works, there remained a bulk of the laboring class in colonial South Asia, who worked inside the middle-class households. It was upon this section, the domestic comfort and freedom from menial labour for the *bhadralok* class largely rested. Lakshminath's house at Dobson Road included domestic labourers like *darwan* or door keeper, *mali* or gardener, sweeper, washer men, cook or *khachama*, *sayce*, *pankha*-puller, and other domestic helps. These people differed from the *golan* or *bandha*, associated with the slavery which he experienced during his early years in his parental home in Assam, in their freedom to leave the work at their will. It is known from his record in the diary that these persons were provided either with daily or monthly wages. The wage depended upon the nature of the work, skill of

the labour, also on the gender. The wage labourers frequently either left the house or refused to continue the service, perhaps only ways for them to exercise if dissatisfied with the burden of work or of low wage.³⁵⁹ The identity of the domestic workers was often reduced to the works they performed within the house by frequently referring them as *darwan*, *mali*, cook,³⁶⁰ *ayah* and so forth, or occasionally relating to their original homeland or language (Oriya, Mahratti for example). Lakshminath's diaries offer us the opportunity to see the importance of these people in making their life smooth-going and comfortable. In a society, where domestic works were naturally associated with women, and men's participation in it was perceived as amoral, it was the domestic servants, relying on whose works women in advantageous positions could manage to practice her creative pursuits. This was particularly true in the case of Prajnasundari, who, though remained confined within the inner domain of the household, made innovative ways out to use her leisure time. These people were indispensable parts of the life of the upper class, they mostly remained unrepresented.

Domestic space is generally represented as inviolable and autonomous, rhetorically presenting it as the inner or spiritual domain, where the east was ever undefeatable. In the second part of the nineteenth century, India saw rapid expansion of the market of readymade goods of Europe. With easy access to the commodity markets, the demand for such things expanded, and the material culture of the house no longer remained altogether untouched by the western culture.

³⁵⁹ In an exceptional case, an Oriya Carpenter gave a case against Lakshminath, however the cause is unknown. On 27 August, 1908, Lakshminath wrote in the diary, "The case for Rs. 87/- brought against me by Kinoo Uriya, carpenter, in the Small Cause Court is dismissed today. God punished the rascal for bringing a false case against me for no rhyme or reason". See *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁶⁰ In the second half of the nineteenth century hiring cooks became a new phenomenon. Cooking was a male profession. While at home, it was considered as a feminine task, translated to profession it became a male job, it had a legacy in courtly cuisine. According to Hunter, the number of cooks around Calcutta was as high as 5152, mostly men. Women domestic workers were not allowed to enter the kitchen, which was entirely controlled by the Brahman cooks.

Daily consumption of a family is an important arena, which can give us valuable understanding of the process of social transformation. In this sense a bazaar list prepared for daily purchase can be read as an important historical document. Reading such a list from his notebook, it can be conceived that in the first part of the twentieth century the material culture of the upper stratum of the society had drastically changed. Lakshminath's bazaar list included bread, butter, jelly, pickle and so forth, which can give us an idea of how tin and packaged food had already got the way to the material culture of the family. Chicken, once a taboo in food practices of the Vaishnavas and Brahmans in Assam, became almost a daily consumption. Until a late age, he even consumed tobacco, cigars, and wine.³⁶¹ Their household items were also quite modern as it had been reflected in the use of ice cream maker, steam or icmic cooker.

The western educated section of the time, particularly males preferred to wear European attire. Describing his own way of wearing Lakshminath wrote that it was for his being accustomed to the western way of life he was addressed by Bholanath as 'Chahab', and instead of being ashamed of this address he rather felt satisfaction. Like most of his friends, Lakshminath wore European attire, which he never left in his lifetime. Being a member of the business community, or an employee of a company like the Birds, it was the most expected dress for him. His projected or widely circulated image in *dhuti* and *kurta* was undoubtedly a later construction, provided permanency through the new technology of photography and new art form of portrait.

³⁶¹ A section of his friends knew his habits and liked to give him occasional gifts with these items. In an incident, recorded by him in his diary he had allegedly behaved in unexpected manners at a dinner organized in the honour of Henry Cotton, on the occasion of his leaving for England on 12 January, 1905 at Town Hall, Calcutta. He was later even warned by his mother-in-law for being drunk. However, he rejected the allegation as 'exaggeration', spread by the Jorasanko people. See diary entries on 12 January, 26 February and 2 March, 1905 in *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

According to the reminiscence of J. Borooah, they even attended the Congress sessions with European attire, which was commonplace at the time.³⁶²

Even during the decade of the Swadeshi movement, in spite of the nationalist emphasis on the ideology of the hand-made clothes, opinions were divided, and a large section of Indians were not ready to relinquish the comfortable European attire. Sarala Devi wrote, instead of the call of the nationalists to give up the foreign made goods in favour of hand-made *deshi* goods, even the members of her own family remained unresponsive.³⁶³ In fact, the very perception of foreign goods was limited to a special stratum of the society, because the use of such imported materials largely remained confined within the elite and upper middle- class stratum of the society. For the large portion of society expenditures in such items were not only unaffordable but also inconceivable.³⁶⁴

Childbirth and Mothering

As it was already emphasized by a section of historians, in the colonial situation of India, family became the core both to the conventionalists and nationalists, in which they proposed to retain the unpolluted Indian self. In one sense, though defined as strictly intimate realm, imagined as solace for the male, living and struggling otherwise in the outer world among anxiety and tribulation, uncertainty and restraint, racial discrimination and economic and social

³⁶² Borooah, Jnanadabhiram. "Mor Katha". *Jnanadabhiram Borooah Rachanavali*. Edited by Jogendranarayan Bhuyan. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1981.

³⁶³ Devi, *Jibaner Jharapata*, 1957.

³⁶⁴ The effect of the use of the imported and factory-made articles on the standard of comfort of the rural population has been generally small. The poverty of the Indian peasants precludes most novel forms of expenditure, while lack of education and prescriptions of custom make him slow to accept any innovations in food and clothing, or the habits of his daily life. But the enormously extended use of cotton cloth, of finer counts, woollen clothes, kerosene oil, matches, collapsible umbrellas, and of better and cheaper cutlery, and of soaps, had appreciably added to the comfort of the people. See The Indian Industrial Commission, *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission, 1916-18, 1919*, p. 11.

differentiation, the family was already a political ground. For nationalists, it was the arena of resistance to the western outward influences. Later, it was the feminist historians, who pointed out another aspect of the contestation of the family site, arguing that through assigning a “feminine” role to a woman to pursue within the family or household, endeavour was made to appear that the “power relations” within the family had not even been existed. Lakshminath and Prajnasundari’s conjugal life not only provides some key insights to understand the transformation in the inner world of family with the modern times, but also compels us to question the simplified discourse based on opposition between the home and the outer world or the spiritual versus material aspects of life.

Giving childbirth was strictly female in biological terms; but like mothering, components of social appropriation necessarily had become its part. If it is a biological female, who can give birth to a child, construction of childbirth as an altogether female arena, and restriction of male to enter in the domain of giving child- birth is socio-cultural. In the extended family life of joint-family structure, a would-be mother got lots of women around her to help with their own experience of child- birth, whereas, in the emerging molecular family, a wife had nobody around her. To adjust with the situation, Indian mothers were always brought to her parental home for assistance in childbirth and rearing of the child in the first days. In June of 1895, Prajnasundari gave birth to her first child, a girl, at the Jorasanko house. Lakshminath, staying at Nagpur for his business matters, got the news through letter and telegram, though it was only on the fifteenth day of the newborn, it became possible for him to return to meet his wife and daughter at the Jorasanko residence. During the birth of the second daughter in November of 1900, he had recorded his reaction about the long three-day labour pain of his wife. In the case of third child in 8 November, 1908, Lakshminath recorded in his diary, “She was in great pain.” This time a doctor with two assistants helped Prajnasundari by using chloroform and forceps to deliver the baby. Remaining at a distance at the time of the wife’s begetting child Indian

males mostly remained insensitive to the labour pain or postnatal physical mental conditions of a new mother; but the modernity gradually made child-birth for women less painful and less vulnerable and brought some degree of change in the attitude of the males towards child- birth.

Marriage with Prajnasundari essentially led to the adoption of some new culture, entry into the cultural universe of one of the most influential families of Bengal, which played a significant role in the cultural modernity. Dwelling in an alien city, and distant from his relatives, Lakshminath's family life had to accept the customs and mores of the father-in-law's family. Prajnasundari lost her father at an early age, and it was Debendranath, the grandfather, who was her actual guardian. He, by the time of her marriage though lived in a separate house at the Park Street, instead of the Jorasanko residence, until his death remained the Karta of the family.³⁶⁵ Lakshminath's memoir and diaries provide enough evidence of how Debendranath, the Karta Moshay inspired reverence and loyalty from them. Many customs, values and daily rituals of the family were borne by Prajnasundari to their unitary family. Among them was the practice of upbringing of children at the hands of the nurses and ayah. Feeding a neonatal child by a wet nurse³⁶⁶ was largely a western culture, which had been for long adopted in the Tagore household. Sarala Devi recalled in her memoir that within the Tagore family a child after its birth was separated from its mother and brought up by a foster-mother; a wet nurse was provided for breastfeeding.³⁶⁷ Memoir of Rabindranath also reveals that in the extended family

³⁶⁵ Sibnath Shastri, who knew Debendranath directly wrote, "He was a perfect disciplinarian. He subjected his large household to strict domestic discipline and would not tolerate the least departure from it. He was truly an old Hindu Patriarch in that respect, who meant theoretically and practically to be sole master of his house." Shastri, Sibnath. *History of the Brahmo Samaj*. Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1974, p. 127.

³⁶⁶ On 11 May of 1904, Lakshminath wrote in his diary, "A wet nurse was brought who wanted Rs.16/- pay & 20/- reward & Rs. 80/- when to let her go at the end of the term of service and ornaments, etc. I agreed". See *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁶⁷ Devi, *Jibaner Jharapata*, 1957, p. 1. She recalled that in her childhood, mother seemed to be an 'agamyā devī-pratimar mato'. (Ibid, p. 13)

of the Tagores, children were kept at a distance from their mothers, putting the children at some emotional crisis. It was family cooks and servants, who provided them food and company and care, substituting their mothers, whereas mothers remained often invisible to them.³⁶⁸ It is evident that what became common practice for a family like Tagores was not the way to be followed by the common folk. Prajnasundari was the bearer of the practice to her own household, though equally caring for the children by herself. Lakshminath and Prajnasundari's daughters were brought up through the care of Hindustani *ayahs*, and the first child was taught exclusively in Hindi and English. It was in retrospective gaze at own life, this appeared for him to be a sickness of imitating and being *chahab*".³⁶⁹ Juxtaposing the practice of wet nurse with the ideology of mother tongue, which describes one's relation with the language as one that begins at the mother's knee with taking of mother's milk, of which, throughout his life, Lakshminath in his public life remained a strong proponent, we can understand the rift and hiatuses of the personal and public lives, whereas adoption of the custom of wet nurse can make us unsure of the nationalists' claims of the inner domain as "unpolluted" arena of Indian life.

The Schism

By the turn of the century, the Bholanath-Lakshminath duo came to be assessed as the business ideal for youths from Assam.³⁷⁰ But soon their "partnership" came to an end out of mistrust and doubt. In 1903 Lakshminath's business relation with Bholanath took a crucial turn, which

³⁶⁸ Tagore, Rabindranath. *Jibansmriti*. National Book Trust of India: New Delhi, 2010.

³⁶⁹ Bezbaroa, "Mor Jivan Sowaran" in Bezbaroa *Granthavali: Part I*, 1968, p. 83.

³⁷⁰ Rajani Kanta Bardoloi, a contemporary writer of Assam, a renowned novelist and government official, wrote in the *Usha* that commerce was the means of the development of England, while landlords played a crucial role in the progress of Scotland. Assam has neither *jamindari* nor commerce. Bholanath and Lakshminath, who chose to pursue commerce rather than going for government jobs should be the ideal for the Assamese. "Asamiyanir Sajpar", *Usha*, Volume 3, Issue 7, 1908 in Tamuli, *Usha Collection*, 2005, p. 602.

in terms of Lakshminath was the entry of “kali” into their former brotherly relation. The relationship came to an end in the next year, although the old partnership on teak business was carried on for another few years. Lakshminath indicated that it was Bholanath’s whimsicality, opportunism and trust of breach that he was kicked out of the business. He even indicated that calculative Bholanath needed a ladder in the alien city of Calcutta to make his pace upward, and he used him to serve the purpose. Marriage with a daughter of the Dwarakanath-Debendranath lineage enabled Lakshminath to acquire an identity in the city, which meant an upward mobility in the society of the notables. Doors of the many respectable families of Calcutta became open for him. As suggested by himself in his memoir, the marriage had enriched him with “cultural capital”, because on account of his marital relation with the Tagore family access to many respectable families of Calcutta became possible for them, which was utilized by them for their joint venture of business. They even made an understanding between them to appear in the public eye as real brothers of the same parents, and Lakshminath made it confirm by slightly changing the spelling of his name in the business papers.³⁷¹ Tirthankar Roy has shown that although in the first part of the nineteenth century, the Indian business partnerships were largely of informal kind, gradually it changed to a formal nature.³⁷² Indian business houses in the nineteenth century were based on family ties and kinship relations. Lakshminath believed that Bholanath, then an established merchant of the region, also started to trust more on his kinsmen and gradually marginalized Lakshminath from his business.

³⁷¹ Lakshminath made a note in a sheet of paper that Bholanath initially signed in the business papers as Bholanath Das, and compelled Gopinath Borooah, his relatives and business associates in Calcutta to sign as Gopinath Dutta. If that was true, that might be an effort of Bholanath to make him appear as a Bengali, which seemed to him as a much convenient identity in Calcutta. In fact, a section of the upper caste gentry in Assam of the time liked to show their Bengal or mainland India connections of their lineage, and used two surnames, one offered by the Assam king, and another connected with their original homelands.

³⁷² Roy, Tirthankar. *Economic History of India 1857-1947*. Second Edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010.

That was a very crucial stage in the life of Lakshminath from a material point of view. A person, already being used to living among the affluences was told to vacate his residence, which till the moment he considered as his own, at the same time his power of handling bank accounts was withdrawn with the blame of being “dishonest”. Two lines quoted from his diary are sufficient to depict his condition,

“I see I am a ruined man now. With my wife and two babies I am going to be left penniless.”³⁷³

It was said that when a theist has no friend to believe he or she has God to rely upon. Lakshminath also tried to resolve his tension concerned with material life at a spiritual level. He blamed himself and his fate for the course of events and looked to God as his “only help”. When all efforts to come to an understanding, even the intermediary of his wife and mother-in-law ended fruitless, he blamed his own lack of prudence for too much faith on human relation rather than in written documentary evidence, and in utter despair, he wrote in his diary,

“Save from this man, god.”³⁷⁴

Ultimately the matter was settled in a sitting held at the India Club, Otul Krishna Ghosh, friend and business partner of both as the mediator. Lakshminath was offered Rs 14000 in cheque of Bank of Bengal with a horse and *gharry* and the promise of a monthly stipend of Rs 175, as recognition of his service in the business. He, on 17 June, 1904, through a letter to Messers Gregory and Jones proclaimed Bholanath’s release from any further responsibility and relinquished his claim to his sleeper and other business except the business of teak.³⁷⁵ The same year a partnership deed was made to carry on the teak business.³⁷⁶ Thus, the whole affair, which was once started without any paper, exclusively depending on mutual trust, ended formally.

³⁷³ See diary entry on 12 February, 1904, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁷⁴ See diary entry on 8 June, 1904, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁷⁵ *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁷⁶ See diary entry on 15 November, 1904, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

Immediately shifting to a house at the Salt Gola Lane at the monthly rent of Rs 70, Lakshminath on 19 August, 1904 purchased a house at the Rosemary Lane of Howrah which he registered in the name of Prajnasundari and named as Laurels.³⁷⁷ In 1907, the second storey of the house was built through a contractor.

In this juncture, we can observe an explicit spiritual attitude towards life in Lakshminath. There had been a complaint against spiritualism that it remained a hindrance for Indian business and industry. Conversely, we may notice in his life that in the time of deep material crisis, he escaped to a spiritual world, and it provided him mental strength to overcome the crisis. Lakshminath's personal account of life can show that despite his own perception of spiritualism as diametrically opposite to the material interests of life, in colonial modern situations, they, rather than contradicting one another, tended to converge in one.

The period was in the real sense a time of struggle to survive. Lakshminath founded a grocery shop with the name Assam-Bengal Store first at the Bowbazar, and then shifted it to the Lalbazar Street Calcutta, which he initially ran through his brother Harinath. The Store advertised itself as 'the sole Assamese store' situated in Calcutta, and apart from its services as book supplying agency, it supplied various things according to the order of the customers in Assam including turban, turban-cap, coat, shirt, steel trunk, handbag, *kurta*, jacket, wrist watch, wall clock, harmonium, violin, silk yarn, notebooks, pens, school and college books, costumes of *jatra* and theatre, essential commodities for stage, press and tea gardens, ink and so forth, which can provide us an idea of how an extensive market of readymade goods was gradually formed in Assam, and how the Calcutta-based Assamese intelligentsia became instrumental for

³⁷⁷ The Rosemary Lane house was purchased at the price of Rs 12000 from Mr Frankum with additional charge of the broker for Rs. 120. See diary entry on 19 August, 1904, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

it.³⁷⁸ The Store also rendered services of printing and proof-reading. Later it was shifted to the Canning Street, and named as the Timber & Stores Agency,³⁷⁹ which in addition advertised itself as the sole agent of Tamulbari Standard Teas.³⁸⁰ Chandrakumar wrote to Lakshminath that he had been appointed the sole agent of Tamulbari Standard packaged tea.³⁸¹

During this time, he concentrated on the publication and distribution of books, but because of the limited size of the readership in Assamese, as a business venture it was hardly successful.

He, by heart, expected that Bholanath would again take him in his business and tried through various ways for his compliance. There is evidence that both his wife and mother-in-law took initiative to restore their former relationship, but without any fruit. From then, Bholanath and Lakshminath continued a complex relationship until Bholanath's death in 1923. They met and exchanged letters, went together to attend the annual Congress session and stayed in the same hotel booked by Bholanath, even made pleasant trip to Kashmir, Lahore and Karachi together and enjoyed very good time, Lakshminath ran to Agra to look after Bholanath lying at bed for an accident at Agra, Bholanath also offered gifts for his family, lent him money, but after 1911, no further business relation was wished by Bholanath with him.³⁸² In his personal letters to

³⁷⁸ See advertisements of "Assam-Bengal Store" in *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 6, 1913. The advertisement entitled "Jayanti Tel" shows Timber and Store Agency as its supplier. See *Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 1, 1835 Saka, 1913.

³⁷⁹ *Banhi* published a notice about the change of its official address to Canning Street, which was also an office of the Timber and Store Agency. The Agency showed L. N. Bezbaroa (Lakshminath) as its proprietor, whereas another advertisement of Assam- Bengal Store showed H. Bezbaroa as its sole proprietor. See "Assam-Bengal Store" in *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 6, 1913 (1835 Saka).

³⁸⁰ Tamulbari Tea Estate in Assam was founded in the initiative of Chandrakumar Agarwala, and the advertisements showed that Chandrakumar introduced branded Package tea in the market. *Banhi* published an advertisement of Tamulbari Tea Company entitled "Tamulbari Standard *Chah*", in the left side of the upper corner of the front page. See *Banhi*, Volume 12, Issue 12, 1844 Saka, 1922.

³⁸¹ Chandrakumar's letter from Tezpur, 17 March, 1913 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 177-178.

³⁸² In September 1911, their partnership business of teak came to an end, and Lakshminath had to carry on his own business singularly.

Prajasundari, Lakshminath expressed his grief at the death of Bholanath and called him “a friend of all situations’ ”.³⁸³

Bholanath was engaged in a diverse field of business activity including mining, wholesale of kerosene, castor oil, Assam silk, steel trunk and so forth.³⁸⁴ As characteristic of the Indian merchants of the time, he also invested in landed property and possessed land and houses in several places in India including Howrah, Agra, Simla, Shillong, Calcutta, Jharsuguda, Cuttack, Visakhapatnam and so forth.³⁸⁵ Why a person, who, though in a humorous way but so openly proclaimed that “nothing but money in cash and Ramnam are true in the world”,³⁸⁶ in his late age, so much inclined to possess real estate is a point to be noted. Being unmarried, he left no successor behind, and already in 1919, entrusted the managing of his business to the

³⁸³ Lakshminath’s letter to Aruna, 2 June, 1923 from Sambalpur, Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 101-102.

³⁸⁴ S. N. Sarkar, the biographer of the Maharaja of Mayurbhanj mentioned that in 1906 a prospecting licence for building and ornamental stone, limestone, ocher and kuolin was granted to Messrs B. Borooah & Patrick Gow. The firm exhibited a number of samples of these minerals at Calcutta Industrial exhibition and was awarded a gold medal for ornamental granite, and silver medal and certificates for the other items. Quoted in Mohanty, Jagannath. *Indian Culture and Education (Encyclopaedia of Education, Culture and Children's Literature)*, Vol. 3. New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2009. From 12 November, 1906, the Messrs B. Borooah and Patrick Gow Company were provided a prospecting licence of gold grant in Moharbhaj district of Bengal covering an area of 23040 acres of land. See Geological Survey of India. *Records of the Geological Survey of India*, Vol. XXXVI Part-1. Calcutta: Geological Survey of India, 1907, p. 85. B. Borooah Company, 8 Hare Street is shown as the Managing Agent of Lakshmiganj Coal Company in Wilson, J. R. R. *Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India under the Indian Mine Act (VIII of 1901) for the year ending 31st December 1908*. Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1909, Appendix V, List of Coal Mines Worked Under the India Mine Act, 1901, p. 115.

³⁸⁵ The report of the Indian Industrial Commission said that money of the Indian business class was invested in the purchase of landed property, and as a consequence the price of land had risen very high in many parts of the Country. The Indian Industrial Commission. *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission, 1916-18*, 1919, p. 9

³⁸⁶ Quoted by Lakshminath in a letter to his daughter Aruna, 4 December, 1932 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 113.

Martin & Company.³⁸⁷ He left Rs. Five thousand to Lakshminath through his last Will executed on 12 August, 1922.³⁸⁸

At Sambalpur (1917-1937)

In October of 1911, Lakshminath's business relation with the B. Borooah & Company had already ended for good, and he had to leave the office bringing back his "office box" home and ceased to go there. Though his individual business on teak continued, at the end of the First World War he became bankrupt. Describing the situation, Lakshminath wrote that teak business in Burma was monopolized by the European merchants, who had their European agents in prime cities of India like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Karachi. Indian merchants were dependent on these agents for capital to purchase teak, which they had to repay within 90 days. Otherwise, the agencies stopped supplying money to them, and they may even go for trial in court. The smaller Indian merchants, like Lakshminath bought teak and then sold it to the petty traders in Calcutta and other mofussils. With the break of the War, a lot of these petty traders left their business without repaying their credit, and getting his capital blocked, Lakshminath could not help searching for an alternative way for livelihood. He requested Bholanath to take him again in his business, but no positive response from Bholanath's side was shown. To adapt with the financial situation, he even had to leave his office at Canning Street and transfer it to his own residence at Rosemary Lane.

As put by Sumit Sarkar, the First World War affected "the different sections of Indian people in varied and sometimes even opposite ways", and brought to the "surface" not only the

³⁸⁷ "Sampadakar Alochana- Asamiyar Sankatkal Upasthit", *Chetana*, Volume 5, Issue 1, 1919.

³⁸⁸ Section 4 of Bholanath Borooah's Last Will and Testament dated 12 August 1922. It was probated at the Calcutta High Court on 8 and 15 October, 1923 after his death. Family Archive of Late Keshavkanta Borooah and Krishnaram Borooah, Guwahati.

numerous contradictions between Indian and British interests, but also sharpened the tensions within the Indian society too.³⁸⁹ While the War excessively benefited the British jute magnates like the Bird, & Company,³⁹⁰ and also the Marwari businessmen like G. D. Birla,³⁹¹ It meant misery and a fall in living standards for the majority of Indian people. For Lakshminath, a hard time began with the War.³⁹²

At last, by dint of a letter of reference from Ashotosh Choudhury, the Judge of the Calcutta High Court, who married Pratibhasundari, the elder sister of Prajnasundari and qualified by his previous experiences with timber business, Lakshminath managed to get a job in the Bird & Company. In August, 1916, almost at the 52 years of age he joined his new service. The Bird, a leading company of the time was started by Samuel Bird as a trading firm, which initially supplied indentured labour to the government construction projects and took the railway contracts of loading and unloading of goods, but later turned to manufacturing industry. By 1917, the firm and the companies under its management had a capital valued at about £20,000,000, or Rs 300,000,000 and directly and indirectly employed 100,000 persons.³⁹³

³⁸⁹ Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern India, 1885-1947*. New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers, 2013, pp. 168-169.

³⁹⁰ During the war, due to the new demands of the jute items for the military, the jute mills made very large profits. During the War and later up to 1926, dividends declared by the jute mills and agency houses like the Bird & Company and Andrew Yule & Company were above 100 percent of their paid-up capital. See Bagchi, Amiya Kumar. "Indian Economy and Society during World War One." *Social Scientist*, 2014: 5-27.

³⁹¹ By 1914 the Marwaris had acquired sufficient economic power in the eastern India to secure war contracts and speculate profitably in shares and commodities. The Birlas organized their own jute mills by 1919. See Lamb, Helen B. "Indian Business Communities and the Evolution of an Industrialist Class." *Pacific Affairs*, 1955: 101-116

³⁹² As his diaries reflect, he had to take a loan from his friends and also from the bank. On 20 September of 1912, Lakshminath mortgaged his Rosemary Lane house for a loan of Rs 10,000 at an interest rate of 8 percent, but after deduction of Rs. 1000 for loan repayment with some other cost, he, in fact, got a cheque for Rs 8,800. See *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁹³ Jacomb-Hood, M. S. *A History of Bird & Company, 1864-1929*. Calcutta: Caledonia Printing Works, 1929, pp. 23-24.

Being initially appointed as a canvasser he had to make extensive tours through places, but in 1917, he was posted in Sambalpur district of Bihar and Orissa division.

Sambalpur though originally was a part of the Central Provinces, in 1905, major part of it through a territorial adjustment was transferred to Bengal and formed a district of Bihar and Orissa division, but some other parts remained with the Central Provinces and incorporated in the district of Bilaspur and Raipur. The Bird, at the time, purchased a government forest in the district, working on which was entrusted to him. Apart from supervising he had to arrange sawyers, pass sleepers, make arrangements with the *jamindars* or *gaontiyas* to purchase new forest from them, maintain good relations with the government officers and so forth. The job provided some financial certainties to him, because for a responsible father whose three daughters were pursuing their higher studies in Calcutta, a stable income was an unavoidable necessity. At that time, the Company's works were mainly at Meghapal area of the district, where a camp house was built for night stay of the company officials. In the forest roads, they mostly used *tonga*, a kind of bullock-drawn vehicle. One can easily imagine the condition of the roads from the following extracts from his diary,

“... came six miles by that road, then took the jungle road of 5 miles. Very bad road, uneven & 8 or 10 nullas. The tonga & bullock suffered very much.”³⁹⁴

That day he stopped at the forest *bungalow*. The next day, they left for Meghapal by a forest road up to Chamunda.

“*Very bad road, 4 coolies with kodalis, had to repair the road in places*”³⁹⁵

Though initially living at Sambalpur only for his works in the company, in July of 1918, he sold his Rosemary Lane house at Howrah, and intended to permanently settle at Sambalpur.

³⁹⁴ See diary entry on 7 November of 1917, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

³⁹⁵ See diary entry on 8 November of 1917, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

Sambalpur was a small town with a population of 12,981 in 1911, which increased to 19,504 in 1921.³⁹⁶ Life in a small town was very much different from life in the city. It was not as busy as the life of Calcutta. However, Sambalpur provided a comfortable life to him, where he possessed a big compound not only to build a spacious house of his taste and need, but also to build a big office, extra kitchen, servant quarter, guest house, orchard, flower and vegetable gardens, and other big trees all around the campus. He ordered plants at the Calcutta-based nursery and implanted the fruit trees, which soon began to flower and give fruits. Lakshminath had a peculiar fondness for pet animals and birds and kept them as his company.

The upper stratum of the inhabitants of the town including the top administrative officers of the district and the respectable professionals developed their own circle at the town and endeavoured to enjoy leisure time either through various kinds of parties or picnics, or through hunting in the deep forests of the district. Shikar became part of their life, and peacock, pigeon, duck, boar, deer, bison, even tiger were made their targets. They killed innocent animals and birds only to relieve them out of the boredom of the close and routine life as well as to get the taste of varieties of meat and to boast of their trophies made of the skin, horn, and scalp of the dead animals. He, by the time became a respectable and dedicated officer of the Company, who made destruction of the forests only to give his company the profits. In 1926, the settlement officer of Sambalpur district wrote in its report that no forest or mining law was operative in the district.³⁹⁷ So, to check the destruction, a suggestion was given to implement 'cess' on the mines, owners, or timber contractors on the basis of extraction, not on the basis of profit made by them. He further pointed out that since the local zamindars considered the forests as God's gifts to them for payment of debts, inordinate destruction of forest became very common in the

³⁹⁶ Hamid, Khan Bahadur Muhammad. *Final Report of the Land Revenue Settlement of the Sambalpur District* 1926. Patna: Superintendent, Government Printing, Bihar and Orissa, 1927, p. 9.

³⁹⁷ The officer was very close to Lakshminath, and regular companion of him in shikar expeditions.

district.³⁹⁸ If the government official's interests were with extraction of revenues from the forests, Lakshminath wrote to his wife, reflecting the interests of the timber company,

“The mouth of the Government Forest Department has been opened so much that if it swallows the whole Sambalpur, it will not be satisfied.”³⁹⁹

In between these two interest groups of the colonial administration and the Company, the lives of the peasants and adivasis remained unnoticed.

Towards the last months of 1927, Lakshminath, then at 63 years of age, was sent by the company to Assam as the in-charge of timber works at deep and interior forest area of the Garo hills of Assam. The forests were situated in the Nepal border, and hardly communicable. Lakshminath had to do almost all initial works for the new project of the Company- from collecting sawyers and coolies, to establishment of a shop for supplying their ration, which he mentioned as “spade works”. On 12 December, 1928, Lakshminath wrote to his wife that for the last one month he had to spend all days and nights in trains. The climate of the jungle was “dangerous” and there was no rice or clean water to eat or drink. Sometimes there was incessant rain. He had to walk on the hills and plains up to 35 miles per day to inspect the sawing works and manage all other field and official works. He felt anxiety about his health and was totally unhappy to work in such vulnerable conditions. He preferred to stay at Guwahati for a few days and then to go to the jungle for a few hours. But Jenner, the European officer, strictly instructed him to make his head office at jungles, and not at Guwahati, for which he had no choice but to obey.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ Hamid, *Final Report of the Land Revenue Settlement of the Sambalpur District 1926, 1927*.

³⁹⁹ Lakshminath's letter to Prajnasundari from Sambalpur, 13 November 1921 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968.

⁴⁰⁰ Diary entry on 14 January, 1928, *Diaries*, Tezpur University; See Lakshminath's letter to Prajnasundari, Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 66-74.

The youthful idea of being an independent trader was no more, rather than being an employee in a company he had been restrained in all aspects. During that period, Lakshminath commenced to read Ramakrishna Paramhansa.⁴⁰¹ He searched for spiritual solace in Ramakrishna. Lakshminath was unhappy with the situation and wrote to his wife about the selfishness of the Company. He had anticipated that after all preliminary works had been done, the company would send an English officer offering a heavy salary as his superior authority.⁴⁰² He wrote to his wife about his loss of faith in human beings. He even lost his willingness to work for the Company. Ultimately, it was at his will, the Company granted him leave from the first of March of 1928.⁴⁰³ In fact, that was his resignation from the Company.

Lakshminath returned to Sambalpur. In May 1928 he started his own business of teak there. In the meantime, he purchased a Ford car for his personal use, and learnt to drive it.⁴⁰⁴ But as always, this time also he saw no success in business. In 1931 he wrote to his daughter Aruna that his business was very bad. He in a light tone wrote to her to provide him a shelter with a handful of rice. Otherwise, he had no choice but to go to Vrindabana.⁴⁰⁵ During the period of Sambalpur, Lakshminath extensively wrote on various socio-political issues related to Assam and India in the Assamese magazines and newspapers; the reading public of Assam also waited to hear from him. Later we will see, instead of his explicit stand in favour of moderate politics, Lakshminath gradually emerged as a hardened Assamese nationalist. Perhaps, the hard struggle

⁴⁰¹ Borooah, Jnanadabhiram. "Mor Katha." *Jnanadabhiram Borooah Rachanavali*. Edited by Jogendranarayan Bhuyan. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1981. Jnanadabhiram wrote that Lakshminath lived in Calcutta at the same house with a person, who later came to be known as "Ma ", an early biographer of Ramakrishna. Ibid, p. 128.

⁴⁰² Lakshminath's letter to Prajnasundari from Jungle on 3 February, 1928 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 74-75.

⁴⁰³ Lakshminath's letter to Prajnasundari, Guwahati on 14 February, 1928, Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968 in pp. 76-77.

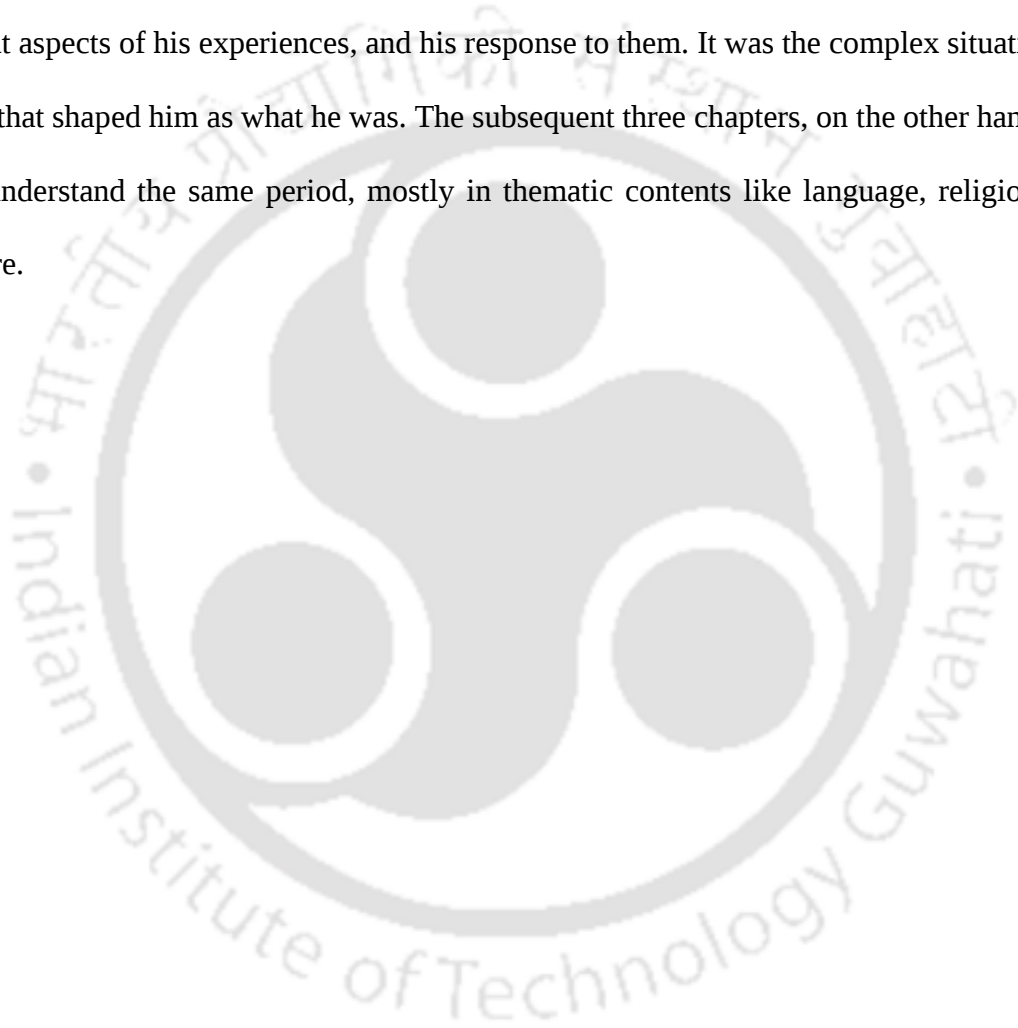
⁴⁰⁴ Invention of motor traffic brought tremendous change to the communication to the life of Sambalpur. In 1931, there were 65 motor cars and 57 trucks and lorries in Sambalpur, whereas in 1921, it was 27 and 1 respectively. O'Mally et al. *Bengal District Gazetteer: Howrah*, 1909.

⁴⁰⁵ Lakshminath's letter to Aruna, 13 January, 1931 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 112.

in deep and interior jungles of Orissa that he had to undergo, and the financial uncertainties of life, all had their contributions in making him an Assamese nationalist.

Conclusion

The chapter encapsulates the long journey of Lakshminath from 1886 to 1937. Its basic focus was on his personal-familial ties, as well as on his professional struggle of life. It examines different aspects of his experiences, and his response to them. It was the complex situations of his life that shaped him as what he was. The subsequent three chapters, on the other hand, will try to understand the same period, mostly in thematic contents like language, religion, and literature.



CHAPTER THREE

Championing the Assamese Linguistic Nationalism

The chapter intends to inquire how colonialism had brought changes to the perception of language and became instrumental for a nationalistic ideology around language in south Asia. Colonialism did it both by introduction of new knowledge of philology and by some deliberate policies combined with their intended and unintended consequences. It introduced not only the European notion of language as a coherent object, but also developed a new kind of attachment with language by connecting it with community. Mapping the linguistic past through philology had obviously opened a distinct possibility of controlling the present of a community. The chapter will focus on Lakshminath's careful handling of such knowledge, which evidently augmented the growth of a nationalistic consciousness among the contemporary literati of Assam as a whole.

The linguistic nationalism of the Assamese intelligentsia was a collective project, in which Lakshminath represented a prominent voice among many other voices. The chapter will examine how the Assamese linguistic nationalism of the period, while taking an overt turn towards Sanskritization, had to grapple with many contending voices. It will address how without giving the proper attention to the extensively multilingual world of Assam, the nationalist claims of Assamese as a *Jatiya Bhasa* were tried to be established. Questioning the idea of language as a closed entity, it proposes to address the variations of language use, including the fluidity of its boundary. The chapter will also focus how the claims for an incessant struggle for language could be read to some extent, in terms of reactive measures of a dependent intelligentsia for and against the colonial policies and praxis, regarding language, territory, education, employment and as such.

It proposes to concentrate on the literary-cultural activities of Lakshminath Bezbaroa as a representative of the bilingual intelligentsia of colonial Assam, who used the platforms of public sphere organizations and emerging technology of print for the sake of their newly cherished dream for a community around a language. The ideology of mother tongue was championed by Lakshminath in public arenas like debate, discussion, humorous essays, cartoons, and performing arts like songs, plays etc. It tries to read his thoughts and works in the background of the broad socio-political issues and activities of the time. An individual effort derives its meanings only in relation to the current paradigm of thought, the larger activities of a society in a particular time. The chapter, while exploring Lakshminath's life, tries to excavate how a person's professed rootedness to his mother tongue came to be challenged in many ways, whether by his modern and expatriate personal life or by the contradictions inherent in the ideology of mother tongue.

Imagining an Assamese Identity

Like most of the places of colonial South Asia, Assam also represented a multilingual situation. In 1865, reiterating the multilinguality, A. Eden, the Secretary of the Government of Bengal wrote to the Commissioner of Assam, that Assamese was not the “universally spoken” language of the province. Apart from the hills-tribes, a considerable population in Assam did not speak Assamese.⁴⁰⁶ S. Endle, the author of the Outline of Kachari Grammar, in his preface to the grammar in 1884, quoting a tea planter from Europe commented that taking into account the immense variety of languages, it was not ungrounded to see the tree of Babel within the

⁴⁰⁶ A. Eden's letter to the Commissioner of Assam on 11 September, 1865, File No. 471, 1862-1873, Assam Commissioner's Office, Assam State Archives.

limits of Assam.⁴⁰⁷ Edward Gait, in his report of the Census of Assam in 1891, pinpointed the same feature of the region and called it an “extraordinary” linguistic scenario.⁴⁰⁸ Focusing on the administrative difficulty the province had to face, the Government of India informed the Statutory Commission that it was the natural result of “a medley of races and languages”.⁴⁰⁹

However, Assamese as a communicative language had been continuing to emerge in the scene. As early as in 1832, when Wilcox made an exploration to the Dihong and Dibong river valleys, he got immense help from a letter written in Assamese to the Abor, a mountain tribe of the region by a junior commissioner.⁴¹⁰ In 1849, William Robinson, then Inspector of Government Schools in Assam has written,

“Proceeding now to the examination of languages spoken in Asam, and by the tribes bordering on the valley, the one that naturally claims precedence is the Assamese. It is the language usually spoken by the entire population of the valley, and in most cases, is the only medium of intercourse used between them and the people of the hills.”⁴¹¹

In 1872, R. Cornish, an assistant commissioner of the Kamrup district stated that instead of “many tribes of non-Aryan extraction such as the Garos, Cossyas, Rabhas, Cacharies, Mikirs

⁴⁰⁷ See “Preface” in Endle, S. *Outline Grammar of Kachari Language as Spoken in District Darrang, Assam: With Illustrative Sentences, Notes, Reading Lessons, and a Short Vocabulary*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1884, p. ix.

⁴⁰⁸ Gait, E. A. *Census of India, 1891: Volume I, Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892, Chapter VIII, p. 156.

⁴⁰⁹ According to the 1921 census, no less than 101 distinct languages were spoken in Assam. Of these 52 languages were of Assam, 37 of other parts of India, 6 of Asia outside of India, and 6 of Europe. Quoted in Indian Statutory Commission. *Memorandum submitted by the Government of Assam to the Indian Statutory Commission, XIV*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1930, p. 551.

⁴¹⁰ Wilcox, R. "Memoir of a survey of Asam and the neighbouring countries, executed in 1825-6-7-8." *Asiatic Researches* 17 (1832): 314-469, p. 331.

⁴¹¹ Robinson, William. "Notes on the Language Spoken by the Various Tribes inhabiting the valley of Asam and Its Mountain Confines." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* Volume 18, Part 1 (1849), pp. 183-310.

and others” had possessing their own languages, among all those “races”, the language or dialect called Assamese was used as a “lingua franca”.⁴¹² As colonial administration progressed, numbers of new variants of language entered the region. The situation had become such that by 1895, the public preaching at bazaars by the missionaries of Sibsagar already took place in Assamese, Hindi, Bengali, and English.⁴¹³

In such a situation, from the very beginning, colonial archives reflected its surprise to see the development of an Aryan Assamese language amidst the vast speakers of Non-Aryan origin. Nathan Brown, while trying to resolve the paradox, came away from the usual proposition of the Aryan Assamese language and implicated the probability of formation of Assamese by “engrafting the Sanskrit upon some original native stock now extinct.”⁴¹⁴ His argument was based on his observations recorded as,

“The names of common and familiar objects are those which longest resist the encroachments of a foreign tongue”.⁴¹⁵

However, the Assamese intelligentsia of the time, mostly consisting of the Hindu upper caste males, was not ready to avoid their claims on the Aryan lineage of their language. They had already internalized the western notion of language as a coherent whole and refused to see language in terms of either divergent speech practices of the people, or a fuzzy identity, which refuses to obey the territorial borderline of the modern era. Underplaying the multilingual

⁴¹² File No. 471, 1862-1873, Assam Commissioner’s Office, Assam State Archives.

⁴¹³ “Minutes of the Conference of the Assam Missionaries of the American Baptist Missionary Union, December 14th to 22nd, 1895, Sunday, December 15” in the Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union. *Minutes, Resolutions and Historical Reports of the Fourth Triennial Conference held at Sibsagar in 1895*. Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1896, p. 3.

⁴¹⁴ Brown, N. *Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language*. Sibsagar: American Baptist Mission Press, 1848, p. 9.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

world of the region, and presence of the vast non-Aryan population, what the intelligentsia wanted to establish from its inception was the distinctive identity of Assamese from Bengali. They, from their part, posited the notion of a movement from original similarity to difference of the Aryan language, and claimed a relationship of sisterhood between Assamese and Bengali.⁴¹⁶

The intelligentsia's position could be best understood within the framework of thought, which became dominant in nineteenth-century India, and which emphasized on the national cohesion offered by the Aryan tradition. The discourse, taking its inspiration from the European Indologists, tried to establish the idea of a golden Aryan past in the region. Thomas R. Trautmann has shown that it was William Jones' formulation of the Indo-European family in the 1870s, which entwined languages and nations or races in a way that genealogical relations among languages came to be held as an ethnological tool.⁴¹⁷ Comparative Philology endeavoured to discover the root and standard forms of the vernacular. Those who speak the same language belong together and are by nature one and inseparable. The intelligentsia of the time frequently made their claims to the Aryan lineage, which was firmly attested by the presence in the region of Assamese, allegedly a descent of the Indo-European language family. It was the colonial officers, who from the outset, tried to assert the same tie between the language and ethnology of the people. Robinson wrote that Hinduism in Assam was introduced from Bengal, and the "Aryan physiognomy of the people" proved that they had come from the

⁴¹⁶ Even in an earlier writing, Nathan Brown also noticed close affinity between the two languages, grounded on their derivation from the same Sanskrit language. See Brown, N. "Comparison of Indo-Chinese languages." *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* 6, no. 72 (December 1837), pp. 1023-1038.

⁴¹⁷ Trautmann, Thomas R. *Language and Nations: Dravidian Proof in Colonial Madras*. New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006, p. 1.

same quarter, “and the natural inference is that thence also come the language”.⁴¹⁸ To show the analogy between Assamese and Bengali, people’s influx from Bengal and Behar, and their continuous communication with the mother country was emphasized. In the 1870s, R. Cornish argued in a letter that the Brahmans and *Kaiths*, allegedly the speakers of pure Assamese were “not of a distinct stock from the Brahmans and Sudras of Bengal and Behar”, and the entry of their ancestors were not of ‘very remote period”, so parity between languages is natural. He further argued that the Assamese had already become an “integral part of the ‘Bengali nation”, who resembled them in manners, customs, religion and language. He claimed,

“After the Ahom invasion the sovereignty passed into the hands of a rude unlettered tribe speaking a Mongolian language utterly distinct from that of the great Hindoo family, a portion of which it had subjugated.”⁴¹⁹

The Census Report of Assam in 1881 pointed out “extreme difficulty” in administration and inter-communication, caused by the presence of a great variety of languages in the province.⁴²⁰ The report focused on the “mixed” population of the plains consisting of an Aryan sub-stratum, which was mingled with a Mongolian element, and to the presence of the tribes of the hills that had preserved their aboriginal qualities in various degrees.⁴²¹ The authors of the Report of the

⁴¹⁸ Robinson’s Remarks in Reply to the Missionaries on Vernacular Education, 5 December, 1854, attached with The Commissioner of Revenue in Assam’s Letter to the Secretary of Government of Bengal, No. 236 of 1854, “Correspondence Relating to Vernacular Education in the Lower Provinces of Assam” in Long, J. *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No XXII*. Calcutta: Calcutta Gazette Office, 1855, pp. 155-159.

⁴¹⁹ R. Cornish’s letter on 16 November, 1872, File No. 471, 1862-1873, Assam Commissioner’s Office, Assam State Archives.

⁴²⁰ Driberg, J.J.S., and C.A. Elliott. *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*. Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1883, p. 103

⁴²¹ Ibid.

Indian Constitutional Reform in 1935 defined the Assamese as a “mongrel race with Ahom, Chutiya, Koch, Bodo, and Aryan blood in their veins”.⁴²²

The nationalists endeavoured to undermine the non-Aryan elements of the language as either extraneous or deviation from the standard. In 1853, an “Assamese Person from Calcutta ” argued that influences of surrounding hill *jatis* were clearly visible in Assamese, especially of the Ahoms, who had ruled the region for a long period. For him, since the arrival of the Ahoms, the pronunciation of the Assamese language had been much “deviated”. The nationalists suffered from Assam’s attachment with the non-Aryan, *ardha-sabhya* or half-civilized, near “barbaric” people, and tried to establish its historical and cultural connections with the mainland of the glorified Aryan culture. They appropriated the mythical kingdom of *Pragjyotishpur* and *Kamrup* to assert this Aryan lineage. Kanaklal Borooah’s *Early History of Kamrup* was part of this project. In 1912, with the goal of unearthing the golden past of Assam, a body called the *Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti* was formed. However, the Assamese nationalists from the outset rejected the proposition that Assam shared its linguistic and ethnological history with Bengal. In 1892, it was stated in an article published in the *Jonaki*,

“Kamrup, presently known as Assam was never subjugated by Bengal. Our land is swatantra, independent. Its Brahmans are independent. Its language is different.”⁴²³

Lakshminath’s stance on the issue was representative of the time. In the 1890s, when J. D. Anderson, the author of the *Kachari Folktales*, after Brown, had suggested the probability of the non-Aryan origin of Assamese, it aroused dissatisfaction among the Assamese nationalists.⁴²⁴ Lakshminath, discussing Anderson’s view on Assamese made his stand clear,

⁴²² *Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms*. Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1918, p. 246.

⁴²³ Borooah, Gunabhiram. “*Asamat Koulinya Pratha Nai Kio*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 4, Issue 5, 1892, pp. 479-481.

⁴²⁴ “*Asamiya Bhasa (Pancham Baktrita)*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 10, 1897, Saikia, Nagen, ed. *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001, pp. 750-755. As soon as Anderson’s discussion had

and told that proximity of Assamese to Bengali was more acceptable to him than its similarity with any other non-Aryan language. He always had taken it for granted that as per the law of natural selection, Assamese established its dominance on the other indigenous languages of Assam like Bodo, Barahi, Chutia, Ahom etc.⁴²⁵ Later, we will see that the intelligentsia's rejection of the missionary-introduced policy of simplified and phonemic orthography symbolized the same strategic importance for them, for assertion of the Aryan-Sanskritic lineage for their nationalism.

Tracing the Language Issue

The history of linguistic nationalism could be traced around colonialism's institution of Bengali as a medium of instruction in Assam. Explaining the situation under which, the decision to institute Bengali as language of court and medium of instruction had come to place, Francis Jenkins, the Revenue Commissioner of Assam, in 1854, reported that since the British possession of Assam, as the Bengalis were appointed in chief situations of the all zillas, "as a matter of the course, and without any specific orders", all the business of the courts were carried on their own language.⁴²⁶ He, trying to defend the position of the government, clarified that

appeared in the Calcutta Review of July, 1896, the *Jonaki* immediately reacted to its proposition. "*Bibidh Toka*", *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 7, Ibid, pp. 728-729.

⁴²⁵ "*Asamiya*", *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1909 in Goswami, Jatindranath, ed. *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001, pp. 9-13.

⁴²⁶ Jenkins, in 1854, refuting the proposal for introduction of Assamese as medium of instruction, wrote to Sir William Grey, the Secretary of Government of Bengal, about the background of institution of Bengali as medium in colonial offices in Assam. He informed that all the *omlahs*, except two or three, he found in his office from the date of joining were Bengalis from Mymensing and Dacca, and mostly from Sylhet. The business of the courts was conducted in Bengali, except a few papers in Persian for the *Sudder* court. The courts of Kamrup and Gawalpara were filled with Bengalis, who had accompanied Scott from Rungpore. The police officers, native judges, chief revenue officers and all the treasurers of the districts were Bengalis from Mymensing, Santipore and Rungpore. "Correspondence Relating to the Question Whether the Assamese or Bengali Language should be

since the institution of Bengali in the courts of Assam, not a “single proposition” was made to “retain Assamese”, nor any difficulty was reported.⁴²⁷ He insisted that the Assamese gentry were not “ignorant” of Bengali, and as the court language, all were “desirous of learning” it. In a letter to the Secretary of the government of Bengal, written on 7 December of 1854, he argued, besides administrative convenience, Bengali would prove to be “expedient” for “gradual amalgamation of the people of Assam” with the “subjects in Bengal”.⁴²⁸ Another concern of the imperial government against implementing Assamese in schools as a medium of instruction found expression in the arguments of William Robinson, the Inspector of Schools. He pointed out the financial burden to be shouldered by the Govt. for translating and publishing Assamese textbooks, the government regulations, official gazettes, circulars, and important documents for a community that “does not amount more than a fraction of the millions of Bengal”.⁴²⁹

By 1853, when Justice A. J. Moffat Mills of the Calcutta Sudder Court made an official visit to Assam, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, otherwise a loyal officer to the British rule, urged that the consequence of introduction of Bengali in the courts was detrimental to the province. He argued that the masses and other than the court officials possessed no knowledge of Bengali, and Bengali had no closer affinity to Assamese than it did to Oriya, and it was hard to understand on what ground, Assamese, unlike Oriya, had been provided with the privilege of being the court language, in its own country.⁴³⁰ Questioning the medium of instruction in

taught in the Assam Schools, 7 December, 1854”, No. 236 of 1854” in Long, *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No XXII*, 1855.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ See “Some Remarks in Defence of the Use of Bengali in the Government Schools in Assam”, 5 December, 1854, Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Mills, A. J. Moffatt. *Report on the Province of Assam*. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, 1984, p. 131. The practice of recording the statement of the witnesses in Bengali, Anandaram argued, was in violation of the Section

Bengali, he pinpointed that imparting knowledge through a language little understood by the teachers themselves, the pupil, instead of acquiring useful knowledge of literature and science had to waste their much time to learn Bengali. He pointed out the limitation of the government's argument against substitution of Assamese in lieu of Bengali on the ground of Bengali becoming the court language and questioned whether the object of education was to "make the Assamese a nation of judicial officers." Insisting on the need to "modelling" of the vernacular institutions, Anandaram urged the government to release a grant of a few thousand rupees for supplying the schools with elementary works in Assamese on "native and European knowledge."⁴³¹

Language questions masked a serious concern on the emerging professions at the colonial office, or schools etc. Jenkins admitted that the "undue proposition of the appointments in the courts" to "the foreigners" took place on account of the lack of knowledge of Bengali on the part of the Assamese. Only a few Assamese had attained "the high office owing to the influence of the Bengalis who were already at the head of the offices and whose relations have always poured in great numbers."⁴³² A letter from the Secretary of the Bengal Government to the Commissioner of Assam, that was written after a decade suggests that the government, without coming away from their language policy, wanted to address the economic issues. It was stated,

"...the Lieutenant Governor sees no occasion for any change in the present system; and it seems only necessary to request that you will be careful that the use of Bengalee does not lead to the employment of

VI Regulation IV of 1793, under which evidence should be taken in the language intelligible to the witnesses. Ibid, p. 122.

⁴³¹ Ibid, p. 106.

⁴³² Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Revenue of Assam's Letter to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 236, 7 December, 1854, in "Correspondence Relating to the Question Whether the Assamese or Bengali Language should be taught in the Assam Schools" in Long, *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government*, No XXII, 1855.

foreigners, or to the exclusion of the natives of Assam from public offices for which they are otherwise eligible.”⁴³³

The Wood’s Despatch on education of 1854, which advocated the use of vernacular language as the language of instruction in primary educational institutions throughout India, made the question of language an important policy issue for the colonial government.⁴³⁴ Language and community subsequently came to the forefront in a public debate when the Assamese speaking intelligentsia, in the initiative of the Baptist Mission Society of Assam, organized a campaign for the institution of Assamese as the language of instruction in schools. They tried to convince the colonial government that Assamese was not a dialect of Bengali, but a language with its own literary heritage. Refuting their claims, Jenkins called it as the “vain fancies” of the missionaries and a few countrymen to keep them a “distinct people”, who still possessed the vanity that they were “a nation”.⁴³⁵ The debate seemed to end with the Court of Directors of the East India Company’s concurrence to the Lieutenant Governor’s refusal to proposed change of language, though with the suggestion that

⁴³³ Letter from Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Commissioner of Assam on 11 September, 1865, File No. 471, 1862-1873, Assam Commissioner’s Office, Assam State Archives.

⁴³⁴ The Despatch of 1854 declared in clear terms that it was not its ‘aim’ or ‘desire’ to ‘substitute’ English for the vernaculars; but “...while the English language continues to be made use of, as by far the most perfect medium for the education of those persons who have acquired a significant knowledge of it to receive general instruction through it, the vernacular language must be employed to teach the far larger classes who are ignorant of, or are imperfectly acquainted with, English.”. See Government of India. "Report of the Conference held at Shimla on the 20th and 21st August, 1917 to consider the question of English and Vernacular teaching in Secondary Schools." 1917.

⁴³⁵ Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Revenue of Assam’s Letter to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 7 December, 1854, Correspondence Relating to the Question Whether the Assamese or Bengali Language should be taught in the Assam Schools”, in Long, *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government*, No XXII, 1855.

“Assamese dialect should be permitted to be used by the boys in some of the lowest classes for a certain period after their admission to the schools.”⁴³⁶

Meanwhile, the government, probably to serve the interests of the tea planters had to decide for an administrative change.⁴³⁷ By a proclamation of the 7 February of 1874, the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Darrang, Garo Hills, Khasi and Jayantiya Hills, Naga Hills, Cachar and Goalpara were separated from the Lower Bengal, and formed a new Chief Commissionership of Assam. In September of the same year, Sylhet, a densely populated and educationally advanced district of Bengali speaking population was amalgamated with it. By this amalgamation colonialism produced a two-pole linguistic universe, where, since then two dominant language communities were striving against each other to get maximum benefit for themselves.

Prior to that, it was mainly in the initiative of the Baptist Mission Society of Assam, the emerging Assamese intelligentsia tried to make a major intervention in relation to the government language policy. In 1872, a memorial on behalf of the “Assamese Community” of Nowgong was placed before the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal to retain Assamese in the courts and the schools of Assam, in which apart from Miles Bronson, the president of the Committee, 215 numbers of local persons including a few women had endorsed. Simultaneously, a section of Assamese persons of Sibsagar, mostly consisting of the government clerks, *dewan*, *khajanchi*, *mahari*, *ameen* and such had made a public appeal to

⁴³⁶ The Court of Directors of East India Company to the Government of India, Narrative for the 3rd quarter of 1856, dated 1 December (No. 35) 1856, (No. 86, dated 22 June, 1858), "Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department, No. LXXVI: A Collection of Despatches from the Home Government on the Subject of Education in India, 1854-1868." Calcutta, 1870.

⁴³⁷ Throughout the colonial period, Assam's polity and economy was determined by the interests of the tea planters. Fuller, the chief commissioner of Assam, recollected in his memoir that Assam, with its large area of tea garden under the management or supervision of about 1000 Europeans, had '*a character of an English colony*.' Fuller, Bampfylde. *Some Personal Experiences*. London: J. Murray, 1930, p. 104.

the government to institute Assamese through a letter published in *Arunodaya*.⁴³⁸ The government, in response, made a detailed investigation on the subject, and opinions from the top administrative officers were discussed, which reflected divided opinions. Five were in favour of Assamese, whereas seven officials were for retaining Bengali.⁴³⁹ R.C. Dutt, then serving as an Assistant Magistrate and Collector of the 24-Pargunnah, had stated in a written memorandum to the government,

“... it is precisely in the short familiar words that the Bengalee totally differs from the Assamese, while the classical words coming from parent Sanskrit are generally to be found in both the languages.”⁴⁴⁰

However, before amalgamation, Assamese was instituted as the language of instruction in the Brahmaputra valley districts excluding Goalpara. A. Mackenzie, the Officiating Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, notified that, under the provision of Act 29 of 1837 and Section of 337 of the Criminal Procedure Code, Assamese would be the language to be used in Judicial and Revenue Proceedings of the five Brahmaputra valley districts⁴⁴¹ of Assam.⁴⁴² Before that, under orders of 19 April, 1873, Assamese was adopted as medium of instruction for all primary schools, middle schools and in the lower and middle classes of higher schools in the aforementioned districts of Assam. It was also told that in the upper classes of higher schools,

⁴³⁸ Letter titled “*Asam Jatir Nimitte Asam Bhasa*” dated 3 April, 1872 to the editor of *Arunodaya*. The letter showed 15 signatories from Nazira, all served in colonial offices, in File No. 471, 1862-1873, Assam Commissioner’s Office, Assam State Archives.

⁴³⁹ File No. 471, 1862-1873, Assam Commissioner’s Office, Assam State Archives.

⁴⁴⁰ Memorandum of R. C. Dutt, Assistant Magistrate and Collector of the 24-Pargunnah, attached a Letter of H. Hopkins, Governor General’s Agent of North-East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 67. Gowhatty, 20 March, 1873, File No. 471, 1862-1873, Assam Commissioner’s Office, Assam State Archives.

⁴⁴¹ The districts were Kamrup, Durrang, Nagaon, Lakhimpur and Sivasagar, excluding Gowalpara.

⁴⁴² *Calcutta Gazette*, August 6, 1873, Government of India, Calcutta, 1873, pp. 24, 124.

if Assamese textbooks were available, they were to be taught in Assamese.⁴⁴³ In practice, until the beginning of the twentieth century, instruction in Assamese for the middle school remained confined within the Upper Assam schools. In the case of the district of Kamrup, the situation was not ‘*quite clear*’.⁴⁴⁴ The official correspondence of the period tried to suggest that it might be partly due to the unwillingness of the “Bengali community”, one of the dominant groups in the district, that Assamese could not be introduced in the schools of Kamrup.⁴⁴⁵

The viability of Assamese as a medium of instruction was constantly being questioned on the grounds of paucity of textbooks and educated people to serve as teachers. Colonel H. Hopkins, the Commissioner of Assam believed that not to teach Bengali would be to arrest vernacular education.⁴⁴⁶ He remarked on the Inspector’s Report that “the dialect adopted by the Government is at all events not “Assamese”, whatever else it may be” and asserted that “official Assamese” and “official Bengali” were identical.⁴⁴⁷ The official recognition of Assamese, in his opinion, had little significance, because it was utterly unknown to the greater masses excluding a much smaller section of educated ones, who even once obtained their education through the medium of Bengali.⁴⁴⁸ With their interests ‘chiefly confined to the harpies about

⁴⁴³ “Report of C.A. Martin, Inspector of Schools, Assam Circle” in *General Report of Public Instruction in Bengal 1872-73, 1874*, p. 8.

⁴⁴⁴ Letter from the Secretary of the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts on 28 March, 1903, Chief Commissioner’s Office, General Department (Miscellaneous), 1903, Assam State Archives.

⁴⁴⁵ “Remarks of Colonel H. Hopkins, the Commissioner of Assam in the Report of C.A. Martin, Inspector of Schools, Assam Circle”, *General Report, Public Instruction in Bengal 1872-73, 1874*, Appendix A, pp. 10-12.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ A writer in the *Jonaki* commented in an article on Sir George Campbell, “The Commissioner Hopkins did not like to call the people except the Ahom, Chutia, Mikir, Naga and Kachari as Assamese. He preferred to refer to them all as Bengali”. “Sir George Campbell”, *Jonaki*, Volume 4, Issue 3, 1892, Saikia, *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03, 2001*, pp. 449-452.

our courts, the lower classes of mukhtears and petition-writers, and such like', he insisted, they had liked to be the sole possessor of "official Assamese".⁴⁴⁹

In 1877, with the aim of "ensuring sound vernacular education", Bengal introduced a change in medium of instruction. Prior to that, instruction of English was given in English, which was then changed to Bengali. Sir Stewart Bayley, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, though found the change applicable to Assam as to Bengal, however, expressed his doubt on the circumstances of Upper Assam. According to him, the vernacular of Upper Assam, particularly the "common everyday speech" was "certainly not Bengali", and nor was "literary Bengali easily intelligible to the people". While being aware of the government's desire to see "one speech only current from Bhagalpur to Sadiya", Bayley warns of the "strong feeling" of the local people against the "forcible imposition" of Bengali as the teaching medium. He, to provide "full justice to the claims of the local dialect", proposed that whether Assamese or Bengali by birth, teachers must be acquainted with both languages.⁴⁵⁰

Knock at the Door and the Door Opens

Despite the role of Anandaram and a few others, during the period from the 1850s to the 1880s, it was mainly the missionaries, who played a crucial role to institute Assamese as a medium of instruction in Assam. But towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, they made a shift in their policy regarding imparting education. They, still continuing to believe in the role of Assamese to work among the plain tribes like *Miri*,⁴⁵¹ concentrated on the surrounding hill

⁴⁴⁹ "Remarks of Colonel H. Hopkins, the Commissioner of Assam in the Report of C.A. Martin, Inspector of Schools, Assam Circle", *General Report, Public Instruction in Bengal 1872-73*, 1874, Appendix A, pp. 10-12.

⁴⁵⁰ *Report on Administration of Province of Assam for the year 1878-79*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1880, pp. 100-101.

⁴⁵¹ Paul, Reverend Joseph. "The Miris" In "Minutes of Conference of the Assam Missionaries of the American Baptist Missionary Union, held on 14-22 January, 1893", Tura, p. 523.

tribes of the region, who they chose to educate through their own languages. In 1893, the American Baptist Mission resolved to use the Roman alphabet that was considered by them as “the best for the Hill Tribes” of Assam, who did not possess written language.⁴⁵² In the meantime, the colonial government, from their experience of the Khasi hills, found it “successful” enough to introduce a policy to educate the people of the Garo, *Mikir*, Naga and Luchai hills in their own vernaculars written in the Roman characters, instead of attempting to instruct them in Assamese or Bengali.⁴⁵³

It was the time India saw formation of public sphere organizations to promote the cause of the regional language and literature.⁴⁵⁴ In the same spirit, on 25 August of 1888, the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (Society for Improvement of the Assamese Language) was formed with the goal to foster the infant *matribhasa* to make it equal to any developed language of the world. By 1893, its members rose to 123. The emerging Assamese intelligentsia, already trying to consolidate itself around the issue of mother tongue, came to the fore with its own agenda. Lakshminath, besides bearing the post of treasurer and one of the executive members of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, edited the *Jonaki*, for two consecutive years, in 1891 and 1892. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the *Sabha* was the platform from which the Assamese nationalists furthered its agenda. A section of its members, even after going back

⁴⁵² Minutes of Conference of the Assam Missionaries of the American Baptist Missionary Union, held on 14-22 January, 1893 at Tura.

⁴⁵³ *Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the Year 1903-04*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1905, Part- I, General Summary, p. vi.

⁴⁵⁴ The *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* was founded in 1893. In the same year, the *Nagari Pracharini Sabha* for the propagation of Hindi in the Nagari script, followed by the *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan* in 1910 was founded. The *Utkal Sanmilani* to champion the cause of the Oriya speaking regions, and the *Anjuman-Taraqqi-E-Urdu* formed to assert the claims of the Urdu language was formed in 1903. Sumit Sarkar has identified the development of regional sentiments along linguistic lines as a ‘significant feature’ of the period 1905-1917. See Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern India, 1885-1947*. New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers, 2013 (First published in 1983), p. 162

to Assam, whether leading their lives either as government employees or in liberal profession of business or law or education, did not cease to pursue their ideology of mother tongue and national literature.⁴⁵⁵

Throughout the nineteenth century, the language controversy was swinging to-and-fro on the issue of independent status of Assamese. The proponents of Assamese argued that, it was only for the common origin of Assamese and Bengali from Sanskrit, they possessed a shared vocabulary. The Assamese intelligentsia, taking recognition of Assamese up to middle classes as a head start, strictly adhered to their claims for its entry to the University courses. It was at this moment, Lakshminath's presence was felt. He, in a lecture delivered in Calcutta, in January 1895, expressed high hope for Assamese. He told in his usual roundabout manner,

“Assamese have been highly benefited by the cruel attacks on it by the government officials and outsiders. As long as they are trying to negate it by poking fun at it, we are making our best and united efforts to promote its causes. Their curse on our language becomes in effect blessings bestowed on it. In a way, the opponents of Assamese are indirect friends of it.”⁴⁵⁶

Since then, a significant shift was perceptible regarding the perspectives and focus on the language issue. In the earlier decades, language question was dealt primarily as a question of

⁴⁵⁵ The language question entered the genre like private letters exchanged among the intelligentsia. In 1888, Ratneswar Mahanta wrote to his friend Hemchandra Goswami, “...I love my native tongue and how often I have spent my leisure time contributing to its improvement. ---Let Assamese be formed into a real language first, let there be enough books, books of substantial merits, then our hearts of Assamese blood as they are, will themselves urge us to procure a room for our mother language in the University.” Letter written from Nowgong on 17 August, 1888, in Goswami, Hemchandra, *Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*, Benudhar Sharma (ed.), Asam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat, 1972, Appendix “Kha”, pp. 554-557.

⁴⁵⁶ “*Asamiya Bhasa-Pratham Baktrita*”, Volume 5, Issue 4, 1894, Saikia, *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*, 2001, pp. 604-612. “*Asamiya Bhasa-Dvitiya Baktrita*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 5, Issues 5, 1895, Ibid, pp. 621-628, “*Asamiya Bhasa-Dvitiya Baktrita*, Volume 5, Issue 6, 1895, Ibid, pp. 638-645. On first January of 1895, it was written in his diary, “I polished and corrected my article Asamiya Bhasa.” See *Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Diaries*, Digital Archive, Centre for Assamese Studies, Tezpur University (Henceforth, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.)

medium of instruction, but since the 1890s, the issue emerged as a question of the formation and assertion of rights of a linguistic community.

Apparently, for the competition for placements with the educationally advanced neighbouring Bengali-speaking community, the educated section came to explicitly react against the government language policy. In the first sitting of the *Sabha*, it chalked out a scheme to invite the attention of the Public Instruction Department to see the employment of Assamese people at all levels of schools in Assam, so that the children had got facilities to study their mother tongue.⁴⁵⁷ The *Sabha* pressurized the concerned officials of Assam to recommend Assamese textbooks for all higher classes including the Entrance course of the Calcutta University. The Calcutta-resident Assamese gentlemen along with the youths met to greet Sir Henry Cotton, on the occasion of his appointment as the Chief Commissioner of Assam, on 21 November, 1895 at his residence in Calcutta and later published a report on the *Jonaki*, expressing the hope for getting rightful place for the *matribhasa*.

In the colonial situation, having no legislative rights to practise, the intelligentsia mostly used print and other emerging spheres like petitions, memorials, group discussions and such to raise its demands. Lakshminath, during this period delivered a series of lectures on the topic of *Asamiya Bhasa*, in sittings of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, in which he polemicized on the distinct identity of Assamese. In those days, to write or to speak was to assert one's claims. Particularly, in a non-regulation province like Assam, being ruled by an autocratic chief commissioner, without any opportunity for the indigenous population to participate in any legislative body; the option for the intelligentsia was limited.

⁴⁵⁷ The *Sabha*'s demands were to fill the post of school- teachers and school sub-inspectors with Assamese persons, give incentive to the authors to prepare Assamese textbooks, encourage the students for higher education by providing more scholarships and to make the Textbook Committee more effective. "*Asamiya Siksha*", *Jonaki*, Volume 4, Issues 11-12, 1892, Saikia, *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*, 2001, pp. 546-556.

The eighth-year annual proceeding of the Sabha explicitly declared its *mahamantra*,

“Knock at the door and the door will open. We, until the door opens, should incessantly knock at it. To study through our *matribhasa* is our birthright. We must obtain it by knocking at the doors of the rulers.”⁴⁵⁸

Apart from pressurizing the government, the nationalists of the period came with an action plan, which included collection and publication of a catalogue of Assamese manuscripts, publication of a dictionary already compiled by Hemchandra Borooah, collection of Assamese folktales, compilation of Assamese proverbs, writing textbooks, enriching modern Assamese literature and as such. They saw their activities in terms of a movement for the progress of the nation. The nationalists reiterated that language is the core to their nationalism, and the ideology of the mother tongue is the driving force. They always focused on language as crucial to the improvement of the region. A causal link was established between language and the progress of the nation, that saw one’s impact on others as normal, a perception already imbibed in colonial discourse.

In 1890, Kanaklal Borooah, a member, told in a speech delivered at the annual session of the *Sabha*,

“*Andolan* and *alocholana*, movement and discussion are keys to all kinds of development.”⁴⁵⁹

Lakshminath, throughout his life, perceived the activities of their youthful days, as a silent and modest movement of students to invigorate their *matribhasa*, which is the *pran* or essence of a people. He often cited the example of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* to show the

⁴⁵⁸ “*Astam Bacharar Karyya Bibarani*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 9, 1896 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 744-748.

⁴⁵⁹ “*Asamiya Bhasa*”, Hemchandra Goswami, speech delivered at the second annual session of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, 1890 in Goswami, *Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*, 1972, p. 98.

inner potentiality of an apparently small group, in terms of a movement, simple, slow, and benign, but high and far- reaching in its effect.⁴⁶⁰

The *Jonaki* publicly cherished the doctrine of Natural Selection, articulated through the dictum of survival of the fittest, *Yogya Bhogya Basundhara*.⁴⁶¹ Propagating the idea of a community's self-effort for its development as crucial, it said that had the Assamese people not made them fit for the modern age, others would not make them so. The first editorial of the *Jonaki*, *Jonakir Atmakatha*, signalled their coming away from the Assamese intelligentsia's earlier position of exclusively clinging to the dissemination of useful western knowledge, and articulated the discourse of *jatiya unnati* and tried to inculcate in readers *deshaprem*, or patriotic emotion.⁴⁶²

The fight for language was simultaneously a fight to alter their material conditions both in personal and national life. Addressing the backwardness of Assamese in relation to Bengali, Lakshminath argued that the development of a language mostly depends on the material condition or historical situation. It is through their early contact with the colonial rule, patronizing of the rulers, the Bengali language developed to its latest stage. Without feeling any pang of envy for the development Bengali had made, he demanded the same Permanent

⁴⁶⁰ Presidential Speech of the Seventh Annual Session of *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, delivered in December, 1924 in Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*. Edited by Atulchandra Hazarika. Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 1988, pp. 1848-1872.

⁴⁶¹ “*Jonakir Atmakatha*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1889, Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, p. 4.

⁴⁶² Ibid. It simultaneously encapsulated two types of *jatiyata*, related consecutively to Assam and India, and defined both as own *desh*. A travelogue by Gunabhiram Borooah, but anonymously published in the *Jonaki* proclaimed that India was the home, whereas Assam was one's borning room within it. See “*Saumar Bhraman: Jatra*”, Extracts from the diary of a *Saumar Jatri*, *Jonaki*, Volume 2, Issue 5, 1889 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, p. 168.

Settlement and same material condition for Assam, so that Assamese also may prosper.⁴⁶³ There is an indication that Assamese intelligentsia, by the 1890s came away from their early stand favouring the exclusion of Assam from the Permanent Settlement of Bengal, articulated by Anandaram in the 1850s in his memorandum to Justice Mills. More than three decades having left behind, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, the emerging Assamese intelligentsia had already explored tea, commerce, and a few other professions to get established, and vehemently felt the lack of indigenous capital as prime hindrance to their efforts. Living in Calcutta, and trying to be established in merchandise, who but Lakshminath could better understand the profound impact of the economy in the larger life of a people.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶³ “Asamiya Bhasa (Dwitiya Baktrita)”, *Jonaki*, Volume 5, Issue 5, 1895, Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 621-628.

⁴⁶⁴ Telugu under-representation in the services was a crucial factor, which contributed towards the emergence of Telugu nationalism, propagated by the Andhra conferences, later called the Andhra Mahasabha held from 1913 onwards. It also demanded the use of the mother tongue for instruction. See Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, 2013, p. 163.

Assam for the Assamese

Despite the Assamese intelligentsia's focus on themselves as prime agents in the formation of the Assamese linguistic nationalism, several other actors were operative in the scene, colonial administration itself being one, with its policies whether with intended or unintended consequences.

The colonial government seemed to be decisive enough in resolving the language issue of India, and it was comparative philology, which was chosen at this juncture to find out a scientifically grounded effective solution of the issue. Focusing on Comparative Philology, as a tool of the colonial state, Bernard Kohn writes,

“The power of the comparative method was that it enabled the practitioner to classify, bound and control variety and difference. At a phenomenological level the British discovered hundreds of languages and dialects, and these could be arranged into neat diagrams and tables that showed the relationship of language to each other.”⁴⁶⁵

Discussing the impact of the colonial linguistic projects on the self-perception of Indians, Pragati Mahapatra also has arrived at the similar conclusion,

“The process of defining, acquiring, systematizing, and classifying the numerous languages of India altered the ways in which Indians themselves came to look upon, read and write these languages subsequently.”⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁵ Bernard S. Cohn writes, “The power of comparative method was that it enabled the practitioner to classify, bound and control variety and difference. At a phenomenological level the British discovered hundreds of languages and dialects, and these could be arranged into neat diagrams and tables that showed the relationship of language to each other.” See Cohn, Bernard S., *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 55.

⁴⁶⁶ Mahapatra, Pragati. *The Making of a Cultural Identity: Language, Literature and Gender in Orissa in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1997, p. 21.

With the new century, the British government undertook the task of preparing a census report of all the Indian languages, which came to the light in the name of Linguistic Survey of India (1903-1928), compiled by George Abraham Grierson. Offering an independent status to Assamese, Grierson wrote,

“If grammar is to be taken as a test, and if on applying that test, we find that Assamese is a language distinct from Bengali, then we shall be compelled with reason to say the same of the Chittagong patois. If, however, we apply another test, that of the possession of the written literature, we can have no hesitation in admitting that Assamese is entitled to claim an independent existence as the speech of the distinct nationality, and to have a standard of its own, different from that which natives of Calcutta would wish to impose upon it. Assamese literature is as old, if not older, than that of Bengali, and down to the commencement of the present century, was as copious.”⁴⁶⁷

It was an overt departure from the earlier debate of parity between the two languages. The claim for an independent Assamese language was validated by the long and enriched literary culture. It is said that Grierson’s magnum opus was an outcome of the colonial state’s new understanding of the Indian linguistic situation. The colonial state, since then began to see India as a union of multiple linguistic areas. In respect to Assamese, prior to Grierson, it was Edward Gait, the superintendent of the census of 1891, who wrote in the same tone that Assamese has produced a considerable amount of literature, and “it stands in undeniable opposition to literary Bengali”.⁴⁶⁸

As we have seen, the arguments in favour of linguistic territorialism had already taken its root. David Ludden argues,

⁴⁶⁷ Grierson, G. A. *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. V, Part I*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1909, p. 394.

⁴⁶⁸ Gait, *Census of India, Assam*, 1892, p. 157.

“The Linguistic Survey was measuring language regions and the idea then entered official discourse that territories defined by dominant language might be governed more efficiently and simplify consultations with native groups.”⁴⁶⁹

Henry Cotton, the chief commissioner of Assam, in his farewell speech in Guwahati expressed his satisfaction on his policy towards the Assamese community of the Brahmaputra valley,

“Assam for the Assamese, by this principle, I have been guided.”⁴⁷⁰

Fuller, his successor, who played a major role in the formation of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, wrote in his memoir,

“In the higher branches of education, Assam had, for years past, been far behind Bengal in recruiting, and the province had turned to Bengal in recruiting for the higher ranks of its subordinate staff. The Assamese were of little official importance in their own country. This was both unfair and discouraging, and I have great satisfaction by ordering that, so long as candidates possessed the required educational qualifications, preference would be given to the Assamese. Their local claims were not to be overridden by any extra-educational attainments which candidates from Bengal might put forward.”⁴⁷¹

There is hardly any doubt that it was the overall change of the attitude of the colonial rulers which got articulation in the words of both.

Nowhere else but in education and language this almost sudden change of the imperial government's attitude towards Assam was reflected. In March of 1903, the Chief Commissioner informed the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts through a letter that the needs of the Assamese should be preferred in Assam than of the Bengalis. He also added that the Calcutta University had been already asked to recognize Assamese as a Second

⁴⁶⁹ Ludden, David. "Spatial Inequity and National Territory: Remapping 1905 in Bengal and Assam." *Modern Asian Studies* Volume 46, no. 3 (2012): 482-525.

⁴⁷⁰ Cotton, Henry. *Indian Speeches and Addresses*. Calcutta: K. C. Lahiri & Co., 1903, pp. 155.

⁴⁷¹ Fuller, *Some Personal Experiences*, 1930, p. 127.

Language for the Entrance Examination.⁴⁷² By August of the year the Director of the Public Instruction of Assam was told not to teach Bengali as a Second Language in the Assam Valley Districts except Goalpara. He was also told to ascertain Assamese as the medium of instruction for the classes below the class IV, with the possible exclusion of the Gauhati High School, where gradual introduction of the Assamese language was suggested.⁴⁷³

With this change in medium of instruction, a change in the government employment policy was to be instituted. It was explained in the letter that “it is desirable that teachers who have to teach in the vernacular should be Assamese.” The existing Bengali teachers will be gradually transferred to the Surma Valley and Goalpara.⁴⁷⁴ The government resolution of 17 November of 1903 proclaimed that, save with the Chief Commissioner’s previous sanction, all appointments to be henceforth limited to the bonafide permanent residents of Assam alone. Newcomers, who had acquired land and property and could prove their intention to live in Assam permanently, were also to be counted as permanent residents though. So long as the candidates would possess required educational qualifications, the preference would be given to the Assamese.

Thus, the new century, in a sense, was a moment of great relief to the Assamese nationalists, and it was acclaimed as a great success of their endeavour. They felt that a door was opened

⁴⁷² Letter from the Secretary of the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, 28 March, 1903, File No. 11, 1903, Assam Commissioner’s Office (General & Miscellaneous), Assam State Archives.

⁴⁷³ Letter of the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Director of Public Instruction, Assam, 14 August, 1903, 28 March, 1903, File No. 11, 1903, Assam Commissioner’s Office (General & Miscellaneous), Assam State Archives. In the case of the Gauhati High School, a detailed report of the status of the students in respect to their mother tongue was prepared by I. B. Brahmachari, the Officiating Principal of Cotton College, showed that during the period between 1898 to 1903, the average ratio of the Assamese and the Bengali students was 177: 75, whereas only 6 belonged to the other category. I. B. Brahmachari’s Report to the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, 24 April, 1903, Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

for them.⁴⁷⁵ In the meantime, the Indian University Commission of 1902 strongly favoured the inclusion of the vernaculars as a subject in the higher courses even up to the M. A. level.⁴⁷⁶ Subsequently, the University Act of 1904, made Indian vernaculars compulsory subjects for Matriculation, Intermediate and B.A. levels.⁴⁷⁷ Accordingly, in 1905, Assamese was recognized as a subject for matriculation of the Calcutta University.⁴⁷⁸ Manikchandra Borooah greeted it as an outcome of the “most laudable desire to improve the condition of the Assamese” and told that it had infused a new life into the rising generation of Assam.⁴⁷⁹ A small part of the intelligentsia, including Lakshminath, became associated with the activities of text-books writing, and other academic works like preparing question papers and examining answer scripts, assigned by the Calcutta University to them.⁴⁸⁰ Mere textbooks production

⁴⁷⁵ In 1909, Manik Chandra Borooah, in his speech at the Legislative Assembly of the Eastern Bengal and Assam province, mentioned “several important measures calculated to do lasting good to the Assamese”. Among those were the establishment of a very liberal system of senior and junior scholarships, providing employments to all the graduates of Assam and a second-hand College, which has given a real stimulus.

⁴⁷⁶ See speech of the Viceroy in Government of India in Government of India. "Report of the Conference held at Shimla on the 20th and 21st August, 1917 to consider the question of English and Vernacular teaching in Secondary Schools." 1917.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ The *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* and the *Jonaki* constantly urged the concerned officials to recognize Assamese textbooks for the Entrance examination of the Calcutta University. The eighth Part of *Jonaki* praised the decision to transfer the Text- Books Selection Committee from Nowgong to Sibsagar. It was called as ‘the best work’ Booth, the Director of Public Instruction had done for the wellbeing of Assamese. “We shall be much grateful, if he peruses the matter of running Assamese text- books for the Entrance Course.” “*Bibidh Toka*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 8, Issue I, 1997 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, p. 868.

⁴⁷⁹ Speech of Manik Chandra Barooah on 8 April of 1909, in the Legislative Assembly of Eastern Bengal and Assam. *The Asam Banti* heralded it as recognition of the long-standing demand of the public.

⁴⁸⁰ The *Jonaki*, in 1904, published a news item on the publication of the Asamiya Entrance Course, according to which, it contained 148 pages and the price was ten Anna. The periodical expressed indebtedness from the part of all the Assamese people fond of their *matribhasa*, to Maheswar Goswami, the publisher for his benevolent work. Lakshminath became a part of the process. His Diary of 1904 reflects that on 19 July he took delivery of 500 copies of the textbook, and sent it to Maheswar Goswami on 20 July. The receipt was sent to S. N. Borah in registered cover. See *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

could never protect a language from its plight, instead of own involvement in textbook production, Lakshminath clearly stated his stand.⁴⁸¹ His emphasis was on the growth of literature like novels, history, biography etc. It was a stand just opposite from a section of contemporary Tamil nationalists, who celebrated one as a Tamil devotee for his attempt to make Tamil suitable for school textbooks.⁴⁸² However, the institution of Assamese as an academic subject of the Calcutta University had produced an impetus in the intelligentsia to concentrate on writing books. Since then, a far more productive phase of the modern Assamese literature came to be visible, Lakshminath himself being a regular contributor to it.

Rajniti or Prajaniti

Trying to assert the separate identity claims for itself, the Assamese nationalists more or less followed the policy of appeasement with the colonial rule. The stance of remaining apolitical was for the first time voiced through *Jonakir Atmakatha*, the first editorial of the *Jonaki* in 1889. It overtly declared,

“*Rajniti, politics* will remain outside our province.”⁴⁸³

Claims were made that it will champion *prajaniti*, and would concentrate on *sahitya, bijnan, samaj* and such.⁴⁸⁴ In a subject country, the editor wrote, the people had nothing but *prajaniti*

⁴⁸¹ There is another side of the story. Textbook writings became crucial in many parts of India in the rise of a section of writers from the intelligentsia. According to an official report of the early 1870s, the Bengali books were published in large editions, and at the responsibility of the author, without any inducement from the government. One Bengali primer had more than 1,00,000 copies in a single edition, more than a dozen had 10,000 or more copies, 5000 copies in a single edition was numerous. While before the emphasis on the vernacular education through the Wood's Despatch it was limited in number. *General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal, 1871-72, 1873*, p. 82.

⁴⁸² Ramaswami, Sumathi. *Passions of the Tongue, Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997, p. 55.

⁴⁸³ “*Jonakir Atmakatha*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1889, p. 4.

⁴⁸⁴ “*Jonakir Atmakatha*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1889, p. 4.

to follow.⁴⁸⁵ Since in those days, *rajniti* or politics meant the criticism of colonial rule, it was not only unacceptable but also inconceivable to them. *Prajaniti*, or principles of the subjects, on the other hand, referred to the emerging law-abiding subjects of colonial rule.

Remaining apolitical seems to be largely strategic. In effect, with the turn of the century, the separatist claims for the Assamese language had already taken a sharp political turn. In 1903, the imperial government's draft proposal on the territorial adjustment of India including the formation of a new province, combining eastern Bengal with Assam, which later came to be named as the Eastern Bengal and Assam, was made public. In 1905, the enactment of the plan provoked huge protest on the issue. It was a moment which, in the language of David Ludden, "brought Indian national space into public politics for the first time."⁴⁸⁶ Language became an important issue in the Congress platform in 1903, and the new plan was described as a divide-and-rule policy of the British, by "the division of the Bengali speaking people into two arbitrary sections."⁴⁸⁷ Citing the government decision to amalgamate the Oriya speaking areas at the same time, the Hindu intelligentsia of Bengal criticized the double standard of the colonial policy. The language issue got a new momentum. Surendra Nath Banarjee, one of the great orators of the Congress of the time, told in the annual congress session of Benaras in 1905 that

⁴⁸⁵ The Utkal Sammilani of Orissa from its origin in 1903 until 1920 proclaimed the same principle of *prajaniti* for *praja*, which apparently seemed to be a denial of politics. Misra, Pritipushpa. *Language and the Making of Modern India: Nationalism and the Vernacular in Colonial Odisha, 1803–1956*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 106-151.

⁴⁸⁶ Ludden, David. "Spatial Inequity and National Territory: Remapping 1905 in Bengal and Assam." *Modern Asian Studies* Volume 46, no. 3 (2012): 482-525: 482-525.

⁴⁸⁷ Resolution moved by J. Chowdhuri of Bengal for discussion on Territorial Redistribution of Bengal in *Report of the Proceedings of the Nineteenth Indian National Congress Held at Madras in December 1903*. Madras: G. A. Natesan and Company, n.d, pp. 128-129.

until then he was unaware of the capability of mother tongue for the purpose of “explanation, argument and inspiration”.⁴⁸⁸

What for Bengal was a partition had some other implications for Assam. Assam, as we have already mentioned, since the constitution of the Chief Commissionership was a heterogeneous province dominated by and suffering from the conflicts between the two dominant language groups. In administrative parlance, it remained “the smallest and most backward of the local administrations”⁴⁸⁹ as reconstructed was going to acquire a new and “composite” character.⁴⁹⁰ The Assamese intelligentsia was in a dilemma. They criticized the Bengali nationalist leaders’ contradictory attitude to recognize the distinctiveness of Assamese, while deplored the breaking up of the homogeneity of Bengal. Still suffering from anxiety at the probable outcome of the amalgamation, perhaps the Assamese intelligentsia took it as an opportunity.

In 1903, 1904 and 1906, when the Congress opposed the separation of Bengal, Lakshminath was present in the annual sessions as delegate from Assam. He was a member of the Subject committee in the former two, though no record of his participation in the debates on any issue including Bengal partition is found. In the 1903 session, V. Krishnaswami Iyer, a participant in the discussion of the issue of territorial readjustment pointed out that the subject committee’s stand on the resolution was not “unanimous”. It is to be noted that after 1906, Lakshminath never participated in any session of the Congress, not even in the 1926 session held in Assam, though in the same year, he actively participated in the annual session of the *Asam Sahitya*

⁴⁸⁸ *Report of the Proceedings of the Twenty-First Annual Conference of Indian National Congress held in Benaras in December, 1905*, Indian National Congress, 1905.

⁴⁸⁹ *Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms*. Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1918, p. 575.

⁴⁹⁰ At first, it was the ‘backward’ state of a non-regulation province like Assam, for which the Bengali nationalists opposed the proposed transfer of advanced Bengali districts like Dacca and Mymensingh. Resolution moved by J. Chowdhuri of Bengal for discussion on Territorial Redistribution of Bengal, *Report of the Proceedings of the Nineteenth Indian National Congress Held at Madras on December 1903*, n.d, pp. 128-129.

Sabha, the premier literary forum of the time. Lakshminath since then was mostly visible as an editor, writer and a champion of language activism.

However, during the early decades of the twentieth century, there was no such division between language activism and political activism.⁴⁹¹ The intelligentsia's political aspirations were largely reflected in its passion as a linguistic community. It was the platform of the Assam Association, the first regional political body of Assam established in 1903, which became instrumental in formation of the student organization like the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan* in 1916 and literary body like the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* in 1917. Initially all three shared the same places, arrangements, and audience to hold their annual conferences. The Assamese intelligentsia, still not quite big in size, had a homogenous character, which represented a shared opinion and approach to the issues related to the region.

It was often said that the transfer of liberal ideology through colonial education was conceived by the colonial rule for a numerically small but ideologically congenial intelligentsia that it needed even for its own legitimization. Linguistic shifts towards vernaculars that took place during the colonial period, followed by their standardization could also be seen as part of the plan to extend colonial ideology. Tier within education policy was instrumental for the emerging political structure. It was even in the colonial officers' reports, critique of the public political domain got reflected. As late as 1927, when the Chief Secretary of the Government of Assam wrote to the Government of India on the functioning of the reformed constitutions in Assam, he stated that there could not be said to be any public opinion in the political sense outside the educated classes, which was reported to be a very small section of the total

⁴⁹¹ Nabinchandra Bardoloi and Tarunram Phukan, two prominent faces of the earlier stage of the Assam Congress, were also known for their literary activities. Phukan, being a popular orator, participated in the 1926 annual session of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, and delivered a persuasive and effective lecture there. After two years, mostly as a reward for the speech, he had been elected as its President.

population. Larger section, being confined to the immediate material needs, cared “nothing for larger political questions” or even knew about them.⁴⁹²

Unity’s Strength is a Half-truth: Debate with Rabindranath

In 1891, after being married with a Bengali family, when Lakshminath chose to settle in Calcutta, his marriage became an issue of talk in certain sections of Assam. The marriage with the Tagore family did not remain a personal or family affair. In a letter to Hemchandra Goswami, another prominent activist of language politics in Assam in the period, a friend of both expressed his personal concern on Lakshminath’s marriage with “a daughter” of “rival Bengal” as well as Assam’s loss of a “graduate” and “worthy” son and at personal level their loss of a “good friend”.⁴⁹³ That was not an isolated case. Lakshminath’s own reminiscence of his marriage with Prajnasundari clearly indicates that his marital relationship with a Bengali family elicited some controversies among the educated section of Assam.

Contrary to the doubt expressed by his friends on him, it was during this time, Lakshminath concentrated on the language debate more minutely. He conceived a series of lectures entitled *Asamiya Bhasa* and delivered the first of it on 5 January of 1895 in a sitting of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*. The series, consisting of eight lectures, was an attempt to address the question posed at that time by a section on the status of Assamese as an independent language. He argued in the speech that difference or similarity of the languages could not be judged, nor origin be determined by examining and comparing isolated word lists, which had

⁴⁹² *Reports on the Working of the Reformed Constitution, 1927*. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, Government of India, 1928, p. 514

⁴⁹³ “Let the bride be the scion of even a more illustrious family than the Tagores, still you must admit that she is a daughter of our rival Bengal. By this marriage, Assam does not lose a graduate but a worthy one too. We lost a good friend ...” Letter from Prasanna Kumar Phukan to Hemchandra Goswami, 26 April, 1891 in Goswami, *Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*, 1972, p. 558.

become an out-dated method with philologists like William Jones and Johan Christoph Adelung. Borrowing words are natural for a developing and living language. Although each language has some basic vocabularies untainted by outer influences, the true test of individuality of a language is its syntax or idiom. It was through these speeches, Lakshminath pioneered the Assamese nationalists' attempt to produce a biography of the Assamese language.

It was also a time, when in spite of the deep impact of the print public spheres of Calcutta on the youths from Assam, and their celebration of heroic images of writers like Bankimchandra and Rabindranath, the intelligentsia of Assam identified the Bengali as their rival. Hemchandra Goswami, in his lecture on *Asamiya Bhasa*, already published in the *Jonaki*, saw a '*Bengali Plot*' in the institution of Bengali in Assam.⁴⁹⁴ Reflecting on the first few years of the twentieth century, Sumit Sarkar comments that regional and local interests determined the nature and extent of specific responses of the intelligentsia towards the raj. In Bihar, Orissa and Assam, the educated Bengali became increasingly unpopular due to its dominant position in services and professions, and '*counter-elite*' movements developed with the spread of education.⁴⁹⁵ Lakshminath in a lecture made an explicit complaint,

“If a situation of monthly salary of Rs 15/- lies vacant, the Bengalis try to import their Bengali brothers from their homeland. Only in unavoidable circumstances, the Assamese are appointed. They also get pleasure in daily speeches by referring to the Assamese people as 'Asami bhoot, backward or uncivilized Assamese'.”⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁴ Fakir Mohan Senapati of Orissa showed a similar reaction to the language question of Orissa. Senapati, Fakir Mohan. *Atmcharit*. Translated by Maitri Shukla. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2009, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁹⁵ Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, 1983, p. 125.

⁴⁹⁶ “*Asamiya Bhasa-Pratham Baktrita*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 5, Issue 4, 1895 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 603-612.

The Assamese intelligentsia, to resolve the issue, sometimes made a division between the “lower class” Bengali who were held to be aspirants of pretty jobs in Assam and the “higher class” Bengali, who allegedly championed the liberal values. Instead of their animus for the first category, the Bengalis of the second category constantly remained a template for them.

Meanwhile, with the gradual popularity of the Indian National Congress, in the twentieth century, the older debate on Assamese and Bengali appeared in a new form. Some of the Bengali elite began to believe and propagate their opinion that the Assamese should relinquish the demand for independent status of Assamese for the unity’s sake.⁴⁹⁷ The Indian nationalists, at this phase, considered regionalism to be an impediment to greater Indian nationalism and blamed the imperial language policy as divisive. Rabindranath Tagore, uncle of Prajnasundari and literary idol of the Assamese youths, wrote an article in the *Bharati* in 1894, a family-run Bengali journal entitled *Bhasabichched*. The article was later included in his collection *Sabdatattva*, published in 1908. Rabindranath argued for merger of weaker languages like Assamese and Oriya with Bengali, which was the only developed modern language of India.⁴⁹⁸ He advocated for the unity among the cogent, *sagotriya* languages, which according to him, was either a natural consequence to happen or to be achieved by a little effort, and this unity will lead to permanent progress.

Concentrating on the necessity of a common language in India, he argued that being a foreign language, English could not obtain that place. Bengali modern literature is the core of the

⁴⁹⁷ Dinesh Chandra Sen, in his lectures delivered at the Calcutta University, within the months of January to April, 1909 made his opinion that the vanity of preserving the peculiarities of a small province ‘does not indicate a healthy state of feeling.’ Emphasizing on the unification of language, he argued, “---unity in languages, as in other matters, contributes to the glory of our national life, and this point should not be ignored by our brethren who speak only different forms of the same language.” Sen, Dineshchandra. *History of Bengali Language and Literature*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1954, pp. 115-117.

⁴⁹⁸ See “*Bhasabichched* ” in Tagore, Rabindranath. *Sabdatattva*. Calcutta: Indian Publishing House, 1909.

success story of the Bengali, and if the law of natural selection is applied, Bengali is the fittest language to occupy that position. What he explicitly proposed was Bengali as the sole medium of reading and writing for the Assamese and Oriya speaking communities. Taking into account the relatively more prosperous literature of Bengal, it will be beneficial not only from the standpoint of development of Bengali but also from the perspectives of the speakers of Assamese and Oriya. He believed that the division around the issues of employment was for a shorter period, but the unity of language was permanent and far deeper.

Tagore, while praised the colonial rule because its imperial design had facilitated the development of trade, commerce, and improved employment opportunities, also for producing an emerging bond of single administrative unit; simultaneously argued that the colonial rule artificially created this rift of language by the wilful instigation to a section of educated youths to propagate their separatist claims. If uninterrupted by the ruling class, Bengali would prevail in Assam and Orissa in natural course. He pointed out the similarity of Assamese and Oriya with Bengali, and concluded that language existed to ascertain free communication among the brothers; the barrier of language was undesirable, which only promoted rigidity and provincial arrogance.⁴⁹⁹ Rabindranath's response to the language issue could be better understandable to us in the context of the time. In 1900, the Nagari script had acquired equal status with Urdu, which gave a new momentum to the demand of Hindi as a *Rastrabhasa* in India, whereas within Calcutta, Bengali was already challenged by the rising population in the city of the Hindi speakers.

Lakshminath, in his part, denounced Rabindranath's appeal for the merger, and pointed out that the proponents of solidarity and unity mask their vanity and interests of getting employment in Assam. The Bengali would not give up their language for the sake of Hindi to prosper in the

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

name of fraternity and unity of India. They even do not accept English to inherit the richer literary tradition of that language. The same was true with the Assamese. Assamese is an ancient language with at least a five-hundred-year-old tradition of written literature. It was never formed artificially from the outside by anybody's will or effort. No language is and can be created by the will of its speakers. Language evolves spontaneously from the material and natural condition. Assam possesses an independent history, and due to its distant location from the original Aryan speaking area, and its mixture with the native languages, the originally spoken Aryan language of the region has acquired new form in Assam. It will flow forever with the life-blood of the people being inseparable from the flesh and soul of the sons of Assam. It will be continued, though the warriors for its cause may come and go.⁵⁰⁰

Lakshminath criticized that the call for unity was nothing but an effort to swallow the independence of the minority linguistic groups in the name of unity. One language for the entire India is good to hear, but a thousand miles to go for that. He does not believe that hundreds of languages need to die for the sake of development of a lingua franca in India. There are enough spaces for them to exist in a relationship of opposition and even of tussle within them. If one calls to relinquish the demand of autonomy of Assamese to widen the empire of Bengali, then he should better call to do the same to the Bengali to widen the horizon of Hindi, so that, in India, Hindi may develop to a lingua franca after English.⁵⁰¹ Drawing on the theme of *matribhasa*, Lakshminath stated, nothing was so dear in the world as lovely as *matribhumi* and *matribhasa*. No human being could help submerging in deep love for the motherland. He pointed out that it is through one's separation from one's own land and language; one could

⁵⁰⁰ "Asamiya Bhasa Samparke Aru Duasar Katha", *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 1909.

⁵⁰¹ "Asamiya Bhasa- Pratham Baktrita ", Volume 5, Issue 2, 1895 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 604-612.

comprehend the real significance of mother tongue. No language, how much improved it may be, can replace one's mother tongue.⁵⁰²

In response to *Bhasabichched*, he sent his reaction to the *Bharati*, in which Rabindranath's article was published, but it did not appear there. Then he sent it to the *Punya*, another journal of the Tagore family, where it was published with the signature of an "Assambasi", an inhabitant of Assam. The content page showed his name as Lakshminath Bidyabaryya. Participating in the debate, Lakshminath questioned whether Rabindranath deserved to initiate such a discussion, as he possessed little knowledge both of *Bhasabijnan*, science of language and of Assamese.⁵⁰³ Referring to the numerical strength of the Bengali speakers, Lakshminath commented in a sarcastic style,

"Bengali's mouth and stomach are big enough and have enormous hunger and digestive power. Is it rational to swallow Assamese for that reason? Is it justified that a language with a lesser number of speakers will cease to develop and be extinct forever?"⁵⁰⁴

He argued that if language be the sole factor of unity, then there will not have been any division and conflict among the Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims, and Hindi-speaking Hindu and Muslim. There will not have been division between England and America, because they possess the same language. Rabindranath considered unity of language as panacea for all

⁵⁰² "Asamiya Bhasa- Dvitiya Baktrita ", Volume 5, Issue 5, 1895 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 621-628.

⁵⁰³ Janaika Asambasi. "Asami Bhasa", *Punya*, Volume 2, Issues 1-2, 1305 Bangabda, 1903, pp. 22-32. The article was published with an editorial note that the unification of Assamese and Bengali was desired, but it could not be done forcefully, especially when the Assamese people were resistant to the proposition. It was only through *andolan* and *alochana*, debate and discussion on the topic, the truth would come to the fore.

⁵⁰⁴ As a champion of Assamese linguistic nationalism, Lakshminath in several published speeches, reiterated his argument in favour of the rights of the minority language groups in India. He visualized India as a united form of empire consisting of many linguistic provinces.

division and divorce, whereas he undermined the vast difference of customs and culture of the two regions.⁵⁰⁵

Apart from the issues related to broader nationalistic unity and claims of regional community, the debate had a personal-familial side. Within the family discussions at Jorasanko, particularly at their family gatherings of the *Suhrid Samity*, a semi-social space to pursue art and literature, the contemporary issues on language were raised.

“They tried to make me a Bengali.”

Lakshminath claimed in his memoir referring to his in-law’s efforts. Like other contemporaries from Bengal, the Tagores were not willing to admit the independent status to Assamese, on which, now and then, discussions transformed to debates. On one such occasion, a debate took place on the topic with “*Rabikaka*” or Rabindranath, who otherwise mostly maintained his silence on the issue. It was only after that incident Rabindranath chose to make a public stand on the issue through the already mentioned article in the *Bharati*. According to Lakshminath, finding in him an “untamed horse”, ultimately, they had given up their attempts, leaving him to remain as he had been. Later in the *Banhi*, Lakshminath even published a cartoon with the rubric, War between Poets, portraying Rabindranath (*Thaku Kavi*) as a defeated figure, but caricaturing a mock-heroic image of the *aamar kavi*, our poet, who was none but Lakshminath himself.⁵⁰⁶

It seems that the language debate did not have any detrimental impact on their personal relationship. Lakshminath’s diary of 1896 indicates that the familial relationship went as usual. On 28 September of that year, Rabikaka with other members of their extended family visited Lakshminath and Prajnasundari’s residence to attend the *Annaprasana* ceremony of their

⁵⁰⁵ Janaika Asambasi. “*Asami Bhasa*”, *Punya*, Volume 2, Issues 1-2, pp. 22-32.

⁵⁰⁶ “*Kavir Junj*”, *Banhi*, Volume 3, Issue 2, 1911, p. 41.

daughter and performed a song on the occasion. In 1923, when Lakshminath visited Shillong to treat his dog-bite, *Rabikaka*, who had already been staying there, offered them breakfast and dinner for a day. *Rabikaka* even treated one of the daughters of Lakshminath suffering from fever with homeopathic medicine.⁵⁰⁷

Lakshminath wrote in his memoir that when he met Rabindranath at Shillong, he regretted Assam's opposition to accepting Bengali, and made his point clear, in such a situation from “where can one get encouragement to write and publish one’s books?”⁵⁰⁸ Obviously, it was the size of the readership, at which, as a writer, Rabindranath was concerned. Lakshminath maintained his silence at the moment. In fact, Lakshminath always mentioned Rabindranath with utmost respect. Opinions might vary, but there remained enough reason for him to get inspiration from a writer and thinker as great as Rabindranath.

Crafting a Standard Language

By the end of the eighteenth century, colonial India had already exhibited a tendency to produce vast bodies of grammars and dictionaries of the vernaculars, first by the administrators and missionaries to serve their respective interests,⁵⁰⁹ and then by the efforts of the local literary elite, out of the propagated love for their language. There was an impulse to blanket the everyday language practices of the people in grammars and dictionaries.

⁵⁰⁷ See entries on 10 & 13 May, 1923. *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

⁵⁰⁸ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. "Mor Jivan Sowaran." In *Bezbaroa Granthavali, Pratham Khanda*, by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, edited by Atulchandra Hazarika. Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 1968.

⁵⁰⁹ Robinson, in 1839, published “A Grammar of the Assamese Language”, which, as stated in the Preface by the author, was written to serve ‘real utility’ of the Europeans who entered the region with the interests of ‘mercantile speculations’ could afford an intelligible medium of negotiations with the people, and glean extensive information on commercial potentiality, described Assam in these terms. See Robinson, William. *A Grammar of Assamese*. Dibrugarh: Dibrugarh University, 1996.

Print, prose and education were the pillars on which a standard form of a language may grow, and out of these, the necessity of a standard language emanates. Print demanded a standard spelling system, which was yet to be formed in case of Assamese. As early as in 1813, preparing the Assamese version of the New Testament to print, the Serampore missionaries had observed that the Bengali type did not “fully answer” the purpose, as though almost identical in names and power, several letters in Assamese “vary a little in their shape”, and in one instance the Assamese alphabet had two distinct letters ‘b’ and ‘v’, whereas in Bengali there was but one.⁵¹⁰ Enhancing print culture in Assamese, the Baptist mission press of Sibsagar had to grapple with the forming of a “correct and uniform system of orthography”.⁵¹¹ The Sanskritised orthography was relinquished in favour of a simplified one, because it seemed to them it would produce “distortions” and “unintelligibility”. Nathan Brown expressed satisfaction that among the common people, their effort to give them their own language in a simple and uniform dress, was met with universal favour.⁵¹²

The Assamese intelligentsia, while trying to craft a standard written language, had made a departure from the missionary policy of simplified spelling method, and chosen to follow an artificial Sanskritized model. Hemchandra Borooah considered this orthography “completely wrong” and advocated for a Sanskritised etymological spelling system. In the proceedings of the fifth to the seventh year, the Secretary of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* declared that gradual overcoming of the impure grammar and spelling system to replace it by a *parishuddha bhasa* (refined language), and in place of textbooks written in a polluted language to produce the textbooks in a “*suddha bhasa*” (correct language) were its basic objectives. The

⁵¹⁰ Baptist Missionary Society. *A Memoir of the Serampore Translations for 1813: To Which is Added, an Extract of a Letter from Dr. Marshman to Dr. Ryland Concerning the Chinese*. Kettering: J. G. Fuller, 1815. p. 14.

⁵¹¹ See “Introduction” in Brown, *Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language*, 1848, pp. III-XXVI.

⁵¹² Ibid, p. X.

Sabha emphasized that it would devote itself to “create one single written language throughout Assam ”.⁵¹³ The *Sabha*, in response to a call for a discussion on the issue by A. K. Gurney, a Baptist missionary, constituted a forum.⁵¹⁴

Jonaki published a series of articles on the spelling system, written by Lambodar Borah. He, while coming away from the exclusively phonemic orthography of the missionaries, proposed a simple orthography based on integrity of three principles, pronunciation, etymology and convention. The author pointed out that Assamese is a *chaha*, rustic language, but for the sake of modernizing it, one should follow the speeches of the *bhal* or respected classes as authentic.⁵¹⁵ The Assamese intelligentsia of the time increasingly felt the lack of standard grammar and dictionary in Assamese, so much so that Lakshminath, in a public speech, tried to soothe the audience by stating that it is the dictionaries and grammars, which follow the language. A language is never determined by them. He noted that lack of a dictionary or a good

⁵¹³ “*Kalikata Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabhar Karya Bibarani (Astam Bachar)*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 9 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 744-748.

⁵¹⁴ “*Kalikata Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabhar Karya Navam Bachar*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 7, Issue 4, Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 822-823. Gurney stated, “A system of spelling and style for the Assamese language has not yet been fixed upon. It is very desirable to have such a system devised before the Old Testament is printed. At present the methods of writing the language is various. ... I am in communication in this subject with the three principal Assamese improvement Societies in the province. As yet they taken no united action on the subject.” See Gurney, A. K. “Sibsagor - 1841.” *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Vol. LXXVII, Issue 7, 1897, p. 313.

⁵¹⁵ Borah, Lambodar. “*Asamiya Bhasar Akhar Jotani*”, in *Jonaki*, Volume 3, Issue 1, Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 236-240; Volume 3, Issue 2 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 254-255; Volume 4, Issues 1 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 419-420; Volume 4, Issue 5 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 481-483; Volume 4, Issue 6 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 495-497; Volume 4, Issue 9 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 523-524; Volume 4, Issue 10 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 535-537; Volume 4, Issues 11-12 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 557-565.

grammar could not be serious obstacles for a developing language. The shirt of a dictionary stitched at a time for a language will not properly fit in the later days. He argued,

“*Abhidhan* and *Vyakaran* are outer garments of a language. As the language grows, they have to attune to it.”⁵¹⁶

In fact, Hemchandra Borooah had already compiled a bilingual dictionary, which till then remained unpublished. During this period of efforts to overcome the incongruities of the spelling system and to shape a standard language, the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* endeavoured to publish it, and got the necessary permission from the author.⁵¹⁷ The *Sabha* constantly reiterated its efforts to publish the dictionary, but in the meantime, the author died, and ultimately the government undertook the task. The eighth- year annual proceedings of the *Sabha* expressed its pleasure at the consequence and stated that the government would be the more suitable agency to publish such substantial work.⁵¹⁸ In 1900, the dictionary, compiled by Hemchandra Borooah, came to be published in the title of “*Hema Kosha* or An Etymological Dictionary of the Assamese Language”. It was edited jointly by Capt. P. R. Gurdon, then Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar and Hemchandra Gosain(Goswami).⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁶ “*Asamiya Bhasa-Pratham Baktrita*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 2 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 604-612.

⁵¹⁷ In a letter on 11 May, 1890 from Tezpur, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, the founder editor of the *Jonaki*, who, at his father’s pressure, had to return Assam without completing graduation after failing at his first attempt, expressed his eagerness on the subject. He hoped that the author “has been wise enough to commit his Dictionary to our care, or else it might have been published in no time. Be wise in your turn; strike the iron while it is hot. Try every means at your disposal to get subscribers to your dictionary.” Letter of Chandrakumar to Hemchandra Goswami, from Tezpur, 15 April, 1890 in Goswami, *Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*, 1972, Appendix “Kha”, p. 559.

⁵¹⁸ “*Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabhar Karya Bibarani (Pancham to Saptam Bachar)*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 5, Issue 7, 1895 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 660-663.

⁵¹⁹ Borooah, Hemchandra. *Hem-Kosha, or An Etymological Dictionary of the Assamese Language*. Edited by P. R. T. Gurdon and Hemchandra Gosain (Goswami). Calcutta: Calcutta Baptist Mission Press, 1900.

The *Hema-Kosha* substantially differed from the Assamese-English bilingual dictionary already compiled by Miles Bronson in 1867, not only in its Sanskritised spelling system, but also for its effort to provide the derivations of words, which evidently reflects the intelligentsia's attempt to Sanskritise the language.⁵²⁰ The dictionary contained 22,386 words.⁵²¹ In 1914, Lakshminath wrote in the *Banhi*, that the dictionary and grammar of Hemchandra were recognized both by the ruler and the ruled as standard, correct and ideal, so the writers deficient of sufficient knowledge of Assamese ought to learn the language from them. Lakshminath even reiterated that an enlarged edition of *Hema Kosha* can fulfill the necessity more accurately than a new dictionary.⁵²²

By the second decade of the twentieth century, with the institution of the vernaculars as academic subjects, as well as expansion of the print culture, most of the Indian vernaculars had to more intensely concentrate on the issue of standardization. In 1916, Subramanya Bharati, a Tamil author made a "clarion call" to write as the people say. A section of Tamil nationalists even appealed to "disprove any trace of rootedness to the Aryan".⁵²³ During the same period, addressing a debate on literary Bengali, Jadunath Sarkar made his opinion,

"Our Pandits have been the greatest enemies of the introduction of the vernacular medium by their insistence on a difficult artificial literary Bengali style, which is often more obscure than English to us.

⁵²⁰ See P. R. T. Gurdon's Foreword, Ibid.

⁵²¹ Gurdon, P. R. T. "Chandra-Kanta Abhidhan. A comprehensive Dictionary of the Assamese Language, pp. xxx 1 1044. Assam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat, 1933." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 1935: 235-237, pp. 235-236.

⁵²² It was instead of the fact that 36,819 words were contained by the new dictionary, whereas the *Hema-Kosha* contained 22, 386 words. Ibid, p. 236.

⁵²³ A section of Tamil nationalists questioned imperialism, while identifying it with northern India, the Aryan Brahmans, Sanskrit and Hindi. Another section, on the other hand, wanted to replace imperialism and English with the Indian nation and Tamil. They were sympathetic to the Brahman contributions to Tamil. "One Language, Many Imaginings" in Ramaswami, *Passions of the Tongue, Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*, 1997, pp. 22-78.

Allow a simple unadorned vernacular style in the answers at University examinations as the means of ensuring true knowledge.”⁵²⁴

In Hindi, Mahabir Prasad Dwivedi was in favour of a grammatically fixed, standard print language with regular syntax, word order, elaborate subordinate clauses and preference for abstract nouns and verbs. His view was stern and normative in opposition to Bharatendu Harischandra, who stressed that the standard language should be useful and intelligible to all.⁵²⁵ Vasudha Dalmia describes his notion of standard language as a “simple vernacular” spoken by and intelligible to masses as “innovatory”, if it is not proper to call it “revolutionary”.⁵²⁶

Crafting literary prose or a standard written language had become the prime challenge immediately to be tackled by the generation of Lakshminath. He, in a public speech in 1895, called to come away from the high style Sankritised prose and emphasized the importance of a simple and lucid prose style grounded on the familiar language of the mundane life. He emphasized on the necessity of cultivating creative prose like novels and history. It is the language of such prose genres which, in his opinion, belong to the crores of the readers.⁵²⁷

Coming back to the theme in 1924, Lakshminath pointed out that in Bengali, the distinction between *sadhu bhasa* and *moukhik bhasa* is clearly perceptible. He warned the Assamese writers to be careful so that the division between the literary and everyday language would not become as high as to be insurmountable. Propagating a middle way as usual, he argued that in literature, there are places for both, and gifted writers use them with equal competence. Literary language should not be divorced from the language of mundane life. But it is not sufficient to

⁵²⁴ *Modern Review*, Vol. XXIII, January, 1918.

⁵²⁵ Dalmia, Vasudha. *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bhāratendu Hariśchandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010, p. 197.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁷ “*Asamiya Bhasa-Samarani Baktrita*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 4, 1895 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 699-703.

say that literary composition should be simple and natural. Literary language should be a heightened language of serious concern. In the meantime, Lakshminath's *Banhi* and his writings including the humorous prose written in the sobriquet of *Kripabor*, came to be assessed as ideal prose of the modern times.⁵²⁸ On the other hand, the *Assam Bandhab*, a periodical of the time, blamed his prose for its provincialism.

Ujani/Bhati: Regional Contestation

However, the celebrated event of emergence of a literary language or shaping of a “pure” language to perform some socially elevated functions hides within it, ways of inequalities. Standardization presupposes homogenization, whereas language varies according to region, class, caste, profession etc. Every language is internally divided.

Towards the first decades of the twentieth century, the emerging Assamese linguistic community had to suffer from internal strife.⁵²⁹ The dominance of the speech of a particular area in the standard form was being questioned by a section coming from other areas. The process of standardization of Assamese on the basis of the speeches of the upper Assam,

⁵²⁸ “Without reading Lakshminath, one cannot hope to write good prose in Assamese”, Banikanta Kakati, a contemporary critic in Assamese of the younger generation proclaimed in a discussion in the 1930s.

⁵²⁹ By the 1840s, even the missionary opinions were divided on the question of the speeches of upper and lower Assam. There remained a ‘material difference’ between the language of the Assam proper and that of the lower Assam. Danforth, living in Guwahati, found ‘so great a discrepancy between Assamese and Dhekeri’ that he was beginning to talk of ‘designing a separate language of Kamrup’, which was the language of the lower Assam. Brown countered the idea on the ground that it might produce a split in the mission. In 1844, Brown openly expressed his anxiety over the proposed removal of the press from Assam proper to Guwahati, which, according to him, would be followed by the conversion of ‘the Assamese mission’ into a ‘Bengali’ one. According to him, the Bengali language had already obtained the ascendancy in lower Assam and being the only one encouraged or cultivated by the government, sure to prevail. He deprecated the measure and argued that ‘at our doors so large a population speaks one uniform, copious, and beautiful language, as yet unsupplied labors at all adequate to the occupation of the wide field.’ See Barpujari, H. K. *The American Missionaries and North-East India, 1836-1900*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publication, 1986, pp. 124-128.

particularly the then Sibsagar district, aroused a degree of reactions from the educated sections of other regions including those of then districts of Kamrup, Durrang and Goalpara. The rift had been fermenting in the 1890s. The eighth-year proceedings of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* mentioned the construction of organizations of the same objectives and with the same name of Kohima, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Tezpur, Nagaon, Barpeta and Jorhat. The secretary especially appealed to the Barpeta branch, the branch situated in lower Assam, to make an effort for prevalence of one written language all over Assam. The members were requested to be concerned about a “great and noble objective”.⁵³⁰ Lakshminath himself once visualized the Assamese standard language to be exclusively based on the speech of the upper Assam.⁵³¹

It is not true that dialects of the *bhati*, the western Assam remained altogether invisible in the print. But with the recognition of Assamese for the entrance course, and other scholarship courses, the intelligibility and appropriateness of the language of question papers was put into question. It was pointed out that the language of the Assamese question papers was replete with upper Assam *jargons* and incomprehensible for the candidates of the lower Assam. Writers from Kamrup district complained of the standard Assamese as far more provincial and rustic.

The *Asam Bandhav*, a periodical, allegedly conceived by a section of the lower Assam intelligentsia with the intention of challenging the dominance of the upper Assam language, complained against the privilege of the “elder son” enjoyed by the people of a particular area.⁵³² It criticized the *Banhi* and the *Alochani*, two major periodicals of the times edited by two

⁵³⁰ “*Kalikata Asamiya Bhasa unnati Sadhini Sabhar Karyya Bibabarn (Astam Bachar)*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 9, 1896, pp. 744-748.

⁵³¹ “*Asamiya Bhasar Samparke Aru Dusharman Katha*”, *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issues 2, 1909 in Goswami, *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*, 2001, pp. 42-52.

⁵³² “*Amar Sahitya*”, *Assam Bandhav*, Volume 7, Issue 10, 1917, p. 366.

leading Assamese nationalists, for not publishing the writings of the lower Assam writers, and demanded equal right to serve the *matribhasa*. The periodical challenged the authority of the *Hema Kosha*, and complained that Hemchandra Borooah's Grammar of Assamese was not a grammar of the Assamese language as it really was, but a prescriptive one of what kind of language he himself wanted to make of Assamese.⁵³³ Without lodging any separatist claims, it called this difference in terms of *Bhasa-Sangram*, tussle of languages, and declared that while the *Banhi* and the *Alochani* were trying to make Assamese obsolete by the prevalence of speeches of *Ujani*, the *Bandhav*'s effort was to make Assamese universal. It proposed broadening the horizon of Assamese, so that it became acceptable to all regions. The *Asam Bandhav*, alarmed the Assamese nationalists to avoid their parochialism in favour of a liberal attitude. Otherwise, it warned, the posterity will not excuse them for creating such a division.⁵³⁴

In 1909, Lakshminath called the writers of the lower Assam not to oppose the formation of a universal *jatiya bhasa*, which he conceptualized as a sea. The rivers, rivulets and streams, prior to their union with the sea, keep their own characteristics; but all are lost after the union. Similarly, he appealed to avoid the local variations of the language with the greater interest of enrichment of the *jatiya bhasa*.⁵³⁵ He also stated, Assamese is a language neither solely of *ujani*, nor of *bhati*. It is a language of the whole Assam. There may be much influence or dominance, and high presence of idiom of the *ujani*, and less from the *bhati*, but the language used in the literary domain and by the respectable classes is the "real Assamese language of Assam". Again, he quoted the law of natural selection. It is the material condition or convenience, on

⁵³³ Ibid, p. 367.

⁵³⁴ "Deshar Katha-Goalparat Asamiya Bhasa", *Asam Bandhav*, Volume 7, Issue 8, 1916, pp. 317-319.

⁵³⁵ *Asamiya Bhasar Samparke Aru Dusharman Katha, Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 1909 in Goswami, ed. *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*, 2001, pp. 42-52.

which a local speech becomes powerful enough to assert its dominance over the other forms. Language and *jati* also follow the natural law of progress.⁵³⁶

Being challenged as an editor of *Banhi*, Lakshminath had to clarify his stand on the debate.⁵³⁷ Earlier the *Banhi* declared a competition of short- story to be written in the language of Kamrup.⁵³⁸ The effort was challenged by Uttam Chandra Borooah, who introduced himself as “*Kamrupiya Nibhaj Dhekari*”, a pure *Kamrupi*, as a divisionist tendency.⁵³⁹ Trying for reconciliation, Lakshminath argued that *Asamiya bhasa* means *Kamrupiya* and *Kamrupiya* means Assamese. It is equally possible to compose excellent poems in the language of *bhati*. It is not true that, if one preserves the peculiarities of a dialect in his composition, it is only for the purpose to despise the speakers of that dialect, or to make the dialect rival of the *ghai bhasa*, standard language. Whether old or new, any composition in *bhati* language with excellence must be preserved and welcomed.⁵⁴⁰ He even argued that a living language always borrows from others. A growing language makes the surrounding ideas and words indicative of those ideas of its own, which a dead language cannot. The language of *ujani* has also been borrowed from *bhati* and will continue in future. In this process of give-and-take, both become transformed.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ “*Amar Namani Asamar Bandhusakalar Prati*”, *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 2, Calcutta, 1910 in Goswami, ed. *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*, 2001, pp. 82-83.

⁵³⁸ *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 10, 1909, see content page.

⁵³⁹ Borooah, Uttam Chandra “*Ejan Asamiya Dangariyar Chithi*”, *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 2, 1910 in Goswami, ed. *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*, 2001, pp. 80-82.

⁵⁴⁰ “*Amar Namani-Asamar Bandhusakalar Prati*”, *Sampadak*, Ibid, pp. 82-83.

Goalpariya: Language of the Frontier

Despite the nationalists' imagination of a language as an internally coherent whole, it often resists coherence, and varies from space to space. In the areas between Dibrugarh in the east to Goalpara in the west, language changes slowly. It is not possible to determine where Assamese ends and Bengali begins. The actual practice of the people of a region differs from the standard modern organizations of linguistic difference as they are shown in maps; and the complexity inherent in differentiation becomes clearly perceptible in a borderland, where two languages merge with each other.

Prior to its annexation with Assam, Goalpara, a permanently settled district, was a part of Bengal. According to Grierson, the dialect of western and south western Goalpara was pure *Rajbanshi*, a Bengali dialect, while in the eastern part of the district the dialect is western Assamese influenced by the neighbouring *Rajbanshi*.⁵⁴¹ Quoting a deputy commissioner of the district, the 1921 census report, pointed out the fruitlessness of working upon the existing frame of “Bengali” and “Assamese”, and stated that the plain fact was that the people of the district speak in “*Goalpari*”, with a tinge of Bengali in the Bengal end and a tinge of Assamese in the Assam end, and with of both in the middle.⁵⁴² The census figures show a rapid decline of Assamese speakers from 1881 to 1901, and then a sudden rise in the census of 1911.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴¹ McSwiney, J. *Census of India, 1911, Vol. III: Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press Printing, 1912. p. 117.

⁵⁴² Lloyd, G. T. *Census of India, 1921. Vol. III: Assam, Part I*. Shillong: The Government Press, Assam, 1923, p. 117.

⁵⁴³ It was stated in the report of the census of 1911, that, it appeared that ‘the returns were vitiated to show more Bengali and less Assamese speakers than really existed.’ In the language table, the tendency of changing the language to Bengali in place of the original entry of Assamese, was reportedly found. See McSwiney, *Census of India, Assam*, 1912, Chapter IX, p. 97.

Table [3].2

Assamese Speaking population in Goalpara District

Year of Census	Assamese Speakers
1881	1,06,153
1891	27,595
1901	11,397
1911	85,329

With the reverting of Assam again as a Chief Commissioner's province in 1911, voice raised for inclusion of Goalpara and Sylhet to Bengal. The Assamese nationalists were fully opposed to the claims of Goalpara as a Bengali dominated district, although they did not show such unanimity and rigour in case of Sylhet. In 1913, commenting on Benudhar Rajkhowa⁵⁴⁴ proposing Sylhet's cultural proximity to Assam from the ancient time, Lakshminath wrote in the same tune,

“The Sylheti friends' efforts to be Bengali is a matter of convenience.”⁵⁴⁵

Without compromising the Assamese nationalists' demand on the language of Sylhet as a “corrupt form” of Assamese, Lakshminath later wrote,

“Sylheties live in borderland, living in an ambiguous space, one can side with this or that way at one's will”.⁵⁴⁶

In the case of Goalpara, they were determined and made a lobby for restoring Goalpara, ensuring no more territorial loss for Assam. In 1914, Assamese was declared an alternative

⁵⁴⁴ “*Kitapar Chamu Nantabya* (Notes on the Sylheti)”, *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 6, 1913, pp. 327-329.

⁵⁴⁵ “*Asamiya Gauripurat Bangala Sahitya Sabha*”, *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issues 9 -12, 1909.

⁵⁴⁶ “*Amar Sylhetia Bhaisakal Ki*”, *Avahan*, Volume 6, Issue 8, 1935, pp. 861-864.

court language of the district. Prior to that in 1912, when the Chief Commissioner had given his consent to run Assamese in lieu of Bengali in the schools of Goalpara district, the Assamese intelligentsia was pleased. Hem Chandra Goswami exclaimed,

“This is the golden opportunity for us. If we can run Assamese this time, it will be a victory for Assamese; otherwise, we will lose the opportunity forever.”⁵⁴⁷

Quoting a letter from a friend from Goalpara, the *Assam Bandhav* reported, that after acceptance of Assamese in a few schools of the area, people had to regret on account of the incomprehensibility of the language of the textbooks. It requested the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sabha* to construct a committee with the nobles and *zamindars* of Goalpara to discuss and resolve the language question of Goalpara.⁵⁴⁸

The Assam Government’s memorandum to the Statutory Commission shows that ‘after considerable agitation by the Assamese, and some counter propagandas’ the order was issued in Goalpara that the medium of instruction in primary level would be Assamese or Bengali in accordance with the local demand.⁵⁴⁹ According to it, in 1909, 1912, and 1919, a section of *zamindars* of Goalpara, on the ground of its linguistic unity, demanded its transfer to Bengal. The chief source of contention was ‘the language question’.⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁷ Hemchandra Goswami’s letter dated 22 May, 1912 to Durgadhar Barkataki in Sharma, Benudhar. *Benudhar Sharma Rachanavali, Pratham Khanda*. edited by Nagen Saikia, Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 2014, pp. 578-581.

⁵⁴⁸ Medhi, Kaliram. “*Deshar Katha*”, *Assam Bandhav*, Volume 7, Issue 8, pp. 318-319.

⁵⁴⁹ Indian Statutory Commission. *Memorandum submitted by the Government of Assam to the Indian Statutory Commission, XIV*, 1930.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 77

The Assamese nationalists, on the other hand, tried to convince that the *Kamrupi* language of the past was the real *janani* of the language of Goalpara.⁵⁵¹ Lakshminath, trying to assert the historical connection with Goalpara, invoked Kamrup, the ancient kingdom, and defined Assamese as the prime language of that kingdom, nevertheless, ‘to whatever extent the boundaries of the present Assam alter’. Being a person of practical vision, Lakshminath knew the power interest of the local *zamindars*, and tried to persuade them by reminding them that within Bengal, an advanced and wealthier province, they would get lesser status than what they had been enjoying in Assam.⁵⁵² He published three cartoons of his own composition in the *Banhi*, showing Goalpara as a woman figure. In one of these, she was forcefully dragged by *Banga*, represented by a male, by her lock of hair, whereas another male representing Assam tried to prevent him. The female Goalpara expressed her hatred and anger against violence committed to her by the male.⁵⁵³

The conflict of language came to the forefront in 1926, on occasion of the annual session of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* held at Dhubri, one of the westernmost towns of the then Goalpara district. The Assamese nationalists perceived the session in anticipation as a “battlefield” of languages. Jatindra Nath Dowerah, one of the closest friends of Lakshminath wrote to him,

“Your decision to go to Dhubri is a good one. I believe the future of Assamese in Goalpara will mostly depend on this conference.”⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵¹ “*Chamu Mantabya- Bijaya*”, *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 9, 1911 in in Goswami, *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*, 2001, pp. 405-408.

⁵⁵² “*Asamiya Gauripurat Bangala Sahitya Sabha*”, *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issues 9, 1909, Volume 1, Issue 10, pp. 305-318, Volume 1 Issue 11, pp. 348-355, Volume 1, Issue 12, pp. 362-369 in in Goswami, *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*, 2001, pp. 348-355.

⁵⁵³ “*Bangaj, Goalpar, Asamiya*”, *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 6, p. 249.

⁵⁵⁴ Letter of Jatindra Nath Dowerah to Lakshminath Bezbaroa on 27 September of 1926 from Calcutta in Neog, Maheswar, ed. *Patralekha*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1968, pp. 265-266.

On 19 of October, when Benudhar Rajkhowa was reading the Presidential address, a portion of the audience, allegedly belonging to the Bengali community, took offence at his certain remarks in the speech.⁵⁵⁵ The next day, the leading persons of the Bengali community, along with their volunteers walked out from the meeting and held a protest meeting at the residence of the president of the reception committee of the session.⁵⁵⁶ The *Prantabasi*, a Bengali magazine published from Goalpara, reported that the session was crowded with the government officials. Political motivation was masked in the name of literature, which compelled the government to impose prevention on its employees to join there. Had it been a real *sahitya sanmilan*, the government would not have done that. Otherwise, the government prevents nobody from pursuing religion or knowledge.⁵⁵⁷ Lakshminath claimed that the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* neither knew politics. Neither the conference's objective at Dhubri was to expel the foreigners from there. The *Sahitya Sabha* knows nothing but *dharmaniti*, patriotism and bond among the compatriots, and the ways of how to embody these ideals through *matribhasa*.⁵⁵⁸ Lakshminath, as a special guest of the session, pronounced that Goalpara is of Assam, the people of Goalpara are Assamese, and the language of Goalpara is the Assamese language. Lakshminath's historical play *Joymoti* was performed at night. According to the Assam Government's memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission, as a consequence of this on-going debate on the supremacy of Bengali and Assamese in schools, and the literary conference of Dhubri, the immediate meeting of the Goalpara District Association resulted in a split. The

⁵⁵⁵ See diary entry on 19 October, 1926, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

⁵⁵⁶ See diary entry on 20 October, *Diaries*, Tezpur University. Benudhar Rajkhowa recalled that he had claimed in the speech that Assamese was the original language, and Bengali was its polluted form. See Rajkhowa, Benudhar. *Mor Jibanar Dapon*. Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 1969 (Published Posthumously). pp. 173-174.

⁵⁵⁷ Quoted in "*Cherepar Amoni*", *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, Volume 3, Issue 1, Jorhat, 1929, pp. 18-25.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

Bodo or Mech community, which formed one tenth of the population of the district, had passed a counter resolution against the transfer of Goalpara.

Census, Immigration, Language and Fear of Extinction

Censuses were crucial to the rise of nationalistic feelings, which introduced the emerging intelligentsia with an enumerated world. Impact of census on the thought process of the intelligentsia as a tool of identity formation is an interesting aspect of modernity. In the pre-colonial world, there were differences among people in terms of language, culture, religion, caste etc.; but the knowledge of one's inclusion to a certain group neither aroused any psychological pressure nor motivated one's social action. In modern times, the perception has changed to great extent. Immediately after the publication of the report of the third decennial census of 1891, an anonymously published article in the *Jonaki*, edited by Lakshminath, mentioned the report and commented,

“Large amounts of information related to the Assamese of both pleasure and regret are available in the report.”⁵⁵⁹

The reaction clearly indicates that categories and statistics of the census were received no more as abstract categories and numerical figures, but they had already become a section's parts of concern and emotion.

The census of 1891, shifting from the counting according to geographical territories, introduced the category of “parent language”, thereby providing a new conception of language, instituting language in personal domain. In fact, the census report did more than that. It, like other documents of colonial rule, reflected and tried to perpetuate the differences already present

⁵⁵⁹ “*Asamiya Siksha*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 4, Issues 11-12, 1892 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 546-556.

among the two valleys and the hill districts. Edward Gait, the Superintendent of the census operation remarked,

“Geographically, linguistically, and ethnologically it (Sylhet) is, and always will be, more nearly allied to the adjacent districts of Eastern Bengal than to any portion of Assam.”⁵⁶⁰

In another place of the same report, he reiterated that the ethnological and social conditions of the two valleys, and the hills districts were as diverse as their physical characteristics.⁵⁶¹ In the coming decades, the nationalists of the two valleys constantly quoted the Gait in support of their own linguistic political agenda.

In Assam, the imperial government made its first attempt to operate a census in 1872. In a memorandum on the census submitted by Henry Waterfield, on behalf of the Statistics and Commerce Department of India Office, the population of the Assamese was shown as less than two million who spoke “a language very similar to Bengali”, but had ‘a large mixture of Indo-Chinese blood.’⁵⁶² Considering the population of 37 million Bengali and 4 million Oriya, it was a meagre figure. The report of the census in 1881, made a claim to give a clear picture of the region in regards to language and religion. It demanded showing “distinct languages” only and not the “dialects”.⁵⁶³ The census reported 13,61,759 numbers of Assamese speakers.⁵⁶⁴ Of Enumeration according to birthplace, it showed, out of the total population of 48,81,426 of

⁵⁶⁰ Gait, *Census of India, 1891, Assam*, 1892, p. 56.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid, p. 52.

⁵⁶² Waterfield, Henry. *Memorandum on the Census of British India of 1871-72*. London: India Office (Statistics and Commerce Department), 1875, p. 20.

⁵⁶³ Driberg and Elliott, *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, 1883, p. 12.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 202.

the province 46,00,716 people were home born, showing 2,80,710 numbers of immigrant population in opposition to 41,038 numbers of emigrants from Assam.⁵⁶⁵

Towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, as consequences of the amalgamation of Assam with Sylhet, as well as the migration policy of the imperial Govt., the Assamese speaking community reduced to the status of minority in relation to the Bengali speakers of the province. In 1891 census, the presence of immigrant population from the other parts of India to Assam became clearly perceptible through the entries of the language table, which, apart from the tribal languages of the indigenous population, included categories of languages like Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Marwari, Gujarati, Oriya etc. The census reflected a 2,29,456 population of Hindi speakers, including 1,24,904 in the Surma Valley, 1,02,554 in the Brahmaputra valley, and 1998 in the hill districts of the province. The population of the Bengali speaking community was 27,41,947 which included 22,61,329 in the Surma valley, 4,63,469 in the Brahmaputra valley, and 17,149 in the hills district. The Assamese speaking population of 14,14,284 almost entirely lived in the Brahmaputra valley, except a negligible part living in the Surma valley and the hills districts.⁵⁶⁶

By the turn of the century, the census of 1901, recorded 22 percent of the total population as speakers of Assamese, in the case of 48 per cent of the population spoke Bengali. The census also showed a 4.5 percent decrease of the Assamese speaking population, in opposition to the increase of the Bengali speakers by the population of 2,06,236, within the decade. Interestingly, 21 percent of the population of Lakhimpur, 19 percent of Darrang and 19 percent of Sibsagar, three large districts of the Brahmaputra valley, returned Bengali as their speech. The report showed that, in Lakhimpur, one of the major tea districts of Upper Assam, inhabited by

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 217.

⁵⁶⁶ Gait, *Census of India, 1891, Assam*, p. 153.

numbers of indigenous tribal population, it was “exception” rather than the “rule” to speak Assamese.⁵⁶⁷ In 1911, the largest portion of Assamese speakers was shown as confined to the three Brahmaputra valley districts of Kamrup, Nagaon and Sibsagar, the first two not being the tea districts.⁵⁶⁸ The report alarmed the situation in the words,

“Assamese has suffered not only by the more accurate census of the coolie languages but also by the increase in the number of immigrants in the Brahmaputra valley.”⁵⁶⁹

According to Llyod, the superintendent of the census operation of the 1921 census, the total number of “foreigners” living in the province on account of the tea industry was about a million and a third, that was, one sixth of the whole population of the province at that time. The tea labours mostly came to Assam from the United Provinces, Chota Nagpur, Central provinces, Orissa and Madras, whereas Bengal mostly supplied clerks and supervising staff. After the tea industry had established its foothold in Assam, the colonial authority increasingly felt the necessity of a settled agricultural population in the so-called wastelands. Immigration of peasants from the overpopulated Bengal districts was encouraged as part of the colonizing policy of allegedly land- abundant Assam. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the peasants mostly from Mymensingh district, also from Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur, all Eastern Bengal districts, began to advance to Assam. Although initially remained confined within the *char* land of the district of Goalpara, by the second decade, their movement extended far up, and they formed, in colonial parlance, an “appreciable element of the population”⁵⁷⁰ in the other Brahmaputra valley districts except Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.

⁵⁶⁷ Allen, B. C. *Census of India, 1901. Vol. IV: Assam. Part I.* Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1902, p. 82.

⁵⁶⁸ McSwiney, *Census of India, 1911, Vol. III: Assam*, 1912, p. 99.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁰ Lloyd, *Census of India, 1921, Assam*, 1923, p. 40.

The intelligentsia, although much concerned and vocal on the issues of the salaried job, initially undermined the large--scale migration to Assam in the forms of tea labour and agricultural force. The Assamese intelligentsia's chief concern was the challenges coming from the Bengalis of the Surma valley for dominance in the province. In fact, remaining within the tea garden pockets, and considered by the intelligentsia as "racialised labour class" the tea garden labourers did not seem to pose any challenge to the intelligentsia.⁵⁷¹

However, within a few years, "the contraction of land available for cultivation has given rise to political issues."⁵⁷² The government of Assam stated to the Indian Statutory Commission that though immigration from Eastern Bengal in a large scale was a comparatively recent innovation, "it had already shown signs of leading to conflict between the interests of the vigorous and forceful pioneers and those of the peace loving indigenous population".⁵⁷³ The same memorandum of the government of Assam reflected that the immigrants from the eastern Bengal showed "noticeable enthusiasm" to start a large number of schools at their own cost, and "were at first willing to accept education in Assamese".⁵⁷⁴ By 1930, the picture changed. The census of 1931 shows noticeable increase of the Bengali speakers in Nowgong and Kamrup districts, by the population of 121,000 and 120,000 respectively, for which, no other conceivable ground but immigration of the east Bengal peasants to these districts was pointed out by the Superintendent of the census operation.

⁵⁷¹ Sharma, Jayeeta. "Lazy Natives, Coolie Labour and the Assam Tea Industry." *Modern Asia Studies* Volume 43, no. 6 (2009) pp. 1287-2324.

⁵⁷² Indian Statutory Commission. *Memorandum submitted by the Government of Assam to the Indian Statutory Commission*, XIV, 1930.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

Table [3]. 1

The Distribution of Assamese Speakers According to the 1891 census⁵⁷⁵

The Brahmaputra Valley	The Surma Valley	The Hill Districts
11,03,474	3,461	7,350

The reports of the census operations showed gradual transformation of some plain tribes like Rabha, “*Kachari*” and “*Miri*” speaking people to speak Assamese. Another important aspect was formation of a new communicative language in and around the upper Assam tea gardens. J. McSwiney, the Superintendent of the operation in 1911 remarked that it was difficult to say what language the “settlers” spoke. It was, in his observation, was “a patois picked up on the garden which recruited them, and had a vocabulary made up of Hindi, Bengali and Assamese in the proportions varying depending on the tea districts and to the districts of the recruitment. Hindi predominated in Lakhimpur, but in other districts Assamese words increased”, and “eventually the dialect became Assamese with a mixture of Bengali or Hindi words.”⁵⁷⁶

The Assamese intelligentsia, coming mostly from the upper caste Hindu background, with its conscious desire to maintain difference and distance with the non-Aryan indigenous population, as well as migrant tea “*coolies*” undermined the phenomena of gradual expansion of Assamese. Nor did they take any initiative to expedite the process. Their concentration was towards the expansion of the Bengali language, of which they befell direct victims. The anxiety of the intelligentsia for the community and language found its expression through Manik Chandra Borooah’s maiden speech in the Legislative assembly of the Eastern Bengal and

⁵⁷⁵ Mullan, C. S. *Census of India, 1931, Vol. III, Assam, Part 1. Report*. Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1932, p. 176.

⁵⁷⁶ McSwiney, *Census of India, 1911, Assam*, p. 97.

Assam province, in 1909, who appealed for special measures to protect the interests of a “minority” community.⁵⁷⁷ In the Council debate, the fear of being small numbers was enunciated through a political demand of special privilege to safeguard “a minority community”.⁵⁷⁸

In tune with the political parlance of the time, Hemchandra Goswami and Padmanath Borooah, representing the literary elite of Assam articulated the same concern. They stated to the government through a written submission,

“The unequal competition with a more advanced nation may lead to the extinction of the nation and its language”.⁵⁷⁹

In fact, throughout the journey of Assamese nationalism, *astitwar Sankat*, Paranoia of being extinct remained a prevalent theme, which, being continued till this time, with the pace of time has acquired newer significance.

Lakshminath, as a key publicist, within his lifetime, regularly published his reaction to each decennial census through journals since the times of the 1891 census, until his last written lecture in 1938. Being concerned with the plight of the *Matribhasa*, Lakshminath was acquainted enough with the rationalistic discourse of Statistics. Satyavrata Mukherjee, his son-in-law, being the Census Superintendent of Baroda state, and then serving as the Census Commissioner there, was the author of the census reports of Baroda in 1921, 1931 and 1941.

⁵⁷⁷ Manik Chandra said, “unless special measures are taken to protect us, we ourselves, not only our language are in the process of being crushed out” at the Legislative Assembly of Eastern Bengal and Assam, on 21 April, 1909 (Part VI). See Goswami, Prafulladatta. *Manikchandra Borooah*. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, 1977, see Appendix B

⁵⁷⁸ Goswami, *Manikchandra Borooah*, 1977.

⁵⁷⁹ A Note on Assamese Manuscripts, originally submitted to J. Cunningham, the Director of Public Instruction on 8 July, 1907, published by S. K. Bhuyan as introduction of H. C. Goswami’s posthumously published “Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts” in 1929. See Goswami, *Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*, 1972, pp. 565-574.

He was one of the pioneers of a few Indians who used the emerging science of statistics to question colonial discourse from within.⁵⁸⁰ Lakshminath's diary and personal correspondences provide us the evidence that census operation and figures became subject of their mundane talks and personal letters. In such a familial atmosphere, it was natural that census figures became a part of his thought process.

Standing on the opposite end of his contemporaries, Lakshminath questioned the significance of numerical strength of a nation. Being a romantic, what seemed to be more important for Lakshminath was the inner vitality of a people, its power to resist the threat of being a minority group. He saw in print, the power to overcome the threat of extinction. The assertion he tried to infuse in the hearts of the people had two aspects: First, he appealed to make themselves fit in every respect to stand the coming situations, and the next, he raised his voice against the tendency of the bigger nations to devour the smaller ones. He reiterated that the world is too big to provide a space for every small nation to survive with its own features. The inner content of such a resistant voice was essentially democratic, which exposed his liberal mindedness. He tried to convince the contemporary Assamese intelligentsia that fear of extinction was baseless. It is through the resistance of a language community, their reading of history and tradition and getting inspiration from memory, they could overcome such a threat.⁵⁸¹ Mentioning the fear or anxiety of extinction of the Assamese language of which a section of people were suffering

⁵⁸⁰ M. W. M. Yeatts, the Census Commissioner of India in 1941 has mentioned Satyavrata Mukherjee as a 'doyen', and noted that '*so skilful and experienced an officer*', '*for in a difficult time his knowledge and judgement were of great value not only within his own state*'. See Yeatts, M. W. M. *Census of India, 1941. Vol. I: India. Part I: Report*. Delhi: Manager of Publication, 1943, p. 3. He was a pioneer for holding the fifth session of the Indian Statistical Conference at Baroda in 1942. See Abstracts of Papers Presented before the Fifth Session of Indian Statistical Conference, Baroda." *Sankhya: The Indian Journal of Statistics (1933-1960)* (Indian Statistical Institute) Volume 6 , no. 3 (n.d.).

⁵⁸¹ "Asamiya Bhasar Samparke Asharserek Katha", *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1909 in Goswami, *Banhi*, Part I, 2001, pp. 24-32.

from, Lakshminath criticized such mentality and traced the fear utterly in the realm of psychology of the people. He declared poetically,

“We had possessed, and still are in possession of everything we need. We, the Assamese, are by no means, neither by any reason, poor.”⁵⁸²

However, as a practical businessman, Lakshminath knew better than anybody else that romanticizing one's past can provide inspiration, but it never can solely guarantee one's secured future. The exploration of the past is not enough, equally important is to enrich the present. He emphasized the need of making efforts to enrich the language and literature and proclaimed that industriousness was the key to improvement. What the Assamese really needed was to give up their indolence and spend a few hours for the improvement of *matribhasa*. In the Presidential lecture of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* in 1924, Lakshminath stated the need to open the doors towards India and the world. In the age of greater Indian nationalism, Assam, instead of suffering from anxiety of being extinct, should think of how to make pace forward and ensure its rightful place within the greater nation. Perhaps, in the 1920s, when India's movement for independence in the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi got wide acclaim, he acquired the trust to proclaim that it was in tandem with India's freedom, the Assamese language would prosper.

But the paranoia was still there. In 1938, when he was lying on his deathbed, the Assamese intelligentsia had been trying to resolve the problem of being a linguistic minority. Amidst the anxiety and perplexity of the time, Lakshminath expressed his hope in the resilience and vitality, that is, the indomitable inner spirit of a nation. He urged with deep optimism,

⁵⁸² “*Asam Sangit*”, *Banhi*, Volume 6, Issue 12, 1915, pp. 617-619.

“Don’t panic at the inflow of immigrants”.⁵⁸³

He often chose to proclaim his stand through an imagery of the moon, that in the life of every nation, there may be no moon’s night; but it always bears within it the forecast of arrival of a full moon.

Unsung Stories: A Revisiting

Recognition from and attachment with the colonial institutions provided a kind of power to a language, which aroused loyalty to it. Despite the intelligentsia’s glorified self-projection of itself as restorer of *matribhasa*, the first a few decades of the colonial rule saw Bengali pervaded to day-to-day practices. Hemchandra Borooah, a confirmed crusader for Assamese in the nineteenth century, recalled in his autobiographical note that educated youths of his time, not excluding himself, felt pride in cuddling the “*Rangini Bangini*”, meant conversing with and writing to each other in the Bengali language. The *Assam Bandhu*, a periodical published in the mid of the 1880s commented,

“The government- patronized language came to be estimated by the Assamese as the uchcha or high language, though in reality what they used in the courts was merely a blending of Persian, Urdu, Bengali, Sanskrit etc.”⁵⁸⁴

While the colonial policy was motivated by their intention to “integrate” this frontier space, more firmly with the Calcutta- based colonial administration of India, the emerging Assamese intelligentsia’s aim was, through the knowledge of the government-patronized language,

⁵⁸³ Last public speech (Transcripted), delivered at a public meeting at Dibrugarh on the 19 December, 1937, *Banhi*, Volume 27, Issue 5, 1937 in Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*, 1988, pp. 1881-1882.

⁵⁸⁴ Sir Bampfylde Fuller, the last Chief Commissioner of Assam, who took the charge as the first Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, wrote in his personal memoir published in 1930, “The hill country which surround and divides its two valleys is inhabited by tribes whose marauding propensities needed the forceful control of a “frontier province”. See Fuller, *Some Personal Experiences*, 1930, p. 104.

attaining secured and socially respectable positions for them.⁵⁸⁵ Anandaram's argument, that education was needed not to create a "nation of judicial officers" was long past. Bengali's status as an administrative language already made a great impact on their minds. The educated section preferred to use Bengali in certain fields, with the intention of showing their difference and distance from the vast illiterate masses. After all, Bengali was a language favoured by the rulers, and being instituted as a medium of modern education, came to be considered as far more prestigious than their local speech. Hemchandra Borooah, while publishing the first edition of *Asamiya Byakaran* in 1859, its defects became obvious to him, but, at that time, Assamese was considered as deviation from Bengali; so, no necessity of publishing a revised edition was immediately felt.⁵⁸⁶ It is after recognition of Assamese by the government that it appeared in print for the second time.⁵⁸⁷

In opposition to the stand of the intelligentsia, Miles Bronson, in the mid-nineteenth century observed that "the masses" had 'no inclination to abandon their own for a foreign dialect'. It was only the "higher classes, seeing their own language ignored", strived to obtain sufficient knowledge of Bengali.⁵⁸⁸ He warned in his preface to the Assamese-English Dictionary,

"Were the Government now to abandon the country, Assamese would supersede all other dialects simply because it is the language of the masses."⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁵ Robinson remarked that not seeing any hope of 'benefit', the Assamese expressed 'unwillingness' to 'have their own *Bhasa* taught in their Schools'. See Robinson's Remarks in Reply to the Missionaries on Vernacular Education, "Correspondence Relating to the Question Whether the Assamese or Bengali Language should be taught in the Assam Schools, 7 December, 1854, No. 236 of 1854" in Long, *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No XXII*, 1855.

⁵⁸⁶ The first grammar of the language ever written by an Assamese person, of the former two, the first one was written by a European officer, and the other was composed by an American missionary.

⁵⁸⁷ Borooah, Hemchandra. *Asamiya Byakaran*. 1873, (Second Edition).

⁵⁸⁸ Bronson, Miles. *Asamiya-Engraji Abhidhan*. Sibsagar: Baptist Mission Press, 1867.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

Later, with the expansion of English education, English gradually replaced Bengali. Personal letters, diaries, and other written communications of the Assamese nationalists of the early decades of the twentieth century are examples which unmask that day-to-day linguistic practice of the rising intelligentsia were quite contrary to their ideology of mother tongue. English became the most cherished language of the bilingual intelligentsia. They liked to deliver public speeches in English, even conversing among them in English.⁵⁹⁰ Unlike a fraction of the Tamil nationalists of south India, the Assamese intelligentsia never identified English as mainly responsible for the disgraceful condition of their mother tongue. They never imagined any dichotomous relation between Assamese and English.⁵⁹¹ However, a consciousness in favour of far more political use of Assamese developed among them slowly.

As early as in the 1890s, Lakshminath publicly called on the English educated youths of the time to deliver public speeches in Assamese.⁵⁹² However, until 1919, English remained the language in which most of the discussions of the Assam Association, the first significant political forum of the Assam valley, took place. In that year, the secretarial report of the Association was for the first time written and read in Assamese by Chandranath Sharma.⁵⁹³ The presidential address of the year also for the first time was delivered in Assamese. Until

⁵⁹⁰ Gobinda Bezbaroa, an elder brother to Lakshminath, in his mundane talk, always preferred to speak in English with any educated person of his connection.

⁵⁹¹ Sumathi Ramaswamy, concentrating on the linguistic division of labour in the Tamil- speaking region has shown that a certain fraction of the Tamil intelligentsia, who got inspiration from Indianism, equated English with colonial rule. They believed that it was English, which was responsible for the deplorable condition of Tamil. See Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue, Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*, 1997, p. 50.

⁵⁹² Lakshminath may be influenced by Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arya Samaj, who in the 1880s, to promote the cause of Hindi in Punjab extensively used Hindi for polemical works, debates, speech, correspondence, and popular translation of scriptures. See King, Christopher Rolland. *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 141.

⁵⁹³ Sharma, Chandranath. *Surash Barsik Karyya Bibarani, Barpeta Adhibeshan*. Barpeta: Assam Association, 1919.

then, the proceedings and proposals of the public sphere organizations were also customarily written in English.

In the meantime, through the Constitutional Reforms of 1918-19, limited franchise was introduced in India, which recognized the idea of political citizenship. It became instrumental all over India to bring forth regional linguistic consciousness.⁵⁹⁴ Assam, though initially left outside the scheme of reforms, it was through the united efforts of the Assamese intelligentsia, it finally became successful in getting it included under the scheme. There was essentially a difference between perceiving oneself as merely a subject to the ruler and as a political citizen. Meanwhile, in the 1920s, the Indian National Congress also came in support of increased use of vernaculars, allegedly being the real language of the people, which was identified as crucial for expansion of their mass support.

It was also the time, when the contest between Urdu and Hindi turned to a broader concern, and gradually built up to appear around the issue of a national language for India. Figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Lala Lajpat Roy were in support of the campaign of Hindi as the national language. Lakshminath always remained a champion of the cause of Hindi as the *Rastrabhasa* of India. The Assamese nationalists, including Lakshminath, imagined that the Assamese was to serve as an administrative and academic language of the Assam valley. They never thought of making any competition with either Hindi or English.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹⁴ Chandranath Sharma, the secretary of the Assam Association wrote in his secretarial report of 1919, "Only one year has passed that the leaders of India were reluctant to offer us equal seats with them as a developed nation." Ibid, p. 4.

⁵⁹⁵ Madhusudan Das of Orissa, the foremost Oriya nationalist of the period mentioned English as the developing common language among the educated Indians and recognized it as the '*political language*' of colonial India as well. See Das, Madhusudan. "Presidential Address of the Utkal Union Conference." In *Selected Writings*. New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 2013, pp. 164-165.

As the legislative council of the period was formed of the “educated landholding or professional classes”, so the language question, it was assumed, did not put any “serious difficulty” to the legislators.⁵⁹⁶ On the other hand, it was claimed by an Assam government’s memorandum to Simon Commission that the first member of the backward tracts “could follow proceedings neither in English nor the common vernaculars.” There were fairly one or two members, who chose to speak in Assamese or Bengali. The Swarajist party, in 1927 was quite vocal against the use of English, a “foreign medium as a bar to progress”. The same memorandum of Assam Government, on the other hand, argues that neither Bengali nor Assamese was “sufficiently well-understood by the other party even in a house of the present size to serve as a legislative medium”.⁵⁹⁷ It drew upon the instance of a Swarajist member who, though well-versed in English was elected on principle to speak Assamese during the second council ultimately reverted to English in the third council.⁵⁹⁸

Away from his homeland, Lakshminath, on the other hand, had to live in a multilingual situation, practicing varieties of registers of several languages, Bengali, Hindi, English, Oriya and such. Being married with a Bengali speaking wife, the household language of his family was Bengali. Making fun of himself, he called Bengali “*Bau bhasa*”, or language of the wife, and published a cartoon in the *Banhi* on his situation.⁵⁹⁹ He also admitted that, not to exaggerate a bit, while at Sambalpur and in Calcutta, he had been known as Bengali, and his efforts were for the good of the Bengali people.⁶⁰⁰ Surabhi, his first born was kept under a Hindustani

⁵⁹⁶ Indian Statutory Commission. *Memorandum Submitted by the Government of Assam to the Indian Statutory Commission*, XIV, 1930, p. 234.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 235.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ “*Uddiyaman Na-Asamiya Bhasa*”, *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 11, 1913.

⁶⁰⁰ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Gotacherek Katha*.” *Dainik Batori*, December 10, 1935.

governess, and from the very childhood, she was trained to speak English and Hindustani only. Criticizing himself later, he wrote that at that time he had been of a fully ‘*chahabi*’ mentality.

English already percolates to the speech practices of the bilingual intelligentsia.⁶⁰¹ Throughout his life, Lakshminath customarily wrote his diaries and letters mostly in English, even when he wrote in Assamese, now and then, switched over to English. On 14 September, 1934, Lakshminath had to write a reply to the *Dainik Batori*, the first Assamese daily newspaper, in response to a reader’s reaction to a published letter from him. The letter, which he addressed personally to Jyotiprasad Agarwala, later came to be published in a periodical.⁶⁰² The reader criticized him for writing “*Bilati Asamiya*”, or Assamese mixed with English. Lakshminath, admitting the fault clarified that the letter was purely personal, and never was intended for publication. He also stated that use of such mixed language had become a common trait of the educated section. He promised not to commit such “sin” in future and called all to write the “pure” or clean Assamese.⁶⁰³

Dream of a Linguistically Homogeneous Province: *Bar Asam*

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Indian National Congress increasingly came to realize that without recourse to vernaculars, political ideals could not be propagated. While English served as a lingua franca among the urban elite, it was the vernacular languages, which were the languages of the masses. The Congress for the first time conceded the principle of linguistic provinces for the purposes of its own organizations during its 1917 Calcutta session.

⁶⁰¹ The report of the 1921 census of Assam commented on the formation of a lingua franca in the following words, “English or at least a mixture of English words with Bengali or Assamese sentences, enters a good deal into discussion among educated people.” See Lloyd, *Census of India, 1921, Assam*, 1923, p. 124.

⁶⁰² Lakshminath’s letter to Jyotiprasad Agarwala on Joymoti gramophone record, n. d., in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 36-37.

⁶⁰³ “*Kaifiyat*”, *Dainik Batari*, 14 August, 1936.

As an outcome, in 1919, the provincial Congress committee of Assam was formed. The Surma valley remained a part of the Bengal Congress. This facilitated a new turn in the debate of transfer of Sylhet. The Bengal Provincial Conference passed a resolution in 1918 demanding a linguistic reconstitution of Bengal. It made an urge to reunite the Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet, Goalpara and Cachar with Bengal. During the April session of the Indian Legislative Council in the year, the issue of linguistic reorganization of the provinces of India was taken up. A resolution was moved by Rao Bahadur B. N. Sharma, a representative of the Punjab government, which recommended redistribution on linguistic basis to secure complete success of self-governing institutions of British India. All these factors provided new momentum to the linguistic nationalists of Assam, both of the Surma and the Assam valley, though standing on opposite footings to each other.

The Assamese nationalists always nourished the dream of a homogenous linguistic province, in which Sylhet was considered as an impediment. In January, 1926, the Assam Legislative Council passed a resolution in favour of separating Sylhet from Assam without comprising the “political privileges” it had enjoyed. The issue became complicated with the rise of demand for separation from Assam in Cachar and Goalpara, two other Bengali dominating districts. The Secretary of State ruled that the transfer of Sylhet from Assam to Bengal could not be dissociated from the question of the future form of administration of the province of Assam, because introduction of Cachar brought a new element. If Cachar and Sylhet districts were to be transferred, the province would be left with a population of about four million.⁶⁰⁴ The government of Assam informed the India Government that Cachar had always been associated

⁶⁰⁴ Answer of the Home Member to a resolution moved by M. S. Aney in the Legislative Assembly in January, 1925, Indian Statutory Commission. *Memoranda Presented to the Indian Statutory Commission by the Government of India and the India Office, Volume IV, Part I*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1930, p. 649.

with Assam. In tune with the government, the Assamese intelligentsia, including the Assam valley members of the Legislative council opposed the separation of Cachar. They claimed that the Bengali, who formed the majority of the population of Cachar, were new settlers and could scarcely claim the transfer of the district with the Bengal province.

However, it was a period, when Assam's linguistic and cultural homogeneity was put into question from within by various cross sections. Rashid Ali Laskar from Cachar in the legislative council questioned the linguistic homogeneity of Assam with Cachar and Goalpara within it, and asked:

“How can there be a simple Asamiya province unless some coercive measures are taken to force the people to adopt the Asamiya language”?⁶⁰⁵

J. J. M. Nichols-Roy from the Khasi hills, on the other hand, expressed his doubt on the basic principle of formation of linguistic provinces, and said that such principle would be detrimental to the formation of an Indian nation, as well as for Assam.⁶⁰⁶ Kuladhar Chaliha, representing the voice of the Assamese nationalists of the time, at this juncture, tried to assure that there was no racial difference between the Khasi and the Assamese. They were one and the same people.⁶⁰⁷ Outside the legislative council, claims to get a share in “*legislative authority*” formed part of the demands of various cross-sections of intelligentsia. As for instance, the Goalpara Zamindars association categorically said that out of 39 elected members of Assam Legislative Council, the overwhelming majority came from the non-permanently settled

⁶⁰⁵ Speech from the Legislative Assembly debate in 1926, from the Report submitted to the Statutory Commission by B. N. Rau, Secretary to the Legislative Council, Assam, Shillong, 9 January, 1926, Indian Statutory Commission. *Memoranda Presented to the Indian Statutory Commission by the Government of India and the India Office, Volume IV, Part I*, 1930, pp. 731-732.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 768-771.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 772-775.

districts, i.e. districts excluding Goalpara and Sylhet. Their demand was for transfer of Goalpara from Assam to Bengal.⁶⁰⁸

Realizing the coming challenges of the time, in 1928, the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* took a resolution to popularize Assamese among the hill tribes of the region.⁶⁰⁹ Lakshminath came with a new argument in the *Avahan*, a magazine published from Calcutta, that language alone could not be the marker of nationality. He emphasized Assam's historical connection with Cachar, even with Sylhet. In 1930, a meeting was held at the Albert Hall in Calcutta and presided over by Sir P. C. Roy proposed the inclusion of Goalpara and Cachar with Bengal. Dinanath Sharma, the editor of *Avahan*, tried to oppose the resolution in the meeting, but was not permitted to speak. The incident produced strong protest in the print public sphere of Assam.⁶¹⁰ Already alarmed by the principle of constitution of the linguistic province, the Assamese nationalists of the time, particularly the youths came with a new agenda. They came with a demand for inclusion of Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur, with Assam, and claimed their historical and cultural relations with the ancient Kamrupa.⁶¹¹ In the meantime, the Reform Enquiry Committee in India identified large size, artificial and unnatural boundaries of several existing

⁶⁰⁸ "Memorandum Submitted by the Goalpara Zamindars' Association, Assam", Indian Statutory Commission. *Selections from Memoranda and Oral Evidence by Non-Officials, Volume XVI, Part I*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1930, pp. 24-26.

⁶⁰⁹ "Asam Sahitya Sabhar Dwadash Sanmilana Prastab (Resolution No. 2 of the Asam Sahitya Sabha's Twelfth Meet)." *Asam Sahitya Sabhar Patrika*, Volume 4, Issue 2, 1928; The Sabha even deputed Durgeswar Goswami with the purpose. An attempt was made by the Sabha to collect information on the language and literature of the Surma valley. Das, Ramchandra. "Surama Upatyakat Asamiya Sahitya". *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, Volume 4, Issue 3, 1930-31.

⁶¹⁰ Rava, Bishnuprasad. "Brihattar Asamar Kalpana." *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 11, 1930, pp. 1313-1318; *Sampadakiya*, *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 11, 1930, pp. 1323-1327.

⁶¹¹ The Gauripur branch of the Assam Association, in 1904, suggested that if the territorial adjustment was necessary, it might have a better effect by annexing Rangpur, Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and some parts of Bogra district. The alternative proposal then attracted little attention, but it emerged with a new dimension during the 1930s. See Rava, "Brihattar Asamar Kalpana", *Avahan*, 1930, pp. 1313-1318 & *Sampadakiya*, *Avahan*, 1930, pp. 1323-1327.

provinces, and lack of homogeneity in the population as some hurdles against the effective running of the responsible government in India.⁶¹²

The 1930s saw ample publication of articles to profess the historical possibility of a *Bar*, *Bahal* or *Brihattar* Assam, or a greater Assam. Nagendra Narayan Choudhuri, a zamindar and writer from Goalpara, from his presidential chair of *Asam Sahitya Sabha*'s annual session in 1930, held at Sibsagar declared that considering the minority status of the Assamese speaking population, time had come to chalk out a plan for expansion of Assamese. He called for making efforts towards persuading the inhabitants of Coochbehar about its historical relation with Assamese people, and accepting Assamese as their language. Criticizing too much dominance of the *Ujaniya*, or the upper Assam speech, he stated that to universalize itself the language must come down. Choudhuri pointed out the necessity of the intelligentsia's effort to make Assamese acceptable to the hill people, as well as the immigrant population from Mymensingh district.⁶¹³ The *Sahitya Sabha* formed an eight-member committee, Lakshminath being one of them, to advance the agenda through canvassing and convincing the educated section of those places to obtain their consent to accept Assamese as a lingua franca. The *Sabha* took a resolution to boycott the Bengali papers like the *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, *Sanjivani*, *Liberty*, *Janasakti*, which they felt directly or indirectly tried to harm Assamese nationalism.⁶¹⁴ Lakshminath, in 1934, appealed to the young generation of Assam to boycott the reading of Bengali newspapers, and called to read the English papers instead.

The domiciled Bengali's role in this historic moment was strongly criticized by the Assamese presses. By 1935, the issue of the domiciled Bengali erupted heated debate. *The Asam*

⁶¹² Muddiman, Alexander. *Report of Reforms Enquiry Committee, 1924: Views of Local Government's on the Working of the Reforms*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1925, pp. 26, 64.

⁶¹³ Chowdhuri, Nagendra Narayan. "Sabhapatir Abhibhasan." *Avahan*, 1931, pp. 473-482.

⁶¹⁴ Resolution 10 and 12 of the Annual Session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha in 1930 in *Avahan*, 1931, pp. 373-374.

Sangrakshini Sabha came up with an aggressive position and appealed all the domiciled and immigrant population to accept Assamese as their language in Assam, simultaneously propagating Hindi as the “*rastriya bhasa*” of India. It rejected the claims of the Bengali people for establishment of Bengali medium schools in the Assam valley. The *Sabha* also cleared its position that without accepting Assamese as their own language, no person from outside Assam could claim one’s status as domicile.

Lakshminath, partially in accordance with the stand, wrote in the *Dainik Batori*, living in Assam, the Bengali should work in unison with the Assamese for the sake of Assam.⁶¹⁵ He appealed to the Assamese speaking community,

“As they have been living in Assam; let them work unitedly with the Assamese people for the sake of Assam.”⁶¹⁶

Projecting himself as an example, he wrote,

“At Sambalpur, I am entirely Bengali. My whole-hearted efforts here are for the interests and welfare of the Bengali. In toto, not to exaggerate a bit, I am well known here among the rulers and the ruled, as a leader of the Bengali community”.⁶¹⁷

Paradoxically, Lakshminath, having been living in Sambalpur since 1917, and permanently settling there since 1923, presented himself as a Bengali. Instead of the strong presence of a movement for the amalgamation of the Oriya speaking regions, which ultimately led to formation of the first linguistic province of India in 1936, he neither discussed the movement nor its outcome. During this period, Lakshminath sometimes expressed his leaning towards a stern regionalism for Assam.

⁶¹⁵ *Dainik Batori*, 10 December, 1935.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion

Modern Assam never was a linguistically homogeneous province. Modernity and its associated Colonialism created situations, where some sections of people gradually learnt to live being polyglot, practicing various registers of the same language or of different languages according to the demands of situations. Lakshminath himself was a typical example of a modern polyglot. Paradoxically, the upper caste Hindu Assamese nationalists never adequately realized the multilingual reality of the time, nor could respond properly with the changing linguistic and demographic situations. As a result, when the Assam valley nationalists of the Legislative Council had fought to assert their claims in the Council, the representatives of the other regions and groups countered them. It was the historical limitation of the nationalist intelligentsia, which debarred them from understanding the far and wide impact of their stance. It seems, Lakshminath, supposedly the celebrated hero of Assamese linguistic nationalism of the time also succumbed to the same near-sightedness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Revisiting Sankardeva: Religion, Caste and Nation

The chapter intends to explore the role of religion both in public and private lives of the emerging nationalist intelligentsia, as well as to understand their efforts to appropriate it in colonial modern situations. In a sense, it is partly an extension of and supplementary to the previous chapter on linguistic nationalism. The chapter's focus will be on the religious side of the life of Lakshminath. Instead of being devout to language, Lakshminath showed an ambivalent position in relation to religious affiliation of the people. Paul Brass has said that in multicultural and multi-religious societies like India, language is not the central affiliation, symbol or basis for the political expression of nationalism. Rather, he proposes to define the politics of nationalism as a struggle, impossible even to achieve completely. The state is an actor in the process, which recognizes the categories, and posits the conflicting social groups to make their choices out of them. Their choices are determined by the nature of conflicts among the various elite groups of the society for their share of political power. He further argues that the British provided political opportunities to religiously defined groups, so language politics and language movements in north India developed alongside political religious movements. From the outset, the Hindi-Urdu conflict was tinged with Hindu-Muslim conflicts and animosity. In the north India competition of power was between rising Hindu elite and Muslim elite, and their chosen symbol was primarily religion.⁶¹⁸

However, like South India, this was not the case in Assam. Here competition was initially between two language groups. Then in the beginning of twentieth century, through the colonial

⁶¹⁸ Brass, Paul. "Elite Interests, Popular Passions, and Social Power in the Language Politics of India." In *Language and Politics in India*, by Asha Sarangi, 183-220. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 183-217.

government's intervention of territorial politics of the region, a valley-wise contestation and plains-hills dichotomy came to the fore. The division augmented the language politics of the region, whereas religion mostly remained either sidelined, or being an undercurrent. In the meantime, the emergence of political aspirations among the emerging elite belonged to the various ethnic groups and castes, and the colonial government's introduction of policy of community-wise political representation was a serious blow to the expectations of the Assamese nationalists. Already having been suffering from a minority complex out of the government-induced immigration to the region of the Bengali speaking people, they had to negotiate with the tension.⁶¹⁹ They tried to make Hinduism, and particularly the Vaishnavism of Assam an adjunct to linguistic identity, and thus tried to produce, what was called by Brass a "multi-symbol congruence". Alongside Vaishnavism, *Bihu*, a festival of the peasant community, was elevated to symbolize the people.

The chapter tries to explore the appropriation of *bhakti* as resolution of the anxieties of the intelligentsia in colonial times both in personal and public life. Its central concern will be to examine the appropriation of Sankardeva, the religious preacher of Assam and the *Mahapurushiya* sect, founded by him by the colonial intelligentsia to serve their purpose of identity formation. It will explore how literary genres like criticism, biography etc. had become instrumental in canonizing Sankardeva as the founding father of the Assamese nation and culture. Sankardeva was simultaneously celebrated by them for his literary merit par excellence, as well as a religious and social reformer. He was also made to symbolize the Assamese people as a whole. The chapter tries to explore the Hindu religious reform

⁶¹⁹ As early as in 1890, the Assamese intelligentsia articulated their anxiety over immigration through print. In 1890, an article published in *Jonaki*, stated that despite the increase of population in Assam, it should be kept in mind that it was largely due to immigration from Bengal and other parts of India, and not for increase of the indigenous population. See Borooah, Kanaklal. "*Amar Silpa*", *Jonaki*, Volume 2, Issue 5, 1890 in Saikia, Nagen, ed. *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001, p. 164.

movements of the time including the activities of the Hindu Mahasabha in Assam. It revisits the high caste Hindu intelligentsia's critique of the caste system intended to overcome caste prejudice as a barrier to nation formation. It will explore the Assamese intelligentsia's simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the Hindu reformist and revivalist ideology of the mainland India, and their attempt to define a secular, inclusive regional nationalism on the basis of Sankardeva as a heroic icon and the *Mahapurushiya* sect of Assam as a distinctive growth of Vaishnavism at large. The chapter tries to show that the intelligentsia's alternative model of a regional identity on the basis of a religious sect was far more influenced by the Hindi of Hindu proposition of north India. It simultaneously claims that such a framework of thought was already prevalent among the Orientalists and was institutionally recognized by census reports and other administrative devices of colonial rule in India. It also shows that unlike Hindi for Hindu and Urdu for Muslim propaganda, the Assamese nationalists' attempt was to incorporate Sankardeva with some secular, rational and modern components of thought.

Religion in Personal Domain

Religion in the individual life of a person is a key for the understanding of one's complicated response to modernity in South Asia. Moreover, the colonial intelligentsia of India always made a division between the outer and inner domain of life. The inner domain of the spiritual life was conceived as the never-changing self of India, which was juxtaposed against the outer domain of the material culture. The rhetorical politics of the colonial intelligentsia revolved around the discursive formation of the spiritual and material. Religion was always thought of as the deep core of a person, attempting to keep it free from any external influences. However, in accordance with the house spaces, which tried to imbricate traditional with modern, the

religious practice of the household also reflected the mingling of both.⁶²⁰ Religion had, and still has a dominant share in the day-to-day customary practices of Indian households, which percolated to the deep layer of the psyche of the people.

Lakshminath, with his rootedness in Vaishnavism, a sect of the multidimensional Hindu religious system, was a self-professed 'Hindu' throughout his life. He, both in private and public lives, always showed his piety, and leanings towards the Hindu belief. He once advised his friend Jatindranath to keep more faith in God than on horoscopes, and expressed his reluctance for astrology.⁶²¹ In another instance, Lakshminath advised his daughter Aruna to keep her faith on the benevolent aspect of God, who, he warned, now and then tested his devotees only to make them aware of their too much attachment with the material aspects of the life and thus reminded them of the real purpose of the lives.⁶²² After the rift with Bholanath in business, living amidst financial uncertainties and trouble, Lakshminath became restless and tried to regain his peace of mind in the world of religious scriptures. Sometimes he tried to console himself with the spiritual learning, with which they had been trained in their childhood. He compared his modern materialistic attitude to life with the traditional spiritual attitude in which he had been trained since childhood and blamed himself for his amnesia to God, whom he now came to call as his real redeemer. He even considered this distress as God's punishment

⁶²⁰ During the colonial time, side by side with the emerging modes of socializing in the parties of western manners, which became part of the upper stratum of the society in the city like Calcutta, traditional observance like *annaprasan*, *shraddha*, *Navabarsa Upasana* were also commonplace. These functions were appropriated in the modern context of busy urban life. Celebrating the *annaprashan* ceremony of the first-born in the family, Lakshminath and Prajnasundari invited the family members of Jorasanko to attend. Distinguished members of the family like Rabindranath Tagore, Sarala Devi and others attended the function and as part of the celebration each sang a song.

⁶²¹ Lakshminath's letter to Jatindranath Dowerah on 30 September, 1935 from Sambalpur in Neog, Maheswar, ed. *Patralekha*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1968, pp. 28-29.

⁶²² Lakshminath's letter to Aruna from Sambalpur on 20 August, 1934 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 115-116.

to him to bring him back to his self-realization. “God save me”, he repeatedly wrote in the pages of his diaries in a troublesome period. The Gita became a constant citation for him during the crisis.

Lakshminath’s marriage was held in accordance with the Brahmo customs of the Adi Brahmo Samaj. In March, 1900, when Lakshminath and his family shifted to the Dobson Road house to stay there permanently, a *Griha-pravesh* ritual was held there. His diary of the day shows that it was an “*upasana*” by a *shastry*, sent by the *Karta* Debendranath Tagore. The *Karta* gave them a sermon of the Brahmo, framed and bound to be hung up on the wall of the prayer hall of the house. Sibnath Shastri, a writer and Brahmo preacher, considers that Debendranath, the founder of the Brahmo Samaj and the *karta* of the Tagore family was a believer in the supremacy of the monotheistic form of the Hindu religion, kept his faith on two basic principles. One is, the Brahmo Samaj was a purely Hindu institution and the second is, its mission was chiefly religious and distinguished from social reform.⁶²³ Whatever be the situation, the orthodox believer of Hinduism never accepted the Brahmos as Hindu. Rather they were targeted as followers of atheism, and imposed religious and social restrictions against the Brahmos. In the eastern town of Sibsagar in Assam, as we have already seen in chapter one, Lakshminath’s father Dinanath once was actively engaged in such practices of social exclusion against the Brahmos.

It seems, Lakshminath throughout his life, necessarily endeavoured to relieve him from his psychological burden of marrying at a Brahmo family, which produced a distance with his parental home. He, whenever possible, tried to state that the Brahmos, especially the followers of the Adi Brahmo Samaj were none other than Hindu.⁶²⁴ How important for contemporary

⁶²³ Shastri, Sibnath. *History of the Brahmo Samaj*. Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1974, p. 119.

⁶²⁴ A benign critical tone towards the followers of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj is noticeable in him.

Hindu society, Lakshminath's adherence to Hindu faith could be better understood through comparison of him with the life of Golapchandra, one of his elder brothers. Like Lakshminath, Golapchandra was also excluded by his father for going against the religious beliefs of Hinduism for pursuing medical science in Calcutta and abroad. After his long service in British Guiana and Africa as a military doctor, he returned to India and adopted the Christian religion. In 1904, he got married with a "native" Christian woman, in Howrah Presbyterian church and lived in Howrah until he met his death in December, 1907. Despite being highly educated, and Dinanath also had died, Golapchandra could never return to Assam to meet his parental family.⁶²⁵ He was cremated in the initiative of Lakshminath according to Christianity through a business firm.⁶²⁶ Lakshminath attended the ritual. But not being satisfied with that, brought an urn of ashes to offer it in the Ganga at Kalighat, and Harinath, one of their younger brothers, then stayed with Lakshminath, performed the ritual in accordance to the prevalent Hindu

⁶²⁵ Lakshminath wrote a note in his diary, where he briefed the life of his elder brother, "Dr Bez returning rich was the expectation, but found him back as a poor soldier. His relations (are) ignoring and avoiding him." See *Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Diaries*, Digital Archive, Centre for Assamese Studies, Tezpur University dated 31st December, 1932. (Henceforth, *Diaries*, Tezpur University)

⁶²⁶ Golapchandra was cremated in Lower Circular Road crematorium by Brine (Brown) & Company. See *Diaries*, Tezpur University dated 3 December, 1907. Remarkably, no mention of any public applause to Golapchandra, despite his active role as the President of *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, also representing Assam in the annual conference of the All- India Congress, from the part of the Calcutta-based intelligentsia of Assam is noticed, though by then such a funeral gathering became almost usual practice for them. In the 1920s, when a religious tension emerged within the extended family circle of Dinanath Bezbaroa, regarding the *shraddha* of Gobinda Bezbaroa, an educationist and another elder brother of Lakshminath known as a non-conformist, Lakshminath tried to negotiate with the situation. See Debendranath Bezbaroa's letter on 30 April, 1920 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 288-289. Jagannath Bezbaroa, one of the elder brothers of Lakshminath, in a letter wrote that neither Lakshminath nor Gobinda did anything objectionable publicly. What remained in the inner domain, within the household was never made a public issue. Gobinda, in spite of his highly westernized life-style did not refuse to offer sacred thread to his sons. See Jagannath Bezbaroa's letter to Lakshminath on 11 August, 1928 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 236-238.

shastric tradition.⁶²⁷ The instance provides us to see how in the complex situation of modern life, Indian persons negotiated with *dharma*.

In the late 1920s, when Lakshminath was above sixty years of age, Dipika, his youngest daughter's decision to convert herself to Christianity came to him as a bolt from the blue. He tried his utmost to prevent her from this. He wrote to her in a letter that, out of poverty, Golapchadra converted himself to Christianity, whereas it was her mistrust of the parents which led to take such a harsh decision.⁶²⁸ He tried to restrict Dipika from her decision and tried to make her trust that her feeling of loneliness was nothing but deception. Going for Christianity was not a solution at all. She was running after mirage only. He blamed her, because without giving any prior hint of it, immediately after attaining adulthood, she suddenly proclaimed her firm resolution that she had already taken. It was described by him as a "whirlwind" in their life. Dipika's conversion to Christianity was an incident, which resulted in, to quote his own expression, making him "a half-dead-father".⁶²⁹ In the letter to Satyavrata Mukherjee, his eldest son-in-law Lakshminath called it "a plan by the Christian devils" for spreading "all the tentacles to grasp the impressionable stupid girl".⁶³⁰ He wrote, "I have become worse than a woman."⁶³¹

However, with the lapse of time, he recovered his composure, and in 1932, he wrote in a letter to Aruna that if Dipika had sincerity, she would get God's grace, Ram, Rahim or Jesus, through

⁶²⁷ *Diaries*, Tezpur University dated 30 December, 1907. Several mentions of *Gangasnan* or holy bath in the Ganga by the family members of Dinanath Bezbaroa were found in the diaries of Lakshminath. In a letter, he wrote to his daughter, "I drink a drop of *Gangajal*, named whisky; have I become 'untouchable' for it?" See letter to Ratna from Sambalpur on 29 October, 1936 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 140-141.

⁶²⁸ Lakshminath's letter to Dipika on 14 July, 1932 from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 144-145.

⁶²⁹ Lakshminath's letter to Satyavrata Mukherjee from Sambalpur on 2 July, 1932 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 133-134.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid*.

⁶³¹ *Ibid*.

whoever that sincere love was offered, it would not matter at all. The house of her parents in Sambalpur remained open for her. Lakshminath even translated a few Christian hymns at her request to Bengali.⁶³² He expressed his extreme desire to see her.⁶³³ She was at his side at his death bed at Dibrugarh in 1938.

However, remaining religious minded as ever, Lakshminath's socialization with persons from different religious orientation (the orthodox Hindu, the Christian, the Brahmo, the Arya samajist, the Mussalman, the Jew etc.), and taking food with them informs about the liberal mindedness of him. He, at Sambalpur, even kept a Mussalman cook in their house, in the absence of Prajnasundari for a few months.⁶³⁴ His diary shows he once spent nights with a Muslim family and had a meal there.⁶³⁵ Considering the mindset of the Hindu upper caste intelligentsia of contemporary society, it was quite a radical step from the part of Lakshminath.⁶³⁶

⁶³² Lakshminath's letters to Dipika from Sambalpur on 9 February, 1937 and 24 May, 1937 and 14 June, 1937 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 147-148.

⁶³³ Lakshminath's letter to Dipika on 14 June, 1937 from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 152.

⁶³⁴ Lakshminath mentioned a person named Golap in one of his letters to Prajnasundari. See Lakshminath's letter from Sambalpur, on 8 November, 1921, Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 56. Maheswar Neog introduced Golap as a Mussalman cook from Cuttack. "*Toka-Ka*", No. 64, Ibid, p. 331.

⁶³⁵ In the referred instance, as it was described by Lakshminath, while he was visiting a place nearby Surat, he '... became a guest of a rich Mussalman gentleman mullah (Bora). Had breakfast and tea at his'. See entry on 15 October, 1923, *Diaries*, Tezpur University. Abdul Mazid, the session judge of Rajshahi, originally from Assam and Khan Bahadur Mohammad Hamid, the Land Settlement Officer of Sambalpur district were two intimate friends of Lakshminath. He paid his homage to the first by dedicating *Kadamkali*, his poetry book to him and Hamid was offered a righteous place in his memoirs.

⁶³⁶ For example, we may consider the case of Padmanath Bhattacharyya Bidyavinod, an erudite scholar of the time from Sylhet, and teacher of the Cotton College, who consciously avoided physical contact with *mlechchhas*, and immediately after returning from the college took a bath to save him from any possible contamination to the caste. See Hazarika, Atulchandra. *Smritir Papari*. Gauhati: Dutta Borooah and Company, 1977, p. 47.

Bhakti: An Intermediary Way

In 1927-28, Lakshminath, serving on a project of the Birds' and Company, had to live in Assam for several months. As we have already shown in chapter two, long being separated from his family, and doing work amidst adverse situations of deep forests, Lakshminath had been spending his days amidst agony. During that time, out of professional and personal anxiety, Lakshminath took refuge in Ramakrishna Paramhansa.⁶³⁷ Lakshminath, and a section of his contemporaries' leanings towards Ramakrishna were embedded in the crisis of their time.

According to Sumit Sarkar, in Bengal, by the time of Bankimchandra, *bhakti* emerged to the *bhadralok* as an escape in an inner world from personal anxiety. He has shown that *seva* or willed submission to God was opposed to forceful bondage of the colonial world.⁶³⁸ The paternalistic, benevolent, personalized God, different from the cruel office bosses, was a spiritual solace for them. Sarkar has further argued that the society of the time had exhibited certain changes in its attitude towards life. By then even the Hindu College students, who were once known for their iconoclastic rejection of Hindu tradition were found in harmony with the orthodox society. Their Anglicism remained superficial, and they failed in developing any effective programme for social reform. He has said that rural retrospect, feminization, a turning away from social activism- these were characteristics displayed by the behaviours of the intelligentsia. Retreating from rationalism practiced by Rammohun Ray, the society searched in the *balak* bhava of Ramakrishna, allegedly a child as free as *pagal* directed by whims, for

⁶³⁷ Borooah, Jnanadabhiram. "Mor Katha." *Jnanadabhiram Borooah Rachanavali*. Edited by Jogendranarayan Bhuyan. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1981, p. 183. Jnadabhiram, one of the closest to Lakshminath, recalled that during that period, he read the biography of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, and Lakshminath listened to his reading.

⁶³⁸ "Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti" in Sarkar, Sumit. *Writing Social History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 311.

its major cult figure.⁶³⁹ It was the inner tension of the generation, for which, even the personality like Keshab Chandra Sen had to withdraw himself from the reform activities.

Once in the rationalistic spirit of the time, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya argued that India's poverty and subjection lied in the absence of those attributes that have made the Europeans culturally equipped for progress and power.⁶⁴⁰ The overwhelming part of the religion is emphasis on the *vairagya* and other-worldliness. If India were to progress, it had to outmode its archaic beliefs and institutions. He believed that conditions for such a change had been created by the British rule in the forms of finer legal and judicial systems.⁶⁴¹ But towards the end of the nineteenth century, "pessimism" and "conservatism" were identified as the characteristic traits of contemporary journalistic literature, and the origin of this other-worldliness was mostly traced in Vaishnavism. A report of the Bengal Library stated,

"The recrudescence with Vaishnavism with its innate antipathy to what may be styled the temporal and material aspect of life, has tended to accentuate these traits. As a consequence, healthy liberalism, which sets its face against morbid pessimism and delights to dwell upon the bright side of life, rarely finds expression in native journals."⁶⁴²

Apart from literature, the report noticed a "great religious excitement" in the society too, with the effort by a section of the intelligentsia to replace "atheism and religious apathy" by "a firm and fervent belief in Hinduism" and "revival of Hinduism in its spiritual form".⁶⁴³

⁶³⁹ "Renaissance and Kaliyuga" in Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 1999.

⁶⁴⁰ Bankimchandra's "Samya" article was originally published in 1879. Chattopadhyaya, Bankimchandra. *Bankim Rachanavali: Part II*. Edited by Prafulla Kumar Patra. Kalikata: Patra's Publication, 1983, p. 352.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 350-374.

⁶⁴² See Rajendra Chandra Sastri's (Librarian, Bengal Library), "Report on the Bengal Library" in *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department: Report on Publications Issued and Registered in the Several Provinces of British India During the Year 1896, No. CCCLII, Serial No. 21*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1898, pp. 31-59.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

From its inception, Lakshminath's journal *Banhi* emerged as a prime site of religious debate.⁶⁴⁴ Lakshminath, who, as a publicist had a close watch on the reform initiatives of Hinduism, as well as on the society as a whole, had expressed some interesting observations on the reform movements of India through it. His critique of the reform initiatives of the time was based on his celebration of a sincere emotional personal relationship with God. Lakshminath considered a rationalist figure like Rammohun Ray as a God's incarnation. Rammohun's emphasis on monotheism and denial of the ancient *shastric* tradition is celebrated by him as timely, but Rammohun's denial of the greatness of Krishna was regretted.⁶⁴⁵ Rammohun denied Krishna, because his rationality prevented him from believing in the human incarnation of God. Subsequently, and contrary to Rammohun, Bankimchandra's rationalistic reading made Krishna an historical figure. *Rasalila* for Bankim was a metaphor, a *rupak* or poetic imagination, whereas he believed that the Mahabharata had depicted the historical truth of Krishna's life. Bankim purified Krishna according to the needs of the nineteenth century civilization. He knew that without Krishna the war with the Christianity could not be fought against.⁶⁴⁶ Later it was through the advocacy for a personal God by Keshabchandra Sen, Lakshminath argued, that Krishna came to the forefront in modern Bengal.⁶⁴⁷

Lakshminath, in consonance with Bankim, rejected idolatry. He argued that the worshippers of idols elevate the inert objects as God, and at the same time despise the real lively beings and

⁶⁴⁴ At one point of time, even an objection was raised by a section of readers that the *Banhi* had become entirely a religious journal. See *Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 1, 1913. A section of readers believed that the *Banhi* was the print organ of the Mahapurushiya Vaishnava sect in Assam. In fact, the name *Banhi* or lute itself suggests its connection with Krishna.

⁶⁴⁵ "Srikrishna-Katha", *Banhi*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 1918 (1840 Saka), pp. 27-32.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

did not even repent for torturing them.⁶⁴⁸ Similarly, Rabindranath also rejected idolatry, but his logic was different. Rabindranath wrote,

“It is the reification of mind, what impedes the common people from the formless infinite God. They could not perceive beyond the limit due to their limits of mind.”⁶⁴⁹

Lakshminath, from the outset, criticized Rammohun and Keshabchandra, who appeared to him to be “aggressive reformers”, whereas it was in Sankardeva, he had seen a far more “practical” approach to his surrounding reality. He reiterated that like these contemporary reformers, Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, the preachers of Vaishnavism in Assam were not iconoclasts. They possessed the spirit of true statesmanship instead.⁶⁵⁰

The point to be noted is that Ramakrishna Paramhansa’s emotional devotion was equally celebrated by Lakshminath. He argued that Krishna, the personalized and benevolent god, was the central deity in both. Being a self-declared moderate, Lakshminath never believed in radical change either of the society or of religion. In his consideration, radicalism or revolution was alien to Indian tradition and the only exception was Buddha, whose *dharma* was denied by India. He criticized Buddhism for its radicalism and praised Hinduism for its tolerant attitudes. He glorified the all-embracing power of Hinduism, and even deification became acceptable to him, because, for him, it was an innate human nature and so nothing was objectionable about

⁶⁴⁸ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 6, Issues 1, 1914 in Tamuly, Lakshminath, ed. *Banhi: Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*. Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 2008, pp. 970-971.

⁶⁴⁹ “*Sakar o Nirakar*”, Tagore, Rabindranath. *Adhunik-Sahitya*. Kalikata: Visva Bharati Granthalaya, 1938, 1345 Bangabda (First Published 1305 Bangabda).

⁶⁵⁰ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 1913 in Tamuly, *Banhi: Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 680-683.

it. In personal life also, Lakshminath never adhered rigidly to monotheism, and while at Howrah, attended the household Durga puja celebration of his friends.⁶⁵¹

Lakshminath wrote that two extreme positions could not represent a full truth. The *Karma marga* propagated by the Vedas and the *Jnana marga* propagated by the *Upanishadas* are two extreme positions. It was the *Gita*, which tried to find an intermediary position, a golden means and became successful in it. “The middle position is the best way in the world,” his emphasis was on the popular appeal of Vaishnavism.⁶⁵² He believed that Hinduism is more popular than Christianity, because the former took a more practical approach to attract the common people. On the other hand, *jnana marga* and *karma marga* are difficult, whereas the *bhakti marga*, based on love and devotion, is easier and much more appealing to the general people. The popular imagination always wants a personified god as a symbol of eternal. He tried to reconcile between the infinite being or the *Brahma* and the finite and perceptible aspect of the same. Lakshminath wrote that the *Brahma*, the absolute truth of Indian philosophical thought, is the supreme unity of all contradictions. As there is no difference between the ocean and its

⁶⁵¹ Apart from attending the household Durga puja at Kalikrishna Pramanik’s house at Howrah, a friend of Lakshminath and proprietor of Caledonia Dock, Lakshminath saw Durga immersion at Dhubri in 1926, and became ‘happy’. *Diaries*, Tezpur University dated 17 October, 1926. Debendranath Tagore, on the other hand, in 1849 set out to Assam in order to ‘avoid’ the pujas held in his own house. See Tagore, Debendranath. *Autobiography of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore*. Translated by Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi. London: Macmillan & Company, 1914, p. 181.

⁶⁵² “*Karmabada*”, *Alochani*, Volume 7, Issue 6, 1837 Saka, 1915. In fact, throughout his literary career, Lakshminath emphasized on pragmatic aspects of Sankardeva’s thought, and pointed out how he tried to avoid any conflict with the local kings and other people in relation to religion so that this rigidity to own ideology ultimately would not become a hindrance towards diffusion of it. Lakshminath always focused on Sankardeva as a practical reformer. See Bezbaroa, Lakshminath, *Sankardeva*. Sambalpur, n. d., First Published in 1911, pp. 217-220. He wrote that Sankardeva and Madhavadeva were not revolutionary or rebellious to Hinduism, but they propagated *yugadharma*, defined as dharma adapted to time. *Banhi*, Volume 10, Issue 4, 1920 (1842 Saka).

waves, so there is no difference between the finite and infinite aspects of the *Brahma*, because in it all contradictions cease to exist.⁶⁵³

Search for Alternative: Religion as Identity

Relating religion with the emerging notion of national and regional consciousness was another significant aspect of the mental world of the colonial intelligentsia of South Asia.⁶⁵⁴ Being a self-professed warrior for assertion of the identity of a regional linguistic community, Lakshminath still exhibited an ambivalent attitude towards religion and nation in terms of the emerging nationalist questions. The year 1913, marked a departure in his thought from the exclusively language-based model of nationality. In an editorial in the *Banhi*, he argued that among the nation-making bonds, the bond of religion is the foremost.

“The bond of language is powerful; but it is not long-lasting. If Assamese people want to be a nation, then it is obtainable only through the binding of religion.”⁶⁵⁵

How a person almost obsessed with a language-based nationality could abruptly switch over to advocate religion as the prime ground of unity?

In fact, the change was not as sudden as it seems to be. It was the basic frameworks of thought, prevalent among the nationalists of the time, which already carried such a schema. Max Muller,

⁶⁵³ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Srikrishna-Katha*”, *Banhi*, Volume 9, Issues 3-4, 1918 (1840 Saka), pp. 67-73.

⁶⁵⁴ Dietrich Reetz has argued that in colonial India, the high point of Indian nationalist movement was also the formative phase of the regionalization of politics in ethnic and religious terms. Sikhs and Pathans developed autonomous movements in the 1920s. Religious nationalism proved to be an effective tool of mass mobilization in South Asia. Reetz, Dietrich. “Ethnic and Religious Identity in Colonial India (1920s to 1930s): A Conceptual Debate”, *Contemporary South Asia*, Volume 2, Issue 2, 1993, pp. 109-122.

⁶⁵⁵ *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 12, 1912 in Tamuly, *Banhi: Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 625-529.

one of the chief proponents of Comparative Philology, in a lecture in 1870, that he delivered at the Royal Institute of London declared,

“It is language and religion that makes a people, but a religion is even a more powerful agent than language.”⁶⁵⁶

He has cited the example of the Jews as the “most signal-confirmation” of the view that religion more than language provided the foundation for formation of nationality.⁶⁵⁷ He traced the origin of the idea in Schelling, and added that even Hegel, like Schelling, arrived at the same conclusion, and in his Philosophy of History, proclaimed that the idea of God formed the general foundation of a people.⁶⁵⁸

Max Muller saw an intimate connection between early religion and early language, and argued that whatever classifications for science of language were found useful were equally useful for the classification for the science of religion. The only scientific and truly genetic classification of religions for him was the same as the classification of languages.⁶⁵⁹

In 1882, Max Muller’s lectures on the science of religion series were published. Subsequently, in the report of the Census of Assam in 1891, Edward Gait, the Superintendent already had quoted Max Muller. The colonial officers, in their construction of the Census data, deployed the idea, and explained the expansion of Assamese among the non-Aryan communities in terms of a parallel process of their conversion to Hinduism. Even the distinction of Assamese as a language from Bengali was sometimes premised on the religious line of arguments. For example, in 1896, J. D. Anderson, as part of a debate stated in the Calcutta Review that

⁶⁵⁶ Max Muller, F. *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution in February and May, 1870*. Oxford: Longmans, Green and Company, 1882, p. 85.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 86.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 87.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 82.

Assamese had “the idioms of a race whose social custom differ widely from the Bengali, and are essentially those of a Hindu race who has not adopted Mussalman social habits.”⁶⁶⁰ He argued,

“The Assamese claim, not without reason to speak a language unaffected by Christian or Moslems influences, a language reflecting the primitive forces of Hinduism, which are still sufficiently flexible to grow and to convert. Its syntax is still redolent of a primitive and even savage past. But it has literature which is entirely indigenous.”⁶⁶¹

Lakshminath, while contending the views of Rabindranath on unity of languages, extensively quoted Anderson. The nationalists believed that the Aryan Assamese language had a connection with Hinduism. In 1909, Lakshminath, probably being inspired by the Hindi-Hindu and Urdu-Muslim formulations of the time, pointed out to the religious underpinning of the Aryan Assamese language, which he argued was based on Sanskrit, the vehicle of Hinduism.⁶⁶² However, whether for the colonial officers or the Assamese nationalists, like Hindi or Urdu, it was not at all possible to equate the Assamese language with Hinduism. Edward Gait stated in his report of the census of Assam in 1891 in clear terms,

“Assamese is the parent tongue of the Mussalmmans and Hindus, including the Hinduised aboriginals, of the Brahmaputra valley.”⁶⁶³

The categories used by the censuses were not adequate enough to reflect the religious and cultural diversity of the region. In the census of 1881, there was a single column to describe religion or tribe, and in case of the hill tribes only tribes were returned. It was only in the 1891

⁶⁶⁰ Quoted by Lakshminath Bezbaroa in “*Asami Bhasa*”, *Punya*, Volume 2, Issues 1-2, 1893 (1305 Bangabda), pp. 22-32.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶⁶² “*Asamiya*”, *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Calcutta, 1909, Goswami, Jatindranath, ed. *Banhi: Part I (First & Second Year)*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001, pp. 9-13.

⁶⁶³ Gait, E. A. *Census of India, 1891: Volume I, Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892, p. 157.

census, two separate columns were kept for the aboriginals, and who declared himself as Hindu was held to be a Hindu. Gait has pointed out that,

“Assam is scarcely India, and Hinduism here is a foreign not an indigenous religion.”⁶⁶⁴

He added that a large number of people were still untouched by Hinduism.⁶⁶⁵ While converted to Hinduism, though they changed their names, and entered a caste especially reserved for them, sometimes they became Hindus without changing their tribal appellations.⁶⁶⁶ The pre-Aryan beliefs had not yet “died out”.⁶⁶⁷ The report of the 1911 census stated that it was hard to say when the “new converts” became “Hindu”, because they did not leave their old habits of “eating and drinking”.⁶⁶⁸ Many aboriginal tribes embraced either Christianity or Hinduism without “forfeiting their tribal characters”.⁶⁶⁹ Moreover, the conversion to Hinduism was not necessarily analogous with the acceptance of Assamese.

In the Census report of 1921, G. T. Llyod had observed that excluding Kamrup, Darrang and Cachar districts, Assamese and Bengali were steadily displacing Kachari. Though in practice the people were bilingual, they expressed their “desire” to return as Bengali or Assamese speakers. The Assam-Bengal Railway had facilitated a section of them to come in contact with the outer world, and with the conversion to Hinduism they turned to bilingual people. Already 5000 people had lost their mother tongue within ten years, and they returned Bengali as their

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 83.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 82.

⁶⁶⁸ McSwiney, J. *Census of India, 1911, Vol. III: Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press Printing, 1912, Chapter IV, p. 41.

⁶⁶⁹ Croft, Alfred. *Review of Education in India in 1886, With Special Reference to the Report of the Education Commission*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1888.

mother tongue.⁶⁷⁰ Emphasizing the parallel processes of some tribal communities' gradual acceptance of Hinduism with their conversion to Assamese speaking communities, or at least to bilingual people, the Assamese nationalists tried to appropriate the *Vaishnavism* of Assam to serve the formation of a broader Assamese nation.

Lakshminath argued that arrival of different stocks of people to Assam both from the west and east to form a composite culture notwithstanding, there always existed a deeper bond of Vaishnavism.⁶⁷¹ The Assamese intelligentsia of the period tried to project Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism of Assam as a founding pillar of the emerging Assamese *jati*, in which Lakshminath's role was pivotal. However, such an attempt from the vernacular intelligentsia was not an isolated phenomenon in Assam. As Pragati Mahapatra has shown, in colonial Orissa, the Jagannatha cult of Puri was also incorporated with the land and people of Oriya. The deity Lord Jagannatha was venerated to mean the Oriya community.⁶⁷²

Religious identity, like language-based identity, is not easy to define. It was the censuses introduced by colonialism, which compelled the people to define them in terms of religion. Prior to that, without giving any name to it, most people practice religion as part of their lives. The census officials often found that when asked to name their religion, the question was “incomprehensible” to the people.⁶⁷³ But there was a presumption among the colonial officers

⁶⁷⁰ Lloyd, G. T. *Census of India, 1921. Vol. III: Assam, Part I*. Shillong: The Government Press, Assam, 1923, p. 124.

⁶⁷¹ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath, “Asamiya”, *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Calcutta, 1909 in Goswami, *Banhi: Part I, Collection of 1st & 2nd Years*, 2001, pp. 9-13.

⁶⁷² Mahapatra, Pragati. *The Making of a Cultural Identity: Language, Literature and Gender in Orissa in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1997, pp. 11-13. Mahapatra argues that identification of a community with a deity is certainly rare, if not unique in South Asia. A combination of factors made it possible to incorporate Jagannath cult with imagining of Oriya identity.

⁶⁷³ McSwiney, *Report of Census, 1911, Assam*, 1912, see Chapter IV, p. 36.

that a native of India was a Hindu, and anyone who cannot define his religion otherwise would also be considered to be a Hindu.⁶⁷⁴ Accordingly, the Hindu in Assam were 54.72 per cent of the population, 2,997,072 in numbers.⁶⁷⁵

Furthermore, in Assam, it was never possible to define the boundaries of different sects of Hinduism in rigid terms. The people, while being Vaishnava, never stop to worship *Ma Shitala* or *Aai*, female deities known for their afflicting influences in creating certain diseases or *Shiva*, another popular male deity among them. Contrary to the nationalist's claims regarding prevalence of Vaishnavism in Assam, Gait, on the other hand, observed that Shaktism had more vital force than Vaishnavism.⁶⁷⁶ According to him, many Vaishnavas were attracted by the more realistic worship of the Shaktas, and offered sacrifices at Kamakhya.⁶⁷⁷ The census report of 1911 pointed out that since the time of Sankar's death, a Vaishnava sect called *Bamuniya* refused to accept Sankar, a *shudra*, by caste hierarchy as the founder of a religious sect. Moreover, in Assam, there was a separate division called Chaitanya *panthi*, or the followers of Chaitanya.⁶⁷⁸ The report stated that though in Assam, Hindus were mainly either Shaktas or Vaishnavas, in spite of the apparent distinction the categorization was not mutually exclusive.⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁴ Gait, *Census of India, 1891, Assam*, 1892, p. 82.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ See Chapter on Religion in McSwiney, *Census of India, 1911, Assam*, 1912, p. 42. According to Charles N. E. Eliot, it was after Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, two *mahapurushas* or great men, the sect takes its name, who they regard as their founders. The *Mahapurushiyas* worship footprints of Sankar and Madhav, and regard their compositions as scripture. The *gosains* of this sect are not Brahmans and less autocratic than the *gosains* of Brahmanic satras. "They lay little stress on caste, though they do not absolutely condemn or reject it." Eliot, Charles N. E. "Hinduism in Assam." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, October 1910: 1155-1186, p. 1182.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 44.

Mahapurushiya Vaishnava Identity

Lakshminath's conception of Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism was an inclusive category, which tacitly and sometimes overtly tried to include all local growths of Vaishnavism within it. Defining *Mahapurushiya Dharma*, he proposed to include all sects of Vaishnavism prevalent in Assam in it. They are by nature and teachings one and the same.⁶⁸⁰ His formulation of Mahapurushiya, while showing its difference with Vaishnavism of Bengal, tried to overcome the sectarian debate and conflict prevalent among the various Vaishnava groups of Assam. During the 1910-20s, universality of *Namdharma*, the essence of all religions, was largely focused on by him. The period showed his eagerness to encapsulate Islam, Christianity, Vaishnavism, the Shakta cult- all in one, the singular cult of *Nama* or name of the Supreme Being. *Namadharma* was defined as a place of union for all religions, a 'common platform', manifestation of unity. God, the supreme truth has no specific names, it responds to anyone, through whatever name it is addressed. Shaktas utter Kali or Durga. God is one, so, truly speaking, all religions are one.⁶⁸¹

However, focusing on the *Mahapurushiya Dharma*, Lakshminath proclaimed in the editor's column of the *Banhi*,

"The religion propagated by Mahapurush Sankardeva should be the *jatiya dharma*, national religion of the Assamese people. It has every merit and competence to occupy that place."⁶⁸²

Elaborating his point, he emphasized on the *sattvic* aspect of Sankar's religion. He pointed out Sankar's association with Assam, because, like some other preachers, he was not alien to this land and culture, Sankardeva's forbearance to other religions and lack of parochialism and

⁶⁸⁰ "Sampadakar Chora", *Banhi*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 1918 (1840 Saka), p. 11.

⁶⁸¹ "Mahapurush Sankardeva", *Banhi*, Volume 7, Issue 10, 1916 (1838 Saka), pp. 529-539.

⁶⁸² Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. "Sampadakar Chora", *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 12, 1913 (1835 Saka) in Tamuly, *Banhi : Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 625-629.

communalism were prime reasons behind his choice. He made it clear that parochialism and communalism would not help the formation of Assamese nation, and in the *visva-janin* and *sarbajanik* religion of *Mahapurushiya* Vaishnavism, there is no room for such parochialism.⁶⁸³ What was exclusively taught to us by Sankardeva and Madhavadeva is self-extension, and not parochialism.⁶⁸⁴

While choosing to base the Assamese identity on a religious sect, the Assamese nationalists immediately had to face the challenges posed by the presence of other groups outside the purview of Hinduism. For instance, a question may arise, where will be the room for the Muslims in a nation constructed on the basis of *Vaishnavism*? Lakshminath addressed the issue and argued,

“In formation of national temple of Assamese, we could not avoid our Muslim brothers. They are half of the body of the nation. The whole body of the Assamese nation is constituted by the union of the Hindus and the Muslims”.⁶⁸⁵

The religion of Sankardeva is monotheist and opposed to idolatry, hence it is nearer to Islam, he argued. He did not call on the Muslims to accept Vaishnavism, relinquishing their own religion. What he meant was to come nearer to the liberal Hindus. He firmly declared that the parochialism of communalism would not help to form a healthy Assamese nationalism. Even Sankardeva had deep respect for Kabira, a legendary Vaishnava *santa* allegedly a symbol of communal harmony in India. In fact, what he invoked was *sattvik* dharma, which was by definition non-violent, universal and all-embracing. The crucial point is, for him, it is the

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁴ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 12, 1914 (1836 Saka) in Tamuly, *Banhi : Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 626-633.

⁶⁸⁵ “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 12, 1913 in Tamuly, *Banhi : Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 625-629.

Christianity, Islam and Buddhism; and not the Hinduism, which possess these norms of *sattvik dharma*. In later part of the article, Lakshminath even elaborated how Islam in his view deserved the status of a *sattvik dharma*.⁶⁸⁶ For Lakshminath, the essence of pure religion was *bhakti*, and it is universal, unitarian, equalitarian.⁶⁸⁷

Referring to Muslims living in Assam, he reiterated, Sankar's religion alone could make it possible for Hindu and Muslim brothers, to go nearer to each other, which none other religion could do to such an extent. Two *jatis*, that meant for him, the Hindu and the Muslim, are nearly of the same spirit and of the same nature'. So, they should avoid communalism, and being inspired by the unitary feelings should form a *birat*, wider Assamese *jati*.⁶⁸⁸

However, the intelligentsia's projection of Sankardeva and Vaishnavism in the period was crucial from their felt attachment with Aryan-Hindu lineage, and probably a conscious choice from their part. Since the *bhakti* cult of Vaishnavism was a pan-Indian phenomenon, and Sankardeva's family also allegedly migrated from Kanyakubja region of mainland India, it seemed to be helpful for them in asserting mainland Indian cultural link with Assam. Their intention could be easily discerned in the following line from Banikanta Kakati. Banikanta, in 1948, trying to incorporate the "comparative method of modern sociological studies", and professedly avoiding any "hazarded" conclusion, in the preface to his study of religious history of ancient Assam wrote,

⁶⁸⁶ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. "*Sampadakar Chora*", *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 12, 1913 (1835 Saka). Lakshminath's analysis of Islam as a *Sattvik dharma* got its inspiration from Carlyle's analysis of Mahomet in his essay on the Hero as Prophet.

⁶⁸⁷ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. "*Sampadar Chora*", *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 12, 1913 (1835 Saka) in Tamuly, *Banhi: Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 625-629.

⁶⁸⁸ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. "*Sampadakar Chora*", *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 12, 1913 (1835 Saka) in Tamuly, *Banhi: Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 625-629.

“In the present political set up of India, Assam is fast shedding her character of a mere geographical expression in the map of India. And yet she has not told the story of growth and development as a meeting ground of the Aryans and the Mongols.”⁶⁸⁹

He claimed his book to be “an introduction towards the study of the fusion of the Aryan and extra-Aryan beliefs and practices in Assam”.⁶⁹⁰ He also cited that earlier he had written a booklet on Sankardeva, which remained a part of the contemporary intelligentsia’s project to show the “purely Aryan aspects of Assamese thoughts and activities”.⁶⁹¹ The booklet, entitled “Life and Teachings of Sankardeva”, a part of the Saints of India Series, published by Natesan and Company, Madras, assumed to appear in 1923.⁶⁹² Later the booklet was incorporated into another volume “From Chaitanya to Vivekananda” also published by the same Company in 1928. The Natesan Company, while widely advertising their book “Chaitanya to Vivekananda” in the Bombay Chronicle, claimed that book was “sketches of six saints, five Bengali, and one Assamese”, portraying both their individual character and teaching, and displaying the historic setting.⁶⁹³ About the book, it was also claimed that in spite of wide differences among the saints one from the other, it was the ancient philosophy of the Hindu, which got varied utterance in

⁶⁸⁹ See “Preface” in Kakati, Banikanta. *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya: Or the Studies in Fusion of Aryan and Primitive Beliefs of Assam*. Gauhati: Assam Publishing Corporation, 1948.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid. The sub-title of the book itself illuminates its approach to the subject matter and objectives of the book. The articles were mostly written in the early 1940s, and already published through journals like the New Indian Antiquary in 1939 and 1944, newspapers like the Assam Tribune and the commemoration volume of P. V. Kane, published in 1942.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.

⁶⁹² Instead of the author’s mention of the book’s (Life and Teachings of Sankardeva, Saints of India Series, Natesan and Company, Madras) publication in 1923, and later incorporation of it as a part of another volume (From Chaitanya to Vivekananda) also published by Natesan & Company of Madras in 1928, as per catalogue of the Company, it was published in 1919.

⁶⁹³ “Chaitanya to Vivekananda”, *Bombay Chronicle*, Issues of 19 July, 20 July, 24 July, 23 July, 27 July, 30 July, 31 July, 2 August, 3 August, 1928, Bombay.

all of them.⁶⁹⁴ Thus, it could be imagined that towards the early years of the 1920s, the Assamese intelligentsia already developed a connection with various forms of nationalist consciousness prevalent in India, and their revisiting and assertion of Sankardeva and Vaishnavism in Assam were somehow linked with the contemporary reformist and nationalistic initiatives of the similar kinds widespread in India.

Canonizing Sankardeva

Turning to *bhakti* as spiritual solace, the colonial intelligentsia of Assam necessarily had to focus on Sankardeva, the Vaishnava preacher of Assam in the fifteenth- and the sixteenth-century. Sankardeva was projected as the progenitor of a universal and “simple” religion.⁶⁹⁵ He was perceived as the spiritual redeemer of their contemporary *kalikal*. It was through revisiting Sankardeva’s life simultaneously as a religious preacher, a social organizer and literary icon, the intelligentsia searched for redemption from their crisis in reality. Lakshminath argued that *bhakti*, the only way of salvation in the *Kalikal* was bestowed by Sankardeva to all, irrespective of their caste and birth. So, without any doubt, he is an avatar of the Supreme Being.⁶⁹⁶ Thus, it was through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rereading of Sankardeva, who was earlier basically held to be a religious preacher, emerged as the chief idol of the Assamese people, and *dharma* came to be imagined as one of the founding pillars of the Assamese identity.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁵ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “SriSankardeva Pracharita Dharmar Bishaye”, *Banhi*, Volume 12, Issue 3, 1920 (1843 Saka), pp. 72-74.

⁶⁹⁶ See “SriSankardeva Ishwarar Avatarne” in Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part III*. Edited by Jatindranath Goswami. Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 2005, pp. 2014-2018. The essay was shown to be originally published in *Banhi*, Volume 24.

It is not that while looking back to the past for redemption in the present, the colonial intelligentsia of the time discovered in Sankardeva the potentiality and power merely in the realm of religion. They felt the same redemptive power also in the field of literature. They eventually made their systematic attempts to canonize him as a great poet, whose literary achievements, they claimed, like all great literature, had passed the test of times. Literary criticism and biography were the genres through which the revisiting of Sankardeva was made possible.

They realized that canon formation was *sine qua non* for the construction of literary modernity. Shaping such canons, some literatures were marginalized as indecent or contaminated in taste, whereas others were canonized as universal. English literary studies had introduced intelligentsia with a range of literary-cultural choices. Simultaneously, with print, by the 1850s, the religious *shastras* were renamed and focused as *sahitya*. Gunabhiram Borooah, publishing the *Namghosha*, one of the sacred texts of Vaishnavism of Assam, wrote a *Vigyapan*, a notice in *Arunoday*, which highlighted the printed *Namghosha* both as *shastra* and *sahitya*. Gunabhiram emphasized on the *bhaktirasa*, spiritual pleasure that a follower of Vaishnavism was to feel in the reading of such bhakti texts. He compared Sankardeva with Nanak, Martin Luther and even with Francis Bacon, and thus tried to argue in favour of a secular rationalistic reading of the scripture. He argued that in the *Namghosha*, manifestation of the emotion of *bhakti* of the saint-poet had been transformed to an experience of universal validity.⁶⁹⁷

Prior to Gunabhiram, it was Miles Bronson, a Christian missionary, nevertheless being critical enough of the hypocritical *satradhikars* or religious *gurus* of the Vaishnava sect, simultaneously expressed his concern to notice the great impact on the masses of ‘*Shri Hungkor*

⁶⁹⁷ Borooah, Gunabhiram Deka. “*Ghosa Puthi Chapa Hoar Vigyapan*” (The Ghuha Shaster) in Saikia, Arupjyoti, ed. *Arunoday, 1855-1868: Nirbachita Sankalan*. Nagaon: Krantikal Prakashan, 2002, pp. 140-141.

Purah’ or Sankardeva.⁶⁹⁸ Visiting *Bar Duar Than*, the birthplace of Sankardeva, Bronson in his journal of 1844 delineated the popular belief around Sankar as an incarnation of the deity lord Visnu. He reported that the people believed that,

“... Krishna was incarnated in the form of a man called Sonko (Sankar); that he gave direction that the place should be sacred to his worship.”⁶⁹⁹

Bronson even noticed the popularity of the compositions of Sankardeva among the people,

“What is the secret of these books being so popular as to be found in almost every house, and on every tongue? Simply this, Shri Hungkor struck for the masses. He came down to the level of the people”.⁷⁰⁰

On the occasion of printing of the *Namghosha puthi*, Bronson again expressed his opinion and commended Sankardeva’s celebration of *matribhasa* to inform the peasantry, whereas coming away from the customary practice of Sanskrit, a language of arcane knowledge. Bronson pointed out that through this, Sankar not only protected his mother tongue, but also provided the opportunity to the masses for rationalistic judgement of *shastric* knowledge. At the same time, Bronson offered a critique of Sankardeva as partially becoming successful in sieving out mythological from truth, and by propounding “a new religion” based on monotheism and ignoring caste division. He called it a long advancement towards truth, but negated

⁶⁹⁸ It was the same journal, in which, Bronson recorded the people’s engagement with Sankardeva, Miles Bronson, also wrote about the functioning of the Barduar Satra, “The *bhokots* seem to think that they are bound to the establishment for life, with their wives and children; and, in fact, they are just in the capacity of slaves and bondmen. They appear to be of all castes, and follow the occupation suited to their caste, whenever their Brahmanical lords require their services. Much of the time they are idle; and this is one of the evils of endowing these places, that is, encourages a great body of people in idleness. This is strikingly exhibited at Bar Duar, for almost the whole of the thousands of *poorahs* of land, with which it is endowed, is a waste jungle. And although there are scores of children, and many Brahmins qualified to teach, there was no school in the vicinity.” *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Vol. XXIV, No. 6, American Baptist Foreign Mission, June, 1844, p. 244.

⁶⁹⁹ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Vol. XXIV, No. 6, American Baptist Foreign Mission, June, 1844, pp. 242-245.

⁷⁰⁰ Bronson’s letter from Nowgong to the editor, *Friends of India*, May 25, 1855.

Gunabhiram's marking of Sankar and Madhav as *avatars*, and stated that being interpreters of *shastras*, they were only common men or authors.⁷⁰¹

Imagining Sankardeva as the "*Jatiya Kabi*" was prior to Sankardeva as the "*Jatir Janak*", or the founding father of the Assamese nationality. Though reading Sankardeva beyond religious devotion preceded the *Jonaki* group, it was Hemchandra Goswami, who had projected in a lecture that he delivered in 1890 Sankardeva as the *Jatiya kavi* of Assam, as well as the paternal figure of the Assamese literature. Hemchandra argued that every nation had their *jatiya kavi*, or national poet, but fewer among them were adored equally like Sankardeva as *mahapurusha*, even as an *avatar*, an incarnation of God.⁷⁰² Concentrating on the poetic qualities of Sankardeva, from what he claimed as a modern, secular perspective, Hemchandra critiqued the failure of Sankardeva as a poet. Reading literature through the sensibilities and perceptions acquired through their training on western literary canons and writers, the bilingual intelligentsia initially considered certain portions of Sankardeva's writings as morally deviant, below the norms and ethics of a civilization. As a playwright, Sankardeva's limitation was shown in his inability to portray any role model or ideal character. On the other hand, Sankar's portrayal of the *prem bhakti* or erotic love in two chapters of the *Kirtan* was condemned as alien to the Assamese tradition.⁷⁰³ Ratneswar Mahanta, resonating his friend Hemchandra in the same kind of arguments, offered a critique over certain kinds of dramatic scenes performed in the *Bhaona* or Vaishnava dramatic art of Assam as incongruous, and proposed for the refinement of the artistic taste of the people. He criticized the traditional theatre art of *bhaona*

⁷⁰¹ M. B. "Ghosa Puthi Chapa Hoar Vigyapan (The Ghuha Shaster)", *Arunoday*, July, 1857 (1778 Saka), pp. 103-106 in Saikia, *Arunoday, 1855-1868*, 2002, pp. 141-142.

⁷⁰² Goswami, Hemchandra. "Asamiya Bhasa- Part IV", *Jonaki*, Volume 3, Issue 3, 1891 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 282-285.

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

as unrealistic and incoherent.⁷⁰⁴ Evidently, in spite of being brought up in the Vaishnava tradition of Assam, it was their English education, which inspired them to evaluate the works of their *guru* in a new secular perspective while maintaining a critical distance towards him as an author.

Given the far and wide, and the deep-rooted impact of the Vaishnava sect, also the influence of religious gurus of the *Vaishnava satras* in Assam, colonial administration from its beginning tried to acquire knowledge on Sankardeva and his religion.⁷⁰⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century, publishing a report on the Barpeta Satra, another important sacred place of Assam Vaishnavism, E.T. Dalton, a colonial officer wrote in a paper,

⁷⁰⁴ Mahanta, Ratneswar, “*Bhaona*”, *Jonaki*, Volume1, Issue 5, 1889 in *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 144-146.

⁷⁰⁵ Whatever be its authorial reactions, the missionary accounts of the 1840s are illuminating to see the Vaishnava religious practices of the people. For instance, Nathan Brown, in his journal of 1843 described an experience, “Stopped for the night at a namghar in the vicinity of Nazira. After I had gone to bed, a large number of natives came, and after politely hoping they might not disturb me, commenced a singing school, which they kept up till after midnight. The first hour was occupied in singing the praises of Ram, interspersed with clapping of hands, and prostrations. After this prelude, which was performed with apparent solemnity, they grew noisier, and, at length, the incessant clapping of hands, together with the clanging of cymbals, and the noise of their drums, became so distracting that I heartily wished I were elsewhere.” See *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Vol. XXIV, No. 6, American Baptist Foreign Mission, June, 1844, p. 293. Nathan Brown gave a description of the functioning of the Auniati Satra, “He (the *Satradhikar*) must have added large sums to his treasury since he has been here, as he collects a fee from all who acknowledge him as their spiritual guide. He is said to be avaricious. Whenever he moves, it is in great state, with drums and trumpets sounding, and a numerous revenue attending him. About two thirds of the people in this region reorganize his authority.; the rest are mostly under the Dakhinpat. The influence of the *gosains* over their followers is almost unbounded, and it is considered the height of impiety to disobey their commands’. See *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Vol. XXIV, No. 6, American Baptist Foreign Mission, June, 1844, p. 121.

“The doctrines taught by these divines appear clearly the same as those ascribed to Chaitanya, and perhaps the most essential difference between the Mahapurushiyas and the Vaishnavas of Bengal is that the former more rigidly observe and preserve in greater purity what they received.”⁷⁰⁶

Dealing with religion, the census reports of 1891 and 1901, also traced Sankardeva's Vaishnavism in Assam as a separate growth of Chaitanya's religion in Bengal. Hara Prasad Shastri, the Librarian of Bengal Library stated in an annual report of the Library that Sankar and Madhav, founders of the *Mahapurushiya* sect of Vaishnavism in Assam were pupils of Advaita, the associate of Chaitanya of Bengal. He commented that compared to the *Kirtana* of Bengal the Assamese *Kirtana* had a far larger scope, which meant any religious song in honour of Visnu and his numerous incarnations. He observed that the Bengali *Kirtana* showed leaning towards Mithila because of the impact of Vidyapati, whereas, the Assamese *Kirtana* had a leaning towards Sanskrit and Bengali.⁷⁰⁷ It is noteworthy that the report, on the other hand, distinguished Vaishnavism of Assam from Bengal in its receiving patronization from “the royalty and the nobility”.⁷⁰⁸ It even claimed that it was for this, Vaishnavism in Assam “became to a great extent a national religion imbued with the national spirit, while in Bengal it remained

⁷⁰⁶ Dalton, E.T. "Notes on the Mahapurushiyas: A Sect of Vaishnavism in Assam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society* XX, no. VI (1851): 455-469.

⁷⁰⁷ See Report of Hara Prasad Shastri, the Librarian, Bengal Library, Calcutta, 23 February, 1893. C. A. Martin, the Officiating Director of Public Instruction of Bengal sent the report on 11 March, 1893 to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal. Martin described the report as “very interesting”. The Report described the *Kirtana* in Bengal as a musical performance attended with songs describing the love of Radha for Krisna from its inception to Krisna's departure for Mathura. The last scene of the act of *Kirtana* was at Prahas, where the milkmaids were invited to the sacrifice and at last reunited with him. See *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department: Report on Publications Issued and Registered in the Several Provinces of British India During the Year 1892, No. CCCVII, Serial No. 13*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1893, pp. 43-54.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

the religion of the lower orders; wealth, influence, learning, and power always standing aloof from it.”⁷⁰⁹

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Assamese intelligentsia had made their attempts to institute Sankardeva as a heroic ideal for them in the sense of the Carlylean hero. In 1907, *Asamiya Lorar Ekata Sabha*, a Guwahati-based circle of the students observed *Mahapurush Sankardeva Sowarani Sabha*, literally a commemoration of Sankardeva, which celebrated him as a *veer*, or hero. Defining a *beer* on the occasion, Ambikanath Borah, a youngster of the time stated that a *veer* was one who had endeavoured for the benevolence of his motherland through his great efforts. He becomes immortal through his works.⁷¹⁰ Quoting Carlyle, Lakshminath emphasized that throughout time, heroes had been worshipped everywhere. We all love great men; love, venerate and bow down in submission before great men.⁷¹¹ However, Lakshminath’s conception of the Carlylean hero was curiously blended with Hindu religious doctrine of *Avataravada* as well. He once articulated a related question in *Banhi* in an article entitled “Is Sankardeva an avatar of *Ishwar, or God*”, to which his answer was positive.⁷¹²

The intelligentsia already became successful to avail public holidays from the colonial administration for the *tithi* of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva in the Assam valley

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁷¹⁰ Borah, Ambikanath. “*Mahapurush Sankardeva Sowarani*”, *Usha*, Volume 2, Issue 4, *Usha* (1828-1862 Saka) in Tamuly, Lakshminath, ed. *Usha Collection*. Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 2005, pp. 360-362. The author perceived *Veerpuja*, hero-worship as a necessary and sacred duty in all civilized nation, and marked it as a part of new civilization.

⁷¹¹ “*Brahmo Dharma*”, *Banhi*, Volume 11, Issue 1, 1921 (1843 Saka) in Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa-Granthavali: Part III*, 2005, pp. 2034-2047.

⁷¹² Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Banhi*, Volume 24 in Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa-Granthavali: Part III*, 2005, pp. 2014-2018.

districts.⁷¹³ Thus, making an appearance in the emerging public sphere outside the realm of religious space, Sankardeva gradually came to be imagined as a *jatir janaka*, nation maker. Considering the power of religion over the vast masses of Assam, without any formal education, upon whom the impact of print culture was limited, the role ascribed to Vaishnavism and Sankardeva had deeper significance.⁷¹⁴ Invocation of Sankardeva and Vaishnavism made it possible for them to get immediate access to a vast population, whose emotion and loyalties were already associated with both. Furthermore, it attributed Assamese nationality to a lineage older by four centuries. Projecting Sankardeva as the redeemer of the nation, once Lakshminath wrote to Jatindranath Dowerah in a personal letter that Sankardeva for Assam is like the puranic river Mandakini, which was ushered by Bhagirath to the earth to revive his cursed forefathers, the lineage of Sagar. Similarly, it is only through focusing on the centrality of teachings of Sankardeva and Vaishnavism, resuscitation of Assamese nationality is possible.⁷¹⁵

Being engaged to assert the distinctiveness of whatever was the Assamese from the Bengali, the Assamese nationalists first tried to differentiate Sankardeva's religion from that of Chaitanya of Bengal and then tried to glorify Sankardeva by emphasizing on the universal side of his religion. They, as part of the attempt to appropriate him for the contemporary age, tried

⁷¹³ The public holiday list of 1897 of Assam shows that in the year there remained a holiday for *Janmastami*, the alleged birth date of deity lord Krishna, but no holiday for Sankardeva and Madhavdeva's *Tithi* were recognized till then. See Public Holiday List for 1897, Assam Commissioner's Office, Assam State Archives. In 1900, Sankardeva Tithi and Madhavdeva Tithi might be notified as half-holidays. See entry of 27 August and 13 September, 1900, *Padmanath Gohainborooah's Diaries*, Digital Archive, Centre for Assamese Studies, Tezpur University. But instead of the continuous demand from a section of the intelligentsia, till 1914, these days were not declared as holidays. (*Sampadakar Chora*, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, *Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 8, 1836 Saka, 1914 A. D in Tamuly, *Banhi Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 838-839.

⁷¹⁴ Charles Eliot has observed that both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva's compositions were regarded by the followers as scripture, and treated with extreme reverence, receiving worship almost like deities. He commented, "This form of bibliolatry is rare in India, but something like it is found among the Shikhs" See Eliot, "Hinduism in Assam", 1910, pp. 1155-1186.

⁷¹⁵ Lakshminath's letter to Jatindranath Dowerah in 23 September, 1918 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 14-16.

to highlight the social and cultural contributions of Sankardeva. His presence beyond the realm of *dharma* became apparent through the celebration of the *tithi* of Sankardeva and performance of his *Bargeet* in emerging secular public places.⁷¹⁶ By the second decade of the twentieth century, *Bargeet*, the spiritual songs began to occupy a place in the agenda of the public meetings.⁷¹⁷ Sankardeva, in the emerging public life, was often mentioned both as a *mahapurusha*, a great person and as the *Jatir Janaka*, the founder of Assamese nationality.

Writing Biography

Keeping all these in mind, Lakshminath's intensive study of the lives of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, two key personalities of Assam Vaishnavism seem to be significant. In 1911, Lakshminath published a biography of Sankardeva, being the first modern biography of the saint.⁷¹⁸ It was a study of the life and religious works produced by him. Lakshminath planned the book in western model of rational history, and used footnotes and mentioned sources. It was an attempt to write a factual account of the life of the saint, and as informed by the author, was written within a very short span of time and sometimes without consulting the authentic sources. He said that the objective of writing this brief work was to draw the attention of the people towards this great saintly figure, in which he became partly successful.

⁷¹⁶ Lakshminath, in a letter to Jatindranath Dowerah expressed his excitement at public celebration of Sankardeva's Tithi in Assam, about which he came to know through the latter's letter, and also through photographs published in *Asamiya*, a periodical founded by Chandrakumar Agarwala. Ibid. Gradually the Tithi became significant in such a way in his personal life, that in the diary of 13 September, 1930, while recording the birth of a grand-daughter of his in Calcutta, he mentioned the day as 'Sankardeva-Tithi day'. See entry on 13 September, 1930, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

⁷¹⁷ Lakshminath's daughter Ratna made one of the pioneering efforts of such a public performance of *Bargeet* in the founding session of the Asam Chatra Sanmilian in 1916, presided by Lakshminath.

⁷¹⁸ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath, *SriSriSankardeva*, Howrah: Banhi Press, 1911.

Lakshminath's book can claim the credit of initiating the process of searching in Sankardeva a father figure for an emerging national identity. He, already in his other writings, constantly insisted on the paternal image of Sankar, and argued that Sankar had enriched the Assamese nation, contributing everything necessary for forming a *jatiyata*, nationality, and make it beautiful in all aspects of national life consisted of poetry, religion, morality, conduct, art, music, painting etc.⁷¹⁹ Two years later, Lakshminath produced another book on him entitled *Sri Sankardeva aru Sri Madhavdeva*.

The first book, according to Lakshminath's own account, was an outcome of his attempt to publicly address some questions put by the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* of Guwahati.⁷²⁰ The Census report of 1911 stated that whether Sankardeva had taken inspiration from Chaitanya, as it was claimed by the former two census reports was a question of worth considering, and the Society for the Improvement of the Assamese Language of Guwahati had taken up the question and made strong objection to it. The Society claimed that Sankardeva was antecedent to birth of Chaitanya, and there was evidence that Sankardeva even began his preaching of Vaishnavism prior to Chaitanya.⁷²¹ Hence, it becomes clear that the Assamese nationalists, represented by the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* of Guwahati, had already reacted to the colonial government's stance on the issue.

In fact, a part of the Assamese intelligentsia, in the 1910s and 1920s, was conjunctively engaged in projecting Sankardeva and the *bhakti dharma* propagated by him as founding pillar

⁷¹⁹ "Asamiya", *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1909, *Banhi* in Goswami, *Banhi: Part I, First & Second Year*, 2001, pp. 9-13.

⁷²⁰ Though no direct mention of any question raised by the Sabha was found in the book, we can reconstruct those from the issues addressed by Lakshminath. It seems, the Sabha raised questions on the prevalent notion of Chaitanya's influence on Sankardeva, and expressed its doubt on the facticity of Sankardeva's visit to or direct influence from Chaitanya.

⁷²¹ McSwiney, *Census of India, 1911, Assam*, 1912, p. 41.

of the emerging Assamese nationalism, tried to focus on the distinctive features of the *bhakti dharma* of Assam from Bengal. *Gurucharitas*, hagiographical accounts of the Vaishnava saints, composed in the medieval times, were largely explored, discussed, compared, preserved and tried to restore either in print form or in original manuscripts. Kanaklal Borooah, the author of *Early History of Kamrupa*, and a friend of Lakshminath wrote to him in a personal letter that Mahanarayan Das, the civil *cheristadar* of Guwahati, and a member of the Society for Improvement of Assamese Language (referred in the letter as the ALI society) for many years, was engaged in research relating Sankar's any probable connection with Chaitanya of Bengal.⁷²² Lakshminath's books were also evidently part of this intervention of the intelligentsia to articulate their claims on the originality of Sankar's thinking.

The first book *Sankardeva* was evidently an attempt to address the issue regarding Sankar's attachment or acquaintances with Chaitanya of Bengal. It, by comparative reading of biographical accounts of Sankar and Chaitanya, tried to establish that the supposed impact of Chaitanya on Sankar's religion was utterly baseless. Mentioning the second book, yet to be published, Kanaklal, while referring to certain sources on the matter and discussing his view on them, suggested Lakshminath to avoid any "controversial matter" in it, although without "deviating" from truth or "concealing" it.⁷²³ Though a certain section among the Assamese intelligentsia differed a little from the stance of Sankar's originality as a preacher, and it took a form of public debate in the Assamese print arena, it was already taken for granted by another section Lakshminath as its authority.⁷²⁴ Banikanta Kakati, , a promising young Assamese critic

⁷²² Kanaklal Borooah's letter to Lakshminath in 22 May, 1911 from Barpeta in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 200-201.

⁷²³ Kanaklal Borooah's letter to Lakshminath on 16 November, 1913, *Ibid*, pp. 201-202.

⁷²⁴ Mentioning Hemchandra Goswami's position, Kanaklal Borooah wrote to Lakshminath that their friend Hemchandra Goswami, unfortunately thought that Sankar had a *dikshaguru*, either Chaitanya or Damodardeva. Hemchandra, as it seemed to Kanaklal, was not desirous to assign a 'subordinate position' to Damodar. *Ibid*. The

of the time, later emerged as a philologist and cultural historian of repute, for instance, while preparing some writings on the issue, trying to deal with the distinctive features of Sankardeva's religion and to show his originality of thinking, wanted some clarifications and sanction from Lakshminath on the matter.⁷²⁵ His query was about "did Sankardeva carry his inspiration from abroad while on pilgrimage or did he evolve it independently."⁷²⁶ Later, conceiving Acharya Ramanuja as an early proponent of *Dashya bhakti*, Banikanta again wanted his confirmation on the issue.⁷²⁷

Lakshminath's first book, while consciously avoiding the biographical details of Sankar, extensively dealt with the literary compositions of Sankar, as well as traditional hagiographic accounts on him, and exalted Sankar as a mastermind of literature. As we have already mentioned, a decade earlier, Hemchandra Goswami had designated Sankar as the *jatiya kavi*, the national *laureate* of Assam. In this book, Lakshminath came forward with minutely examined internal evidence in support of this claim. His analysis, or rather the adulations of Sankar's literary creations were tried to be supported by extensive citations of the relevant texts. By deployment of literary sources, and gradually developing a rationalistic argument in western line of historiography, Lakshminath in the 224 page-book, posed an intellectual challenge to the colonial administration's earlier representations of Assam Vaishnavism.

The report of the census in 1911, drawing upon the controversy related to Chaitanya's impact on Sankardeva's religion, ultimately had to make a revision of the perspective, and to clarify the matter. The report stated that Sankardeva preached his religion at a time when Chaitanya

debate took a spectacular form around the *Banhi* and *Assam Pradipika*, two important periodicals of the time, Rajanikanta Bordoloi being the chief proponent of the opponent group.

⁷²⁵ Banikanta Kakati's letter to Lakshminath on 27 September, 1920 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 220-224.

⁷²⁶ Ibid.

⁷²⁷ Banikanta Kakati's letter to Lakshminath on 28 November, 1920 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 227.

did not start his career as a religious reformer.⁷²⁸ Then coming to the internal evidence of difference of the two sects, the report had shown that Sankar's emphasis was on the worship of Vishnu or Krishna alone, while Chaitanya propagated the worship of Krishna and Radha simultaneously. It claimed that the female deity was entirely absent in Sankardeva's religion. It also mentioned in tone of recognition that apart from the places of keeping the family or household idol, each village of the Brahmaputra valley had a public *Namghar*, where people assembled for prayer. The most common ceremony of the Brahmaputra valley, according to the report was singing hymns or *namgoa* and the reading of sacred book, *Kirtan seva*.⁷²⁹ However, from the part of the census report, no necessity of recognition to any source, or credibility to any person or group for this changed position was ever felt.

Lakshminath's biography on Sankardeva, initially being his sole venture, in its third edition, published probably in 1924, appeared in a revised form.⁷³⁰ The edition was presented with an adulatory poem on Sankar, written by Jatindranath Dowerah, then a younger poet, as prologue. The eleventh chapter on *Bargeet*, lyrical compositions of Sankar was dealt entirely by Banikanta Kakati. Thus, this assessment of Sankardeva as national poet and constructing him as *jatir janak*, founder father of an emerging nation was transformed to a collaborative effort of the Assamese nationalists as a whole.

The book's recognition by Calcutta University both for its undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the same year unearths for us the power of institutional recognition of a book. Jatindranth Dowerah, who supervised the printing works of the book at Calcutta, requested

⁷²⁸ The Report, concentrating on the claims of the Assamese nationalists mentioned that according to the prevalent biography of Sankardeva, he was born in 1449 A. D., and hence 36 years senior to Chaitanya. Sankardeva went to pilgrimage for two times, once when he was forty years old, and then at the age of eighty. At the time of his first visit Chaitanya was a four-year old child.

⁷²⁹ McSwiney, *Census of India, 1911, Assam*, 1912, p. 41.

⁷³⁰ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath, *Sankardeva*. Sambalpur, n. d., First Published in 1911.

Lakshminath to do some necessary revisions of the book. He suggested that the book was though initially planned to answer a few questions aroused in the public platform around Sankardeva, as it had served the contemporary purpose, in its third edition the book should be planned to upgrade to the level of a “literary criticism”, covering all aspects of the subject. The enthusiastic Jatindranath wrote to his mentor in a letter,

“The book is supposed to be held as Raleigh’s books on Shakespeare and Milton.”⁷³¹

Debate on Caste: Caste, Region and Nation

While trying to universalize Sankar and his religion for assertion of them as symbols of unity and identity of a region, the Assamese nationalists felt caste division as a barrier to such unity. The intelligentsia deployed periodicals as a platform of caste critique, which in colonial times were particularly concerned on social responsibility as part of their existence, and played a crucial role not merely to entertain but also to inform and reform. Lakshminath also extensively wrote on the social reform agenda of the time, focusing mainly on religion and caste.

Lakshminath, in personal life, felt no need of taking a critical stand on the sacred thread, the marker of the Brahmanical caste identity. Rather he acted as a priest in his grandson’s Brahmanical thread offering ceremony held in Baroda. In fact, though in the later part of the nineteenth century, the *Sangat Sabha* of the Brahmo Samaj took a resolution to discard Brahmanical thread and give up caste, as a social reform movement it did not become so popular.⁷³² Instead, towards the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the Calcutta-based intelligentsia of Bengal commenced to show their attractions towards the orthodox Hinduism,

⁷³¹ Jatindranath Dowera’s letter to Lakshminath on 27 June of 1924 from Calcutta in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 252-255.

⁷³² The *Sangat Sabha* resolved to give up caste, to discard sacred Brahmanical thread, and to accept no invitation to any idolatrous festival. Shastri, *History of the Brahmo Samaj*, 1974, p. 83.

a trend which ultimately culminated in the ideology and personality of Vivekananda. It is interesting to note that Bholanath and Lakshminath since the 1890s maintained some business-related connections with the Arya Samaj of Punjab, and regularly contributed to a few *sadhus* of the samaj.⁷³³ In 1900, Lakshminath introduced Ganapati Pundit of the Arya Samaj to Debendranath Tagore, and organized a speech of the pundit in the Adi Brahmo Samaj for the Calcutta audience.⁷³⁴ Devendranath, known for his “conservative instinct”⁷³⁵ was also a believer in preservation of caste, and proposed that marriage within Brahmans of any place of India should be promoted for the sake of formation of larger unity.⁷³⁶ According to the Memoir of Jnanadabhiram, Gunabhiram Borooah, his father, an active follower of the Brahmo reform movement in Assam also believed in caste preservation and expected that his sons would marry within the Brahman caste.⁷³⁷ Perhaps, in Assam, Padmahas Goswami of Nowgong was the first Brahmo to discard his Brahmanical thread.⁷³⁸

⁷³³ Lakshminath wrote in his diary on 15 February, 1900, “Raishaheb called with Swamiji tonight, and---pd. Rs 500/- to Swamiji for Arya Samaj. Kept Rs. 11000, gave them a handnote (on demand to Swami Biswesarananda and Nityananda)”. See *Diaries*, Tezpur University. The diaries reflected such connections. The Arya Samaj followed strict caste rules. According to Lala Lajpat Rai, one of the chief propagators of the Samaj, it was in favour of vegetarianism both by conviction and caste rituals. The righteousness of the meat diet was one of the central issues, on which the Samaj ultimately went to split up itself in 1892. Rai, Lajpat. *The Arya Samaj: An Account of its Origin, Doctrines, and Activities with a Biographical Sketch of the Founder*. London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1915, p. 107.

⁷³⁴ On 1 September, 1900, Lakshminath attended Gonopati Pandit’s lecture at Raisaheb’s place with B. B. Two days later, he talked with ‘Raisaheb’ about the arrangement of a lecture. In 4 September, 1900, Lakshminath wrote in his diary, “Saw Ganapati Pandit this morning at Ghanashyam Das Korta, Burrabazar; took him to Karta Moshaya and arranged a lecture at Adi Brahmo Samaj tomorrow evening.” Then on 15 September, 1900, he again wrote, “Attended the proposed lecture of Gonopatti Sarma, the Arya Samaj Pandit. But it was a failure as the audience small, this being a rainy day.” *Diaries*, Tezpur University of the respective dates.

⁷³⁵ Shastry, *History of the Brahmo Samaj*, p. 87.

⁷³⁶ Devi, Sarala, *Jibaner Jharapata*, Sahitya Sansad, Calcutta, 1957, p. 185.

⁷³⁷ Borooah, “*Mor Katha*”, 1981, p. 160.

⁷³⁸ Shastry, *History of the Brahmo Samaj*, 1974, pp. 518-519.

However, critique of caste became a recurrent theme for Lakshminath in the *Banhi*, which became instrumental for familiarizing the contemporary debate on caste in India for the vernacular readership in Assam. He sometimes disparagingly attacked the *Brahmanical* system. However, whether a component of realization and sincere recognition of social injustice and deprivation was present or not in these critiques seems to be a relevant question to explore. Despite much had been written and debated in relation to caste discrimination in literary realm in the period, whether any practical reformist attempt from the nationalists were made or not is another question to be asked. In this respect, in the report of the Census of 1921, G. T. Llyod had made a significant remark on the caste scenario of Assam on the context of Gandhian nationalist movement,

“Although there has been a good deal of discussions, largely in connection with recent political movements, about the levelling up of lower castes and brotherhood of all from the religious and human standpoints, it appears to be still in the domain of talk and not of practice”.⁷³⁹

A section of Assamese nationalists’ disagreement regarding presence of caste discrimination nonetheless, caste, in Assam had its own particular and complex fabric.⁷⁴⁰ Preparing a note on the issue in Assam to place before the Indian Franchise Committee in 1932, C. S. Mullan, the Superintendent of the Census of Assam made it clear that the situation of the Assam valley districts was quite different not only from the rest of the country, but also from the Surma valley districts of the same province. He, to adequately represent the picture of Assam, had introduced a new terminology of the “exterior class” in lieu of the “depressed class”, because, according to him, there was no such depression prevailing in Assam as it was in the rest of

⁷³⁹ Llyod, *Census Report of India, 1921, Assam*, 1923.

⁷⁴⁰ According to C. S. Mullan caste was like ‘a dome of many-colored glass’, which stained the whole fabric of Hindu society. Mullan, C. S. *Census of India, 1931, Vol. III, Assam, Part 1. Report*. Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1932, p. 201.

India. Mullan, in his note, suggested that Hindu exterior castes in Assam were recognized as Hindu, but they actually suffered from “social disabilities”. They were deficient in education, wealth and social influence. On the other hand, there were some aboriginal tribes, which were backward, but quite untouched by Hinduism. They were outside the pale of the Hindu society.⁷⁴¹

Close reading of C. S. Mullan’s note has shown that various degrees of exclusion and depression regarding taking food, water and entry to the *Namghar* or any other religious functions were practiced among the castes. The caste practices even entered the dining halls of a modern educational institution like Cotton College, the only institution of higher education in the Brahmaputra valley. Mullan’s report recorded that in the Cotton College, allegedly “the most liberal-minded society in the Assam Valley”, though the students, for years went on agitating for admission into the general dining hall, nevertheless, a separate dining arrangement prevailed.⁷⁴² The authority justified such practices in the terms of the policy of “benevolent neutrality” and “absolute non-interference” towards tradition and caste.⁷⁴³

⁷⁴¹ See “Note on the Depressed and Backward Classes of Assam, submitted to the Indian Franchise Committee” in Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Assam, 1932*, Chapter XII, Appendix I.

⁷⁴² Special arrangements for students from lower castes existed in the hostels of the Cotton College. Professor B. C. Sengupta, the Superintendent of the hostel informed the government that the castes, viz., Miri, Deuri, Kaibartta, Bania, Lalung, Kachari etc. generally took their meals in the four rooms meant for the ‘backward’ or ‘depressed class boys’. Ibid, p. 213. A leaflet of All Assam Ahom Students’ Federation of the time has complained that during that time, Ahom students were despised by a certain section of other students, and denied to attend the *Tithi* of Sankardeva, Saraswati puja etc. held in the educational institutions or in any public place. *Sadou Asam Ahom Chatra Federation-ar Gohari*, attested by Benudhar Mohon, President and Bhogeswar Lahan Borooah, Secretary, Ahom Chatrabash, Jorhat, 7 November, 1945.

⁷⁴³ See “Note on the Depressed and Backward Classes of Assam, submitted to the Indian Franchise Committee” in Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Assam, 1932*, in Chapter XII, Appendix I, p. 213.

An experience of caste discrimination towards a boarder of Sonowal Kachari community by a section of the upper caste Hindus found room in the editorial column of the *Banhi*.⁷⁴⁴ In 1913, Lakshminath expressed his deep concerns at the incident, and stated that parochialism had already enfeebled the Hindu race, while Muslims and other religious groups had gradually strengthened themselves. He pointed out that the Sonowals were followers of Vaishnavism. Even the Kacharis and Ahoms were also Hindus. It was the futility of their liberal education, which prevented a section of upper caste Hindu youths to offer equal status to their fellow students only because of one's attachment with a particular caste. Such differentiations and discriminations from the part of the educated youths were described by him as opponents of national unity. He even expressed his doubt in the pure Aryan blood or lineage of most of the upper castes of the region too. Because it was hardly possible, the migrant Aryans entered this bordering land accompanying women.⁷⁴⁵

Lakshminath's critique of the caste system was partly an outcome of the deep impact of Mahatma Gandhi on him.⁷⁴⁶ In 1918, he expressed his delight at the Indian National Congress's concerns on the lower castes. He criticized the Hindu customs of differentiation on the basis of caste, and demanded a life of dignity for all. Without it, he warned, India's dream of independence will be meaningless. He, under the influence of Gandhi, greeted the rise of resistant voices of the *dalit* groups within the Congress, and justified the harsh criticism of Bhimrao Ambedkar to Gandhi. If the long discriminations and oppressions done by the upper caste to the *dalits* are taken into account, it seems to be justified. He questioned,

⁷⁴⁴ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Sampadakar Chora, Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 4, 1913 (1835 Saka) in Tamuly, *Banhi Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 218-224.

⁷⁴⁵ *Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 4, 1913, Ibid, pp. 218-224.

⁷⁴⁶ Lakshminath considered Mahatma Gandhi 'the best person of the modern world', and extensively translated his critique of caste system and untouchability published in Harijan through the *Banhi*.

“If you do not overcome the caste discriminations in your country, how can you expect to get equal status from the Europeans?”⁷⁴⁷

Sumit Sarkar has observed that in case of most of the Bengal intelligentsia of the period,

“Caste, then, was still being critiqued as harmful primarily for obstructing national unity and for hindering high caste improvement. There was little awareness of concrete lower-caste grievances or protests”.⁷⁴⁸

Similar nationalist attitude was shared by Lakshminath. He argued in clear terms that leaving aside a vast population, formation of one Indian nation would be impossible. Unlike E. V. S. Ramasami, a prominent Tamil nationalist, who wanted annihilation of caste for equality and social justice to prevail, Lakshminath never proposed for any “revolutionary change” for the society as such, but wanted a humanitarian approach to all.⁷⁴⁹ Lakshminath explained the caste division in terms of a feature of the fallen *kalikal*. He never opposed the caste hierarchy in essence. Without altering its basic framework, he only wanted to appropriate it with the spirit of the modern age, and proposed a revised democratic set up for it. Like many nationalists of the period, he argued that initially the system was well-intentioned, but later degraded to sickness. He idealized a sacred world of the past, unspotted by the contemporary contamination and juxtaposed it with the degraded profane state of the present, in which religion reduced to a business. What he opposed was the caste division on the basis of birth, and warned that if the division continued to be so, it would one day push India to collapse.⁷⁵⁰ In the case of Assam, he called to the Vaishnava *satras* to take a liberal attitude to provide equal human status to all

⁷⁴⁷ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 1918, pp. 1-15.

⁷⁴⁸ See chapter “Identity and Difference: Caste in the Formation of the Ideology of Nationalism and Hindutva” in Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 1999, p. 466.

⁷⁴⁹ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 1918, pp. 1-15.

⁷⁵⁰ “*Kharali*”, *Milan*, Volume 1, Issue 3, 1923 in Goswami, *Bezbaroa Granthavali, Part III*, 2005, pp. 2578-2581.

castes. He even demanded for the hypocrite religious gurus of Vaishnava *satra* to resign from their posts. The sacred seat should not be taken as *talukdari* or *zamindari*, or merely as means to ascertain their individual happiness.⁷⁵¹ In a former article, he wrote that the *gosains* may raise contributory funds from their disciples, but they have no right to punish them or demand more than necessary. He called them to use the wealth of the *satras* for the welfare of *desh*, disciple and religion, and not to be much inclined towards *vishaya* or pomp and luxury.⁷⁵²

Politicizing Caste and Religion

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, by the late nineteenth century, with the introduction of census, a shift from a fuzzy to enumerated world was on the way, which necessarily had produced some new identities, as well as conflicts. Caste consciousness and solidarity found expression in the public sphere in the forms of *sabha*, *samiti*, annual meeting, conference etc., which came forward with its own social, economic and political agenda for development of the castes.

With the turn of the century, Assam, like other parts of India had seen an outbreak of many caste-based organizations. C. S. Mullan, the author of the 1931 census report, had identified five objectives at work behind the formation of these bodies, like to preserve and acquire caste privilege, to raise social status of the caste, to encourage education and to improve economic

⁷⁵¹ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Srikrishna-Katha*”, *Banhi*, Volume 9, Issue 2, 1918, pp. 35-39. Satradhikars of Vaishnava *satras*, as pointed out by a census report in the beginning of the twentieth century were ‘men who exercise great authority over their numerous disciples, and on the whole exercise it wisely as well.’ The report also said that there were probably no men except the Vaishnavite Gosains of Auniati and Dakhinpat, ‘whose word would carry greater weight with the Assamese’. See Chapter IV in Allen, B. C. *Census of India, 1901. Vol. IV: Assam. Part I*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1902, p. 41. However, Satradhikars were constant targets of the critique of the emerging English educated class, who warned them against their greed, luxury, conservative attitude and narrow-mindedness.

⁷⁵² Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 9, 1914 (1836 Saka) in Tamuly, *Banhi: Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 865-873.

condition, to agitate for the special representation in the government service and to agitate for political privilege.⁷⁵³ Such organizations were constantly in negotiation with the colonial government. Mullan even stated that in 1932, giving their evidence before the Assam Provincial Franchise Committee, the representatives of the “low castes” expressed their fear that under the proposed arrangement of provincial autonomy, their interests would receive “scant attention”.⁷⁵⁴

The nationalists’ critique on caste can also be partly understood in the context of contemporary uprising of the depressed class politics in India. The Census of India in 1931 defined the “depressed caste” in terms of castes, contact with whom entailed purification on the part of high caste Hindus.⁷⁵⁵ The Census report overtly declared that to “throw fresh light on what is loosely called the depressed class of Indian society” was one of its main objectives.⁷⁵⁶

In 1930, when the process for the 1931 census was going on, Lakshminath reacted on the issue, and claimed that there was no depressed class in Assam, for which the credibility of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, two Vaishnava preachers was cited.⁷⁵⁷ He argued that it was not for broad-mindedness of the so-called upper castes of Assam, but for the humanitarian outlook of Vaishnavism, caste division never took such a rigid form as it was in the other parts of India. Certain castes’ claims in Assam to enter them in the census as a depressed class was criticized

⁷⁵³ Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Assam*, 1932, p. 207.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 208. According to the Report of Indian Franchise Committee, apart from the administrative officers and European tea planters, three persons from the Assam valley witnessed before the Indian Franchise Committee, one was Sonadhar Das Senapati, representing the Depressed class, Gopika Ballabh Goswami, representing Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha, and another was Pramathesh Chandra Borooah, representing Goalpara Zamindars’ Association. Indian Franchise Committee. *Report of the Indian Franchise Committee 1932*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1932, p. 265.

⁷⁵⁵ Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Assam*, 1932.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 201.

⁷⁵⁷ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath, “*Kahudi aru Kharali*”, *Banhi*, Volume19, Issue 4, 1930, pp. 168-172.

by him as baseless, and identified as a threat to “national unity”. He, defining *Brahman* in terms of quality, tried to argue that anybody can be a Brahman merely by acquiring the qualities of a true



Table 4. [1]

**Population of Assam according to Race, Class, Religion and Nationality in the
beginning of the twentieth-century⁷⁵⁸**

Division	Population
Aboriginal Tribes	651, 765
Semi- Hinduized Aborigines	6,14,248
Hindu	6,72,522
Muslim	1,76,195
European, Eurasian and American	471
Non-Indian Asiatic (Bhootea, Nepali etc.)	2029
Native Christian	1,023
Total	21,27,453

Brahman. *Brahmanatwa* or being a Brahman is not a birthright. He even expressed a utopian desire to see Assam as a country possessed entirely by qualitatively defined Brahmans.⁷⁵⁹

Lakshminath's reaction reflected a larger section of the Assamese nationalists' response to the issue of the depressed castes, who refused to acknowledge the presence of caste strictures or restraint in the province, and wanted to resolve the issue at a spiritual level. Differentiating the spiritual side of religion with its social aspect, Lakshminath said that two aspects of *dharma* were of different kinds. When the Gita says of *Swadharma* and *Paradharma*, it only says of social religion, that is, *dharma* in accordance with social custom and practice, or caste division.

⁷⁵⁸ Figures taken from *Imperial Gazetteer of India, The Indian Empire: Descriptive, Vol. I of XXV*, Oxford, 1907, p. 18.

⁷⁵⁹ Bezbaroa, "*Sampadakar Chora*", *Banhi*, Volume 21, Issue 3, 1932 in Goswami, *Bezbaroa Granthavali, Part III*, 2005, pp. 2570-2575.

The Gita always wanted to protect social bonds, or convention. Lakshminath even wrote that *Varnashrama dharma* is necessary for neat social and religious functioning.⁷⁶⁰

Making and Unmaking Hinduism: Hindu Mahasabha

In reality, caste critique of the upper caste Hindu intelligentsia of the time was a dissociable part of Hindu reform initiatives in India. Such critiques often masked within them deeper anxiety of the contemporary literati. The Hindu intelligentsia of the time sought to defend the Christian missionary challenge to the cultural and spiritual world of Hinduism. Opinions among the intelligentsia may vary, but the religious debate of the period unearths for us the upper caste Hindu intelligentsia's anxiety over challenges coming from "lower" castes and other tribes, as well as their fear from the expansion of other religions. It was for the sake of getting relief from this tension that the intelligentsia mostly focused on *bhakti* as a prime spiritual doctrine of the time.

Contextualizing the reform initiatives as the social agenda of Bengal, Sumit Sarkar has shown that towards the last decades of the nineteenth century, the *bhadralok* world of Calcutta went through certain tensions and transitions. Their horizon of expectations had to be constrained within pretty clerical jobs or small business. But such jobs were also not easy to obtain, and satisfactorily paid. According to him, the offices were one of the most visible sites of colonial discrimination, manifested in the differentiation of salary and racial arrogance of the white bosses.⁷⁶¹ On the one hand, the *bhadralok* found themselves squeezed out of the developing

⁷⁶⁰ *Mahapurush Sankardeva, Banhi*, Volume 7, Issue 10, 1838 Saka, 1916, pp. 529-536. In fact, the nationalist intelligentsia of Assam, largely comprised of the upper caste Hindu, showed their aversion to the political uprising of the undeveloped castes, and overtly opposed their demand for separate electorate to the Franchise Committee. Making its stand clear, one of the editorials of *Banhi*, strongly criticised such demands in the line of B. R. Ambedkar as detrimental to the unity, and identified it as an issue of serious concern. See "*Bhotadhikar Samasya*", *Banhi*, Volume 20, Issue 12, 1931, p. 556.

⁷⁶¹ "Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti" in Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 1999, p. 310.

dynamic economic sector, which was mostly controlled by Europeans, and on the other hand, deprived of their traditional occupations by the expansion of the colonial economy. They defined the evils of the present in terms of mythical *kaliyuga*, which, for them, became apparent in alleged decline of male power, excessive book reading, time bound labour etc. Sarkar has found their tension-ridden, “unhappy consciousness” at work behind their manifest anxiety towards women and *shudra*, the lower castes.⁷⁶²

Kenneth W. Jones, on the other hand, thinks that the socio-religious movements of Bengal were led by a rising English educated elite. They drew their symbols, concepts and scriptural legitimization for the long protest within their religious heritage. They created new forms of Hinduism that met the social and psychological needs of an educated elite caught between two opposing poles of civilization, the indigenous Hindu and intrusive western.⁷⁶³

Assam’s situation differed a lot from Bengal, but a crisis was already in the air.⁷⁶⁴ By the 1930s the Brahmans of rural Assam had to leave their original habitats to work as cooks in the emerging towns, as well as had to be employed as clerks or *gomastha* in the enterprises or shops owned by “lower caste” persons.⁷⁶⁵ The changing scenario found expression even in

⁷⁶² Ibid.

⁷⁶³ Jones, Kenneth W. *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India: The New Cambridge History of India, III.1*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, India, 1994, p. 46.

⁷⁶⁴ With the abolition of slavery, and introduction of a new land revenue arrangement, from the part of the colonial government, the *Brahmans* and *Gosains* found themselves in crisis. They, in 1842, all assembled at Ashvaplanta to perform *Sivapuja*, and then tried to articulate the menace to Jenkins, the Revenue Commissioner, through one thousand petitions submitted to him. They all prayed to keep their *devottar* land including their *das* and *dasi* intact. However, the petitions were not granted. Sharma, Harakanta Majundar Borooah. *Sadarminar Atmajivani*. edited by Kumudchandra Bordoloi, North Guwahati: Kumudchandra Bordoloi, 1960, pp. 40-41. The Brahmans were also felt themselves to be in pitfall, when they were compelled to work as *coolie* in construction of roads. Ibid, p. 41.

⁷⁶⁵ See “Note on the Depressed and Backward Classes of Assam, submitted to the Indian Franchise Committee” in Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Assam, 1932*, Chapter XII, Appendix I.

writings of Lakshminath. He wrote that the sacred *chaturvarna* had already declined, and in the struggle to survive in the modern world even the Brahmans had to do service under *mlechchas*, to serve as cook, *garwans*, and even to become sellers of shoes. The *Kshatrias* had to serve as *darwans*, *laguwa* etc. and the *Baishyas* had to serve as *kakati*, clerks etc. Brahmans are used to take salt, oil, pulse etc. from markets sold by non-Hindus, drink water supplied through pipes, and are accustomed to foreign goods. As *jat* is already degenerated, then, Lakshminath asked, what is the meaning of vanity of one's belonging to a certain caste.⁷⁶⁶

In fact, with the spread of universal education, a consciousness to challenge the social authority of the Brahman caste gradually emerged among a part of the literati. In the 1920s, Banikanta Kakati wrote in a personal letter to Lakshminath that a *serious 'samajik samasya'*, social rift became visible in Kamrup district, and the people of Kalita caste not only declared themselves as *kshatriya*, the warrior class of the *Varnashram* system, but wore *lagun*, *upavita* or sacred thread and revised the *shastric* practice of *shraddha* etc. to challenge the Brahmnical authority.⁷⁶⁷ One among them even offered sacred thread to so called low castes like *nadiyals* and such. Proclaiming his position on the issue, he clarified that though he was not in favour of the Kshatriya movement of the Kalita caste, what he wanted was wane of "*Brahmanical*

⁷⁶⁶ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Sampadakar Chora, Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 9, 1836 Saka, 1913 A. D in Tamuly, *Banhi Collection from the 3rd to 6th Year, 1911-1915*, 2008, pp. 865-873.

⁷⁶⁷ The Kshatriya movement in the Gangetic belt of India emerged in the 1890s within the Kayastha, followed by some other peasant communities like Kurmi, Yadav etc. In the early decades of the twentieth century, they made an attempt to elevate their social status by asserting their genealogical link with either Ram or Krishna, and thus claiming themselves as Kshatriya. Though enhancement of their social status was the core agenda of the various Kshatriya organizations related with the movement, they largely deployed Vaishnava symbolic vocabulary, and as it has been shown by William R. Pinch, was to an extent ideological heir to the Vaishnava reform initiatives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and specifically to the liberal Ramanandi group. See Pinch, William R. *Peasants and Monks in British India*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 81-114. In the 1920s, on the other hand, under the leadership of Panchanan Barma, a similar movement occurred among a section of the Koch community in Coochbehar region, who also claimed Kshatriya status for them, and subsequently came to introduce themselves as Rajbanshi.

autocracy” to some extent.⁷⁶⁸ Under such circumstances, anticipating economic peril in the near future a section of the Brahmans stepped up to form a Brahman Sabha.⁷⁶⁹ The conflict between the communities intensified to such an extent that a few *devalayas*, or temples debarred a section of their dissident *pykes* from entering their places, and the matter was tried to resolve at the courts.⁷⁷⁰

It seems, in the question of caste, Lakshminath’s attitude was partly influenced by the reformist activities of the *Arya Samaj*. Kenneth W. Jones has argued that it was as an outcome of the introduction of religion as a category in the census of 1871, the concept of religious community grew in India. Later in the twentieth century, granting of separate electorates linked religion with political power and political patronage. Within that structure, the religious communities and their organizations spoke for their own interests. Jones stated that the religious reforms also reinforced “a new form of political institutions.”⁷⁷¹ The leaders of such religious communities focused on the numerical strength of them. As the census reports exhibited gradual decline of Hindus in comparison to other religions, and especially reflected the Christian missionaries’ success in conversion of lower castes and aboriginal tribes to Christianity, the *Arya Samaj*, to meet the challenge, came forward with an agenda of proselytization to Hinduism. Initially, it began as individual conversion or readmit to Hinduism, but in the 1920s, it transformed itself to an organized form of group conversion. In 1922, the *Arya Samaj* reformists strongly condemned the caste system, and founded the *Jat Pat*

⁷⁶⁸ Banikanta Kakati’s letter to Lakshminath on 12 June, 1923 from Gauhati in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 232-233.

⁷⁶⁹ Goswami, Pratapchandra. *Jeevansmriti aru Kamrupi Samaj*. Gauhati: Pratul Goswami, 1971, p. 125.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 188-199.

⁷⁷¹ Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, 1994, pp. 184-185.

Todak Mandal or the Society for the Abolition of Caste, and furthered the institution of *Shuddhi* to make so called untouchable castes “clean castes.”⁷⁷²

Lakshminath, in 1923, openly extended his support to the *Shuddhi Andolan* of the *Arya Samaj*. In *Banhi*, he expressed his enthusiasm at a number of Muslims’ conversion to Hinduism at Agra, because they, allegedly originally being Hindu were later forcefully made Muslims.⁷⁷³ Quoting the census reports of 1911 and 1921, he showed the decrease of Hindu population in India, and tried to justify the Hindu proselytizing mission as mere “self-defence”.⁷⁷⁴ He equally celebrated a number of Christians’ acceptance of Hinduism, which took place in the Bombay Presidency earlier.⁷⁷⁵

The Hindu reform movements of colonial India developed as an outcome of some sections of intelligentsia’s reaction against the activities of the Christian missionaries. The missionaries out of the need for proselytization always criticized the Hindu deity and religion as immoral, without any foundation and historically untrue. Their stress was on the difference between Hinduism and Christianity, and the excellence of the latter. However, in the later period, the developments in Indological research took a different stand. Indologists emphasized the similarity between Hinduism and Christianity and showed linkage between *bhakti* and Krishna. In the meantime, in the late nineteenth century, the Hindu reform and revival movements came to operate against the invectives of the missionaries about the lack of recognition of any Hindu personal God, which is truly monotheistic and who demanded not only personal allegiance but also moral. The Indian intelligentsia of the time began to focus on *bhakti* as a personal emotional bond between the *bhakta* and *bhagavan*. Through *shastric* interpretation, the

⁷⁷² Ibid, pp. 192-199.

⁷⁷³ *Banhi*, Volume 13, Issue 1, 1923.

⁷⁷⁴ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 18, Issue 2, 1929, pp. 55-59.

⁷⁷⁵ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Bibidh Katha*”, *Banhi*, Volume 10, Issue 8, 1920, p. 240.

benevolent aspect of a god as redeemer was constantly projected, and he was shown to be subject to *bhakti*. What one cannot attain in the world, one can easily gain in the spiritual realm.

By the last years of the 1920s, the provincial body of the *Hindu Mahasabha* in Assam was in the fray. In fact, the formation of the *Hindu Mahasabha* in 1923 had a far-reaching impact in India, as well as in Assam. In 1927, the Assam provincial unit of the Hindu Mahasabha was held at Nowgong, where nationalist leader like Tarunram Phukan, liberal-minded *satradhikar* of Majuli like Pitambar Deva Goswami, along with Swami Satyananda of the Hindu Mission had participated.⁷⁷⁶

The *Mahasabha*, on the other hand, took special initiative before the census operation of 1931 to ascertain that the Garo, Khasi, Munda, Santal, Mikirs, Mishimi, Lushai, Lalung, Rabha, Kachari, Mech and such castes and tribes living in Assam would return them as Hindu. Making ‘*extensive propaganda*’ with the purpose, the Sabha, by citing the proofs from the two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, tried to justify the claims for pure Hindu lineages of such castes and tribes.⁷⁷⁷ There was even propaganda among the tribes to give up eating pigs and fowls in Kamrup, which was identified as a “new feature” in Assam.⁷⁷⁸ The 1921 census report’s exclusion of these tribes along with Kaibarta, Chutiya, Koch etc., and inclusion of them in the category of animists was described by the Sabha as “*injustice*” done to these “*simple*” and “*religious brethren*”.⁷⁷⁹ The Sabha made a public call to the people of these tribes

⁷⁷⁶ Sharma, Tirthanath, ed. *Karmayogi Kamakhyaaram Borooah*. Gauhati: Kamrup Sahitya Parishad, 1975, pp. 60-65.

⁷⁷⁷ Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Assam*, 1932, p. 188.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 191. An opposite tendency was reflected in a government report, which recorded that, “The price of eggs and fowls is going up in all parts of India, and the consumption of fowls, ducks and eggs is no longer confined to European and Eurasians only, but almost all classes of well-to-do and advanced Indians have now taken to eating them.” Hunter, William Wilson, James Sutherland Cotton, Richard Burn, and William Meyer. *The Imperial Gazetteer Of India, Vol. I*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907, p. 97.

⁷⁷⁹ Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Assam*, 1932, p. 191.

to return as Hindu. Mullan, the Superintendent of the census had stated that a leaflet published by the *Sabha* was actually “exact word for word translation” of a similar leaflet issued from Dacca by the Bengal Hindu Sabha. He even commented, “both owe their inspiration to the same source”, allegedly the Hindu Mission, the central office of which was at Calcutta. A pamphlet of the Mission declared its aims and objectives in terms of “to check conversion of aboriginal people to Christianity working in Bengal, Bihar and Assam since 1926”.⁷⁸⁰ The mission claimed substantial success in its works till 1928.⁷⁸¹

Although no record of personal connection of Lakshminath with the Hindu Mahasabha is available, still as a publicist, he helped to spread the ideology of it in the vernacular realm. In 1929, Lakshminath, in the *Banhi*, discussed the presidential address of Ramananda Chatterjee, the editor of *Prabasi*, in the Hindu Mahasabha held at Surat, and emphasized the discourse of duty towards the nation as well as to the religious community of Hindu. Considering the country-wide social tension of the time in communal lines, between the Hindus and Muslims, it was a noteworthy aspect.⁷⁸²

Apart from his special attraction to the personality like Madan Mohan Malaviya, one of the main ideologues of the Hindu Mahasabha,⁷⁸³ Lakshminath was influenced by personalities like

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 189

⁷⁸¹ The census reported about the impact of the propaganda on the people. The deputy commissioner of Durrang informed Mullan, the Census Superintendent, that the Hindu enumerators often listed Miri, Mikir and Kachari as Hindu. The propaganda had enormous influence on some tribes hovering on the borderline between Hinduism and their primitive faiths, but some people protested against such recording against their will. Ibid, p. 190.

⁷⁸² According to Mullan, in Assam, ‘a great change’ had occurred, and it was possible that at the slightest provocation, one community might fly at another. Ibid, p. 194.

⁷⁸³ Bholanath Borooah, close friend and associate of Lakshminath, at the call of Malaviya, had donated Rs 1,20,000 for the establishment of the Benares Hindu University, in addition to an endowment grant to offer scholarships for the study of mining. Sundaram, V. A., ed. *Benares Hindu University (1905-1935)*. Benaras: Benares Hindu University, n.d.

Lala Lajpat Rai, Gopal Chandra Gokhale and such, and as shown in a previous section, maintained both personal and business relations with the Arya Samaj. He in 1929 quoted a presidential address in the Hindu *Mahasabha* and justified the cause to dedicate towards the religious community along with one's devotion to the national cause. Simultaneously, he made ruthless critique of the separatist tendency of the Muslim League. Given the emerging Hindu-Muslim tension around the separatist claims of the Muslim League, Lakshminath appealed to the Muslims to come away from their demand of separatist electorate for them, and tried to assure them that a handful of communal Hindus were not the whole India, there were others in large proportion who wanted to offer equal rights to them. He believed that a section of Muslim leaders' secessionist agenda to convert India to a '*Moslemstan*' was an illusion.⁷⁸⁴

Lakshminath's attitude was not communal, which he blamed as a ghostly tendency. In the 1920s, while he was engaged extensively in translating from Gandhi's *Young India* in the *Banhi*, he tried to shape opinion against the nascent Hindu-Muslim division.

"Religion is a spiritual matter. It should not be allowed to control one's conscience or wisdom."⁷⁸⁵

Unfortunately, he had to deplore, for a great many people, Hinduism seems to be founded merely in "eating or non-eating."⁷⁸⁶

Sankar Mission to Sankar Sangha

Decisively enough, Lakshminath never felt the need of any new religious reform movement in Assam run at that time either by the Arya Samaj or by the Hindu *Mahasabha*, to reinforce the strength of the Hindus. For him, as well as for the entire Assamese nationalists of the time,

⁷⁸⁴ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Sampadakar Chora, Banhi*, Volume 18, Issue 6, 1929 (1851 Saka), pp. 286-288.

⁷⁸⁵ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. "*Daladali*", *Banhi*, Volume 13, Issue 6, 1923 in Goswami, *Bezbaroa Granthavali, Part III*, 2005, pp. 2113-2114.

⁷⁸⁶ *Banhi*, Volume 13, Issue 5, 1923 in Goswami, *Bezbaroa Granthavali, Part III*, 2005, pp. 2513-2515.

Sankardeva's allegedly *Samyatantrabadi* principle, or the principle of democracy was sufficient to serve the purposes of Hindu reformists and Assamese nationalist cause as well. Lakshminath even named the contemporary age as *Sankar yuga*, and wanted a mission after Sankar to transform the society in the way of his ideology.⁷⁸⁷

The intelligentsia, at least a part of it, was initially attracted to the body like Hindu Mahasabha, but soon came away from it, and maintained a critical distance towards the Hindu Mission or Ramakrishna Mission. They noticed that both of the Missions' effort was towards introduction of the Bengali language among the tribes of Assam, and they established Bengali medium schools with the target. So, they proposed to found a Sankar Mission in Assam to increase the Assamese Hindu population instead of the *Bideshi* Hindu.⁷⁸⁸

The Assamese nationalists' agenda of nation formation took a crucial form in the 1930s. Bishnu Prasad Rabha, a young Assamese nationalist of the period, later turned to be a Communist activist, resonating Lakshminath's earlier proposition, emphasized the need of a religious mission named as Sankar Mission, after the name of Sankardeva, to work for religious unity among the people of Assam.⁷⁸⁹ He declared,

"Mahapurushiya Bhasa is jatiya bhasa, and the Mahapurushiya dharma is jatiya dharma of Assam."⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁷ Bezbaroa, "*Sampadakar Chora*", *Banhi*, Volume 10, Issue 8, 1920, pp. 227-238.

⁷⁸⁸ "*Sampadakiya*", *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 3, 1929 (Puh, 1852 Saka), p. 353. The *Batari*, another periodical of the time, appealed the readers to found an "*Asamiyar Bhasar Mission*" with the same target.

⁷⁸⁹ The concept of Sankar Mission emerged as a reaction to the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission, which worked among the tribal population of the hill areas. Bishnu Prasad Rabha saw the motive of linguistic expansionism in the mission's work, and called for a more liberal attitude from the *Vaishnava* preachers of Assam to embrace the non-Aryan communities within the fold of it. Rava, Bishnuprasad. "Brihattar Asamar Kalpana." *Avahan*, 1930: 1313-1318.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

The intelligentsia, after Lakshminath repeatedly claimed that religion was an effective medium of motivating the people, and Sankardeva's *dharma* was far more liberal in its attitude.

Bishnu Prasad Rabha also pointed out that the driving force of the Ramakrishna Mission among the people of Manipur, Karbi hills, Garo hills, Naga Hills etc. had been motivated by another kind of expansionism, which came to the fore through their publication of Bengali periodicals. He warned not only the Satradhikars, but also the provincial wing of the Hindu Mahasabha not to differentiate the Hinduized tribes in the names of Madahi, Mataliya, Koch etc. from the other Hindus, which might one day push the communities to a civil war like situation.⁷⁹¹

Interestingly, it was at the same time, and mostly in the initiatives of the same personalities of Assam, who had some kinds of links with the Hindu Mahasabha, a religious-reformist body named Sankar Sangha was founded. In the early 1930s, the Sankar Sangha (initially conceived as Sankar Mission) came into being at Nowgong at the initiative of Haladhar Bhuyan and Ramakanta Muktiar. Simultaneously, Gopikaballabh Goswami with Bhubanchandra Bhuyan and others took a reformist agenda at Golaghat, reinterpreting the scripture and challenging the Brahmanical orthodoxy in religious practices, which subsequently became instrumental in institutionalizing a number of intra-caste and widow marriages in Assam.⁷⁹² Gopikaballabh's interpretation of shastric knowledge, and intervention in the hierarchy of *jat* or caste system, challenging the intermediary of Brahman priesthood had produced a heated atmosphere among the contemporary society, including Lakshminath's own paternal family then living in the

⁷⁹¹ Ibid.

⁷⁹² In the 1920s, Ghanashyam Borooah, a friend of Lakshminath and the secretary of the Assam Association initiated locally at Golaghat a number of religious reformist debates within Hindu religious practices like *shraddha*, *vivah* etc. through a Dharmalochana Sabha that became instrumental in the following decade in reformist initiatives by a part of the intelligentsia.

various places of colonial Sibsagar district.⁷⁹³ However, in 1933, the first session of the Sankar Sangha on a provincial basis was held at Nowgong, in which Lakshminath's welcome address was read. Lakshminath suggested the *Sangha* to name its proposed monthly paper as the *Nam-Dharma* instead of the proposed name of *Yuga-Dharma*, which the Sangha accepted. In 1935, its annual session was held in the same venue of Hindu Mahasabha,⁷⁹⁴ in which it was renamed as SriSri Sankardeva Sangha to avoid any ambiguity about its lineage both from Sankara or Siva and from Sankaracharya, the preacher of *Advaita* philosophy of Vedanta.⁷⁹⁵

Effeminate Bengali versus Masculine Assamese: Masculinization of Land

Manifestly enough, the Assamese intelligentsia's revisiting of Sankardeva and interpreting his religion from the outset was oscillated around cultural differentiation between the Assamese and the Bengali. The intelligentsia of Assam, whose basic target was to assert the distinctive Assamese identity, strategically tried to maintain its difference from everything that was held to be Bengali characteristics. Hemchandra Goswami, in his already mentioned 1890 speech, introduced the idea of national character and national psyche in Assamese. Hemchandra

⁷⁹³ It is known from a personal letter addressed to Lakshminath by Jagannath Bezbaroa, one of his elder brothers that Binanda, another elder brother of Lakshminath, with Radhika (Radhika Sharma, a school teacher) assumed to challenge the authority of Dinanath Bezbaroa, and publicly formed a body to propagate widow marriage. Reacting on the issue, a section of the members of the extended Dinanath Bezbaroa family had sent a letter to the *Asamiya* for publication. See Jagannath Bezbaroa's letter to Lakshminath on 11 August, 1928 from Sibsagar in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968. Another personal letter addressed to Lakshminath by Debendranath Bezbaroa, one of the sons of Gobinda Bezbaroa informed him that the Brahman Sabha of Sibsagar led by Jagannath Bezbaroa and Ganga Gobinda Sharma Phukan enquired about Debendranath's 'status and caste'. He described himself in the letter as an 'outlander' in the society, and expressed his preference 'to remain at safe distance from the orthodox Brahman society. See Debendranath Bezbaroa's letter to Lakshminath on 30 April, 1920 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 188-189.

⁷⁹⁴ Bhuyan, Haladhar. "Sri Sri Sankardeva Sanghar Abhyudaya." *Lokasevak Haldhar Bhuyan*. Edited by Tosesar Sarma. Nagaon: Haladhar Bhuyan Birth Centenary Committee, 1991, pp. 157-170.

⁷⁹⁵ Nilomoni Phukan, a key nationalist of the time, suggested the name then, but in 1970, the Sangha changed its name to Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha.

differentiated the Bengali readership from the Assamese readership, and claimed that difference was essential and innate. He argued that the Bengali readership's inclination for genres like novel or drama emanated from the allegedly sentimental trait of the Bengali people, which was rooted in their national psyche. On the other hand, the Assamese as a nation, it is argued, is of restrained and rational character, and they prefer to read scholarly literature.⁷⁹⁶ Apparently, a subtle gender-based differentiation between the Bengali and the Assamese was being operative in the schema, in which Hemchandra had deployed the framework of sentimental female vs rational male binary proposition to explain the psychic differentiation of the Bengali and the Assamese.

The concept of the effeminate Bengali could be traced in the colonial discourse of the time. Mrinalini Sinha has argued that towards the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the stereotypes of Masculine British or European and effeminate Bengali had been repetitively reproduced, which even found expression in the larger debates like the Ilbert Bill controversy, the Age of Consent for women debate etc.⁷⁹⁷ The British were viewed as innately rational, industrious, fond of *shikar* and similar expeditions and alike. In contrast, the Bengali babus were portrayed as sentimental, irrational, and fond of book reading. The Assamese nationalists noticed this essentialist division manifested itself in the realm of religious belief and practice. As an instance of such differentiation, Hemchandra had pointed out the prevalence of the *Devi* or *Shakti* in Bengal, in opposed to the preponderance of *Vishnu*, a male deity in Assam.

⁷⁹⁶ "Asamiya Bhasa", Speech delivered in 1890 in the second annual meeting of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* in Goswami, Hemchandra. *Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*. Edited by Benudhar Sharma. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1972, pp. 95-142. The proposed differentiation seemed to be never informed by any empirical studies of the time.

⁷⁹⁷ Sinha, Mrinalini. *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.

The Assamese intelligentsia, largely in imitation of their colonial masters, took a reductionist view of the complex religious life of the people, and reproduced a simplified pattern of the Shakta Bengali versus the Vaishnava Assamese. In spite of the nationalists' celebration of land and language in analogy with mother, and being accustomed with the expressions like *matribhumi*, *matribhasa*, *aai Asami* and as such, in 1926, Lakshminath identified the geo-body of Assam with Krishna, the prime deity of Assam Vaishnavism. In his imagination, the eastern hill of the Patkai is the lock of hair, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat- these eastern places comprise the lotus-face, Tezpur, Biswanath, Nowgong, Guwahati, Darrang and Barpeta- these central places are the high breast, and Goalpara and Dhubri, these western places are depicted as the extended legs of the lord Krishna.⁷⁹⁸

Lakshminath argued that Assam's Vaishnavism was philosophically different from that of Bengal. Exploring the erotic love of Krishna and Radha, Lakshminath traced it on the sentimental and eccentric nature of Chaitanya. He saw the same eccentricity in the *bhakti* cult of Bengal, and formulated it as a religious-spiritual version of love already being popularized by poets like Jaydeva, Vidyapati and Chandidas in different poetic traditions of the eastern India. His focus was on the temperamental and irrational nature of Chaitanya, which he ascribed to the alleged shortcoming of the Bengali national character.⁷⁹⁹ Lakshminath claimed that unlike Chaitanya, Sankar had a restrained and sincere personality, which according to him was an ideal Assamese character. As a consequence, Sankar came to be known as a practical reformer, who possessed the wider vision of *desh*, *kal* and *patra*.⁸⁰⁰ Chaitanya, on the other hand, was evaluated by him as a dreamer, and as the result of his lack of sense of reality, his

⁷⁹⁸ Speech of the distinguished guest of the Dhubri Session of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* in 1926 in Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*. Edited by Atulchandra Hazarika. Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 1988, pp. 1872-1881.

⁷⁹⁹ Bezbaroa, *Sankardeva*, n. d., pp. 217-220.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid.

whole agenda of Vaishnavism dwindled with the lapse of time. For him, more than individuals, Sankardeva was an epitome of the Assamese characteristics and Chaitanya of the Bengali.⁸⁰¹ In the background of the nineteenth- and early twentieth- century linguistic politics of the region, this essentialist differentiation between two preachers, and celebration of them as typical national symbols, could be read in terms of an effort to provide the linguistic difference a firm and deep cultural base.

Thus, the early twentieth century reading of Sankardeva's religious doctrine of *bhakti* as different to the *bhakti* cult of Bengal had claimed that the differentiation was fundamental, deeply rooted in the respective psyche of each *jati*. Concentrating on the volatile political situation of the time, when the Bengali intelligentsia had taken an overt anticolonial turn, such an essentialist proposition must have conveyed a far more significant political meaning. The political significance of the colonial intelligentsia's projection of Sankar as an archetype of the Assamese mind was made explicit by Lakshminath himself. Elaborating Sankar as a *sanskarak* or reformer of caste divisions, he argued, though Sankar did not believe in the caste system, and provided high status to a *bhakat*, devotee of lower caste than to an *abhakat*, non-follower, of the upper caste, nonetheless he never took the position of extreme opposition of the caste hierarchy, because such opposition might arouse dissatisfaction among the king and the people which ultimately might have prevented in his real mission of propagating the Vaishnava religion. Being a social reformer, Sankardeva had to accommodate *reality*.⁸⁰² According to Lakshminath, *bhakti* is the *yugadharma* of *Kalikāl*, and in it, there was no trace of rebellion against Hinduism. The Hindu religious preachers and even the social reformers knew well how

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

⁸⁰² Bezbaroa, *Sankardeva*, 1911, pp. 217-218.

to give respect to old customs, morals and etiquettes. They never jeered at tradition.⁸⁰³ Mahapurush comes to the world only to construct not to destroy.⁸⁰⁴

In 1933, Lakshminath, being invited by the Maharaja of Baroda, delivered a lecture at Baroda entitled “History of *Vaishnavism*”.⁸⁰⁵ The lecture focused on bhakti as a pan-Indian religious movement. Considering the audience of Baroda, it was a necessary appropriation of a theme, towards which he devoted a long period of his life. In the lecture, Lakshminath emphasized the difference between the Vaishnava cult of Assam and Bengal, but with slightly modified arguments, trying to highlight the greatness of Sankardeva as a social reformer. He argued that the *bhakti* based on *madhura bhava*, of which Chaitanya was a proponent, was more prone to degeneration than the *bhakti* based on *dashya* or total submission to God, which was preferred by Sankardeva.⁸⁰⁶

Lakshminath’s reading of Sankardeva placed Sankardeva’s religion strictly founded on the master-slave relationship between the deity-lord, Visnu and the devotee-servant, the *bhakat*, pushing back to the margin the relationship between the two as analogous to the relation between two lovers.⁸⁰⁷ Sankar’s leaning for the *dasya bhakti*, or the *bhakti* explained as a relation between a master and his selfless slave is not beyond social and political significance. It was a religious doctrine by which the political system of monarchy based on feudal enslavement was supported. Lakshminath and his contemporaries not merely explicitly upheld

⁸⁰³ “Mahapurush Sankardeva”, *Banhi*, Volume 7, Issue 10, 1916 (1838 Saka), pp. 529-539.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁵ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *History of Vaishnavism in India: Lecture Series-1933-34*. Baroda: Department of Education, Baroda State, 1934.

⁸⁰⁶ *Bhakti of madhura bhava* imagines Krishna as lover and *bhakta* or devotee as beloved. *Bhakti of dashya bhava* imagines Krishna as master and the devotee as slave to him.

⁸⁰⁷ In the 1890s, Hemchandra criticized two chapters of Sankardeva’s Kirtan, viz. the *Harmohan* and *Rasalila*, which respectively depicted Shiva’s infatuation towards a woman, and Krishna’s erotic love towards women of Gakul including Radha, as deviation from the moral standard of bhakti cult.

the *dasya bhakti* as core to the Assamese Vaishnavism, a brilliant reading of Madhavdeva's *Namghosa* by Banikanta Kakati later posited the poet-devotee's realization of the selflessness of his being as a rarely celebrated moment of his literary career, as well as the climax of his spiritual journey.⁸⁰⁸ In fact, it was the same policy of moderation the intelligentsia followed in the colonial situation of Assam, which may be called strategic for them to negotiate with the 'backward' situation of the province. Always being challenged for its hegemonic claims by a stronger linguistic group like the Bengali, both within and beyond the administrative boundaries of the province, the intelligentsia of Assam always preferred to maintain a measured attitude to the ruler.

⁸⁰⁸ Kakati, Banikanta. *Purani Asamiya Sahitya*. Gauhati: Kitapghar, 1940, see chapter "Namghosa".

Bihu and Durga Puja

The new notion of *Bihu*, as *jatiya utchava* of Assam, in opposed to the Durga puja, formed a part of the same project of differentiation between the Assamese and Bengali national life, Lakshminath being one of the early propagators of the conception. In the fourth decade of the twentieth century, the Assamese nationalists exhibited their eagerness to focus *Bihu*, as *jatiya utchava* of Assam, which was an overt departure from their earlier stand on the same. For instance, in 1885, an anonymous writer, trying to assert the Aryan link of Bihu, expressed that Bihu was an issue of serious concern. It could not be ignored anyway; nevertheless, he deplored its gradual degradation in moral standard and wanted its immediate reform and purification.⁸⁰⁹ In 1890, while composing a poem, Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya described *Bihunam*, songs associated with Bihu, as obscene, dirty, and advocated composition of heroic and patriotic songs instead.⁸¹⁰ He even identified Bihu as pernicious to Assam's improvement, and implored,

“Educated Brethren, try to displace Bihu immediately.”⁸¹¹

In the twentieth century, the perspective changed slowly, and an effort to institute Bihu as the *jatiya utchava* of Assam came to the fore. In spite of a section of upper caste Hindu intelligentsia's constant disapprobation of Bihu, Lakshminath, in 1912, published a pictorial representation of Bihu at the advent of it, which showed performing Bihu dance beneath a tree by a group consisted of four male figures and one female figure, with typical Bihu-instruments like *dhol*, *pepa*, *tal* and *taka*. A male figure named *Deka Dangariya Bihu* was in the focal

⁸⁰⁹ Anonymous. “*Bihu*”, *Asam Bandhu*, Volume 1, Issue 5, pp. 152-157.

⁸¹⁰ Bhattacharyya, Kamalakanta, “*Bahagar Bihu*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 2, Issue 3, 1890 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, p. 150.

⁸¹¹ Bhattacharyya, Kamalakanta. “*Asamar Unnati*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 2, Issue 3, 1890 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, p. 145.

position.⁸¹² The contemporary perspective towards Bihu and particularly towards songs and dance associated with it was reflected in a satirical representation entitled *Bihua Dangariya*, in which a *vidyadiggaja* pandit in traditional attire is shown to refer to Bihu as vulgar. He prohibits Bihu dance and declares that students, who ignore such prohibition are morally deviant. Another person is shown to state that the entire land is demoralized by such activities of the youth. As the younger generation does not heed any attention to their warning, so there seems to be no way but to take punitive measures to protect the society from moral degradation.⁸¹³ In another representation, a person named *Slila* (literally meaning genteel, decent) Sharma, deplores Bihu dance and Bihu song as pastoral and obscene. Anticipating that the editor of *Banhi* may publish Bihu dance and song like some previous occasions, he warned that *Banhi* should propagate higher ideas only.⁸¹⁴

Reflecting the disapproval of the contemporary literati, the Census report of Assam in 1911 described the three “great” Bihus in terms of “rural” festivals of the Brahmaputra valley. Apart from other practices, the report offered a description of dance performed in Bihu drawing upon its analogy with the episode of Krishna with *gopis* of Vrindavan,

“In the night time, parties sing hymns recounting the doings of Krishna as the cowherd of Brindaban and visit the house of the well-to-dos-the songs are accompanied by clapping of hands, drums and cymbals. ---After the first day youths and maidens dance together in the open field and the courtships begin which often result in runaway marriages and so-called marriages by capture.”⁸¹⁵

⁸¹² “*Bihu*”, *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 6, 1911 (1853 Saka) pp. 220-223; Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*, 1988, p. 1665.

⁸¹³ “*Burha Aap Bihu*”, *Banhi*, Volume 3, Issue 6, 1834 Saka, 1912; Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*, 1988, p. 1666.

⁸¹⁴ Ibid.

⁸¹⁵ McSwiney, *Census of India, 1911, Assam*, 1912, p. 43.

Whether the Assamese intelligentsia's claims for a *jatiya utchava* was inspired by similar claims by the Bengali intelligentsia for Durga puja could also be explored. A report of the Bengal Library of the 1890s, for instance, recorded, that two writers of the time were of opinion that the goddess Durga or *Sakti*, should be worshipped not so much for religious as for social and political purposes, for the purpose of acquiring power of all kinds, and chiefly the power to rise as united nation from a condition of abject dependence and helplessness. They argued that for political and patriotic inspiration, Durga puja should be to the Bengali a "national and patriotic celebration", rather than a "religious and domestic" as it was at the time. The Librarian even made it clear that those types of thought were not only confined to the particular writers but characteristics of even "the best Bengali writers of the day".⁸¹⁶

The Assamese intelligentsia tried to offer Bihu a modern nationalistic garb, and to posit it in contrary to Durga puja, the Shakta worship of *devi* Durga. A part of the intelligentsia of Assam believed that Durga puja in Assam was a new arrival, and it was only after establishment of British rule in Assam, both household and *barwari*, public Durga puja came to be celebrated.⁸¹⁷ It, however, was not an uncontested opinion. Hiteswar Barbarooah, a contemporary writer, for instance, while recognizing *Bihu* as *jatiya utchava* of Assam, still pointed out the popularity of Durga puja and profound participation of the masses in its *mela*.⁸¹⁸ He noticed something carnivalesque in the *mela* of the Durga puja, and pointed out that it was in the time of the pre-colonial Ahom rule, Durga puja entered Assam. Commenting on him, Lakshminath argued that instead of getting patronization from the Ahom rulers, Durga puja could never occupy the

⁸¹⁶ "Report of Bengal Library" in *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department: Report on Publications Issued and Registered in the Several Provinces of British India During the Year 1896*, 1898.

⁸¹⁷ Borooah, Gunabhiram. "Soumar Bhraman", *Jonaki*, Volume 2, Issue 5 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection 1889-1899 & 1901-1903*, 2001, pp. 167-168.

⁸¹⁸ "Rangali Bihu aru Durga Puja", *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 10, 1931 (1853 Saka).

position of *jatiya utchava*. Because a *jatiya utchava* is not confined to a particular enclave, but is equally celebrated by the entire people.⁸¹⁹ In 1936, Lakshminath stated in a personal letter that taking into consideration the prevalence and popularity of the *Mahapurushiya dharma*, he was of the opinion that Bankimchandra's *Vande Mataram* song, based on Shakta imagery, was quite irrelevant in Assam.⁸²⁰ In tune with Lakshminath, Ambikagiri Raychoudhuri argued that *Durga Puja* never was an important festival to Assam neither was it properly assimilated to the Assamese culture.⁸²¹

It was in the 1930s, a section of intelligentsia made their concerted attempts to hold *Bihu* in public platforms. The photos of Bihu came to be focused in the print arena.⁸²² Both *Asamiya* and *Banhi*, two influential print organs of the Assamese nationalists of the time published special Bihu issues on the occasion.⁸²³ *Banhi*'s issue on Bihu was contributed by all of the prominent nationalists of Assam of the time.⁸²⁴ The news of Bihu celebration was printed in the periodical with the title *Udbuddha Asam*, meaning galvanized Assam.⁸²⁵ It was not only a crucial turn in the perspective of the emerging intelligentsia towards Bihu, but it also involved

⁸¹⁹ "*Jatiya Utchava*", *Banhi*, Volume 20, Issue 7, 1931 (1853 Saka) in Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*, 1988, pp. 1885-1886.

⁸²⁰ Lakshminath's reply to Mohan Chandra Mahanta on 10 March, 1936. In his letter, Mahanta expressed his view on the song, and Lakshminath in his reply agreed to it. See Entry No. 39, *Toka-Ka* in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 329.

⁸²¹ Raychaudhuri, Ambikagiri. "*Durga Puja Asamar Kiya Jatiya Utchab Nahai*", *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 11, 193, pp. 1302-1303. The public holiday list of 1897 of Assam shows that in the year there remained long puja holidays in the entire Brahmaputra valley excluding Goalpara district. It remained a single holiday for the Bohag Bihu and Magh Bihu each. See Public Holiday List for 1897, Assam Commissioner's Office, Assam State Archives.

⁸²² In 1932, Gauhati Ekata Sabha organized a three-day Bihu celebration at Guwahati. See *Udbuddha Asam*", *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 9, 1853 Saka, 1932, p. 1075.

⁸²³ "*Sampadakar Chora, Bihur Olag*", *Banhi*, Volume 20, Issue 12, 1932 (Chot, 1853 Saka), pp. 555-556.

⁸²⁴ *Banhi*, Volume 20, Issue 12, 1931 (1853 Saka).

⁸²⁵ "*Udbuddha Asam*", *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 9, 1932 (1853 Saka), p. 1075.

their efforts to redefine Bihu in terms of the prevalent notion of the Aryan Hindu cultural component. *Avahan* related Bihu with the *Vishuva Sankranti* in the Hindu solar calendar.⁸²⁶ Simultaneously, an article in *Banhi* discussed *Garu-Bihu* the first day of *Bohag Bihu* in connection with a Hindu mythical seer, Rishi Gautam, thus promoting its status.⁸²⁷ It is evident that Aryanization of Bihu became part and parcel of its newly acquired elevated status of *jatiya utchava*. However, a section of the intelligentsia's aversion to *Bihunach*, a dance related with Bihu, still continued. Chandrakumar Agarwala, wrote to Lakshminath in a letter in 1931 that the *Banhi* was severely criticized by a section of the literati for its exposure to Bihu. He regretted that for them *Bilati*, or western dance was far above the scale of civilizational ethos, and it was Bihu dance, which only seemed to be mean and vulgar to them.⁸²⁸

However, instead of disapproval of the intelligentsia at the increasing impact of Durga puja celebration in Assam, it could not be attenuated. In 1935, *Deka Asam*, the mouthpiece of *Asam Sangrakshini Sabha*, wrote a column entitled *Durga puja Asamiyar Kartabya*, meaning what the Assamese should do in the time of Durga puja? It opined that though it is not the *jatiya utchava* of Assam, there are many places in Assam where it is observed. The paper's attention was on the economic aspect of the puja, and it appealed that no Assamese puja committee should buy materials necessary for puja from non-Assamese enterprises. They should buy items like *Pratima* or idols from Assamese *karikar* or artisans, and all other things from Assamese enterprises, *Asamiya dokan*, *pohari* etc. Already Dumduma committee, an easternmost mofussil of Assam advertised at the *Batari*, an Assamese newspaper for *Asamiya jatradal* and *karikar*, which the paper commended and implored all to take the instance as ideal for

⁸²⁶ *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 11, 1930, p. 1303.

⁸²⁷ Talukdar, Pratapchandra. "*Gautam Rishi aru Bihu*", *Banhi*, Volume 20, Issue 12, Chot, 1853 Saka, 1932, pp. 541-542.

⁸²⁸ Chandrakumar's letter to Lakshminath from Gauhati on 9 June, 1931 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 192.

them.⁸²⁹ Thus, without making a compromise to the projected Vaishnava Mahapurushiya foundation of the Assamese identity, a negotiation was made in case of Durga puja. Prior to that, in 1932, writing on Bihu, Lakshminath and his contemporary authors emphasized on the principle of Swadeshi Assam, and insisted on economic self-reliance for Assam through locally manufacturing and producing goods and wished for growth and prosperity of the land.⁸³⁰

In fact, the 1930s was a very decisive decade for the Assamese nationalists, who found themselves amidst various kinds of challenges, economically, linguistically and politically.⁸³¹ Lakshminath, celebrating the emergence of Bihu literature, in 1932, already put their anxiety into pen in terms of *durdin*, bad days.⁸³² The editorial of *Avahan*, also referred to the time as *duryoga*, a time of distress.⁸³³ It is this felt anxiety towards their future, combined with their determination to overcome the adverse situation, the Assamese nationalists showed their steadfastness to their involvement with the cultural symbols that they coined and appropriated to serve their contemporary needs. In the meantime, the election of the provincial legislative council has brought a new stimulus to them, though not without juxtaposing uncertainties about its consequences. Chandrakumar wrote to Lakshminath in a personal letter,

⁸²⁹ *Deka Asam*, Volume 1, Issue 6, Guwahati, 1935.

⁸³⁰ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 21, Issue 1, *Bohag*, 1932 (1854 Saka), p. 44.

⁸³¹ Recession, natural calamities like flood, civil disobedience movement, immigration, valley-wise politics for assertion of power, separatist claims of Cachar and Goalpara, emergence of tribal and backward caste politics, growing rift between the Hindu and Muslim- all made their lives complicated, which repeatedly found expression in the contemporary print media. About Hindu-Muslim relation, the Report of Census in 1931 observed ‘*a great change*’, and warned that the situation had become such a volatile one that on the slightest provocation, one may fly at another’s throat. See Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Assam*, 1932, p. 197.

⁸³² *Ibid.*

⁸³³ *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 11, 1930, p. 1303.

“I discussed with Jnan (Jnanadabhiram Borooah) that if you were here, you, without any doubt, could go to the Assam Council.”⁸³⁴

Conclusion

Thus, it is evident that in the first four decades of the twentieth century, a greater section of the Assamese intelligentsia tried to incorporate Vaishnavism as mobilizing force not only of the Assamese identity but also of the emerging notion of an equalitarian and just society of the future. Sankardeva was read and reread to make a cultural symbol for modernity, and to inspire the emotions of the vast masses that already showed their uncontested loyalties to him. In spite of certain degrees of difference of opinions among the intelligentsia around Sankardeva and Vaishnavism propounded by him, they mostly acted as a rallying force, Lakshminath being the prime focus of the time. A component of pan-Indian consciousness towards social reform and nationalistic agenda was operative in their efforts. Their revisiting of religion was though earmarked with the idea of assertion of Aryan Hindu lineage, still they, and specifically Lakshminath, constantly tried to overcome sectarian prejudices, communal agenda and caste division. However, rather than going for any radical change, what he, and most of them wanted was gradual change of the society, and adaptation of religion to the new situation of their lives. The chapter also tries to show that revisiting Sankardeva from the part of the intelligentsia was motivated by ubiquitous efforts in other parts of India. It, together with the previous chapter, also tries to argue that by the 1930s, the Assamese intelligentsia found themselves in a crucial phase of their making of an identity, and combinations of components like question of political power, linguistic politics, rising Hindu-Muslim division, valley-wise contestations, caste division and emerging depressed and backward class movement, hills-plains dichotomy-all

⁸³⁴ Chandrakumar Agarwala's letter to Lakshminath from Guwahati on 25 September, 1936 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 198.

contributed to the complicated scenario. It was at this juncture; Lakshminath and his contemporaries searched for new cultural symbols for them and tried to remake Bihu along with Sankardeva as an inspiring image of modernity. Print was the major form through which their efforts were carried out, and it is in the next chapter, their steering of new technology of print and its deployment for formation of Assamese literary modernity will be addressed.



CHAPTER FIVE

Literary Modernity in Assamese

Literary modernity is assumed to be interlinked with the coming of print as a new way of publishing books and gradual development of a print market. Print brought with it, new ways of circulation and reception of knowledge, as well as profound change in ways of getting pleasure and conception of entertainment in leisure time. The intellectually enriched elite section of the society in vernaculars deployed print to address some issues, which they claimed to be of the general interests of the society as a whole and by this act asserted themselves as a hegemonic group. Living larger parts of his adult life in Calcutta, Howrah and Sambalpur, it was the technology of print, through which Lakshminath was in constant relation with Assam and the Assamese language and literature. He was an author, editor, and a publisher and distributor of books. As modernity by its new communicational networks like steamboats and railways, produced the provisions to experience a far vaster world than before, it also created the conditions to go away from one's homeland to live a life of an expatriate. As we have already seen, Lakshminath either voluntarily or by compulsion had to choose a life of a permanent sojourner. As a businessman he had to spend an extensively travelled life, from one place to another, one railway carriage or station to another, and into the deep interiors of the Orissa forests. Sometimes spending the night on a railway platform, or in a forest camp, was the life of a traveller. While his intellectual make up was shaped by certain ideological and literary currents of the time, which he received like other Indian writers of his generation both from the western world and of the own indigenous traditions being practiced either in Sanskrit or in vernaculars, his creative mind acquired its materials from a wide panorama of the whole of the eastern India. Living amidst of and being attracted towards growing nationalistic consciousness as Indian, he still perceived himself as belonging to Assam and visualized lands

beyond its limit as *bidesh* or foreign land. Literature, he produced, from one point, seemed to be a quest for his lost home. Calcutta, the polyglot metropolis and the centre of intellectual culture and rising nationalist consciousness provided him a vantage point, from which he painfully recalled the comforts of the motherland. Literature for Lakshminath and his generation in Indian vernaculars was more than writing a book; writing meant for them shouldering the responsibility of inscribing one's own identity through literature. Enriching and transforming a literary tradition to cope up with the new demands of time was projected by them as a sacred duty towards the nation.

The chapter investigates all these aspects of an emerging modern Indian vernacular literature, simultaneously exploring the processes through which a literary tradition in Assamese was formed. The tactics deployed by the intelligentsia to overcome the absence of an economically sound entrepreneurship in the print industry in Assam, challenged by presence of an adjacent powerful print culture, as well as the backwardness in education which consequently resulted in the lack of readership will be explored. It will inquire about the process in which *sahitya* was defined to serve the new discourse of national unity and brotherhood. Whether literature, the new arena of inscribing the national identity and allegedly disinterested devotion to it was a disinterested venture of the intelligentsia is a question necessarily to be asked. In dealing all these aspects, though the centrality of Lakshminath will be kept in mind; the processes by which he was gradually installed as the writer-hero of the modern Assamese literature would be dealt in a subsequent chapter.

Forming a Print Arena

Print in Assam, like anywhere, brought profound changes to the earlier modes of publication and circulation and reception of books. It made a shift from the centrality of oral-auditory practice of reception prevalent in earlier times to a silent reading culture.⁸³⁵ Earlier practices of reception involved a few literate persons as reader-performers, whereas a larger section of people consumed the recitation, singing or any performance as listeners or audience. Reception of knowledge was mostly a group activity, though no way wholly mnemonic. Despite a central role played by memory in circulation of vast bodies of traditional oral texts including songs, history, and traditional knowledge like *bezali bidya*, medicine preparation, bamboo craft, house-making craft etc., writing or copying texts were already thought to be a more permanent mode of preservation. Knowledge of preparation of *sanchipat* and some other materials necessary to write on it, came to be assessed as a useful skill.⁸³⁶ Apart from a scribal culture nourished through the patronage of the local kings and nobles, Vaisnavism of Assam transformed manuscript preparation to almost a household practice. Apart from one's personal collection, *Rajbharal*, *Gandhiya bharal* and *Vaisnava satra* became the repository of manuscripts. It was Sankardeva, the founder of Vaisnavism in Assam, who appropriated the

⁸³⁵ It is already discussed in the previous chapter that Vaishnavism in Assam largely deployed such practices among the people, in the name of *Kirtana* and *Shravana* modes of bhakti, literally meaning devotion through singing aloud and listening. It was the Baptist missionaries, who tried to promote silent reading culture in the classrooms. “*Kheh Aru Asam Deshar Schoool-ar Katha* (Chinese and Assamese Schools)”, *Arunoday*, June, 1853, p. 84.

⁸³⁶ Quoting Edward Gait as source, Chunilal Bose wrote “Certain aboriginal tribes of Assam still use the bark of *Agaru* tree (*Aquilaria Agallocha*) as a natural paper. Sir Edward Gait, the present Lt. Governor of Bihar and Orissa was the Director of Land Records and Agriculture in Assam in 1894, in a paper communicated by him to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, stated that *Agaru* bark was widely used as a writing material throughout Assam prior to the introduction of paper; its employment as such seemed to have escaped notice. Mill-made papers are still regarded by the priests in certain parts of Assam as impure for purposes of religious ceremonies and sacred writings and the *Agaru* bark is used instead. This bark is sometimes used as covers for binding books.” “The History of Paper-Making”, *Modern Review*, Calcutta, September, 1920, Vol. XXVIII, no. 3, Whole No. 165.

age-long oral-auditory mode of reception with *bhakti* cult, for the purpose of diffusion of religious doctrines, emphasizing the *kirtan-shravan* modes, though the latter was certainly more than the mere oral-auditory circulation of scriptures. As an outcome, a large body of manuscripts on various subjects were being produced and remained scattered, all over Assam, whether well preserved, or in decaying condition. Hemchandra Goswami, a writer, contemporary and friend to Lakshminath and a government servant, while in the first decade of the twentieth century surveyed the manuscripts of Assam, came to know about the presence of around 2000 to 2500 manuscripts on various subjects, of which less than half, he could collect and catalogue. *Puthi* is the general name mostly used to encompass the whole body of written texts, considered as sacred and family treasure, adored, and in rare cases of reading, handled with *bhoi* and *bhakti*, awe and reverence. They were kept with care out of the reach of children and females.⁸³⁷ Either religious or *puranic*, *puthi-path* was a ritual to be performed on special occasions. Whereas in Vaishnava culture, reading aloud, and by singing, was the core to the reception, in cases of other *vidyas*, like *bezali vidya*, secrecy was maintained in circulation and reception. Pre-print culture believed in *Gurumukhi vidya*, knowledge acquired through a *guru* or teacher. In fact, *Vaishnava* reception of *puthi* also maintained some restrictions. *Puthi*, especially the *shastra* or scripture was read by a person named *pathak* or *pathek*, literally a reader, who had to possess not only the ability to read, but also to be sanctified by a *Vaishnava samaj* or *satra* as having competency to perform a reading session. Vaishnavism certainly introduced a popular impetus for reception of *Puthi*; but the pre-print

⁸³⁷ Women were largely regarded as bearers of oral culture. As in the Vaishnava perception of the world, women are equated with '*maya*', meaning both illusion and alluring in a derogatory sense, so certain restrictive measures were taken to debar them from full participation in performance of scripture. In the extreme case of Barpeta satra, Dalton observed, "None but *Bhakats*, or disciples, after purification and change of raiment are admitted into the interior of the *Shostro*. Women were excluded but may sit in the verandah, and at certain prods join in the spiritual songs." See Dalton, E.T. "Notes on the Mahapurushiyas: A Sect of Vaishnavism in Assam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society* XX, no. VI (1851): 455-469. Such regulatory practices are still in vogue.

popular culture based on oral-auditory modes were multi-dimensional, which involved from folk song and narrative, to *panchali*, *sadhukatha*, and many other ritualistic and amusement-related performances. These, in Assam were necessarily multi-lingual, multi-religious and as diverse as the population of the province.

Print entered the scene as an inherently democratic and universal technology, as it has been often highlighted about print.⁸³⁸ A significant number of historians see print as possessing the capacity to effectively challenge the confinement of knowledge within some privileged circles prevalent in pre-print societies. A printed text can be read and enjoyed by anybody, who has the capacity to read. In the context of South Asia, and particularly in a province like Assam with a very small literate population, the transition to a print world was not as significant as in Europe or other developed regions.

The size of readership of printed texts was determined by the growth of education and literacy, which in Assam was not an optimistic picture. The 1891 census of Assam showed that out of 1000 males in the province, 924 were altogether illiterate. Out of the other 76, only 58 males were defined as ‘literate’ and 18 as ‘learning’.⁸³⁹ The total number of literate men was shown

⁸³⁸ Conversely, Sheldon Pollock pointed out that instead of the frequent contemporary scholarly emphasis on print, there was another such technological rupture, though with different historiographical consequences. According to him, transition to manuscript culture in the beginning of the second millennium had far greater significance in the modes of literary production and reception, which, in combination with some other factors, made vernacular revolution possible. He underscores that, for long, manuscript culture remained dominant as the medium of authentic knowledge, despite its interaction with print. Pollock’s other point is, though the broadly circulated journals played a significant role in development of literary modernity in South Asian vernaculars, access to printed books remained limited to a smaller section. For a greater section of readers, such accessibility to printed materials is still meant to be textbooks. See Pollock, Sheldon. "Introduction." *In Literary cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, by Sheldon Pollock, 1-36. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, pp. 21-22.

⁸³⁹ “Learning” was though generally defined as those “persons still under instruction, whether they are able to read or write or not”, in the census of 1901, it meant in case of the Brahmaputra valley “only those children who, having acquired knowledge of reading and writing, well engaged in studying other subjects to which that

as 1, 62,553 against 79,664 in the 1881 census.⁸⁴⁰ In 1881, the number of literate women in the province was 1,068, which in 1891 increased to 3,427.⁸⁴¹ Less than 1 out of 1000 women only in 1891 was literate.⁸⁴² Literate population comprised less than ten percent of the entire population. In the report of the Census of 1901, out of 61,26,346 persons being included in the census, 2,22,386 persons returned as knowing how to read and write, including 13,134 numbers of women.⁸⁴³ But the proportion of literates in the Assam valley districts, the region where Assamese was spoken by the larger part of the population, were particularly low, in comparison to the Bengali-dominated Sylhet, which then remained a part of the same province.⁸⁴⁴

B. C. Allen, the superintendent of the Census in 1901 summarized that as nearly all the inhabitants of the province were cultivators, so they “do not require to go to school to learn to follow the plough”.⁸⁴⁵ It is an indication that print culture in Assam was mostly confined within some particular enclaves of urban inhabitants, who had a desire to take education, which, then, was regarded as a way of getting a respectable and reliable livelihood. Necessarily, print and

knowledge is necessary preliminary.” Gait, E. A. *Census of India, 1891: Volume I, Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892, p. 147

⁸⁴⁰ Driberg, J.J.S., and C.A. Elliott. *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*. Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1883, p. 126.

⁸⁴¹ Ibid.

⁸⁴² Gait, E. A. *Census of India, 1891: Volume I, Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892, Chapter IX, pp. 146- 147.

⁸⁴³ Allen, B. C. *Census of India, 1901. Vol. IV: Assam. Part I*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1902, Chapter IX, p. 97.

⁸⁴⁴ The Report of census in 1901 commented that in the Assam valley the proportion of literate was low. Allen, *Census of India, 1901. Vol. IV: Assam. Part I*, 1902, Chapter IX, p. 97.

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid.

the changes brought by print in publication, circulation and reception of books also remained confined within a limited section, and print culture diffused very slowly.⁸⁴⁶

The early initiative to spread print culture in Assam was taken by the American Baptist missionaries. Apart from printing a number of books and religious tracts also a magazine, they endeavoured to introduce private and silent reading, and gratuitously distributed books and tracts among the local inhabitants through extensive tours from village to village which were explicitly part of their proselytization.⁸⁴⁷ In the meantime, expansion of school education in Assam produced a category of readers, who mainly consumed school textbooks. In spite of the small size of readership, print already made its way, and soon came to be appreciated by a wealthy and literate section as a useful technology of the time. According to a record, as early as, in 1830, a person from Assam published a history of Assam, *Asam Buranjea*, in Chandrika Press of Calcutta, which he distributed in gratis.⁸⁴⁸ Two decades later, the first printing press of Assamese ownership was installed at Calcutta by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, which was

⁸⁴⁶ Census report of 1891 has recorded that in the district of Sibsagar, one of the most important districts in the province, from the viewpoint of readership formation, only 57 out of 1000 males, and 0.8 out of 1000 females were able to 'read and write'. Gait, *Census of India, 1891: Volume I*, 1892, Chapter VII, p. 140.

⁸⁴⁷ The missionary accounts on Assam of the 1840s and 1850s provide evidence of their attempts to distribute books, as well as the people's response.

⁸⁴⁸ J. Long's "A Descriptive Catalogue of the Bengali Works", which contained a classified list of fourteen hundred Bengali books and pamphlets, published in 1855, showed 'Asam Buranjea', History of Assam and its famous shrines, by 'Hatiram Dakiyal' (Haliram Dhekial Phukan), containing 86 number of pages, in its History and Biography section. J. Long's "A Descriptive Catalogue of the Bengali Works", which contained a classified list of fourteen hundred Bengali books and pamphlets, published in 1855, showed 'Asam Buranjea', History of Assam and its famous shrines, by 'Hatiram Dakiyal' (Haliram Dhekial Phukan), containing 86 number of pages, in its History and Biography section. Long, J. *A Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali works: Containing a Classified List of Fourteen Hundred Bengali Books and Pamphlets Which Have Issued from the Press During the Last Sixty Years, With Occasional Notices of the Subjects, the Price, and Where Printed*. Calcutta: Sanders, Cones & Co., 1855, Chapter P, p. 24.

initially bought to make the print of a law book of own composition cheaper.⁸⁴⁹ In 1853, when the *Namghosa*, a canonized text of the Assam Vaishnavism was published from the press, it signaled a new direction, printing technology had to adopt in the near future.⁸⁵⁰

With print, the word *kitab* of Arabic origin emerged as the most popular word to denote a book, though a few other words were also in vogue. The word *Puthi* gradually came to be restricted to mean a manuscript. The records show, most of the books published in Assamese until the turn of the century were either religious books or textbooks.⁸⁵¹ Printing technology in Assam, like all over India, was largely adapted to make printed versions of already existing manuscripts, as well as to publish orally transmitted narratives and such. Towards the last decade of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, some teachers, Vaishnava *gosains* and other persons showed keen interest to collect manuscripts and print them at their own cost as a way of preservation, a phenomenon though undermined in elite representation was indicative of growing popularity of print.⁸⁵²

⁸⁴⁹ Gunabhiram Borooah, a near relative of Anandaram wrote that Anandaram purchased a printing machine to make the printing cost of his Bengali translations of *Sadar Nispatti* cheaper, and established it in Calcutta in 1852 with the name of Kalikata New Press, which was registered in the name of Gunabhiram, then a student of Presidency College, as its chairman. Borooah, Gunabhiram. *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jivan Charitra*. Third Edition. 1971, p. 94.

⁸⁵⁰ *Namghosha* printed by the New Press was the first Vaishnava scripture in Assamese to appear in print. It was the popularity of print among the emerging literate sections of the society, by the 1870s, the Auniati Satra, one of the wealthy and powerful Vaishnava religious centres at Majuli of Assam established a press named Dharma Prakash Yantra, from which religious books and also a periodical came to be published.

⁸⁵¹ Apart from the colonial archives, which provide the list of registered books, some library catalogues of the period have been discussed to come to such a conclusion.

⁸⁵² In 1871, the *satradhikar* of Auniati Satra of Majuli founded the *Dharmaprakash Jantra*, a printing machine to publish Vaishnava religious texts. It was from here that *Asam Bilasini*, a magazine was published. Subsequently, apart from the professional-minded publishers, a section of amateur publicists showed their keen interest to publish old manuscripts of religious books, collections of folk songs, *mantra* etc.

Francesca Orsini has shown that in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, popular print culture diffused crossing the borders of Hindi/Urdu script divide.⁸⁵³ Unlike Hindi and Urdu, Assamese with Bengali shared in print almost similar script, which had provided the publishers of Assam the opportunity of printing in Calcutta-based Bengali presses. It also resulted in an impediment for independent growth of the Assamese print industry.⁸⁵⁴ The similarity of script made an impact on the culture of reading, because an Assamese reader could easily read a printed Bengali book, which ultimately led to impede the growth of Assamese book publication. Initially, being instituted as an administrative language, and simultaneously in the status of medium of instruction in Assam, Bengali represented a power after English. The literate section of earlier times became accustomed to reading Bengali books through prescribed textbooks. Even the government took initiative to make Bengali periodicals available for reading in Assam.⁸⁵⁵ Like Punjabi, as Farina Mir has shown, being deprived from government patronization, and surrounded by a more powerful literary culture (in this case, it

⁸⁵³ Orsini, Francesca. *Print and Pleasure, Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, p. 3.

⁸⁵⁴ The first printing press in Assam, established in 1836, was a missionary initiative, which got patronization of the colonial government and the European tea planters. In 1853, M. Bronson, the Superintendent of the press, submitting a statement regarding the activities of the press, to the government requested to provide 'its patronage upon this press, and give to it the printing of the *pottas* or other Forms required in the province'. Bronson's report has emphasized on the local participation with the press, "Considerable interest is felt by many of the Natives for the paper; and occasionally well-written and interesting articles have been contributed by the Natives themselves and published. The illustrations with which the paper is embellished is the work of Native Assamese, who, until recently were wholly untaught and unpractised." The *Arunoday* had hardly 500 copies of circulation, which covered the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, from Sadiya to Goalpara. The year-wise circulation was highest in 1846 with 568 copies, which diminished to 390 in 1849. See Statement on Native Presses by M. Bronson on the 26 May 1853 submitted to C. Holroyd, Magistrate, Sibsagar in "Returns Relating to Native Printing Presses and Publications in Bengal" in Long, *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No XXII*, 1855, pp. 104-108.

⁸⁵⁵ J. Long wrote in his "A Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Works", published in 1855 that 500 copies of the *Masik Patrika* were subscribed by the government to circulate in Assam. See Long, *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No XXII*, 1855, p. 65)

was Bengali, whereas for Punjabi, it was Urdu) Assamese book and magazine publishing remained underdeveloped.⁸⁵⁶ Even after the recognition of Assamese as a medium of instruction in vernacular schools, the colonial officers constantly complained about the lack of appropriate books in Assamese without providing any financial assistance to publish books.

Assam emerged not only as a consumer-producing site for Bengali publications, but the Assamese publications almost entirely became dependent on Bengali press of Calcutta. Till the 1870s, Assam had only 5 registered presses.⁸⁵⁷ At the turn of the century, the number increased to 12, including the Secretariat Press at Shillong, and excluding three presses of the Sylhet district.⁸⁵⁸ Lack of wide circulation of books and periodicals resulted in the increased rate of cost of printing. Writers or publishers chose to print in Calcutta, which became cheaper than in Assam.

Lakshminath, staying in Calcutta and Howrah until 1917, supervised printing works on behalf of a number of his friends in Assam, and made necessary corrections in the proof copies, took delivery of books from the press and then sent by parcels to Assam.⁸⁵⁹ The Presses in Calcutta

⁸⁵⁶ Mir has contradicted with the early scholarships, which argued that, after the rebellion of 1857, due to the destruction of the patronage system, immediately followed by the disruption of the Urdu culture based on Delhi and Lucknow, Urdu poets and men of letters migrated to Lahore in search of patrons and managed to get their shelter there. As a consequence, the Urdu literary culture had flourished in Punjab. Instead, Mir has emphasized that it was the colonial policies, and above all the language policy the colonial state had adopted in the region, which were mostly responsible for the established dominance of Urdu literary and print culture in Punjab. See Mir, Farina. *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010, pp. 27-61, pp. 27-61.

⁸⁵⁷ *Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1874-75 and 1875-76*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1877, p. 153.

⁸⁵⁸ *Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the Year 1899-1900*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1901, p. CCXCIV.

⁸⁵⁹ His diary recorded every detail of the printing process and the delivery of the first Entrance Course in Assamese in 1905. On the other hand, Hemchandra Goswami and Chandrakumar Agarwala publicly expressed their gratitude for his supervising the printing works of their books in Calcutta. Hemchandra wrote that it was

through commercial advertisements tried to convince the Assamese publicists about their quality works, availability of the all Assamese letters, experiences of printing in Assamese, and of cheaper rate.⁸⁶⁰ It was in such a situation, in 1922, Chandrakumar Agarwala's New Press founded in Guwahati in an advertisement, highlighted itself as an *Asamiya* press, which the advertisement claimed, was a signal of the end of the "autocracy" of the Calcutta-based Bengali presses.⁸⁶¹

Lakshminath who had checked the proof copy of his poetry book. See "*Granthakarar Suchana*" in Goswami, Hemchandra. *Phular Chaki*. Tezpur, 1907.

⁸⁶⁰ For example, an advertisement published in the *Jonaki* of the Vedayantra, of Sitaram Ghosh Street, Calcutta claimed all these merits for it. In the same issue, another advertisement of the Kolikata Printing Works, of Cornwallis Street, claimed that they always carefully printed Assamese works, and projected the *Jonaki* itself as an example of their quality publication. *Jonaki, Natun Khanda*, Volume 3, Ahin/Kati, 1826 Saka (1904) in Saikia, Nagen, ed. *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001.

⁸⁶¹ *Banhi*, Volume 12, Issue 12, 1922. The advertisement published at the top in the right-hand corner of the title page, claimed that one need not go to 'bidesh' for quality printing at a cheaper rate. It seems, the advertisement tried to exploit the growing Assamese sentiment of the people for the purpose of the business of the press.

Table [5].1

**Annual Statement showing the printing Presses of the Brahmaputra Valley districts in
1925⁸⁶²**

District	Press Name
Goalpara	1.Vijaya Printing Press
Kamrup	1.New Press, Guwahati 2.Aruna Press, Guwahati 3.Bhavani Press, Guwahati 4.Bandhav Press, Nalbari
Durrang	Assam Central Press, Tezpur
Nowgong	1. Surya Press 2. Dayal Press
Sibsagar	1. Assam Press, Jorhat 2. Assam Printing Works, Jorhat 3. Darpan Press, Jorhat 4. Dutta Press, Jorhat 5. Assam Company Press, Jorhat
Dibrugarh	1. Times of Assam Press 2. Assam Commercial Press 3. Assam Railway and Trading Company Press

⁸⁶² “Annual Statement on Printing Presses in Assam Valley Division in 1924-25”, File No. XI-88 of 1925, General Department, 1925, Assam State Archives.

Formation of a Reading Public

Lack of reading public constantly remained a serious concern of the literary elite of Assam. It becomes an obstacle both for growth of a printing industry, and consolidation of a public sphere.⁸⁶³ In 1889, founding the *Jonaki*, mainly depending on the subscription of the readers, and donation from a few sympathizers, the members of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, had to suffer from the shortage of readership. The editor of the magazine was selected annually in a democratic process. Lakshminath edited the periodical consecutively for two years, in 1891 and 1892. Frequent notices published in the periodical show that its annual subscription of Rs One became hardly manageable to get in time. Appeal to the readers for their money was a regular phenomenon. Ultimately it became irregular, and had to be published as bi-monthly, clubbing two issues. In 1898, the *Jonaki* disappeared, producing a total void for the Assamese periodicals. Lakshminath expressed his anguish over its extinction, and wrote in a letter to Hemchandra Goswami, that aside from the annual subscribers, even the life-long patrons also stopped to send money, and under such a situation, *Jonaki*, the little thing would soon to meet its fatal end.⁸⁶⁴

It is only in 1900, *Assam Banti*, the first newspaper in Assamese was founded at Tezpur, a small town of the north bank of the Brahmaputra valley, followed by reappearance of the *Jonaki* from Guwahati in 1901. The new *Jonaki*, published from Guwahati introduced a new category of *jivanraksak sabhya*, who, it was expected, would rescue the magazine at the financially

⁸⁶³ By the 1870s, there were two Assamese periodicals, dealing mostly with religious content and with circulation of less than 500, which were read only by “the higher classes of Assamese.” In the mid-1880s two other periodicals appeared, but both were very short-lived. A. C. Campbell’s note on 21 May 1873, File No. 59, Jorhat D. C. Files (Judicial), Assam State Archive.

⁸⁶⁴ Letter of Lakshminath to Hemchandra Goswami on 21 April, 1894 from Calcutta in Goswami, Hemchandra. *Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*. Edited by Benudhar Sharma. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1972, p. 560.

critical moment. The secretary of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* of Guwahati however stated that the way was not an effective one.⁸⁶⁵ At times, the literary bodies or editors had no way but to collect donations or seek patronage from the wealthy persons. During 1905, Padmanath Gohain Borooah, another contemporary writer to Lakshminath extensively travelled to collect donations for the *Assam Banti*, not only in Assam but also to Calcutta. Lakshminath, then struggling in Howrah and Calcutta for being established in timber business, although was not directly involved with the new *Jonaki* or the *Assam Banti*, helped them both with donations.⁸⁶⁶ It was in such a situation, Saratchandra Goswami, a contemporary of Lakshminath appealed to the *satradhikars*, *zamindars* and the handful of rich persons in Assam to come forward to assist in printing books or periodicals.⁸⁶⁷ Lakshminath, on the other hand, always hoped that where there was no way, determination and will would make one. Throughout his life, he emphasized the role of the inner freedom of mind, which might strengthen one to proceed through adverse situations. However, the same unpropitious situation for the Assamese periodicals prevailed until the 1930s.

⁸⁶⁵ Sharma, Nila Nath. “*Jonakir Karyya Bivaranī*”, *Jonaki*, Natun Khanda, Volume 3, Ahin & Kati, 1826 Saka, 1904 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*, 2001, p. 1311.

⁸⁶⁶ *Assam Bandhav*, another magazine of the period, opened a contributory fund, and published the name of the donors in the magazine.

⁸⁶⁷ Goswami, Saratchandra. “*Amar Sahityar Abhav*”, *Usha*, Volume 1, Issue 10, 1906 in Tamuly, Lakshminath, ed. *Usha Collection*. Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 2005, pp. 244-247.

Table [5].2

Journals and newspapers published in Assam during the year 1924-25⁸⁶⁸

District	Number of Press	Number of Newspapers Published	Number of Periodicals published	Name of Periodicals/ Newspapers
Garo Hills	1	Nil	1	
Goalpara	2	Nil	1	
Kamrup	4	Nil	7	1. Chetana 2. Bahi 3. Milan 4. Cotton College Magazine 5. Economical Journal of Assam 6. Sadhana 7. Illegible
Durrang	1	1	Nil	Assam Banti
Nowgong	2	Nil	Nil	
Sibsagar	6	Nil	2	1. Aryya Darpan 2. Dipti
Lakhimpur	9	1	Nil	Asamiya

⁸⁶⁸ Statement on numbers of Newspapers and Periodicals published in the Assam Valley Division in 1924-25, File No. XL-88 of 1925, General Department, 1925, Assam State Archives.

Fate of Assamese book publishing did not differ from the periodicals a lot. The religious and puranic books already possessed a large readership, which was now tried to be exploited by a few emerging commercial publishers like Sibnath Bhattacharyee, Haribilas Gupta (Agarwala) etc. It was an indication of a shift of the religious readership from reading manuscripts to printed materials.⁸⁶⁹ B. C. Allen, the superintendent of the Census of Assam in 1901 noticed no “marked tendency” towards the “revival of vernacular literature of Assam”.⁸⁷⁰ During the entire decade of 1890 to 1901, the number of books published in Assamese was 217, and most of them were of “educational character and published by and under the auspices of the missionaries”.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁹ The colonial government’s record had shown that 1000 copies of Sankardeva’s *Gunamala* and 500 copies of the second edition of *Sri Sri Sankardevar Baikuntha Prayan* by Daityari Thakur, both published from Barpeta by Chandicharan Chatterjee were printed in 1895. Considering the circulation of barely 500 copies of any periodicals in the period or number of copies printed of any book of original writing by any author of the period, it was a quite significant number. Circulation of school textbooks was much more than that. For instance, 1000 copies of Padmanath Sharma’s *Padyamala* were printed at a time. “Assam Library Catalogue of Books registered for the quarter ending in the 31 March, 1896”, from J. Wilson, Registrar of Books and Director of Public Instruction, Assam in *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department: Report on Publications Issued and Registered in the Several Provinces of British India During the Year 1896, No. CCCLII, Serial No. 21*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1898, p. 107.

⁸⁷⁰ Allen, *Census of India, 1901. Vol. IV: Assam. Part I*, 1902, p. 92. James Long’s “Catalogue of the Bengali works” had shown, in 1857, 6,00,000 Bengali books were published for sale, excluding a large number of books published by wealthy Bengali with gratuitous purpose, and a large number of tracts, leaflets etc. The statistics give us a clear picture of the uneven development of book culture in India. See “Returns relating to Publications in the Bengali Language in 1857, to Whom is Added a List of Native Presses Submitted” In Long, J. *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No. XXXII*. Calcutta: General Printing Department, 1859, p. i.

⁸⁷¹ Allen, *Census of India, 1901. Vol. IV: Assam. Part I*, 1902, p. 92. In 1906 a catalogue of Assamese printed books preserved in the library of India office was prepared by J. F. Blumhardt, which listed 108 numbers of books including different editions of the same book. Most of the books were sanctioned textbooks. Blumhardt, J. F. *Catalogue of the Library of the India Office, Vol. II, Part IV: Bengali, Oriya, and the Assamese Books*. London: The King’s Most Excellent Majesty, 1905, pp. 345-350.

Table [5].3

Number of Assamese books registered in Assam during the decade of 1891 to 1900⁸⁷²

1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
1	1	0	0	4	2	6	31	25	16

Table [5].4

Number of Assamese books registered in Assam during the decade of 1900 to 1910⁸⁷³

1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
7	20	1	16	17	10	13	-	32	20

Publishing and Popularizing Books

While trying to be established in the timber business, Lakshminath, like some other writers of contemporary India, concentrated on publishing books.⁸⁷⁴ In 1901, he published his own book *Litikai*, followed by another in 1904.⁸⁷⁵ According to his diary 250 copies of *Litikai* were printed at a time. In fact, before entering the print world as a publisher, Lakshminath had

⁸⁷² Allen, *Census of India, 1901. Vol. IV: Assam. Part I*, 1902, p. 96.

⁸⁷³ McSwiney, J. *Census of India, 1911, Vol. III: Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press Printing, 1912 p. 95.

⁸⁷⁴ In 1847, inspired by the potentiality of the educational book trade, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar opened a shop named Sanskrit Press Depository. Fakir Mohan Senapati of Orissa has recalled in his autobiography, how he, with a few local elites, intended to establish a press company at Balasore, how they collected money, acquired technological knowledge on printing machines, and ultimately became successful in the venture. See Senapati, Fakir Mohan. *Atmacharit*. Translated by Maitri Shukla. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2009, pp. 58-77.

⁸⁷⁵ According to a bibliography, *Litikai* appeared as a book in 1894, though no further information regarding the publication was provided. See "A Bibliography: Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1868-1938)." *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi) Volume 11, no. 3 (July-September 1968): 43-46, p. 43. In 1904, *Kakatar Topola*, a collection of humorous portrayals of contemporary society, was published by him.

already earned some experiences on publishing through his involvements in editing the *Jonaki* and assisting and supervising the printing works for others.

Lakshminath's diary can give us some insights regarding the various stages of the printing process of a book, through which a publisher had to go, until it entered the market as a saleable commodity. In 1896, he was involved in printing of the book *Amis-O-Niramis*, written by Prajnasundari in Bengali, for which he had done everything, from purchasing papers to advertising in the newspapers and delivering to the sellers.⁸⁷⁶ Gradually he began to publish his own books, which were distributed mostly by the Assam Bengal Stores at Lal Bazar Street of Calcutta. The store, though managed by his younger brother Harinath, was Lakshminath's own initiative to run a grocery shop, which also functioned as a book-distributing agency.⁸⁷⁷ The Stores eventually functioned as the office of the *Banhi*, Lakshminath's chief organ as a publicist. Facilitated with the services of the Indian Postal Department, the Stores sent the books and the periodical by parcel to the customers and the distributors in Assam. The advertisement published in the periodicals of the time shows that the Stores distributed almost all books of the contemporary authors in Assamese. Later, it was through Lakshminath's Timber & Store Agency at Canning Street, his books were marketed. Lakshminath, being well experienced with keeping the account, neatly recorded in his diaries the accounts of the books

⁸⁷⁶ The diary shows he purchased 3 reams of double crown 28 lbs paper at the rate of Rs 5/7/6 per ream and gave them to the Samaj Press of Calcutta. He made the necessary corrections of the proof-copy. The book was advertised in the Indian Mirror for two weeks, three days for every week. The advertisement was published on 22 April of 1896 with a notice or the editorial note on the book, which was prepared by Lakshminath. The diary of 1900 recorded his receiving of 100 bounded copies of the same book from the Foundry and distributing to various sellers of Calcutta at 15 percent commission.

⁸⁷⁷ The store advertised itself in the *Banhi* as sole '*Asamiya Dokan*', a single grocery shop owned by an Assamese in Calcutta. *Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 6, 1913. Perhaps, it was an attempt to exploit the nationalistic sentiment of the people for attaining his commercial goal.

as publisher with the Assam-Bengal Stores, as distributing agency.⁸⁷⁸ As reflected in such accounts, in most cases, only 100 copies of a book were published at one time. Then, depending on the readers' responses, additional copies came out from time to time. *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, one of the most popular collections of folktales by Lakshminath, was printed initially in 100 copies, of which, within a month 70 copies were sold.⁸⁷⁹ After being recognized by Calcutta University for B. A. courses, Lakshminath's biography of Sankardeva aroused expectation of higher circulation, and 500 copies of a single edition were printed.⁸⁸⁰

Till 1915, Lakshminath published books on a wide variety of genres like farce, historical plays, novel, short story collection, biography, collection of poetry, humorous essays, collection of folktales and such. These were assessed as substantial contributions of an author towards the flourishing of a rising vernacular literature like Assamese, though they brought little expectation of getting any profit to the publisher. The idea of a professional writer was almost inconceivable, but a certain degree of fame and respect for an author was not beyond expectation. In the Preface of a historical play, Lakshminath wrote that he did not publish the book to earn fame, but to inform the readers about the past glory of Assam; though fame also was not to be ignored.⁸⁸¹ Two years back, in the preface of *Kadamkali*, a collection of his poetry, he expressed his expectations in an abashed tone, and stated that the book was published

⁸⁷⁸ Diary of 8 October, 1911 recorded the account of the book "*Kakatar Topola*", which shows that the store at the first phase took 200 copies of books, of which only 8 copies remained unsold. It paid Lakshminath Rs110-12-12/- excluding the commission till 29 November, 1912. The store was given another 100 copies then. *Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Diaries*, Digital Archive, Centre for Assamese Studies, Tezpur University (Henceforth, *Diaries*, Tezpur University)

⁸⁷⁹ See diary entry on 29 January, 1912, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

⁸⁸⁰ Jatindranath Dowera's letter to Lakshminath on 27 June, 1924 from Calcutta in Neog, Maheswar, ed. *Patralekha*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1968, pp. 252-255.

⁸⁸¹ See "*Patani*" in Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Chakradhaj Singha*. Kalikata: Author, 1915 (1837 Saka).

only for preservation of his poems; while it was left entirely to the readers whether they would show their favour to the poems or not.⁸⁸²

In Assam, printing had to emerge to be a sanguine business. Chandrakumar Agarwala, already founding a press with modern equipment, wrote in 1920 that government works alone could keep the hands engaged.⁸⁸³ He, earlier, intending to publish a collection of his poetry in Calcutta, wrote to Lakshminath, “I am sending you my *Pratima* and leave her at your mercy. I am penniless, you know.” He guaranteed Lakshminath that repayment of the credit would be possible only after one year.⁸⁸⁴ On the other hand, by the 1870s, apart from teaching and other jobs, textbook writing had become a good profession for an enlightened section in Bengali. According to an official report of the early 1870s, the Bengali books were published in large editions, and at the responsibility of the author, without any inducement from the government. One Bengali primer had more than 1,00,000 copies in a single edition, more than a dozen had 10,000 or more copies, and the number of books with 5000 copies in a single edition was numerous.⁸⁸⁵

In such an inimical situation, writing and publishing in Assamese was not easy to carry on for long. Neither did Lakshminath come from a financial background, as affluent as to write and publish books for fancy or only for fame. Instead, in a metropolis, far away from home, he had

⁸⁸² Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Kadamkali*, Author, Kalikata, 1913 (1835 Saka). Chandrakumar, Lakshminath's friend, immediately appreciated the poems in a letter as '*very genuine poetry*'. Chandrakumar's letter to Lakshminath on 13 October, 1913 from Tamulbari T. E., Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 178-179.

⁸⁸³ Chandrakumar's letter to Lakshminath on 2 June, 1920 from Dibrugarh in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 180-181.

⁸⁸⁴ Chandrakumar's letter to Lakshminath on 9 May, 1909 from Tamulbari in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 176-177.

⁸⁸⁵ *General Report on Public Instruction Bengal for 1871-72 with Appendices*. Calcutta: Calcutta Central Press Company, 1873, p. 82.

to struggle hard to earn substantial income to ascertain a smooth life with his family.⁸⁸⁶ During 1905-1915, the years he wrote and published regularly, he suffered in personal life from financial hardship; but abstained himself neither from writing nor from publishing. Even, as late as in 1930, when as an author, Lakshminath had earned enough public recognition, still he had to write to Jatindranath Dowerah that for him staying and retiring at home to carry on his literary venture meant to push himself to a situation like to observe the *ekadashi upabas*, ritualistic refusal to eat, as done by a Brahman widow even without taking a drop of water.⁸⁸⁷

In the 1920s, focusing on the size of the readership, Lakshminath regretted that though a few books were being produced by the enlightened section, they remained mostly unread.⁸⁸⁸ He pointed out that in a backward province like Assam free and universal compulsory education was the only solution to promote a reading culture, which the colonial government had been unwilling to provide. Lakshminath's emphasis for expansion of free primary education was nothing but reflection of the general demand of the intelligentsia of the time. According to a confidential report prepared on the native-owned English and vernacular newspapers and periodicals of the Eastern Bengal and Assam Province in 1911, the vernacular presses

⁸⁸⁶ Comparison of Lakshminath with Bharatendu Harischandra from Banaras, a contemporary Indian writer, who pioneered Hindi publishing, may give us some necessary insights to understand the situation under which Lakshminath had to carry on his career as a writer and publicist. Belonging to the wealthy merchant class of Banaras, Bharatendu spent an affluent and extravagant regal life. Vasudha Dalmia has shown that Bharatendu's business were banking, jewellery and sale of sundry goods that caught his fancy. A great amount of his wealth went into supporting his literary activities. He was not interested in making money and keeping it for a protected future. It was for excessive spending of his wealth, soon he found himself amidst debt. Dalmia, Vasudha. *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bhāratendu Hariśchandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010, p. 128.

⁸⁸⁷ Lakshminath's letter from Sambalpur to Jatindranath on 10 March, 1930 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 21-23.

⁸⁸⁸ Presidential Speech of the Seventh Annual Session of *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, delivered in December, 1924 in Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*. Edited by Atulchandra Hazarika. Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 1988, pp. 1848-1872.

advocated the free primary education, and argued that it was education which “could drive unrest and discontent out of this country.”⁸⁸⁹

Nationalization of Readership

In absence of a substantial reading public, publishing books or periodicals was a cumbersome task. In 1907, Padmanath Gohainborooah, the editor of the *Usha*, pointed out that if production shaped consumption, equally true was the reverse phenomenon. It is the size and nature of the readership, which ultimately determined the production of books.⁸⁹⁰ He wrote in a personal letter that creating a reading public was the “crying need of the time”, and intending to highlight the matter in *Usha*, Padmanath wanted a series of articles from Lakshminath on the subject.⁸⁹¹ To negotiate with the hurdle, the literary elite of Assam strategically projected writing and reading as *jatiya dayitwa*, national responsibility. The elite’s writing and publishing ventures were marked as great patriotic works. Even reading came to be mentioned as a manifestation of one’s commitment to the nation and its literature. Purchasing a book was called a sacred duty.⁸⁹²

In fact, they knew, if literature was conceived as a prime way of asserting their hegemony in colonial situations, it could be possible through participation of a larger audience only. To attract the readers and make them collaborators of their printing-publishing projects, the literary

⁸⁸⁹ Report on the Native-owned English and Vernacular Newspapers of Eastern Bengal and Assam for the year 1910, Home (Political), August 1911, Assam State Archives, p. 153.

⁸⁹⁰ “*Sampadakar Sarai: Asamiya Pathak Shreni*”, *Usha*, Volume 3, Issue 7, 1907 in Tamuly, *Usha Collection*, pp. 601-602.

⁸⁹¹ Padmanath’s letter to Lakshminath, 24 March, 1909 from Tezpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 210-211.

⁸⁹² Ibid. Mention may be made that in the annual conference of the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan* in 1920, held at Tezpur, an exhibition was organized on the theme of reading culture in Assam. It, drawing upon and displaying extensive statistical data, tried to motivate the youths for reading books and periodicals. See “*Keitaman Bhabibalagiya Katha- Asamiyar Sahityanurag*”, *Banhi*, Volume 12, Issue 11, 1844 Saka, 1922, pp. 345-347.

elite devised various ways, which involved both promotional and prohibitive measures. With the turn of the century, commercial advertisement of books became a part of the periodicals. The advertisements tried in attractive and persuasive language to promote the book-reading culture among the people. Haribilash Gupta of Tezpur in the *Jonaki*, in 1904 published an advertisement of the *Kirtan*, the prime scripture of the Assam Vaishnavism and other religious books focusing on the quality of the paper and binding.⁸⁹³ Lakshminath's journal *Banhi*, in 1913 published several advertisements on books including his own.⁸⁹⁴ Such an advertisement of a novel declared that if purchased by any distributor twenty or more copies of the novel at a lot, the agent's commission would be provided at the rate of twenty percent, instead of the normal rate of fifteen percent.⁸⁹⁵ Similarly, the manager of the New Press informed in an advertisement in the *Banhi* that some books for which they acted as distributor would be sold at a reduced rate to the customers of the *Asamiya* and the *Banhi* periodicals, published from the press. But the number of copies of the same book thus purchased was limited within one, which meant the copy was purchased for the purpose of own reading rather than for sale.⁸⁹⁶

There was a concomitant call of the Assamese literary elite to the educated section to avoid Bengali books. Reading Bengali books, especially the popular ones, was always criticized by the Assamese intelligentsia. In spite of getting inspiration from, and adoration for Bankimchandra, who as a novelist and essayist was taken by them as an ideal, reading his novels was highlighted as harmful. Lakshminath in a portrayal of the contemporary life of

⁸⁹³ "*Kirtan*", *Jonaki*, Natun Khanda, Volume 3, *Ahin aru Kati*, 1904 (1826 Saka).

⁸⁹⁴ *Banhi*, Volume 4, Issue 6, 1913.

⁸⁹⁵ According to a report of the Officiating Director of the Public Instruction, even for school textbooks, the Calcutta School Book Society commissioned its agents at 15 per cent, on the value of sales, including all the cost of packing and conveyance of the books. *General Report on Public Instruction Bengal for 1871-72 with Appendices*, 1873, p. 78.

⁸⁹⁶ "*Aru Eti Subidha Akal Banhir Grahakar Nimitte*" & "*Banhir Dvitiya Yugarambha*", *Banhi*, Volume 12, Issue 12, 1922, p. 386.

Calcutta showed that a boy, after being deceived by his beloved, who was focused as an avid reader of Bankim's novels, committed suicide; although in his early career of writing, he promptly opposed the idea of harmful impact of novel reading in general.⁸⁹⁷ Opposing the translations of Bengali popular novels to Assamese, he commented that reading such translations meant experiencing thrice away from reality, because Bengali novels were imitations of the western works only.

In the 1920s the Assamese intelligentsia began to react heavily on the influences of Bengali theatrical performance including acting, singing and such on the emerging Assamese theatre arts. Though initially it was the Bengali-speaking persons living in the Brahmaputra valley, who initiated performing theatres in western style, and constructing theatre halls in various towns of Assam, soon the intelligentsia identified the Bengali elements as extraneous and alien and tried to make a 'pure' Assamese way of acting and singing. *Satradhikars*, the religious *gurus* of the *Vaishnava satras*, who by convention had to compose one or two plays, were condemned for their imitation of Bengali plays. Plays by the Assamese playwrights were to be staged on various occasions, even during the *Durga puja* festival, though the tradition was initially set out by the Bengali speaking theatre lovers in Assam. Lakshminath's *Joymoti Kuwari* was performed at the Asamiya Theatre of Dibrugarh in June, 1925, followed by *Chakradwaj Singha* staged for the first time in *Sivasagar Natyamandir*. Performing Bengali plays or translations of Bengali plays were tried to avoid. In the early years of the 1930s, the George Sahitya Sabha of Dibrugarh, an eastern town of Assam appealed for boycott of Bengali plays.⁸⁹⁸

⁸⁹⁷ See "Daktar Babur Sadhu" in Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Sadhukathar Kuki*, Howrah, 1910.

⁸⁹⁸ "Sampadakar Chora", *Banhi*, Volume 21, Issue 2, 1854 Saka, 1932, Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part III*. Edited by Jatindranath Goswami. Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 2005, pp. 2569-2570. In the

Extending his support to the call, Lakshminath in 1932, coined a “Buy Assamese” slogan, reiterating to confirm one’s being an Assamese through seeing, hearing and reading Assamese plays, songs and books and periodicals. Efforts were made for independent growth of Assamese performing arts possible, and to cleanse the Bengali elements from it. Lakshminath argued in the *Banhi* that the call of the moment was, *Basudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the whole world in principle to be sidelined for a time being, and stressed that time for everyone was to either be independent, or to lose the struggle.⁸⁹⁹ Justifying the appeal, he argued that as the original “Buy British” slogan formed in Europe had been translated by the Indian nationalists to produce a “Buy Indian” version, similarly the Assamese people could adapt it to articulate an Assamese cause. Apparently, it was an extremist position from the part of the Assamese intelligentsia. Trying to explain the measure through a medical metaphor, Lakshminath wrote that the sickness was too critical to be cured through *Kaviraji* medicine, and the demand of the time was the Allopathic surgery for the most effective and rapid recovery.⁹⁰⁰

In 1929, the Assamese intelligentsia already came forward with a public appeal to boycott Bengali newspapers and periodicals and Lakshminath was in the front. Though he explicitly propagated a moderate political line regarding colonial rule and opposed any extreme activism from the parts of the Indian nationalists throughout his life, in respect of reading Bengali newspapers and periodicals, he took a stubborn stand. He overtly called for a boycott of Calcutta-based newspapers and periodicals. In the 1930 annual session of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* at Sibsagar, where Lakshminath was offered a special ovation, a formal proposal was

editorial column of *Banhi*, Lakshminath advocated the principle of Swadeshi. See “*Sampadakar Chora-Swadeshi*”, *Banhi*, Volume 21, Issue 1, 1932 (1854 Saka), pp. 43-44

⁸⁹⁹ “*Sampadakar Chora*”, *Banhi*, Volume 21, Issue 2, 1932 (1854 Saka) in Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part III*, 2005, pp. 2569-2570.

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid.

passed in favour of the boycott.⁹⁰¹ The editorial column of *Avahan*, a magazine published from Calcutta, identified it as a crucial time for *Asamiya jati* either to resist or to be extinct forever.⁹⁰² The intelligentsia's anxiety over the situation found its culmination in 1936, when it took a step as aggressive as to collectively make bonfires of "anti-Assamese newspapers" based on Calcutta and Sylhet.⁹⁰³

All these were, however, attempts by the Assamese intelligentsia to form an Assamese readership and audience, who will consume their productions. Apart from such measures of imposition of prohibition on the readers, Lakshminath, from the beginning, applied some innovative methods to motivate his readers. He tried to turn the issue of lack of readership to one of readership formation. Hemchandra Goswami argued that it was Bankimchandra in Bengali literature, to successfully adapt the western genre of novel for meeting the expectations of the Bengali public, by providing it an indigenous Bengali character and by that shaped a readership of his own.⁹⁰⁴ Similarly, Lakshminath, with his experience of trading with timber and other commodities, and even as a book-distributor, always wrote with a target audience or reader groups in his mind. Lakshminath significantly differed from his contemporaries of

⁹⁰¹ In Resolution No 10 of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* Annual Conference of 1930 held at Sibsagar, the patriotic Assamese people are requested to come away from any relation to papers like the Sanjibani, Liberty, Janasahakti, Amrit Bazar Patrika etc. The 12th resolution of the same session appealed to the readers to boycott the newspapers and journals of the *bideshi*, foreign languages, and to contribute towards the commercial growth of Assamese papers. See *Avahan*, Volume 3, Issue 3, 1931, pp. 373-374. Prior to that, the A. S. L Club, in a meeting held at the Ashutosh Building of Calcutta resolved in the same spirit to avoid reading Bengali papers. The *Avahan*, a Calcutta-based Assamese periodical, shared the step for boycott, and published an editorial on it proclaiming it as necessary for the interests of the *jati*. See *Avahan*, Volume 3, Issue 2, 1931, pp. 249-251.

⁹⁰² "Sampadakiya", *Avahan*, Volume 3, Issue 3, 1931, p. 368.

⁹⁰³ "Bonfires of Newspapers, Assam's Drive Against Unsympathetic Journals", *Bombay Chronicle*, Bombay, 6 January, 1936, p. 9.

⁹⁰⁴ "Sahitya Sabhar Sabhapatir Bhasan", 1920 in Goswami, *Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*, 1972, pp. 143-166.

Assam in his attitude to the literary audience of his times.⁹⁰⁵ To enlarge the readership, he always advocated the policy of making it popular. In an editorial in the *Banhi*, he declared that to blame the readership was not a solution; it was the duty of the editors and writers to produce according to the choices and demands of the readers.⁹⁰⁶ It was the same intention of making popular, which inspired him to cherish the mundane language of the people in crafting his literary prose, because he felt that too much Sanskritization would cut its root from the living speech practices of the people.⁹⁰⁷

He, as a publicist, knew it better than others that a book in the market was not only an object of knowledge, but a commodity to be sold. So, writing on Sankardeva, the Vaishnava preacher of Assam in the early twentieth century as part of a contemporary debate, and trying to establish Sankardeva as a great literary figure and social reformer, Lakshminath planned it for the liberally educated modern readers. But two years later, writing another book on the same subject, what he produced was a mixture of western historical biographical account of factual details with traditional hagiographic account of the saint. With the intention of giving the book a more popular character and appealing to the readers irrespective of their social or intellectual background, supernatural or irrational parts of the saint's life were also not erased.⁹⁰⁸

⁹⁰⁵ In his attempt to differentiate Bengali reading choices from Assamese, Hemchandra Goswami tried to essentialize the difference by tracing it in the psychology of readers. “*Sahitya Sabhar Sabhapatir Bhasan*”, 1920 in Goswami, *Pundit Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*, 1972, pp. 143-166.

⁹⁰⁶ *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 1909 (1831 Saka)

⁹⁰⁷ Presidential Speech of the Seventh Annual Session of *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, delivered in December, 1924 in Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*, 1988, pp. 1848-1872.

⁹⁰⁸ See “*Patani*” in Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Mahapurush Sri Sankardeva aru Sri Madhavdeva*. Gauhati: Sahitya Prakash, 1963 (First published in 1914), pp. 0.2-0.9.

Historicizing Asamiya Sahitya

Print enabled not only a relatively easy access to a *dharmaputhi*, but also transformed the perception of it at large, by renaming it as literature or *sahitya*. The transformation of the physical appearance of a book from a *sanchipatiya puthi* to a *chepa* or *chapa kitap*, was not only suggestive of a change in reception of books, but also provided an opportunity to conceive them as part of a literature. As an outcome, *dharmaputhi* of different origins, *mantra puthi*, *buranji*, *malita*, *aainam*, *bihugeet*, *puran*, books on practical knowledge, even *puthi* of *kaitheli anka* or *ganana*, used for counting, all came to be envisaged as part of the *Asamiya Sahitya* or Assamese literature. Thus, the wide range of compositions of the medieval period was covered under a single term, so that Assamese could be provided with an enriched literary past to celebrate. By that time literary study emerged in the educational curriculum of India, and within the first quarter of the twentieth century Assamese was recognized by the Calcutta University for its Entrance, F. A., B. A., and M. A. courses, which essentially produced impetus to study Assamese literature in historical perspectives.⁹⁰⁹

Writing literary history in Indian languages was an outstanding task from the part of the intelligentsia in colonial India, who had begun to rethink their regional literary pasts. Exploring the unexplored and “lost” literary works and authors, such histories, for the first time unearthed

⁹⁰⁹ Though the historical study of Assamese language and literature dates back to the late nineteenth century, the first book on the history of Assamese literature was published in 1912, compiled by Devendranath Bezbaroa, son of Gobinda Bezbaroa, Lakshminath’s elder brother. Commenting on the book Satyanath Borah commented that the book had incorporated the findings of research already done by others in the field. See Letter of Satyanath Borah, No Nil, dated 18 March, 1913 to the Secretary of Assam Text Book Committee in Bezbaroa, Devendranth. *Asamiya Bhasa aru Sahityar Buranji*. Second Edition. Jorhat: Author, 1933. The Text Book Committee requested through a resolution, to the Director of Public Instruction to recommend the book to Calcutta University for Matriculation, Intermediate and B. A. Courses. See Minutes of the Meeting of the Assam Text Book Committee held at Jorhat on Saturday the 24 August 1912, *ibid*.

to the audience the richness of the literary antiquity a vernacular might possess.⁹¹⁰ As early as in 1855, it was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, who in a pamphlet entitled “A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education in Assam”, published from the American Baptist Mission Press of Sibsagar, included a list of manuscripts in Assamese. It consisted of 65 religious and puranic works, and 42 plays, in addition to a vast body of books on history and other topics like medicine and arithmetic.⁹¹¹ Here the author claimed literary heritage as crucial to separate identity claims of the Assamese people. After long being undermined, in 1894, Anandaram’s historic pamphlet was extensively quoted by George Abraham Grierson. He, in the *Indian Antiquary*, a journal of Oriental research, published an article on Assamese Literature, and frankly recognized its importance.⁹¹² He even chose to reproduce partly in full, from that “fugitive pamphlet long out of print”, through which “a Native” defended Assamese as a separate language.⁹¹³ Earlier, when Grierson had published his “The Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan”, which explicitly indicated a shift in the attitude of the European Indologists preoccupied with the classical past to the modern Indian vernacular literature, he

⁹¹⁰ Rabindranath voiced this dimension of writing literary history of vernaculars. He, in his lecture on “*Bangla Jatiya Sahitya*”, remarked that when the first edition of “*Bangla Bhasa O Sahitya*” by Dinesh Chandra Sen was published, they astonishingly found that there was such a big business called the antiquity of Bangla literature. See “*Bangla Jatiya Sahitya*” in Tagore, Rabindranath. *Sahitya*. 1908 (1314 Bangabda), p. 136.

⁹¹¹ Phukan, Anandaram Dhekial. *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education of Assam*, American Baptist Mission Press. Sibsagar: American Baptist Mission Press, 1855.

⁹¹² Grierson, G. A. *Indian Antiquary: A Journal of Oriental Research* Vol. XXV (March 1896): 57-61.

⁹¹³ Grierson wrote, “So little is known about Assamese literature that I make no apology for giving the following second hand and somewhat antiquated information. It deserves better preservation than that afforded by a fugitive pamphlet long out of print.” Then added, “... at the present day, the most valuable portion of the pamphlet, I give it here in full.” Ibid.

did not discuss Punjab and the lower part of Bengal or Assam within it.⁹¹⁴ Later it was Edward Gait, who drew his attention to the pamphlet.⁹¹⁵

Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia have pointed out that after initial attempts to make chronologically arranged listings of literary works, in India, a modern literary-historical sensibility developed only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as part of the new articulations of the nationhood.⁹¹⁶ The new sensibility exhibited gradual movement from merely recording the past to rewriting it within a wider public debate about national origins, linguistic identities and political entitlements.⁹¹⁷ The intelligentsia, with the newly acquired historical sensibility, tried to form a historical trajectory of the vernacular literature. It was a period, when the Indian intelligentsia tried to recall and rewrite the past as a determining factor of the present. Past was imagined as a living tradition. The individual authors and literary works were posited as part of the same literary tradition, and they were tried to be appropriated to serve the contemporary need of forming a distinctive identity around literature.⁹¹⁸

⁹¹⁴ See "Preface" in *The Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan*. Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1889 pp. vii-xi.

⁹¹⁵ It had obviously made some influences on Grierson's attitude towards Assamese because he soon was to publish his formidable works on Indian languages, *Linguistic Survey of India*.

⁹¹⁶ Emergence of literary history in Europe had been linked with an intellectual shift that took place in the eighteenth century as part of a new sensibility born out of the Enlightenment. A belief was pervaded that literature was the store house, living patrimony of the past. Blackburn and Dalmia argue that Indian attempts to produce literary historiography could be best understandable alongside the similar and concurrent attempts to recover past in some other fields like writing of historical novels, institutionalization of archaeology, anthropology and folklore, all of which were developed in concert with new articulation of nationhood. See Blackburn, Stuart, and Vasudha Dalmia. "Introduction." In *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*, by Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008, p. 1.

⁹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 2.

⁹¹⁸ Lisa Mitchel has argued that in the early modern era language neither marked poets nor made claims upon them as exclusively 'Telugu', 'Tamil', 'Sanskrit' or other linguistically defined poets. See Mitchel, Lisa. *Language, Emotion and Politics in South India: Making a Subject of Language*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 72.

It was the growing consciousness of the literary elite of Assam of the time towards literature as identity of a people that in 1872 they took initiative to found the Assamese Literary Society at Sibsagar, just before the government recognition of Assamese as medium of instruction in the schools of the Brahmaputra valley except then Goalpara district.⁹¹⁹ With the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* and the Assamese Students' Literary Club formed at Calcutta, its descendents marked a distinct departure from earlier literary and scientific societies of Assam. While earlier societies were formed for dissemination of western knowledge including improvement of knowledge of English, and propagating public good and such, both of the latter initiated a new phase.⁹²⁰

After Anandaram, the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* came with consistent and continuous effort to bring forward a linguistic-literary agenda, which it carried in the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁹²¹ Focusing on literature as the prime location of *jatiya unnati*, the Sabha in the late nineteenth century undertook the project of preparing a catalogue of Assamese manuscripts and books, which became instrumental for founding an independent

⁹¹⁹ It was the first organization of the Brahmaputra valley, which bore the word 'literary' or *sahitya*, in its nomenclature.

⁹²⁰ The Assam Administrative Report of 1875 reported three 'scientific and literary societies' in Assam, which worked with the goal of promotion of public good and diffusion of primary education or knowledge. The societies formed and registered in the 1870s have been discussed in chapter one. *Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1874-75 and 1875-76*, 1877, p. cc.

⁹²¹ Within the fifth and sixth year, the Sabha respectively held two and twelve sittings of the *ghai sabha* with the average presence of 20 and 13 members. "*Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabhar Karyabibaran- Pancham-Saptam Bachar*", *Jonaki*, Volume 5, Issue 7 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*, 2001, pp. 660-663. In the ninth year, the Sabha held 12 sittings and 3 executive meetings, whereas in the previous year, it held eight. The presence in the sittings was at the average of 19 excluding some audience from outside. "*Kalikata Asamiya Bhasa Unnati sadhini Sabhar Karyibibaran-Navam Bachar*", *Jonaki*, Volume 7, Issue 4, Ibid, pp. 822-823.

literary culture in Assamese.⁹²² The catalogue, published in 1895, and compiled by Ramakanta Barkakati and Kanaklal Borooah, covered 731 numbers of entries.⁹²³ The editors proclaimed in the preface that more than ten times manuscripts than listed remained scattered being unexplored in the *satras* and temples of Assam, leaving a large number already destroyed due to the historical turmoil and natural calamities. The catalogue was published by the donation of some Assamese gentlemen and students mostly living in Calcutta and sent by post to the readers at their request in gratis or at any price that was offered voluntarily as the cost of printing.⁹²⁴

Cataloguing manuscripts was a step towards forming a lineage for an emerging literature in Assamese.⁹²⁵ In Assamese, though no scholarly effort to write a full-fledged history was visible for quite a time, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Hemchandra Goswami tried to provide an overview of the history of Assamese literature.⁹²⁶ In 1890, Hemchandra delivered

⁹²² In a speech delivered in the second annual session of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, in 1890, Hemchandra Goswami proclaimed that the improvement of national literature was homologous to the improvement of the *jati*, nation. Sankardeva, with his ingenious mental capability, knew well that there was no way to recover the fallen *jati*, but through the flourishing of *sahitya*. *Jonaki*, Volume 3, Issue 3 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*, 2001, pp. 282-285.

⁹²³ Kakati, Ramakanta, and Kanak Lal Barooah, “*Asamiya Puthir Talika & Kabalagiya Katha*”, *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 3 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*, 2001, pp. 694-695.

⁹²⁴ Ibid.

⁹²⁵ A few years later, Hemchandra Goswami, then officiating as a sub-deputy collector in Assam, convinced the colonial government to support a project of collection of manuscripts scattered all over Assam, and preparing a catalogue, which in his life-time was never published. Though the cataloguing project was left incomplete, a detailed and full-length study of the history of Assamese literature, with periodization, assessment of individual contributions and attributes etc. were published in eight volumes by the Calcutta University in 1923, with a fund provided by B. Borooah. The voluminous anthology, named as ‘*Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki*’, contained extracts of selected Assamese texts through ages.

⁹²⁶ In 1912, Debendranath bezbaroa, a nephew of Lakshminath had compiled a book entitled “*Asamiya Bhasa Aru Sahityar Buranji*”, which got recognition from the Assam Text Book Committee, and was suggested to the Director of Public Instruction in Assam to recommend for the Matriculation, Intermediate and B. A. examinations. F. W. Sudmersen, the Secretary of the Assam Valley Text Book Committee reported that the book had ‘*broken*

a public speech in the second annual meeting of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* on the topic of *Asamiya Bhasa*, which made the first distinctive attempt to historicize Assamese literature, in which the trajectory of Assamese language and literature was divided into three distinct ages, from the origin of the Assamese language to the birth of Sankardeva, since the time of Sankardeva to the possession of Assam by the British, and since the British-possession of Assam to the present.⁹²⁷ Thus it roughly covered a history of a millennium, from the eleventh to twentieth century. Hemchandra postulated a trajectory of Assamese literature from the preliminary “dark age” to the present. A person of collector’s instinct, his emphasis was on the trace of the past. So, he interpreted darkness in a literal sense, as lack of documentary or literary evidence of the times. Subsequently preparing a voluminous anthology of Assamese literature for the Calcutta University in the 1920s, he elaborately dealt with classification and systematization of literary works.⁹²⁸ Being a part of an academic project, the anthology tended to show its emphasis on three arenas-periodization, evaluation, and analysis of literary works. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Lakshminath, on the other hand, mainly concentrated on the philological aspects of Assamese to safeguard the claims of the Assamese

new ground’ and had ‘marked an advance in the study of the Assamese Language’. Minutes of the meeting of the Assam Text book Committee held at Jorhat on Saturday the 24th August of 1912 in See Bezbaroa, Devendranth. *Asamiya Bhasa aru Sahityar Buranji*, 1933.

⁹²⁷ “*Asamiya Bhasa*”, speech delivered in the second anniversary of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* and later published in the *Jonaki*. A few years later, Lakshminath also delivered a series of lecture under the same rubric but emphasizes were given on issues raised by contemporary debates in the Bengali print arena regarding separatist claims of the Assamese language and literature from Bengali and addressed the issues of linguistic identity.

⁹²⁸ In 1918, the Calcutta University, with the objects of including Indian vernaculars as subjects for the Degree of Master of Arts, sanctioned a scheme for the preparation of a series of volumes of typical selections from all vernacular literatures from the earliest stage of their development to the modern times. Hemchandra’s multi-volume *Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki* was an outcome of the scheme.

language.⁹²⁹ His main concern in the period was to present a biographical account of the Assamese language. As part of the language debate, he tried to claim a glorious tradition of literature, and argued that to produce a poet as great as Sankardeva, Assamese literature must have possessed a far richer poetic tradition prior to Sankardeva.⁹³⁰ Focusing on literature in historical perspective, together with Hemchandra he intended to establish ancient Assam's ethnological and linguistic-cultural unity with the Aryan India, and both celebrated the glories of the ancient texts. Lakshminath cherished a will to write a literary history of Assamese in a far wider historical canvas. As a prologue to this future-plan, he proposed to divide the history of Assam into seven different ages, which had been covered since the time of the battle of Kurukshetra to the early twentieth century.⁹³¹ The division clearly showed not only his attempt to relate Assam's history with the Aryan India, largely on the basis of the epic and puranic sources, but also the effort to highlight the Assamese past, mostly a literary-cultural past.

However, his plan to write a full-length literary history never was realized. In 1924, in the Presidential address of the annual session of *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, Lakshminath came back to the theme, and presented a far more practical division of ages of the literary history, which in effect was a slightly altered version of the division already discussed by Hemchandra in 1890.

⁹²⁹ "Asamiya Bhasa", a series of speeches he delivered since 1895 in the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* and later published in the *Jonaki*. See Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. "Asamiya Bhasa: Part 1 & 2." *Asamiya Bhasa aru Sahitya*. Edited by Atulchandra Hazarika. Guwahati: New Book Stall, 1968, pp. 75-162. In 1924, he reiterated the need of two histories of Assamese language and literature—one from the philological and other from the historical perspectives. See Lecture Delivered from the Presidential Chair of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* in 1924 in Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*, 1988, pp. 1848-1872.

⁹³⁰ "Purani Asamar Jilingani", *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 6, 1910 (1832 Saka), Goswami, *Banhi: Part I*, 2001, pp. 167-179.

⁹³¹ "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issues 2, 1910 in Goswami, *Banhi: Part I*, 2001, pp. 37-55; "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 3, 1910 in Goswami, *Banhi: Part I*, 2001, pp. 86-107; "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 4, 1910, Ibid, pp. 127-133; "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 5, 1910, Ibid, pp. 174-181; "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 6, 1911, (1833 Saka), Ibid, pp. 223-236.

Here he encapsulated the whole history of Assamese literature into the Pre-Vaishnavite, Vaishnavite and Present age. Positing Sankardeva as a milestone, Lakshminath attributed to the *Vaishnavi* or *Sankari* age the status of renaissance or *nava jagaran* era of Assam, from which the ensuing present age was depicted as degradation, titled as a dark period.⁹³²Elaborating his point, he focused on the varied growth of Assamese literature in the time of Sankardeva, while comparing the literary efforts of the period with constructing a beehive by bees, extracting elements from, and enriched by a variety of sources. He particularly pointed out the emergence of prose literature in the period as a positive sign of growth. Lakshminath situated the last years of pre-colonial Ahom regime in Assam as a time of anxiety, political unrest being the chief determinant of decadence in literature. He depicted the arrival of British as the end of anarchy and restorer of peace and order, still showing ambivalence in terms of the challenges closely related with the colonial rule as inimical for Assamese literature.⁹³³

A significant aspect of Lakshminath's historical vision is his eagerness to see the Indian *nava jagaran* as contemporaneous to the European Renaissance, which he explained in terms of the unfolding of the same Aryan mind all over Europe and India. Though like European Indologists, Lakshminath perceived the Renaissance as the universal progression or the world-historical development of the Aryan mind, then suspended it by positing binaries of the material and this-worldly versus the spiritual or the other-worldly, later being projected as the characteristic of the Indian mind. In the similar line of arguments, he emphasized on the awakening of an Aryan Hindu mind through the synchronous development of the *bhakti*

⁹³² In 1880, Bankim also used the European Renaissance analogy to the religious, philosophical, and literary developments of the 15th and 16th century Bengal, instead of the contemporary world. Sarkar, Sumit. *Writing Social History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 199.

⁹³³ Presidential Speech of the Seventh Annual Session of *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, delivered in December, 1924, in Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part II*, 1988, pp. 1848-1872.

movement throughout different regions and vernaculars of India, of which Sankardeva represented a particular regional variant developed in Assam. He conceptualized Indian Renaissance, like its German predecessor, more as a Reformation of religion than in advancement of scientific spirit and advent of new humanistic approaches to the world. He argued that being dominated by the religious bent of thinking Hindu mind of India explored the inner spiritual being, whereas the western mind of Europe delved into the outer material world.⁹³⁴

Coming to the contemporary time of the literary-cultural universe, Lakshminath saw a fall from an earlier potent time to the darkness of the present, equally insisting on redemption through persistent and sincere self-industry of the community. The dual themes of past glory and present decline were featured in most of the writings of the time of India with a concern for national regeneration and progress. Lakshminath's "present" age was not "dark", but an ambiguous time, which was characterized not only by presence of traces of the celebrated past but also by the displacement of Assamese from its rightful place, the advent of European languages and ideas, introductions of new genres like novel and periodical, coming of print and such. Availability of tools and technology was greeted because he saw in them the power of regeneration. For the generation of Lakshminath, print was not merely an instrument, but it introduced the revolutionary idea of general accessibility to knowledge.

⁹³⁴ "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issues 2, 1910 in Goswami, *Banhi: Part I*, 2001, pp. 86-107, pp. 37-55; "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 3, 1910, Ibid, pp. 86-107, pp. 86-107, "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 4, 1910, Ibid, pp. 127-133; "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 5, 1910, Ibid, pp. 174-181; "Assam", *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 6, 1911, Ibid, pp. 223-236.

Conceptualizing *Jatiya Sahitya*

We have already seen that literary historiography has always been developed in concert with literary nationalism. Historicizing a literature is closely related with the conception of *jatiya sahitya*. Francesca Orsini argues, once the *lok*, *jati* or *janta*, the people were accepted as a central and overarching category, everything from language to literature, from society to politics, came to be thought out from new perspectives.⁹³⁵ Rethinking literature in terms of the contemporary needs, Lakshminath once argued that *sahitya*, *sahityik*, *sahityarathi* etc. were words valorized with new meanings, to serve the contemporary purpose.⁹³⁶ It is only in the nineteenth century, in most of the vernaculars of India, the word *sahitya* got wide circulation to denote what was meant by literature in the west. Simultaneously, to appropriate *sahitya* with the spirit of an age of nationalistic resurgence, emphasis was given on its etymology from Sanskrit root *sahita*, insisting on its connotation of union or togetherness.⁹³⁷ In the process, *sahitya* or literature essentially became associated with *jatiya sahitya*, that is, *sahitya* with a territorial border and of political connotation. It was concurrently being elevated as universal, a transcendental realm of sacrosanct human feelings though.

As we have already discussed in a previous chapter, the *Jonaki* explicitly pronounced its firm stand on *prajaniti*, while maintaining its distance from politics. It mainly concentrated on

⁹³⁵ Orsini, Francesca. *Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-40: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 143.

⁹³⁶ Kripabar. “Kripabar Barooar Bhavar Burburani”, *Avahan*, Volume 6, Issue 2, 1934 (1856 saka), pp. 134-136.

⁹³⁷ Focusing on the literature’s role for union, Rabindranath, in his address on “*Bangla Jatiya Sahitya*”, read in the *Bangiya Sahitya Parisad*, emphasized the etymological meaning of the word ‘*sahitya*’ from the Sanskrit root ‘*sahita*’. His emphasis was on union between man and man, past and present, nearness and distance. For him, *sahitatwa* is the basic quality of literature or *sahitya*. See *Sahitya*, 1314 *Bangabda*, 1908 A. D. It was in the lecture delivered in the annual session of the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* in 1890, Hemchandra Goswami insisted on literature’s attachment with the word *sahita* meaning unity.

sahitya, bijnan, samaj and such.⁹³⁸ The rising intelligentsia of allegedly backward province like Assam in the colonial time, despite its small size and slow growth, surrounded, effected, and influenced by the neighbouring Bengali print world, tried to negotiate with the colonial government's policy on certain fields like education, language and employment, literature being a prime vehicle for it. They searched in literature an intermediary way to assert their claims on independent growth of language, history, and polity. Propagating the idea of a community's self-effort for its development as crucial, it reiterated that had the Assamese people not made them fit for the modern age, others would not make them so. *Jonaki* proclaimed that without newspapers and magazines, improvement of *jatiya sahitya* is very difficult. Being inspired by romanticism and championing the ideology of individual freedom, the western notion of self as the teleological agent, the *Jonaki* group came to the fore with determination to fight against the adverse material conditions. Lakshminath once noted that praying and weeping before the colonial administrators for their patronization resulted in ignominy to the people. So, the only alternative left for them was to strengthen the literature by production of good books and periodicals.⁹³⁹ Lakshminath appealed to the intelligentsia, and especially the youths to make sincere efforts for enriching the national literature, which for them meant the sum of the community's literary efforts, also the manifestation of the nation's

⁹³⁸ In a report, made by Pandit Hara Prasad Shastri, the Librarian of the Bengal library in 1892, *Jonaki* and *Bijulee*, two Assamese periodicals were mentioned. He commented that they '*often contain interesting articles on the history, antiquities, and social development of Assam*'. See letter of C. A. Martin, Officiating Director of Public Instruction to Bengal, to the Secretary of the Government of Bengal, General Department, No. 1440, dated Calcutta, 11 March of 1893 in *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department: Report on Publications Issued and Registered in the Several Provinces of British India During the Year 1892*, No. CCCVII, Serial No. 13. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1893.

⁹³⁹ "Asamiya Bhasa - Fifth lecture, delivered in the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*", *Jonaki*, Volume 6, Issue 10 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 750-755.

culture and ideal.⁹⁴⁰ He, like most of his compatriots, believed that national literature was integral to national life. A national life is mirrored through its literature.

While glorifying the past, being equally concerned about the inadequacies of the ancient literature the intelligentsia of the time insisted on the importance of translation, adaptation, and appropriation of the western genre and ideas. Hemchandra Goswami expressed his doubt at whether the *jatiya sahitya* could be formed by mere production of some good textbooks. In 1890, he noted that during the last three decades of the nineteenth-century, if any original compositions were added to the repository of Assamese literature, it was nothing but a grammar by Hemchandra Borooah and a *buranji* by Gunabhiram Borooah.⁹⁴¹ Sharing the view with his friend, and without underscoring the importance of grammar, *abhidhan*, textbooks and translations for the classical and developed modern literature, Lakshminath's insistence was in original creative writings. In the 1920s, he pinpointed that lack of grammar, dictionary, or coherent orthography might be serious obstacles for the expected growth of an emerging literature, but never insurmountable. He was even straight enough to say that though the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* was constituted to work for the development of the Assamese language, it should rather concentrate on the improvement of literature, because if literature prospered, language would naturally follow the course. He believed in the power of popular literature like novel, play or story books, rather than the books consumed by a few intellectual elites. Explaining his position, he said that the language of hard scientific books

⁹⁴⁰ Suggesting a hint for us on the intellectual leanings of the time, the print media kept some records of the events organized by the literary societies. A lecture on the topic of "Aspects of a National Literature" was arranged by the ASL club in 1893 at the Albert Hall of Calcutta, which was attended by around 500 audiences, and Prof. Binayendranath Sen of Presidency College was the appointed speaker.

⁹⁴¹ J. D. Anderson thought that neither Oriya nor Assamese could put 'imported Sanskritic element to such excellent literary use as it was done by Bengali', and both were 'markedly inferior to the rich variety and accomplishment of literary style, in prose and verse alike to which Bengali had attained'. Anderson, J. D. *Introduction to a Manual of the Bengali Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920, p. xvi.

belonged to a few, whereas a good novel or history was read by millions. The language of a popular novel is the language of millions of people.⁹⁴²

Making of the *Banhi*: A Prodigal Son

However, as a timber contractor, and later as an employee of the timber division of a private company, Lakshminath had little time to pursue his literary endeavour. A story written by him on the idyllic life of the Kol tribe, of present Orissa, may illustrate for us the reality of life amidst which he had to pursue his writing. The story, using the first person narrative, presents the character of a writer, who being fascinated with the beauty of the nature tends to express his feelings, but his emotion is always interrupted by a friend, who being a timber contractor, can see nothing except the economic value of a tree, the goal of modern forestry introduced by the British in India.⁹⁴³ Obviously, the story is a depiction of the conflicts between the writer's romantic self with his alter ego of a pragmatic business person.

Such inconveniences notwithstanding, while living at Howrah, in 1909, Lakshminath founded *Banhi*, a monthly periodical published from Calcutta.⁹⁴⁴ He wrote to Hemchandra Goswami that it was for the persistent attempts of the young Assamese students that he had to proceed

⁹⁴² Presidential Speech of the Seventh Annual Session of *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, delivered in December, 1924 in Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali, Part II*, 1988, pp. 1848-1872.

⁹⁴³ See "*Kanya*" in Bezbaroa, *Sadhukathar Kuki*, 1915. He recorded in the diary of 24 July of 1895, "Wrote out a tale, *Kanya Noir Parat*. Passed a restless night." On 24 June of the year, Prajnasundari gave birth to their first baby in his absence. It was only on the 10 July he witnessed his newborn for the first time. Away from home, he had to make extensive travels for business purposes. The diary of 25 July shows that on that day he complained to B. Borooah expressing his disgust for the clerical works he had to perform in those days. See *Diaries*, Tezpur University

⁹⁴⁴ Initially the periodical was registered in Calcutta in the name of Harinath, his younger brother, as the manager.

with such a venture.⁹⁴⁵ The course of incidents, which led him to publish and edit a periodical, was worth considering. By 1907, there remained a single periodical in Assamese, named *Usha*, edited by Padmanath (Gohain) Borooah in which Lakshminath, contributed with a few essays in the name of Kripabor.⁹⁴⁶ In an essay titled as “Anglo-Indian”, he called the Anglo-Indian community migratory birds, and made harsh critique of racial arrogance and discrimination, rampant exploitation of wealth of the native land, deprivation of the local persons from higher posts and lack of democratic values in India, whereas the same English nation advocated democracy and equality in the home country. As a restrictive measure, the government made intervention on the circulation of the issues of the periodical and prevented its further publication. The editor, under pressure from the government, had to withdraw the essay with a public proclamation that the periodical and its editor did not share the opinion of the essay. He had to state that the objective of the periodical was “to practise literature satisfying both the emperor and the public.” To reassert his consistency as a loyal subject,⁹⁴⁷ Padmanath Borooah, the editor, even published an ode eulogizing the British rule in Assam.⁹⁴⁸ In such a situation, Lakshminath gave his consent to the members of the Assamese Students’ Literary (ASL) club of Calcutta to edit a proposed periodical in Assamese. The first issue was so hastily published

⁹⁴⁵ Lakshminath’s letter to Hemchandra Goswami, on 18 October, 1909 from Calcutta in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 315. Lakshminath wrote to Hemchandra that the Assamese boys were ‘*nachorbanda*’, and they had compelled him to bring out a monthly magazine in Assamese.

⁹⁴⁶ The journal *Usha*, which dealt with ‘*literary and social subjects*’ reportedly was ‘*moderate in tone*’, but ‘*popular with Assamese*’. Its recorded circulation was 569 copies. See “Report on the Native-owned English and Vernacular Newspapers of Eastern Bengal and Assam for the year 1910”, File No. 105, Home (Political), 1911, Assam State Archives.

⁹⁴⁷ Padmanath admits in his autobiography that he was consistent enough in his *rajbhakti*, or loyalty to the government. Gohainborooah, Padmanath, *Mor Sowarani*, Guwahati: Asam Prakashan Parishad, 1971.

⁹⁴⁸ Borooah, Padmanath. “*Rajbhakti Asamar*” & “*Kripabar Borooar Lagat Amat*”, *Usha*, Volume 3, Issue 8, 1909 in Tamuly, *Usha Collection*, 2005, pp. 634-635.

that Lakshminath singularly contributed to it.⁹⁴⁹ However, Lakshminath, as an editor also had to clarify the political stand. He proclaimed that there would be no taint of politics in the *Banhi*.⁹⁵⁰ In the meantime, Padmanath, in a personal letter wrote to Lakshminath,

“By the bye, I pray not to write anything on the present disturbances and the so-called agitation of Bengal, for the present, and it is to obey the warnings of authorities here.”⁹⁵¹

Soon, the *Banhi* became a vehicle of literary creations. It highlighted in its advertisements its contribution towards production of a group of new writers.⁹⁵² A section of the bilingual intelligentsia of contemporary Assam contributed to the journal through their writings on various issues and genres. Lakshminath himself was a chief contributor to it among others, who, apart from editing wrote song, poem, essay, polemical writing, satirical writing, short story, religious discussion, biographical sketch etc. For Lakshminath, living away from his homeland, the periodical became a medium of living connection with the people of Assam.

⁹⁴⁹ The issue contained two articles respectively on the Assamese language and people, one short story, one humorous essay, a scientific essay on radium, six songs and two poems. It contained no editorial. Harinath Bezbaroa, Lakshminath's younger brother was shown as the publisher of the periodical. See *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1831 Saka, 1909 in Goswami, *Banhi: Part I*, 2001.

⁹⁵⁰ It seems, such a declaration was mandatory for the periodicals of the time, because the *Asam Bandhav*, another periodical of the time also proclaimed, that it only “treats literary, scientific, commercial and social subjects. Avoids politics.” See O'Callaghan, T. P. M. “Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam During the Year ending 31 December of 1911.” Dacca, n.d. During that period, the colonial government kept close watch on the newspapers and periodicals. Khirod Chandra Raichowdhuri, a friend of Lakshminath and the second husband of Swarnalata Devi, the eldest daughter of Gunabhiram, had to close the publication of the *Star of Utkal*, which he published from Cuttack, for criticizing the government policy on the famine. He expressed his grief in the title ‘*Adieu*’, “We would rather drown the paper in the waters of the Bay of Bengal than work with a halter around the neck.” Roy Choudhury, P. C. *Inside Bihar*. Calcutta, Patna, Allahabad: Bookland, 1962, pp. 6-7.

⁹⁵¹ Padmanath's letter to Lakshminath written on 24 March, 1909, from Tezpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 210-211.

⁹⁵² Advertisement, *Banhi*, Volume 20, Issue 11, 1853 Saka, 1931. It claimed that the *Banhi* had always remained open for the new writers. It has taken its pride for constituting a writer's society.

The *Banhi* was instrumental in familiarizing him among the literati of Assam. Within a short period, it became a part of his identity. After his death, the *Banhi* advertised itself as “*Lakshminath Bezbaroar Pranar Sur*”, the music of Lakshminath’s soul.⁹⁵³ But like most of the other periodicals in Assam, it never became economically independent, and Lakshminath had to bear a portion of its publication cost from his own.

However, having joined the Birds’ Company, in 1917 Lakshminath had to shift to Sambalpur, and it became almost impossible for him to carry on the journal.⁹⁵⁴ In 1920, being unable to run the periodical, he entrusted it to Chandra Kumar Agarwala to publish it from the *Asamiya* Press at Dibrugarh. Afterwards, Chandra Kumar shifted the Press to Guwahati, and the *Banhi* was being published from there. Though Lakshminath could only partly supervise the works of the periodical, nonetheless, it came forth with the imprint of his name as the editor.⁹⁵⁵ It was only after his approval, matters were sent for printing.⁹⁵⁶ In spite of his long-standing friendship with Chandrakumar, Lakshminath was not fully satisfied with the political line the *Banhi* had taken.⁹⁵⁷ Moreover, publication of its issues was often delayed, and numbers of pages were to be curtailed. Chandrakumar, himself was not happy with its reduced size and irregularity of

⁹⁵³ Advertisement of *Banhi*, *Deka Asam*, Volume 9, Issue 1, Aruna Press, Gauhati, p. 12.

⁹⁵⁴ In his absence, Jatindranath Dowerah had to review the proof copies of the *Banhi*. Lakshminath’s letter to Jatindranath on 21 March, 1916 from, Shahjahanpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p 7. Lakshminath expressed his anguish that it became tough for him to carry on the periodical, because he had no one to help, no sufficient response from the readers, no spare time, and not even presence in Calcutta, from where it had been published. Lakshminath’s letter to Jatindranath on 8 March, 1918, Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 12-14.

⁹⁵⁵ Since 1920, Lakshminath remained merely its editor. The *Banhi*, published from the New Press showed Lakshminath Bezbaroa as the editor and the Manager of the New Press as the publisher of the periodical.

⁹⁵⁶ Chandrakumar’s letter to Lakshminath on 27 October, 1931 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 194-195.

⁹⁵⁷ Lakshminath’s letter to Jatindranath from Sambalpur on 11 January, 1935 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 26.

publication. The lack of articles was a serious obstacle.⁹⁵⁸ In 1930, its circulation reduced to 450 copies only, a pessimistic situation for Chandrakumar.⁹⁵⁹

Perhaps, *circulation of Banhi* was confined largely within the eastern part of Assam. Reflecting on the condition of Assamese literature, Kaliram Medhi pointed out that readership of *Banhi* was not so much in the western Assam. Similarly, the *Bandhava* was not read by the readers of the eastern districts of the Assam valley. Both *Banhi*, and *Alochani*, regarding language, exhibit ‘provincialism’ and ‘vulgarism’ of upper Assam, whereas the *Bandhav* wants ‘to universalize’ it. He complains that a certain section of intelligentsia of certain parts of Assam, claimed themselves as *Barputra* of *Asami Aai*, the eldest son of mother Assam and wanted to possess certain rights and privileges over others by dint of it. Others may only bow down from distance to the mother.⁹⁶⁰

How dear the periodical was to him could be imagined through a letter Lakshminath wrote to his friend and follower Jatindranath. He wrote,

“Each copy of the *Banhi* is a piece of the living body and heart of this miserable person”.⁹⁶¹

Lakshminath even preferred to mention the magazine as his own child.

Writing about his life at Sambalpur, he repented that he could not manage enough time to pen something. He wrote to Hemchandra Goswami,

⁹⁵⁸ Earlier *Banhi*’s competition was with the *Asam Bandhava*, later with *Avahan*. Chandrakumar wrote that people wanted stories. *Banhi* was criticized for having lesser numbers of story and photo, being smaller in size and poorer print quality. Chandrakumar’s letter on 10 May, 1931, from Guwahati, Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 191-192.

⁹⁵⁹ Chandrakumar’s letter on 6 June, 1930 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 188; Letter on 10 May, 1931, from Guwahati, Ibid, pp. 191-192.

⁹⁶⁰ Medhi, Kaliram. “*Amar Sahitya*”, *Assam Bandhav*, Volume 7, Issue 10, 1326, 1917, p. 367.

⁹⁶¹ Lakshminath’s letter to Jatindranath, on 8 March, 1918 from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 12-14.

“I am an exile here in the true sense of the word. An out and out Hindu like myself cannot but follow the dictates of our shastras-both spiritual and temporal- and take to Vanaprastha when the time comes.”⁹⁶²

The situation remained unchanged until the end of his life. In another letter, unravelling the irony of his life he rued for his involvement in destroying the beautiful wood, and said,

“I am certain that you will shed tears at seeing the situation under which I have to pass my times.”⁹⁶³

He perceived within him a cruel *vyadha*, a killer or destroyer, whereas his inner being was as soft as that of a poet, a creator. It is evident that the connotation alluded to *Adi Kavi* Valmiki’s reprimanding of a *vyadha*, one of the most cited instances, displaying the poetic sensibility in Indian *Kavya parampara*. It was the paradox of modernity, which produced both a *vyadha* and poet creator in a single human being. Referring to the extremely hot climate of Sambalpur forest, and comparing it with his involvement in devastation of forest, Lakshminath expressed his guilt,

“It is very hot here. But is it hotter than burning and sweating, from which I have been suffering out of my sense of sin?”⁹⁶⁴

Lakshminath’s guilt and agony were partly associated with his profession, partly with the uncertainties of his financial condition through which he had to pass during that time. Above all, he always had to bear within mind the pain of separation from his own land. During this period, he even overtly expressed his desire to go back to Assam. In a letter that he wrote to Jatindranath he frankly said that remaining so much away from Assam and the Assamese

⁹⁶² Lakshminath’s letter to Hemchandra on 18 July, 1918 from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 320-321.

⁹⁶³ Lakshminath’s letter to Jatindranath on 8 March, 1918 from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 12-14.

⁹⁶⁴ Lakshminath’s letter to Jatindranath on 8 March, 1918 from Sambalpur, in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 12-14.

people there, he felt very alone.⁹⁶⁵ In 1924, in his presidential address of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, drawing on the Biblical source, he mentioned himself as the “Prodigal” son, who becoming destitute of all that he inherited from his father, ultimately returned to get an embrace from him.

Colonial modernity in India, through its communication, transport, commercial, administrative, and educational networks, created the possibility of mobility. It was the same networks, which produced the conditions for the emerging Indian nationalism, as well as the modern expatriate life. Lakshminath might be one among those a few Indian writers of the time, who directly experienced a vast canvas of modern wandering life, and from which he garnered his materials for his creative writings. Lakshminath’s professional life, though in a way became an impediment for his writing career, indirectly, it enriched his stories with varieties of contents, capable of capturing a wide panorama of the lives of the Eastern India. If he chose an Adibasi Kol village of Sambalpur area of Orissa to develop a plot on romantic love or for a realistic narrative on labour trade of the colonial regime, he preferred to write a story on a rigorous caste system on the setting of a Bengal village. He told the story of railway journey both within the coach and at the platform, people lived around the timber felling stations in the interior jungles of Orissa, of the convicts and their involvements in crimes, of domestic spaces of the emerging middle classes, and even the traditional lives of peasantry in Assam etcetera. In his stories, the emerging middle-class of contemporary India was portrayed as greedy, amoral people, whose spiritual and moral degradation were juxtaposed with the inner strength and spiritual power of poor and downtrodden classes.

⁹⁶⁵ Lakshminath’s letter to Jatindranath from Sambalpur, on 23 September, 1918, in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 14-18.

Despite his attachment to the romanticized notion of his childhood, or rather his adolescent home that he left long far behind in Assam he always had to wander from hither to thither. Travelling became a recurrent theme in his writings too, whether by boat, or steamer, or by train, by horse-drawn tram, or even by bullock cart. Thus, though he found himself among situations, where the tie to his motherland, his sense of belongingness to a particular culture had been constantly thwarted, even then his mind and emotion were always drawn towards Assam. Being a strong proponent of motherland and mother tongue, Lakshminath had to live amidst dialectical tension between the present and the lost home. His motherland was ever present in him in the emotional bond that he felt towards his mother tongue and his cultural homeland, however displaced and distant his individual existence and day-to-day reality from them. Living amidst such dialectical tension, it seems, Lakshminath's resort to literature was an attempt to fervently maintain his identity, a claim to his authenticity.

Quoting Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt school cultural critic, Edward Said reflected that in the modern world, the only home truly available, whatever extent fragile and vulnerable it may be, was in writing. Elsewhere the house is past.⁹⁶⁶ Whether it is true or not, Lakshminath's life itself provides a critique of the ideology of mother tongue, that he propagated, and for which, his life was dedicated.

Lakshminath was not an exile in the strict sense of the term, because his separateness to Assam was never forced by anybody. Writing the first important study on Lakshminath, Hem Borooah, mentioned Lakshminath as a self-exiled person.⁹⁶⁷ As a matter of fact, there is a difference between an exile and Lakshminath's expatriate life. To comprehend the situation, Edward Said's formulation may help us. He shows that exile originated in the age-old practice of

⁹⁶⁶ Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2001, p. 164.

⁹⁶⁷ Barua, Hem. *Makers of Indian Literature Series: Lakshminath Bezbaroa*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1967.

banishment. Once banished, the exile lives in an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Expatriates voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal and social reasons. Expatriates may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions.⁹⁶⁸

It was mostly out of choice that Lakshminath lived in places which he himself continued to perceive as *bidesh*, or alien places. But in a dialectical twist of the same separateness from his own land, the uprootedness of the life of a modern businessman or an employee in a Company, he was facilitated not only to become familiar with India as widening and emerging nation space, but also to transcend and question it from within. His life, in a way, induces us to address the question whether culture or tradition is fixed and given, having pre-existing content or essence, or constantly being recreated within an individual.

Assam, as depicted by him as motherland, was mostly a metaphorical existence for him than a physical space. His adult life had occasional connections with its land and people. It might be the reason, while repetitively sacralising Assam as metaphor, his imagination of Assam was short of minute physical description. It was the Brahmaputra valley, which he, like his contemporaries visualized mostly as his motherland.⁹⁶⁹ From Sibsagar to Dhubri, the navigational way, then the railway network, the Naga hills, adjacent to and once a part of the Sibsagar district, Shillong, the colonial hill station and capital of the British Assam for a period- these were the places which got articulation in the rare moments of territorial imagination. *Kripabar Barbaroar Will*, a humorous essay provides such a moment of his imagination of Assam, in which it was the riverine geography and ecology of the Brahmaputra with its

⁹⁶⁸ Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 2001, p. 181.

⁹⁶⁹ Padmanath Gohainborooh, while travelling by train in 1905 to Karimganj of the Cachar district, while arriving at Lumding, felt that there was no *prabhutva*, dominance of the Assamese there. See diary entry on 19 February, 1905, *Padmanath Gohainborooh's Diaries*, Digital Archive, Centre of Assamese Studies, Tezpur University.

enriched cultural landscape and biodiversity, which got articulation. The historic town of Sibsagar, the precolonial capital of Assam and emerging urban landscape of Guwahati with Kamakhya and Umananda, two remnants of the prehistoric Aryan civilization in Assam-these remained his central points of focus.⁹⁷⁰

Banhi became the chief organ, the most potent instrument, through which, even in his absentia, Lakshminath was in constant contact with Assam. It emerged as a platform of enthusiastic educated youths of the time, both in Calcutta and Guwahati, like Banikanta Kakati, Birinchi Kumar Borooah, Benudhar Sharma, Lakshmidhar Sharma, Amiya Kumar Das, Madhab Chandra Bezbaroa, Dimbeswar Neog, Jyotiprasad Agarwala and such, who became his associates and ardent followers, and all of whom played historic role in shaping literary modernity in Assamese. Jatindranath once attributed to the *Banhi* the status of originator of nationalism in Assam. As we have already discussed in the previous two chapters, it was mainly through *Banhi*, Lakshminath tried to focus Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism of Assam as the founding pillar of the Assamese national life, and to popularize Bihu as the *jatiya utchava* of Assam. Without *Banhi*, Lakshminath's interaction and dialogue in the public domain would be impossible.

Laughter as a Critique of the Contemporary

One key aspect of the *Banhi*, which made it popular and distinctive among the contemporary readership, was its handling of laughter as a subversive act. Literary critics have pointed out that satire as a weapon of reform became a convention in Indian literature. In fact, satire was not a literary apparatus used from outside out of authorial choice, in most of the cases it became

⁹⁷⁰ See "Kripabar Borooahar Will " in Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Kripabar Borborooahr Obhatani*, Howrah, 1909.

compulsion for the Indian writers in colonial situations.⁹⁷¹ Writers like Bankimchandra deployed laughter as a critical-political tool.⁹⁷² Tanika Sarkar, in her study on Bankimchandra has shown that in Bengal, it was the post-1860s generation, which, gradually becoming “pungently self-critical” exhibited in their literary self-representation an “overwhelmingly satirical” tone, characterized by “mordant black humour”.⁹⁷³

Lakshminath’s *Kripabori* humour also served as an instrument of double-voicedness. In 1890, Lakshminath used the sobriquet Kripabor for the first time to write an essay in the *Jonaki* in mock-heroic style, in which Kripabor was conceived as an extraordinarily talented person devoted to *matribhumi* and *matribhasa*, who met his death at the age of thirty, and attained posthumous popularity.⁹⁷⁴ Though imagined in the lineage of the satirical tradition of writing already popularized by a number of early modern writers in Assamese, Kripabor excelled all, and soon came to be considered as Lakshminath’s other self. Being free of any bindings, Kripabar could critique everything, even his own creator. He could tell the things that otherwise would not have been addressed by any intellectual of the time. Kripabor was not merely a literary device, who exaggerated, and evoked laughter, but a political commentator and critic, who questioned society, tradition, and polity. As a literary character, he became so popular that soon *Kripabori* essays and humour came to be assessed as a category itself. An advertisement

⁹⁷¹ Ulka Anjaria has argued in the case of the Oriya novel *Chaa Mana Atha Guntha* (Six Acres and a Third) by Fakir Mohan Senapati, the narrator’s ambivalent position of complicity- cum- resistance vis-a-vis colonial modernity was internalized to appear in the form of a satire, thereby offering a political critique of the colonial exploitation. See Anjaria, Ulka. "Satire, Literary Realism and the Indian State: Six Acres and a Third and Raag Darbari." *Economic and Political Weekly* Volume 41, no. 46 (2006).

⁹⁷² It is generally argued that comic literature is essentially political, because whereas tragedy deals with the irresistible part of life, comedy deals with the remediable.

⁹⁷³ Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2013, See chapter “Bankimchandra and the Impossibility of a Political Agenda”, pp. 135-162.

⁹⁷⁴ *Jonaki*, Volume 2, Issue 7, 1890 (1812 Saka) in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 191-193.

in the *Banhi*, highlighted *Kripabori* humour as a genre, reading which one cannot resist his laughter even in his sleep.⁹⁷⁵

Cartoons were another core factor of the popularity of Lakshminath among the common readers, which also served as an indirect way of addressing the polity. In the nineteenth-century India, cartoons appeared as a new media form. Through its visual vocabulary, it wanted engagement from the readers on topics such as untouchability, education, religious practices, attitude towards women and hygiene, and other political issues, and offered alternative ways of perceiving certain things. Though originated in Indian vernacular realm as an appropriation of the British *Punch* cartoons, it offered vantage point for the readers of the newspapers and periodicals to experience knowing through seeing.

Lakshminath, who was fond of illustrating his personal letters with inky strokes, employed his skill to introduce the new format of cartoons in the *Banhi*, which entwined politics, humour and caricature. From the first issue of the *Banhi*, it contained caricature. In the eighth issue, in a cartoon entitled Barborooah as the Lute Player, a male, sketched in physical similarity with Lakshminath plays a lute, when a woman being attracted towards him prevents him from playing it. The language used by the woman figure is a kind of popular slang.⁹⁷⁶ In the subsequent issue, two educated persons are shown as appearing in mortal fight against one another with some “dangerous weapons” like orthographical characters of Assamese.⁹⁷⁷ Apparently, the cartoon was based on the contemporary debate on orthography. He used cartoons mostly as a part of the language debate on the independent claims of Assamese, a

⁹⁷⁵ Advertisement of *Banhi* in the last cover page of *Banhi*, Volume 20, Issue 1, 1930.

⁹⁷⁶ “*Kripabar Barboroar Samarani: Barboroai Banhibadya Kare*”, *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 4, 1909, Goswami, *Banhi: Part I*, 2001, p. 126.

⁹⁷⁷ “*Kripabar Borooar Samarani: Mushal Parba ba Dhekithora Parba*”, *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 9, 1909, Goswami, *Banhi: Part I*, 2001, p. 287.

prime issue of the time the *Banhi* had to negotiate. He even caricatured the editor and readers of the *Banhi*, which provide us a vantage point to see how powerful the art of deforming was to stimulate in reader viewers feeling attraction and attachment towards a vernacular literary effort.

Writing Folklore: A Storyteller

We have already shown that tradition-modern dichotomy often resists such a dichotomous relationship. Stuart Blackburn, in his study of Tamil folklore, while trying to show the negotiation of print as vehicle of modernity and folklore allegedly as remnants of a discredited past, has argued, print in Tamil instead of widening the gap between literary culture and oral tradition, actually bridged it, and brought them together in the form of printed folklore.⁹⁷⁸ Though folklore, with its association with superstitions, primitive practices, fanciful legends, and indecent tales, were targeted by the educational, religious and literary reform movements as antithetical to modernity, projected as symbols of ignorant tradition, but simultaneously they were celebrated as repositories of cultural and personal memories. Many Indian intellectuals and government servants took part in collection, publication, and interpretation of folklore. Folklore became an important source for nationalist thinking in India, which as an internal and protected space was appropriated as the seedbed of nationalism.

In Assam, though collection, compilation and publication of folktales was initiated by the missionaries and the colonial administrators, it was in the last decade of the nineteenth century, folklore or oral culture was consciously drawn upon by the Assamese intelligentsia for their literary creations. Lakshminath's *Litikai* (first published in the *Jonaki* in 1889, and later

⁹⁷⁸ Blackburn, Stuart. "The Burden of Authenticity: Printed Oral Tales in Tamil Literary History." In *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*, by Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia, 119-147. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2004.

published as a book in 1901), a farcical play, took its material from a folktale. It was his friend Chandrakumar Agarwala, who appropriated the contents, forms and language of folk tales and ballads in his poetic compositions to express the new romantic notions of human love, freedom, and potentiality, and even to show an indivisible bond between the humanity and nature.

Keeping pace in the same tradition of experimentation, Lakshminath composed a few poems, in which he appropriated the language of the oral literature to serve certain purposes like making a living poetic language, incorporation of the modern literature with the popular tradition and inscribing emotion as part of poetry. In 1913, most of his poems came to be published in a collection named *Kadam-Kali*. In *Dhanbar Ratani*, one of his poems, he used the potentiality of the folk ballad to introduce the theme of romantic love. In another poem, *Binbaragi*, the form of *tokari geet*, spiritual song of *baragi*, a traditional performer who wanders from one place to another, was deployed to arouse the nationalistic feelings.

Folklore, being the living language of the people, energized the literary language with a rare kind of vividness, and it was Lakshminath in the second decade of the twentieth century, through his enormous personal effort to publish books, exemplified how popular diction to be exercised in new literature not only in poetry, but also in prose. Thus, coming away from the Sanskritised model of literary prose, Lakshminath pioneered and consciously advocated in Assamese a new popular style, which in spite of arousing disagreement in certain literate sections on some particular issues was never ignored by anyone of his contemporaries.

In 1911, Lakshminath published his *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, Tales of a Grandmother, being the first collection of folktales in Assamese. For it, he, already settled in Howrah, collected his materials from various persons of Assam, who sent written texts of oral tales to him.⁹⁷⁹ He, after

⁹⁷⁹ In the Preface, Lakshminath described the methodology he employed for collection of materials and compiling them. He even expressed his gratitude to eighteen persons by their names as the informants.

comparing the different texts of the same tale collected from the various sources, retold it in his own language, and finally published a collection with thirty-one stories. In the process, the tales underwent significant changes, which were then claimed by him as “own”. Considering the vast diversity of the folktales of Assam, *Burhi Aair Sadhu* represented a very little portion, but simultaneously made an advance towards study of folklore in Assam. In the preface Lakshminath pointed out the emerging consciousness of the educated section to folklore as a repository of knowledge about national life. Pinpointing on folktales, he offered it with language, the status of the bone and brain of a nation. The history told by a folktale or the etymology of a word is far more valuable than the history of a great war. Discussing on the fact of similarity of some of the tales of his collection with the already published Bengali tales, and especially with those retold by Eastern Bengal narrators, he pointed out to the shared precolonial history of the regions, and by that, made a reconciliation between the universal structure of folktales and the regional diversity of language and form, they acquired with time. According to him, similarity of folktales across the language barriers indicated their shared linguistic cultural milieu of the distant Indo-European past only. Insisting on the difference of terminology in Assamese and Bengali, Lakshminath stated that while in Bengali folktales are called *rupkatha*, in Assamese it is called *sadhukatha*, which means tales told by a wise person to the people and the children to give moral lessons.

Burhi Aair Sadhu was followed by another collection in 1913, with twenty-nine stories presented as told by a grandfather to his grandson, named as *Kakadeuta aru Natilora*. In both, Lakshminath endeavoured to keep the vivid atmosphere of traditional storytelling by presenting them as oral-auditory form, also inscribing active participation of the listener in. The *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, till date, has become one of the most popular books of Lakshminath; a number of editions of it are produced every year by different publishers. Though initially never intended by the collector exclusively as children's literature, later it was stamped as such by the

publishers, which became the core of its success in the market. Curiously enough, the book was still considered by a section of readers to consist of entertaining tales, which also offer the children the key to writing 'ideal prose' in Assamese.

Several translations of the book into English were produced from 1915. One of the earliest translations attempted by J. Borooah was published in 1915 with seventeen selected stories entitled "Folk-Tales of Assam", published by the Timber and Stores Agency of Lakshminath himself. The book, as was declared by the translator in the first edition, was planned for the grownups and children of the English-speaking world to make them familiar with Assam.⁹⁸⁰ Aruna Devi Mukherjee (Mukherjee), the elder daughter of Lakshminath translated "*Kakadeuta Aru Natilora*" in the name of "Tales from a Grand Father of Assam", which, being published from the Indian Institute of Culture of Bangalore in 1955, acquired the scholarly attention. In 1961, Edwin C. Kirkland, in his attempt to prepare a catalogue of Indian folklore for the volume of "Folklore Research Around the World- A North American Point of View". The volume constituted a part of the Indiana University Folklore Series, edited by a personality like Richard M. Dorson, listed the book, and specified its location in the New York University Public Library.⁹⁸¹ The translation was reviewed among others by the Dublin Magazine,⁹⁸² The Illustrated Weekly of India⁹⁸³ and the Aryan Path.⁹⁸⁴ Immediately after publication of the book, Claude Haughton in the Aryan Path commented that the Assamese folktales compiled in the book magically created the fabulous timeless world, which though remote from the accepted

⁹⁸⁰ Borooah, J., *Folk-Tales of Assam*. Howrah: Timber and Store Agency, 1915.

⁹⁸¹ Kirkland, Edwin C. "A Projected Bibliography of the Folklore of India." *The Journal of American Folklore* 74, no. 294 (October-December 1961): 413-18, p. 130.

⁹⁸² *Dublin Magazine*, Vol. 31-33, 1967, p. 7.

⁹⁸³ *Illustrated Weekly of India*, Vol. 88, 1967, p. XX.

⁹⁸⁴ *Aryan Path*, Vol. XXIV, 1963, P. 276.

conception of reality was nearer to an unknown and greater reality.⁹⁸⁵ In 1985, when Sterling published a collection of Indian folktales, compiled and edited by P. C. Roy Chaudhury, it included three folktales from the collections of Lakshminath, viz, *Tezimola*, *Queen Kamala Kuari* and *Tenton*.⁹⁸⁶

History as Literature

Colonialism introduced historical study in India to sustain and ratify the British rule. Academic history was presumably a rational and disciplined study of the past. In parallel to such histories, soon emerged in India a kind of history, as a powerful ground of assertions of patriotism and identity claims. Whether in mutual dependence or in contestation with academic lines, a kind of imaginative history as an alternative way of telling history came to the fore, which invoked historical events and figures as inspiration and materials for shaping identities around them. Colonial India saw large production of historical narratives in a variety of genres like poetry, essay, song, play, novel, public speech, and monograph. They “generated, shared and contested the past for the new modern communities of nation, region, and caste”.⁹⁸⁷

⁹⁸⁵ *Aryan Path*, Vol. XXVII, No.1, January, 1956, p. 85.

⁹⁸⁶ Roy Chaudhury, P. C. *Best Loved Folk -Tales of India*. 1985: Sterling, New Delhi. P.C. Roy Choudhury, alias Pranab Chandra was the third son of Khirode Chandra Roy Choudhury and Swarnalata, the daughter of Gunabhram Borooah, which for both of them was the second marriage. Lakshminath was very close to the family, who attended their marriage, solemnized on the 15 February of 1899. On the date, he wrote in his diary, “Evening 5 p.m. went to witness the solemnization of Swarnalata’s marriage with Khirode Ch. Roy Choudhury and became witness etc.” Several mentions in his diaries of the family, both in personal and business connections are found. Pranab’s career began as a deputy magistrate in Bihar, and he, apart from rewriting the gazetteers of the province, extensively wrote on the papers like the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Behar Herald*, *Modern Review*, *Hindustan Standard* etc. He was the general editor of a more ambitious twenty-volume *Folktales of India*, also published by Sterling, apart from the other collections of folktales from Bihar, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Thailand.

⁹⁸⁷ Despande, Prachi. *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700-1960*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007, p. 7.

Although in India, coming of western methods and practices of history writing as dominant mode of history was taken as a radical break from the pre-colonial practices of historiography, in a region like Assam which for long had possessed a powerful and living tradition of writing, copying, memorializing, narrating, and performing historical narratives, such a displacement was inconceivable. Soon the new technology of print was adopted for circulation of *buranji puthi*, either of recent creation or of family possession, also for reproduction of certain episodes of history of Assam, which through oral tradition had been inscribed in community memory. In fact, being brought up in rural India amidst myth and legend, most of the writers of vernacular history in India adapted the western knowledge of history with the already existing indigenous modes and practices.⁹⁸⁸

Concentrating on the history of Tamil prose, David Shulman has emphasized on a growing dominance of prose in South India, which for him is “an indigenous and organic” development not to be explored in any external, non-Indian cultural practices. The root of development of prose in an early proto-urban environment, he has noticed, in the appearance of a newly crystallized genre of historiography, referred to as *karnams*, indicative of rising novel notions of temporality.⁹⁸⁹ Similar development of secular prose combined with the temporal attitude to life, as manifested in the pre-modern *buranji* form of history-writing in Assam was traced in the South-East Asian tradition. Exploration of these traditions by the nineteenth and early twentieth century intelligentsia posed questions regarding the exclusively western origin of literary modernity in South Asian vernaculars. In fact, English and western impact displacing everything else is a narrative, which pushes a great variety of indigenous and transitional literary cultures of the vernaculars into suppression. Such a clichéd narrative of western

⁹⁸⁸ Saikia, Arupjyoti. "Gait's Way: Writing History in Early Twentieth-Century Assam." In *History in the Vernacular*, by Raziuddin Aquil and Patha Chatterjee, 142-171. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008.

⁹⁸⁹ Shulman, David. *Tamil: A Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

dominance in literary modernity ignores or marginalizes stories of creative appropriation, for example, as evident as in the form of the novel genre. In similar attempts of creative appropriation, Lakshminath, in Assamese literature, transformed genre historical play, drawing heavily from oral and folk narratives. Such appropriations, in their turn, present for us to study the literary modernity of South Asia full of complexities inherent in it.

In the early twentieth century, dramatic art came to be used as a popular medium of writing history. It essentially led to addressing questions like whether literature, premised on imagination and universality was a mutually exclusive category from an empirical science like history faithful to factual details and chronology of time. Did they constitute two separate fields of knowledge? The resolution may vary from person to person and region to region, but at least for a fraction of them, two realms of thought were complementary. A few of them like Bankimchandra practiced both. Lakshminath belonged to this group of writers. He wrote a number of historical writings in various periodicals including some editorials and polemical ones. His public speeches frequently drew upon the issues related to Assam and Indian history.

In the meantime, the rise of public theatre halls in urban and semi-urban stations of Assam with the attraction of the middle-class audience for historical plays, as well as the influence of Shakespeare, inspired Lakshminath to write a few in Assamese. Pioneering the genre in Assamese with a few others, Lakshminath published a trilogy in 1915 with the titles of *Joymoti kuwari*, *Chakradhwaj Singha*, and *Belimar*. Taking all three in together, we can try to explore the various aspects of the colonial intelligentsia's attempt at appropriation of history to serve the contemporary need of a nationalist polity.

Writing historical plays, Lakshminath concentrated on rising debates on the relationship between fact and fiction, or historical materials and the role of imagination. In the foreword of *Joymoti Kuwari*, he stated that Joymoti's story was a mixture of history and imagination, by

which he meant that in this play he more liberally took resort to the play of his imagination. In fact, the historical validity of Joymoti narrative from its first appearance in print had aroused debate and question.⁹⁹⁰ Ratneswar Mahanta, who brought the narrative to the limelight, had mainly gleaned an orally circulated version of *Joymoti* from Indibar Borooah, a person belonged to the gentry of Sibsagar, and then published a narrative on it in the *Jonaki* in the 1891.⁹⁹¹ Neither Gait's *A History of Assam* nor Gunabhiram Borooah's *Assam Buranji*, two major historical works of the colonial period made mention of *Joymoti*. Equally powerful was the attraction, the English educated youths of Assam felt for it.⁹⁹² Already in 1910, a narrative on Joymoti story in Bengali was published by Gopal Krishna Dey. He presented a blending of the themes of good governance with the Hindu *sati*, positioning Joymoti with Sabitri, Damayanti etc.⁹⁹³ By 1914, a Bengali version of *Joymoti* narrative was published in book form composed by Purnachandra Bhattacharyya, for which the preface was written by Padmanath Bhattacharyya Vidyavinod.⁹⁹⁴ Thus, revisiting the Joymoti narrative in terms of a chaste

⁹⁹⁰ Reading its print version, Chandrakumar wrote to Lakshminath, "Thanks for *Joymoti*, which has afforded me excellent reading for nearly three hours. I have not read anything like this in Assamese before." See Chandrakumar's letter from Tamulbari on 23 July, 1915, in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 179-180.

⁹⁹¹ Mahanta, Ratneswar. "*Jaymoti Kuari aru Langi Gadapani*", *Jonaki*, Volume 3, Issues 11-12, 1891 in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 393-396.

⁹⁹² Padmanath Gohainborooah pioneered composition of a play for theatrical performance on the basis of Joymoti narrative, which was published in 1900.

⁹⁹³ Dey, Gopalkrishna. "*Sati Jaymoti*", *Nabya Bharat*, Volume 18, Issue 7, 1911 (1317 Bangabda). Two years back it was read in the second annual session of the *Gauhati-Banga Sahityanushilani Sabha*. Apart from this, Gopal Krishna Dey, the first Librarian of the Curzon Hall Library at Guwahati, had played a leading role in popularizing the Joymoti narrative among the Bengali readers. He wrote on the theme in the *Bharat Mahila*. Haripad Chattopadhyay, another Bengali, wrote a *Jatra* named *Abalar Atmadan* on basis of the story of *Joymoti*.

⁹⁹⁴ *Banhi*, Volume 5, Issue 12, 1914, p. 675. Banhi published a short review of the book. Apart from this, Gopal Krishna Dey, the first Librarian of the Curzon Hall Library at Guwahati, had played a leading role in popularizing the Joymoti narrative among the Bengali readers. He wrote articles on the theme in the *Nabya Bharat* and the *Bharat Mahila*. Haripad Chattopadhyay, another Bengali wrote a *Jatra* named *Abalar Atmadan* on the basis of the story of Joymoti.

woman's self-sacrifice for the sake of her husband, and connecting it with the oppressed realm in the first decades of the twentieth century is clearly visible. Later in 1935, Jyotiprasad Agarwala made the first Assamese film on the basis of Lakshminath's play.⁹⁹⁵

It seems Lakshminath's introduction was a precautionary measure to avoid any controversy relating to its historical validity, which immediately could have made an impact on the play's circulation. To distract the attention from the political overtone of the play, Lakshminath clarified in the foreword that what he had composed was a play or *kavya*, and it had no relationship with politics.⁹⁹⁶ In the foreword of *Chakradhwaj Singha*, for the materials of which he cited Hemchandra Goswami's historical account and Gait's history, more focus was given on the historical accuracy and factual details. Coming away from the position of the earlier play, Lakshminath confidently clarified in the introduction that his objective of writing the play was not to obtain fame from it, but to make his audience aware of its own glorious past.

Belimar was the last play of this series, which dealt with the events of the immediate past. The play depicted the present as a fall, decay from the past glory, and identified craze for power among the nobles, rivalry, treason against each other, loss of inner strength and valour as the *raison d'être*, which ultimately led to defeat and subjugation of a community or people. The writer used the histories of Gunabhiram and Gait as the source of this play. Again, focusing on the historicity of the play, Lakshminath wrote that although the imagination was operating in

⁹⁹⁵ Lakshminath, with Prajnasundari enjoyed the premiere of the movie screened at the Raunak Mahal hall of Calcutta on 10 March of 1935. He came from Sambalpur to inaugurate the movie.

⁹⁹⁶ Later in 1935, on occasion of production of the movie based on his play, a controversy around the historical validity of the story got wide circulation. Lakshminath then pointed out the likeness of the political situation of the Ahom regime with the autocratic regime of Hitler in Germany and in Italy. He, in support of his argument, quoted Saumyendranath Tagore's book "Hitlerism: The Aryan Rule in Germany", published in 1933. Lakshminath's reading of a quote from Saumyendranath Tagore, who already had been known as a Communist leader, and who later emerged as the founder of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, on the other hand, brings forth the liberal side of his thought. See "*Jaymoti Kuari*", Lakshminath Bezbaroa, *Tinidiniya Asamiya*, September, 1935.

the play, he never compromised with the historical facts. Neither character was idealized to produce hero or heroine, nor was the course of events ever manipulated. As a playwright he had performed the twofold responsibility of holding the mirror up to nature and to educate the audience through the shortcomings of the historical characters to inspire them to transform the present into an ideal state of being. So, it becomes obvious how claims for historicity of events and characters were used by the playwright to serve a nationalist purpose of the time.

Joymoti Kuwari, Lakshminath's first attempt to write a historical play, portrayed a period of Assam's history, which was characterized by internal strife among the royal elite. It was about a time when nothing except power mattered, and everyone was involved in treachery against one another. Treason, murder, and mutilation became the rule of the land. Obviously, the *Joymoti Kuwari* was a high-pitched political drama. The puppet king, known as *lora raja*, literally a minor, but the inherent connotation was of a childish and immature ruler was panic-ridden for the loss of his reign. Disorder of the period was reflected through the disintegration of inner and outer worlds. Joymoti's husband Gadapani, a man possessing the potential and required norms of being a king, took self-exile to escape from death. He was the projected redeemer of the land from the states of disorder, chaos, and oppression.

Dramatic conflict was embodied through forceful action on the part of the ruler to bring Joymoti to the public space, which was a violation of the social rule, because being a woman of an elite family her proper place was in the household. The forced action on her was a symbolic act, indication of the fall and degradation of the oppressor. Though the similarity of the situation can remind audiences of the Draupadi in the court of Dhritarastra of the epic Mahabharata; the course of the events and catastrophe were totally different. The epic world of the Mahabharata was wholly dominated by the male heroes, contrary to which, in the *Joymoti Kuwari*, the allegedly feminine principle of love, toleration, self-sacrifice, determination of mind and power to bear the physical atrocity in silence etc., posited against

the masculine principle consisted of violence, oppression, cruelty and craze for power were at work. In the framework of the plot, Gadapani, the redeemer remained instrumental. Everything happened around Joymoti, who was at the centre. She refused to provide any information about her husband's whereabouts and ultimately had to meet her death. One of the ministers, the mother of the existing king, the wife of a higher official of the king, the anonymous common people on the public street- all in different platforms raised their voices against the king's execution of brutal punishment on Joymoti, even wished for the end of the oppressive realm.

In allegorical terms, the play represented the victory of the truth and justice, which was the universally valorized side of the play. Weak and innocent, Joymoti was the ultimate winner. The king admitted,

“The woman is not *avala*, as meek and feeble as an average woman, but enormously *prabala*, a powerful one.”

It was through Joymoti's sacrifice, Gadapani came to realize the purpose of his life; he must make his land free from the oppressive realm, otherwise who will dry the tears of the “unhappy mother Assam”? By developing some subtle themes within the main plot, the play offered a variety of disseminations for the contemporary audience. Joymoti became the embodiment of a *sati*, the unspotted virtuous Indian wife, who dedicated her life for her husband. In the nineteenth- and early twentieth- century India, the image of *sati* was construed as a woman upon whom the future of a land and people depended. Later, during the heydays of nationalist politics, Joymoti was canonized as an archetype of *satyagrahi*, who reigned not only in the spiritual domain, but also in the realm of resistant politics. Weak and innocent, she was the ultimate winner. Obviously, it was a play of Lakshminath's vivid imagination which turned an event of the past, relevant for the contemporary polity of India.

Chakradhwaj Singha, the second of the trilogy was an attempt to recapture a valiantly fought battle of the Ahom monarchy of Assam under the leadership of Lachit Barphukan against the forwarding troop of Raja Ramsingha, sent from Delhi by the Moghul emperor Aurengzeb to take possession of the land. Lachit defeated the alien army, and the troop had to return with lost hope. The most noteworthy point about the play was, no character in the play was portrayed with motivation of showing as hero or heroine, and the society from the top to the bottom was shown as involved in the war. The *Swargadeo* (the Ahom king), the ministers, the army officials, the common soldiers, the war messengers –all contributed according to their role and position.

Instead of being projected as a war between the Ahom and the expansionist Moghul royal powers, the war was depicted as a war between Assam and the *Bangal*, or alien power. A conscious attempt to overcome the barriers of castes and communities had led the play to articulate the modern meaning of Assam in the sense of a regional identity. Throughout the play Ramsingha referred to the enemy as *Asamiya*. Madhavcharan, a *kataki* or messenger from the Ahom side was mentioned as *Asamiya Bamun*, thus highlighting the heterogeneity of the Asamiya or Assamese identity. Even the king mentioned his kingdom as “our *Asam*”, a land possessed by a group rather than a property of a king. Expressing his unwillingness to continue as a slave of an alien power, he desired to die rather than to survive. Through the dialogues of Ramsingha, a Rajput king and general of the Moghul army, Assamese people were eulogized as a superior nation, equal to who in bravery, valour, warcraft and strategy, dedication, intellect, and patriotism he had never seen in the entire Bharatabarsha, both among the Hindus and Mussalmans. A song sung by the common soldiers during the war time offers homage to the land, water, sky, air, and deep embrace of the golden Assam and expresses the desire to die and spend life after life in the same land. Their war cry “*Joi Joi Asam* ”, or double Victory to Assam slightly differed from the mostly used slogan of the Assamese nationalist, also coined by

Lakshminath in an earlier poem, which visualizes Assam as a mother figure. In colonial situation, the rising intelligentsia of Assam, through their historical writings tried to perform two tasks: the first one was to establish a deep cultural link with the Aryan India, which would enable them to maintain a cultural intellectual advance on the vast aboriginal population of the land, who were already represented by a large number of colonial texts as barbaric and uncivilized or half-civilized people, and the second was to confirm a history of modern Assamese identity, which in the process of its making out of disparate, diverse and heterogeneous linguistic-cultural fabric had to define itself as an all-inclusive category. Lakshminath's historical plays, and especially the *Chakradhwaj Singha* were instrumental in shaping such an identity.

Sudipta Kaviraj has argued that for the colonized Bengali middle classes in the nineteenth century historical fiction served as an arena where imagination could have free rein and the potential possibilities of history could be explored.⁹⁹⁷ Commenting on Kaviraj's observation from the perspective of the Marathi fiction of the similar period, Prachi Deshpande has stated that the same creative license of the novelists and playwrights enabled them to erase elements that told a story different from the one that fit the new imagined communities of Maharashtrian and Hindu Indians⁹⁹⁸. She has pointed out that certain aspects of past were repressed to produce Hindu and Muslim as historically separate and antagonistic categories, and Muslims were represented as cruel, barbaric, and arrogant.

The Assamese literature, as exemplified by the historical plays of Lakshminath, on the other hand, exhibited a relatively mature approach in dealing with the materials of history for the purpose of emerging identity of Assamese. In the *Joymoti*, Lakshminath, on the basis of oral

⁹⁹⁷ Kaviraj, Sudipta. *Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Discourse in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 163

history, and contrary to the colonial representation of the Naga people as cruel, barbaric, and heartless, imagined the Naga Hills as the abode of the fugitive prince Gadapani. Though the historical validity of the event could not be proved by any evidence, the possibility could not be ignored. Poetic imagination transformed the Naga Hills into an abode of love, faith, peace, and innocence. It was an idealized place of romantic imagination, where man and nature co-existed in an inseparable and harmonious relationship. Dalimi, the Naga girl with whom Gadapani developed an intimate relationship, was presented as the incarnation of simplicity, love, and ideal and divine beauty. She is like Shakespeare's Miranda. Gadapani ponders,

“Where does she belong: to the earth or paradise?”

Hill was depicted as the other of the plain, which was a place replete with lust and violence. Gadapani outspoken his heart,

“If for the rest of my life, I could have stayed here!”

Thus, in a rare moment of poetic imagination, the idealized space of romantic literature coalesced with the modern national space.

However, it was the period when *Chakradhwaj Singha* was published, and *Belimar* was in press, Lakshminath showed his aversion towards “writing the Ahom period things”. He planned a play entitled *Bhaskarvarman*, “to show the superior civilization of the period”, whose reign he claimed to be the climax of the Hindu civilization in Assam. He thought that unlike those “stand upon the events exploits of the Shan invaders”, it would be “a great Assamese Hindu National Drama”.⁹⁹⁹ In reality, the play was never written.

⁹⁹⁹ Lakshminath's letter to Hemchandra Gosawmi on 9 August, 1915, from Howrah in Neog, *Patralelha*, 1968, pp. 318-320.

Inscribing Prosaic in Literature

In the previous section, it is shown how Lakshminath's poetic imagination played freely on embodiment of the Naga hills as a paradise on earth. In fact, Romanticism was one of the most prevalent modes of the time in Indian literature. As one outcome of this, towards the last part of the nineteenth century, Indian literature in its varied forms of regional languages, exhibited a gradual shift from the external domain of body or lust to the internal domain of love. Literary modernity emphasized on purity of mind or *prem* as a celebratory property and explored it in *bhakti* poets of the medieval times. Simultaneously, modern literature, whether in form of prose narrative, or of lyric poetry, introduced a new conception of love based on a deep and purified emotion towards a particular person, which can never be supplemented by another. Love was defined as almost opposed to *kamana* or physical desire. Towards the end of the 1880s, the *Jonaki* group introduced such romanticized spiritual notion of love through their various literary creations, Lakshminath also being one among them.

Simultaneously, with print, prose came to be celebrated as the proper vehicle of writing literature, and modern genres like novel, short story, autobiography etc. were to be flourished. By 1892, a novel in book form was published by Padmanath Gohain Borooah from Calcutta, another two were already being serialized in the two periodicals of the time.¹⁰⁰⁰ One of them was written by Lakshminath, which, with slight change in its name, appeared as a book in

¹⁰⁰⁰ Hara Prasad Shastri, the Librarian of the Bengal Library reported in 1892, "For the first time in the history of the Assamese literature has appeared a novel in that language. [Sic] Nothing is more appreciated in Assam than history, and their first novel in that language therefore is a historical one. Lahori, by Babu Padma Nath Barua, describes the influence which Gohains exercise for good and for evil over the Assamese society. The plot of the work is interesting and has been developed with great care." *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department*, 1893, pp. 43-54.

1905.¹⁰⁰¹ All three were historicized romances, where the love theme was developed in the setting of the near past.¹⁰⁰²

The novel as an emerging genre in the 1890s aroused hot debates in Assamese. When Lakshminath serially published his novel in the *Jonaki*, Lambodar Borah, a senior writer from Assam questioned moral impact of the novel genre on the youth readers and claimed that novel's depiction of irrational and emotional love story was the prime responsible of some suicides committed by the sentimental readers, particularly of the younger age. He blamed the novels as entertaining and alluring, which through their indulgence to *ripu*, physical desire pushed the readers to lecherous activities. Both reading and writing novels were evil, and against the principles of Hindu culture. Lakshminath, as the editor of the *Jonaki*, though provided a space to the article, supplemented a counter argument with it, which started the periodical's stand. Novel for the editor was not immoral and evil. It argued that novels educated people not only through portrayal of ideal characters, but also depicting the human weaknesses as well. The editor objected to the critic's representation of the novel as lustful and pointed out that *kamana* or physical desire was not equivalent to love.¹⁰⁰³

In fact, novel as a social evil was a highly focused theme of the nineteenth century literary culture in India, from which Assamese literature was not an exception. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, a substantial part of Assam's educated section identified that novel reading had produced among women the negligence to their household activities of daily lives,

¹⁰⁰¹ Though he wrote a historical fiction in 1891 entitled *Padma Kumari*, which appeared in book form (entitled *Padum Kuwari*) in 1905, later he never attempted another of its kinds. The novel *Padum Kuwari* exhibited certain characters of a Gothic romance in the setting of medieval Assam.

¹⁰⁰² Two or three years later, another novel, coming away from the trend, presented a tragic love story of two innocent youths named Janki and Panei in the background of the contemporary life of the Mishing tribe of Assam.

¹⁰⁰³ "Upanyas Aru Atmahatya", *Jonaki*, Volume 4, Issue 3, 1891 (1813 Saka) in Saikia, *Jonaki Collection*, 2001, pp. 452-456.

which for them, indicated a bad sign for social morality. It was even highlighted as more harmful than the political turmoil of the precolonial Assam, popularly known as *Manar din*, which referred to the cruelty and oppression of the Burmese army, side by side with internal division and treachery among the nobles for power ultimately leading to occupation of the land by the British.

However, despite the intelligentsia's attempt to explain modern notion of love as ideal, and their celebration of novel as popular genre, Lakshminath realized the gap between the western educated classes and the vast illiterate masses of the contemporary society, which he delineated in a few humorous sketches based on the conjugal life of the early twentieth century Assam. In one of them, Jagara, a *mandal* or lower grade revenue official from a village visits the house of a young *vakil* and finds him with his friends enjoying the reading of a book. Inquiring about the nature of the book, he comes to know that it is a novel, which deals on the love between two human beings. Being astonished at the information, Jagara wonders at the value of reading a profane love story of two mortal human beings, though he believes in the spiritual value of the *kirtan* of the sacred love story of Krishna. Returning home, he tries to imitate what he heard in the reading session and addresses his wife as "darling" as it is being portrayed in the novel. Jagara's wife, being perplexed at his changed behavior and expressions, which she finds irrational and abnormal, gets shocked and while crying loudly, pours a bucket of cold water on his head to bring him back to the senses.¹⁰⁰⁴

In another portrayal, a college educated youth from a village marries a girl, who can hardly read the letters. The husband, being deeply touched by the romantic notion of love, always lives in an imaginary world. He, cut off from the practical side of life, tries to impress his recently wed wife on their first night of their union through a dialogue of Shakespearean play.

¹⁰⁰⁴ "Jagara Mangalar Premabhinay", *Banhi*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1909, pp. 2-6.

The wife, being frightened at his incongruous behaviour, shouts for help from others.¹⁰⁰⁵

Though burlesque in character, the sketches not only pointed out the ground reality of contemporary time, but also presented a critique of the confinement of literature in an enclave.

Taking Lakshminath's imaginative prose narratives as point of focus, we see that though he pioneered the realistic approach of the western literary form of short story in Assamese, his narrative styles assimilated the miraculous and irrational world of folktales, and at many points realistic mode was either disrupted or questioned through the implied voices of the narrators or other characters. The narrative techniques used by the author were so complex that they induced the readers to read multi-layered texts, which not only show the author's ambivalent position but also complex ways of seeing certain things related to tradition-modern dichotomy. If he developed a romantic love theme in a story, through interplaying several voices with distinctive point of views, the very concept of romantic attitude to life was questioned, thus inscribing another reading of the story. Similarly, if a story deals with the conflicts on personal choices between the husband and wife, the narrative strategy shows the issue as ludicrous to evoke laughter. Thus, in a self-reflexive turn of the fiction, the narratives expose the limitations of literary realism in Indian context.

While upholding love defined in terms of purity of mind as a valuable property of modern self and advocating it as the basic tenet of conjugal life, the literary modernity could not but portray the oppressions that took place in the inner domain of the family.¹⁰⁰⁶ Lakshminath, in a few of his stories, depicted characters of *navya nari* or new women, who being oppressed by their husbands, left the secured place of their family lives for their paternal home forever. Significantly enough, though he portrayed most of his fictional characters mostly as type or

¹⁰⁰⁵ "Amar Sansar" in Bezbaroa, *Sadhukathar Kuki*, 1910.

¹⁰⁰⁶ See chapter "Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Subject" in Chakravarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe, Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 117-148.

representative of a particular social class, his women characters are tried to be portrayed as individuated figures. One of such women characters has criticized the law and social customs of India as patriarchal and hostile to women and advocated new ones on the basis of rights of equality.¹⁰⁰⁷ In another story, a lower caste woman married voluntarily with a male from the Brahman caste, but after a few years, she was relinquished by her husband to marry another woman of his own caste at the will of his parents. Being deceived, she planned to lodge a complaint in the judicial court against the injustice done by her husband and went to the court of the nearby town by walking with a middle-aged man of her own relation as guardian. Suddenly, she became shocked at his lascivious gaze to her. She gave up her desire to go to the court, and gradually transformed into a devoted follower of Mahatma Gandhi.¹⁰⁰⁸

Another story depicted a detailed picture of the daily life of a traditional agriculturalist family. The husband is sowing the land, while his wife prepares food for him besides all other domestic work. As she fails to prepare and provide him the food in time, a quarrel between them takes place on the issue. The husband strikes her with a knife, and she is to be admitted to the hospital. When the judge asks the wife about the incident, she refuses to accuse her husband, and says that it is she who sleeps down to the knife to get a wound on the head. The repentant husband, on the other hand, weeps at the recognition of his misdeeds, admits his fault and chooses at his will to go to jail.¹⁰⁰⁹

¹⁰⁰⁷ “*Laliti Kakoti*”, *Banhi*, Volume 6, Issue 7, 1915 (1837 Saka), pp. 356-364.

¹⁰⁰⁸ “*Patmugi*”, *Banhi*, Volume 20, Issue 7, 1930 (1853 Saka), Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part I*, 1988, pp. 757-761.

¹⁰⁰⁹ “*Bhadari*” in Bezbaroa, *Sadhukathar Kuki*, 1910.

Conclusion

Thus, it is obvious that literary modernity in Indian context was not one and the same with the supposed western impact. The presence of the west as an ideal of ‘modern’ had been always overemphasized. While in modernity being shaped by the multiple universes of the vernaculars, experiences, and responses of the colonized curtailed the imaginative presence of the western as an ideal.

The chapter shows that print emerged as one of the shaping forces of literary modernity in South Asia. It further argues that earlier, the authorial attestation to a composition was not seen. In 1889, in the first issue of the *Jonaki*, *Litikai*, Lakshminath’s maiden attempt in literature was published in the name of *Shri La*. Other writers were also indicated through the initial letters of the names. Anonymity was the convention of the day. Twenty years later, the *Banhi*, from its beginning, published the writings with full authorial attestation. With the expansion of the readership, the name of the author came to bear an aura, which aroused in the regular readers certain expectations about the content, style, or in precise, their literary experiences. Lakshminath, by the time of the *Banhi*, developed a style of his own. He already became a familiar author to the readers. Readers waited for his writings, and gradually, his writings were being marketed by emphasizing the authorial name. Lakshminath developed a style of his own in prose, which emerged as a distinctive marker of him, and was celebrated as inimitable. Thus, despite the smaller size of the readership, Assamese literature, in its short trajectory of modernity soon produced a writer, who was canonized by it in the sense of Carlyle as the hero as writer. In the concluding chapter we will focus on the historical necessity of the time and the process involved with it which made it possible to perceive a celebratory figure in Lakshminath.

CONCLUSION

Making of a Hero

The chapter intends to concentrate on the process of making a hero in the realm of literature. It will try to understand the historical necessity of the society under which it explored a heroic figure in Lakshminath. The process, though, was initiated in his lifetime, in exalted moments of remembrance still came to be repeated. Statues are founded to remind the people of his presence, roads, places and public institutions were frequently named after him, Chairs are founded in the local Universities. The chapter explores how a literary persona has been constantly being made and unmade to serve the causes of the imagined life of a nationality, and elevated to the status of a hero. It will explore why Lakshminath was exclusively chosen for this purpose. It also concentrates on why a man of letters and a creative writer, rather than a contemporary politician, was chosen to represent a regional identity in Assam. The chapter identifies the changes that had occurred in the print public world of colonial South Asia, which largely determined the fate of a litterateur of the time. It outlines how a song composed by Lakshminath, without concern to its literary merit, came to signify the whole life of a nationality, and subsequently acquired a symbolic value. Thus, being elevated, singing that particular song has come to be assessed as a way of assertion of one's identity and belongingness. Finally, it also tries to recapitulate the findings of the study as a whole.

Last Days of the Life

By 1935, when Lakshminath had taken a stern stand on assertion of Assamese identity, and as a publicist as active as ever in his public life, his health had already deteriorated. He expressed the situation in a letter addressed to one of his daughters,

“My body is what it may remain at this age, this time good, and that time bad.”¹⁰¹⁰

His diaries of 1936 also have shown that now and then he had been suffering from fever and the physicians had to visit his home to check his health. Meanwhile, he gifted his Sambalpur house to Aruna, their eldest daughter through a registration deed.¹⁰¹¹ But at Sambalpur, he had to live with Prajnasundari alone. Two daughters were already married and lived with their families, Aruna at Baroda and Ratna at Dibrugarh. Dipika, the youngest one, after choosing the life of a nun, was in Europe. Letters were the sole medium of communication with them. Being concerned about his health issue, daughters began to warn him about his drinking habit, and Lakshminath argued for himself,

“In the evening, I take a peg of Gangajal named whisky, is it such a serious crime really?”¹⁰¹²

In 1937, an arrangement for his staying at Dibrugarh in Assam with Ratna for a while was made. Lakshminath also eagerly waited to visit Assam. He wrote to Aruna,

“My health is, to some extent, improving. Medication is going on. Ratna has not sent money yet. It will probably come at the last hour. *Naa ele, na gachchami*. If money does not arrive, we would not leave for Assam.”¹⁰¹³

Expressing his passionate desire to see Dipika, then in Europe, Lakshminath wrote in a letter to her,

¹⁰¹⁰ Lakshminath's letter to Aruna from Sambalpur on 30 July, 1935 in Neog, Maheshwar, ed. *Patralekha*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1968, pp. 116-117.

¹⁰¹¹ See entry on 25 November, 1936, *Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Diaries*, Digital Archive, Centre for Assamese Studies, Tezpur University (Henceforth, *Diaries*, Tezpur University).

¹⁰¹² Letter to Ratna written on 29 October, 1936 from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 140-141.

¹⁰¹³ Lakshminath's letter to Aruna, 23 May, 1937, from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 118-119.

“I have recovered completely, and have not left for Dibrugarh. Here the rainy season has come with cold, and in Assam, it is full monsoon now. They also haven’t sent money, and I think, it is only for good. I have already written to them that no need to send money now”¹⁰¹⁴

Ultimately, in November, 1937, Lakshminath left for Assam. Staying with his daughter, grandchildren and the son-in-law at Dibrugarh in Assam, and getting their care, he remained happy. In December, he wrote to Aruna,

“My health is improving. But slight irregularity of food even creates disturbance in my stomach. However, on the whole, I am good. It is very cold here. I cannot bear it, so I am getting (in) pain.”¹⁰¹⁵

He was weak, but already became a heroic figure in Assam and could not but attend a public felicitation to him and deliver a lecture.¹⁰¹⁶ People gathered to see and offer their homage to him at his sick-bed. He wrote in his diary in his natural style of sarcasm, “A wonderful creature I have become!”

Nevertheless, he thought of his house at Sambalpur, and his business, his sole way of livelihood and planned to go back there. In March, 1938, he was still expecting to return to Sambalpur.¹⁰¹⁷ A few days back, he wrote in another letter, “I am improving. It will be better if I can leave.”¹⁰¹⁸ Dipika was with them at Dibrugarh for some days. Lakshminath tried to be non-judgmental to her. He later wrote to Aruna, “I am treating her with love and care. She has done something out of her own conviction, though under the pressure of an alien advisor and circumstances. After all, it is nothing like theft or robbery or any repugnant act as such. It is also a way of

¹⁰¹⁴ Lakshminath’s letter to Deepika on 14 June, 1937 from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 152-153.

¹⁰¹⁵ Lakshminath’s letter to Aruna from Dibrugarh on 23 December, 1937 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 120.

¹⁰¹⁶ Ibid, p. 120-121.

¹⁰¹⁷ Lakshminath’s letter to Aruna on 12 and 15 March, 1938 from Dibrugarh in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 121-122.

¹⁰¹⁸ Lakshminath’s letter to Aruna on 22 February, 1938 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 121.

realization to God, by whatever name he may be addressed.”¹⁰¹⁹ Meanwhile, Chandrakumar Agarwala’s death came as a serious blow to him. He expressed his feelings in a note to Aruna, “Chandrakumar Agarwala is no more. I alone have been left out. Truly enough, I had no other friend like him.”¹⁰²⁰ Life did not keep more days ahead for him to go. It came to its full circle, and on 26 March, 1938 he died at Dibrugarh.¹⁰²¹

Long ago, Lakshminath poetically expressed his desire to die in Assam, to become one with the mighty river Brahmaputra, or the Luit,

“O Brahmaputra, Listen to me!

You are the living picture of my golden Assam

When my act in this earth will come to the end

Let the canoe of my life be engulfed by you

O Luit! Are you the same as the mythological river *Louhitya*?”¹⁰²²

It was as if through his death at Dibrugarh and his cremation at the sandbank of the Brahmaputra, his long-standing desire came to be realized.

¹⁰¹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁰ Lakshminath’s letter to Aruna on 15 March, 1938 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 122.

¹⁰²¹ Jnanadabhiram Borooah recalled that on 26 March, 1938 Lakshminath had to arrive at Guwahati railway station on his way back to Sambalpur and they had to meet there. Instead, he got a telegram from Rohini Kumar Borooah, son-in-law of Lakshminath, which carried the news of Lakshminath’s death at dawn. He wrote that the month of March in 1938 was a horrible month for Assam and Assamese people. See “Bezbaroa ” in Borooah, Jnanadabhiram. *Jnanadabhiram Borooah Rachanavali*. Edited by Jogendranarayan Bhuyan. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1981, pp. 242-248.

¹⁰²² “*Brahmaputra Sangit*”, *Banhi*, Vol 7, Issue 2, 1915 (1837 Saka), pp. 57-60.

After Life

Immediately after the death, the Assamese periodicals of the time took the task of publishing special commemorative volumes on him. Until then, no prior example of such special volumes was ever noticed in Assamese. The photos of his funeral ceremony were also published, which displayed public participation at the moment.¹⁰²³ Reporting his death from Tezpur, the *Bombay Chronicle* on 28 March described his demise as a loss to Assam literature, and Lakshminath was mentioned as the builder of modern Assamese literature.¹⁰²⁴ The *Avahan*'s editorial declared that *Bezbaroa Sahitya* was national wealth, and Lakshminath was the best *Jatiya Sahityik* of Assam.¹⁰²⁵ The *Asamiya* in its editorial said that Lakshminath was not only a *Sahityarathi*, but also a pioneer of culture, civilization, freedom and nationality of Assam.¹⁰²⁶ A condolence meeting took place immediately on 29 March, 1938 at Ashutosh Building of Calcutta at the aegis of Assamese residents there. The same day, another condolence meeting was held at the Curzon Hall of Guwahati. It immediately formed *Lakshminath Bezbaroa Smriti Samiti*, which took a resolution to build a *Smriti Mandir* of Lakshminath. However, it took thirteen years of time, when a statue, built solely in the public initiative was brought from Calcutta to be founded, and after some controversy about the place to erect it, ultimately in July, 1951, Joyram Doulatram, then Governor of Assam inaugurated it.¹⁰²⁷

¹⁰²³ *Avahan*, *Bardoichila*, *Jayanti* and *Assam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, these were the periodicals which published special commemorative volumes on the occasion. *Avahan*, 1938 (*Jeth*, 1860 Saka).

¹⁰²⁴ *Bombay Chronicle*, 28 March, 1938, Bombay, p. 12.

¹⁰²⁵ *Avahan*, Volume 9, Issue 4, 1938 (1860 Saka).

¹⁰²⁶ "*Asamiya*", Republished in Editorial in *Avahan*, Volume 9, Issue 4, 1938, p. 398.

¹⁰²⁷ Medhi, Kaliram. *Kaliram Medhi Smritimalya*. Edited by Ramcharan Thakuriya. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1978. pp. 63-64.

Within a year, the first literary portrait, a biography on him was also published, which came out with a foreword written by Rabindranath.¹⁰²⁸ Lakshminath's sincere dedication for the upliftment of regional literature was recognized by Rabindranath as fulfilment of unity in diversity,

“It is only through explorations of the cornucopia of all provincial literatures, exchange of the best of each literature with others will be possible, which ultimately will accelerate the unity based on respect to each other. In his lifetime, Lakshminath made persistent attempts for this, and, I expect, after his death his influence for such unity will subsist.”¹⁰²⁹

Quoting a letter from Satyavrata Mukherjee, Lakshminath's son-in-law, Kamaleswar Chaliha attested that, in assessment of an author as devoted as Lakshminath for the development of national literature of Assam, recognition from outside is less significant than the affection the readership of Assam had shown to him.¹⁰³⁰ In the Assamese literary sphere, Lakshminath already emerged as a larger-than-life figure. Mahendranath Dekaphukan, an inspired youth of the time, composed *Bezbaroar Geet*, a traditional heroic ballad on Lakshminath, which exhorted the audience to celebrate Lakshminath as an idol and inspiration for them.¹⁰³¹

Interestingly enough, instead of Lakshminath's reputation as a confirmed nationalist, Kamaleswar Chaliha's book presented him as a *Viswarasik*, a true lover of the world. As a matter of fact, Lakshminath aroused different kinds of response among the Assamese intelligentsia, both contemporary and of later period, and they showed divided opinions in matters of his ideology. In 1968, publishing a souvenir on Lakshminath, the principal secretary

¹⁰²⁸ Chaliha, Kamaleswar. *Viswarasik Lakshminath Bezbaroa*. Jorhat: Barkataki Printers, 1939.

¹⁰²⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁰ “*Patani*” in Chaliha, *Viswarasik Lakshminath Bezbaroa*, 1939.

¹⁰³¹ Dekaphukan, Mahendranath. *Monai Bairagi Birachita Srisri Bezbaroar Geet*. Howrah: Banhi Publishing House, 1939.

of the Asam Sahitya Sabha identified Lakshminath as an “aggressive nationalist”, who was ever ready to defend the causes of Assam, and who contributed in all aspects of literary modernity in Assamese.¹⁰³² Contrary to that, Haliram Deka, who knew Lakshminath personally claimed that Lakshminath liked to call himself a cosmopolitan.¹⁰³³ Birinchi Kumar Borooah of the same generation, later known for his research works on folklore, also focused that Lakshminath’s nationalism was free of insularity and bigotry.¹⁰³⁴ Prior to that, in 1967, the Indian Sahitya Akademi had published a biography of him under the Makers of Indian Literature Series, which was compiled by Hem Borooah.¹⁰³⁵ The book presented him as “the principal architect” of Assamese literature. Emphasis was given that no other individual of his time contributed to it with “so much wonderful devotion and versatility” as did Lakshminath.¹⁰³⁶ In the month of October of the same year, another compilation on him was published by Shashi Sharma to make a literary assessment of him. It, while initiating discussion on various aspects of Lakshminath’s literary works, insisted on his personality as a driving force to the Assamese regional identity.¹⁰³⁷

In 1944, the first part of his autobiography appeared in book-form from the *Banhi* press, published with the intention to keep his memory alive,¹⁰³⁸ followed by its translation to

¹⁰³² See Neog, Hariprasad. “*Pradhan Sampadakar Nibedan*” in Devagoswami, Mahesh Chandra, ed. *Bezbaroa-Prativa*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1968.

¹⁰³³ See Deka, Holiram. “*Bezbaroar Udar Dristi (Prakriti Bichar)*” in Devagoswami, *Bezbaroa-Prativa*, 1968. pp. 228-232. The essay originally appeared in Banhi’s special Bezbaroa issue (Volume 26.)

¹⁰³⁴ Borooah, Birinchi Kumar. “*Bezbaroar Jatiya Kavita*” in Devagoswami, *Bezbaroa-Prativa*, 1968, pp. 241-243. The essay originally appeared in *Banhi*’s special Bezbaroa issue (Volume 26).

¹⁰³⁵ Barua, Hem. *Makers of Indian Literature Series: Lakshminath Bezbaroa*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1967.

¹⁰³⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁷ Sharma, Shashi. *Rasaraj Bezbaroa*. Nalbari: Duttaborooah & Company, 1967.

¹⁰³⁸ “*Mor Jiban Sowaran, Pratham Scandha, Balyakal*”, Banhi Press, Calcutta, 1944 (1868 Saka).

Bengali, appeared in 1957, which was published by the Indian Sahitya Akademi.¹⁰³⁹ Lakshminath's wife Prajnasundari expressed her concern to publish Lakshminath's works immediately after his death. She, in a letter to Jyotiprasad Agarwala expressed her desire to publish his entire writings, which, however, never materialized in her lifetime. In 1964, the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* took a resolution to the birth-centenary celebration of Lakshminath in 1968, and formed a committee for the purpose.¹⁰⁴⁰ In 1966, it was resolved to collect and edit the entire literary works of Lakshminath in a volume by the Sahitya Sabha, to be published by the Sahitya Prakash of Guwahati, as it was already arranged by the family of Lakshminath with the publication agency. Thus, it was only in 1968, as part of his birth centenary celebration almost all of his writings including his personal letters and diaries appeared in print form. On the occasion, the Centenary Celebration Publication Committee requested the provincial government of Assam to assist with a financial grant, which was rejected by the government for its alleged financial inability. However, as a way to boost, the government promised to instruct educational institutions to buy copies of the publications.¹⁰⁴¹ On 5 October, 1968, the India Posts and Telegraph Department, as part of his birth centenary, had published a twenty-paisa postal stamp on him as homage. The stamp bears a portrait of Lakshminath at the right half side, and an open book with a quill is shown between the word "Bharat" in Hindi at the top, and "India" in English at the bottom in the left half of it.¹⁰⁴² Besides Assam, the birth centenary celebration was observed in some of the major cities of India and abroad including

¹⁰³⁹ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Amar Jibansmriti*. Translated by Arati Tagore. New Delhi: Indian Sahitya Akademi, 1957.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Until the Centenary Celebration of Lakshminath in 1968, it was assumed that Lakshminath was born in 1868, the year, once officially declared by Lakshminath as the year of his birth, but later it came to the fore from testimonials that he was actually born in 1864.

¹⁰⁴¹ Neog, Hariprasad. "Nibedan", Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Bezbaroa Granthavali: Part I*. Edited by Atulchandra Hazarika. Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 1968.

¹⁰⁴² Issued on 5 October, 1968, Indian Post, <http://indianpost.com>.

Calcutta and Sambalpur. As a matter of fact, it was mostly at the initiative of the intelligentsia of Assam, and their consistent attempt, Lakshminath remained at constant focus in Assam.

However, as we have already pointed out, Lakshminath, as a literary figure, was little known outside Assam. Showing penitence at the situation, the Assamese intelligentsia tried to emphasize that taking his colossal image in Assam as the restorer of the *Jati*, *Jatiya Bhasa* and *Jatiya Sahitya* into consideration, recognition from outside was worth less. Evidently, in the history of modern Assam, it was for the first time, a contemporary person has got such wide and collective acclaim from the people. In the next sections of the chapter, we will try to understand the making of a celebratory figure of Lakshminath by the intelligentsia.

In Search of a Hero as Writer

On May 19 of 1840, Thomas Carlyle delivered his lecture Hero as Man of Letters, the fifth one of the series of Heroes and Hero Worship. Here Carlyle focused on the emerging “Hero as man of Letters”, a product of the new age as the dominant hero, who, according to Carlyle, will remain in the same elevated position as long as the art of writing and printing will subsist. Highlighting the role of printing, Carlyle delineated print as equivalent to democracy, whereas literature was described as the parliament. He argued that without any concern to whatever the rank one possessed earlier, through print, one can speak to the whole nation. The press for him was to superseding the pulpit, the senate, the academics, and much else.¹⁰⁴³

What Carlyle had said about nineteenth-century Europe was partly true of colonial India. Print and mass education had produced at least at theoretical level a possibility of formation of a literate community, a requisite for democratization of Indian society. By the last decades of

¹⁰⁴³ See the chapter “Hero as man of Letters” in Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Project Gutenberg Edition, 2008 (First Published in 1841), p. 224.

the nineteenth century, with the expansion of print culture, the emergence of such a community became palpable. In the realm of literature, one's authority did not emanate from one's social status, rather it was one's status that came to be determined by the very act of one's participation in the discourse of literature. The disruption of literary patronization and expansion of print had enabled a new relationship among the writers and readers, in which, communication with readers became unavoidable aspects of any literary creations. Reader, however anonymous he or she may be, became part of the consciousness of a writer at work. Literary circles and periodicals were accessible to all, where one's social or economic privilege was suspended so that participation and discussions from all blocs of a society might be possible. It is an arena where without any acknowledgement to social status, people could meet, and exchange their views to form public opinions.

It was in this backdrop, towards the end of the nineteenth century, among the western educated class of colonial India, the Carlylean notion of writer-hero became a familiar concept. Rabindranath in Bengali extensively used the term *sahitya-beer* to denote authors, heroes in the realm of the literary.¹⁰⁴⁴ In Assamese, the epithet *sahityarathi* was coined to stand for the same. Literally, the term *sahityarathi* means a warrior or a charioteer in the realm of literature. Initially, all prominent literary figures of the time were signified by the term, by which their contributions towards an emerging literature were indicated.¹⁰⁴⁵ A writer or group of writers

¹⁰⁴⁴ “*Saundaryya o Sahitya*” in Tagore, Rabindranath. *Sahitya*, 1912 (1314 Bangabda), p. 79.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Enough examples of the use of the term by Lakshminath, as well as his contemporaries in this general sense are available for us. Ambikanath Borah, in 1930, from the Presidential chair of the newly- founded ‘Bezbaroa Samiti’ declared, “We are not going to disregard other *Sahityarathies* of Assamese literature. We, in fact, are going to establish a foundation to study all writers.” See *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 2, 1930. However, from when the term came to be used in Assamese exclusively to refer to Lakshminath requires further enquiry. In 1956, the *Bombay Chronicle*, while reporting publication of “Tales of a Grandfather from Assam”, an English translation of a Lakshminath’s folktales collection, mentioned him as ‘Sahitya Rathi’. See “Assam Folk-Tales Delight Readers”, *Bombay Chronicle*, Bombay, Sunday, January, 1956.

assumes an analogy with epic heroes can certainly suggest the role assigned by a society to literature as a whole. In the colonial situation of India, particularly in a non-regulation province like Assam, where the intelligentsia had very little scope of participating in the democratic process, literature was imagined more as a battlefield rather than as a parliament. Without any doubt, the notion of literature as a contesting ground is intimately related with the prevailing ideas of *jatiya bhasa* and *jatiya sahitya*, and Lakshminath's analogy with a warrior hero was conceived to focus his role as custodian of them.

Despite the smaller size of the readership, Assamese literature, in its short trajectory of modernity soon produced a writer, who was canonized by the contemporary literary circles in the sense of Carlyle as the hero as writer. Perhaps, it was only posthumously the epithet “*Sahityarathi*” became an integral part of the nomenclature of Lakshminath; no one officially bestowed the title on him though.¹⁰⁴⁶ Without print, periodicals and other public sphere organizations, Lakshminath's image as an intellectual and heroic literary personality is inconceivable. He lived in a time, when literature in Assam was neither fully professionalized, nor it emerged as a specialized arena largely practiced by academicians.¹⁰⁴⁷ On the other hand,

¹⁰⁴⁶ It was since 1968, when the birth centenary celebration of Lakshminath was observed all over Assam, including some metropolis and other localities of India and abroad, the term in this specific and restricted meaning got wide circulation, while general use of the epithet gradually became extinct. At present, the term is used exclusively as a prefix to Lakshminath.

¹⁰⁴⁷ In the case of Tamil, David Shulman has claimed that it is through the institution of language-learning as an educational objective in its own right, more self-conscious acquisition of language became possible, which ultimately helped South Indian languages to develop as parallel communication mediums. See Shulman, David. *Tamil: A Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. Study of language and literature as part of curriculum has a tremendous impact on the growth of regional literature in India. In 1918 and 1919, Calcutta University recommended Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Sadhukathar Kuki* for the paper of Vernacular Composition in Assamese as a Matriculation textbook. See Calcutta University. *Calcutta University Calendar, 1917*. Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, Senate House, 1917, pp. 380, 388. However, it was only by the 1920s, the Assamese literature got entry into the B. A. and M. A. curriculum of the Calcutta University, whereas, apart from teaching and doing other jobs, textbook writing had already become a good profession in Bengali. In the same decade,

with the disintegration of the pre-colonial regime, patronization from the nobles was on the ebb, and literature became disburdened from its former engagement with the aristocracy.

As the political self of the emerging intelligentsia under colonial rule was denied, literature became a subterfuge for articulating the political. Living under the colonial regime, they masked their political motivation under the umbrella term of “literature” or *jatiya bhasa* and *sahitya*, and chose to remain apolitical. The intelligentsia of Assam of the times was yet to be consolidated enough, though being a homogenized community, they still possessed common political interest. The word *Sahityarathi*, in a sense, reflects the Assamese intelligentsia’s will to celebrate a literary icon, whose distance from politics was held to be the apolitical character of literature per se. From the perspective of the Assamese intelligentsia, it was a convenient position to fight for assertion of right as a community without being prone to the oppression of the colonial rulers.

Literature was the apparatus, through which, the intelligentsia could unearth the contradictory nature of the colonial rule that explicitly espoused discourse of rationalism and progress, but often exhibited its tendentiousness to patronize a discriminatory regime. It is not to say that literary discourse of the period had posed a subversive critique of colonial rule and existing social order. Contrary to that, to a certain degree, it made adjustments with both, and acted in a reformist and conservative line. In Assam, the situation was further complicated by the small size of the readership, which was crucial for independent growth of a book market, and print arena as a whole. The authors and publicists, whether voluntarily or not, had to look for patronization of the government. In 1910, Lakshminath, as the editor of the *Banhi*, publicly

Assamese became part of intermediate and B. A. curriculum of Benares Hindu University, Lakshminath’s *Joymoti* and *Belimar* respectively being recognized as textbooks. Benares Hindu University. *Benares Hindu University Prospectus of Studies*, 1927. Benares Hindu University, 1927. However, Assam, instead of public demand, had to wait till 1948 to establish its first university.

expressed his opinion in favour of the government patronization of the vernacular journals. He wrote an introduction of the *Biswabarta*, a government sponsored Assamese newspaper published from Dacca in Assamese, and criticized the other papers' hostile attitude to it for getting financial support from the government, and hence the role played by it as a mouthpiece of the colonial administration. Lakshminath pointed out that the Bengali *Sulabh Samachar* of the time also got government financial assistance, but never was criticized for that. Taking count of the tremendous financial hurdle faced by a publicist in Assam, getting government support could be no way objectionable.¹⁰⁴⁸

Coming to the social role of literature, whatever be its ideology, literature was often assessed as part of social responsibilities. Literature and imaginative literature in particular, according to its self-image was a universal and disinterested phenomenon, and dissociated from immediate politics. Nevertheless, in colonial context, such a proposition hardly could work throughout. The periodicals like *Jonaki* or *Banhi* articulated and formed public opinions. They even made endeavours to work as educational instruments for the people. It was a world, where boundaries between literature and politics, fictitious and non-fictitious, pleasure and education were not clearly defined. The journal like the *Banhi* encompassed politics, philosophy, religion, public health, poetry, history, economics and all such subjects. An author or editor was perceived less as a litterateur in the recent connotation of his specialized knowledge, but more as a critique of contemporary society. Socially marginal professionalism of the academy was still in an inchoate stage, and amateurism was in vogue. Since a mass market around books and periodicals was still inconceivable in Assam, literature had to wait to be amenable to the market forces. The readership discerned in Lakshminath a custodian of a regional identity. It is not out of relevance that Banikanta Kakati, instead of his engagement with literary studies and close

¹⁰⁴⁸ *Banhi*, Volume 2, Issue 2, 1910.

acquaintance with the western literary perception and canon, understated the artistic merits of his writings, and focused on *deshaprem*, or patriotism as the most admirable quality of him as author.¹⁰⁴⁹

It took a long time for the elevation of a writer to the status of a national icon. In September, 1910, Lakshminath came to Assam to meet his bed-ridden mother at Golaghat, a mofussil town of Assam. He reached the place on the 10 September.¹⁰⁵⁰ Four days later, he had to attend a tea party held at a local club. Metropolis in colonial India nourished a public culture largely in imitation of the European lives, which was immediately adopted by the elite in the mofussils. By the first decade of the twentieth century, club-culture became a part of the lives of a section of the people of a small town like Golaghat. On the occasion, in the western fashion, the club was grandly decorated. Lakshminath delivered a lecture on the Assamese language, which was his life-long concern. Coming away from what was a *la mode* those days, he delivered the speech in Assamese instead of English, and the lecture was appreciated by the audience. In fact, that was the first public ovation offered to him in any place of Assam as recognition of his services to language and literature.

The year 1916 may be taken as an entry point to understand the process of elevation of literature as a dominant discursive formation of the time in Assam. Meanwhile, all major literary works of Lakshminath, whether poetry, novel, historical plays, biography etc. were published, and the *Banhi* was being published and edited by him. By 1916, a sharpened political consciousness was on its headway in Assam, and the annual session of the Assam Association of the year for

¹⁰⁴⁹ Banikanta Kakati's essay "*Bezbaroa*" read in the sitting of the Bezbaroa Samiti, held at Presidency College, Calcutta, 1931. See *Avahan*, Volume 9, Issue 4, 1938 (1859 Saka), pp. 373-376. The essay originally appeared in the *Avahan*, Volume 1, Issue 5, 1930.

¹⁰⁵⁰ He wrote in his diary that day, "Saw mother lying bed ridden, emaciated. Tears rolled down from my eyes at the sight." See entry on 10 September, 1910, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

the first time attracted persons, men and women, “both from the high and low brows”, from towns and interior countryside, who sat rubbing their shoulders in a national forum “without distinction of class and caste”.¹⁰⁵¹ As recalled by a delegate present in the session, it was “a huge crowd”.¹⁰⁵² Lakshminath was invited to the session to chair the newly founded student organization of Assam, which he attended with his wife and daughters. Addressing a gathering of the youths on the occasion, he appealed to them to maintain distance from the politics, and equated the extremist politics of contemporary Bengal with “sin” like sedition, robbery and human killing.¹⁰⁵³ He even expressed his satisfaction at the Assamese youth’s reluctance for being involved in such seditious activities.¹⁰⁵⁴ Revisiting his public speech on the platform of the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan* in Guwahati, also the writings of the period, against the political scenario of the time in India and all over the world, we can make an assessment of his political stance.¹⁰⁵⁵

¹⁰⁵¹ “New Awakening in Assam”, Unpublished Reminiscence of Prasanna Kumar Borooah, Dibrugarh, Assam, Assam Association File, Political History of Assam, Assam State Archives.

¹⁰⁵² Ibid. Though the exact number of participants and audience in the session is not known to us, a police report of the period has shown that around 600 people were present in the 1918 session held at Goalpara. Abstract taken from Assam Police, Assam Association File, Political History of Assam, Assam State Archives. According to a report published in the *Asam Bilasini*, the audience consisted of around 500 persons.

¹⁰⁵³ During this period, anti-colonial waves were in the air, and a number of seditious literatures were being circulated particularly among the youths. According to a police report several ‘*seditious pamphlets*’ were found in various districts of the province, the chief among them were ‘*the Liberty Leaflets*’. But instead of ‘vigorous enquiries’, made to discover who was responsible for these, nothing was known. See Herbert, D. *Report of the Police Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1914*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1915, p. 25.

¹⁰⁵⁴ According to the Police records of 1917, 254 cases of riots were tried in Assam, which involved 2458 persons, of which 168 ended with conviction of 1166 persons. 16 cases of rioting in Sylhet, 1 in Cachar, 2 in Durrang, 2 in Nowgong were attended with loss of lives. Herbert, D. *Report of the Police Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1917*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1917. p. 19.

¹⁰⁵⁵ In fact, the intelligentsia of Assam, by that time, as a whole preferred to show their loyalty to the government. The journals of the time declared on behalf of Assam confirmed their stand that ‘*the votaries of Swadeshi and Swaraj*’ never could expect the people to follow their lead, so long as their programme was ‘*bloodshed, violence,*

In 1916, while offering their invitation to preside over the founding conference of the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan*, the youths from the province offered a public recognition to him. At his arrival by train, a few students from Guwahati escorted him from the Amingaon railway station, and then a procession consisting of elders and youths welcomed and garlanded him at the Guwahati station. Formerly, such welcome was offered only to the top colonial officers like the Chief Commissioner of Assam or the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal on the occasion of their visit to the various localities of the province. In the twentieth century, the intelligentsia began to adopt such ceremonial practices to offer public greetings to the distinguished public personalities of Assam on some exultant moments.

Lakshminath's speech in the students' meet insisted on the importance of order and restraint for the youths. The speech, especially his propagation of spiritual attitude to life, reportedly aroused mixed feelings among the student community of Assam. He, in the speech, made a harsh critique of belligerent Germany and referred to Nietzsche as the propagator of the modern *vamanay shashtra*, whose philosophy was called intellectual manifestation of European power-craze and aggressiveness. He simultaneously praised England as redeemer of the poor and harbinger of happiness, peace and progress. His loyalty to the British government was directly said,

“It is our good luck that we have been ruled by such a ruler!”¹⁰⁵⁶

Coming to Assam, Lakshminath, in the speech praised the Chief Commissioner “Earle Bahadur” as *prajaranjak* and *upakari*, both benevolent and beneficial for his decision to

and disorder'. The *Assam Banti* even appealed to discontinue subscribing newspapers permeated with '*sedition sentiments*.' See "Report of the Native owned English and Vernacular Newspaper", File no. 83, 1910, Home (Political), Assam State Archives.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Speech delivered in the First Conference of the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan*, 1916, pp. 1835-1848.

provide primary education in Assam *in gratis*.¹⁰⁵⁷ With the spread of the democratic ideal, as well as the idea of political citizenship among the intelligentsia of South Asia, universal education had already become a subject of serious concern. But this faith in colonial rule had gradually faded away. Two years later, from the chair of the President of the Assam Association, Tarunram Phukan criticized the government for spending “very little on education”. He claimed that the major portion of money sanctioned on education was spent for the European staff, whereas the demand of the time was “compulsory and free” primary education.¹⁰⁵⁸ However, coming away from his previous position, Lakshminath, in a later article exposed two faces of England—one was of liberal ideas and another of oppression to the colony. The European nations did not attain liberty in its true sense. Because liberty enjoyed by a handful of rich and powerful to exercise power over the ninety-nine percent poor and weak could not be called liberty at all. In contrast, Gandhi’s advocacy for universal freedom is real freedom.¹⁰⁵⁹

In 1917, the intelligentsia formed a literary body named the *Asam Sahitya Sabha*. From its inception, the Sabha held its annual session at the same location, following the day of the annual session of the Assam Association, the forerunner of the Assam Congress. Both consisted of almost the same members, and with the same participants of the annual conference. It continued

¹⁰⁵⁷ The Coronation grants for the extension of elementary education in Assam had been partly used for the extinction of fees in upper primary and middle vernacular schools, and by that, since 1914, Primary and middle vernacular education became free in Assam. Indian Statutory Commission. *Memorandum submitted by the Government of Assam to the Indian Statutory Commission, XIV*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1930, p. 496.

¹⁰⁵⁸ See “Abstract of Assam Police’s File on the Assam Association”, File no. 114, Political History of Assam, Assam State Archives.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Tarunram, a close one to Lakshminath, challenged the already prevalent idea of Assam as a ‘backward’ province, and the Chief Commissioner’s doubt regarding the introduction of the Reform schemes in full. He argued that in Assam, *satras* and village communities had always been exercising self-governance. See “Abstract of Assam Police File on Assam Association”, File No. 114, Political History of Assam File, Assam State Archives.

until 1920, when the Association dissolved itself to form the Assam provincial committee of the All-India Congress. According to a literary activist of the time, the resolution to hold the annual sessions in the same place was mostly tactical. As the intelligentsia of Assam was largely composed of government servants, it seemed to be less problematic to participate in a literary conference than in a political forum.¹⁰⁶⁰

An important phenomenon, which substantially contributed towards the conception of the writer's image as a heroic figure was the visibility of the authors in the public domain. Earlier, authors were masked in anonymity, or signed the writings with the initial letter of the names, lurking behind the scene to be easily ignored or forgotten by the readers. But towards the turn of the nineteenth century, authors came to the forefront, and emerged as a distinctive category. The authorial signature increasingly came to be associated with individuated writings. The authorial name became the bearers of power and esteem. In 1889, *Litikai*, Lakshminath's maiden attempt in literature was published in the first issue of the *Jonaki*, in the name of *Shri La*. Other writers were also indicated through the initial letters of their names. Anonymity was the convention of the day, which soon became extinct. Twenty years later, the *Banhi*, from its beginning, published the writings with full authorial attestation.

Authors and the reading public of the times more or less came from the same social strata and even in some ways were intimate to the writers. Lakshminath's readership not only exhibited a homogenized character, but also shared the same political aspirations with the authors to a certain degree. As readers of Assamese literature, they came to form a unitary

¹⁰⁶⁰ Goswami, Pratapchandra. *Jeevansmriti aru Kamrupi Samaj*. Gauhati: Pratul Goswami, 1971, pp. 128-129. As indicated by a letter written by Jatindranath Dowerah to Lakshminath, it is imaginable that Lakshminath, in his presidential address of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, criticized the service holder Assamese and domiciled Bengali, a portion, that was cut by Jatindranth, because in the platform of the *Sahitya Sabha*, most of the presence was of the service holders, so Jatindranath felt there was no need of heartening them. See Jatindranath's letter dated 13 December, 1924 from Calcutta in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 258-259.

identity. In the reciprocal process, Lakshminath's popularity as a writer also stimulated the realization of this felt unity too. Playing the significant role of the foremost architect of public opinion of the time, in most of the instances, he expressed the shared interests. As an editor of a journal, sometimes his role was mostly as a populariser of certain issues. With the expansion of the readership, the name of the author came to bear an aura, and it aroused in the regular readers certain expectations about the content, style, or in precise, their literary experiences. Lakshminath developed a style of his own, and already became familiar to the readers. Perhaps, he was the first author in modern Assamese literature, who earned a certain degree of popularity among the readers. Readers waited for his writings, and gradually, his writings were being marketed by highlighting the authorial name.¹⁰⁶¹ A far-reaching impact of authorial attestation to literature was felt in the consciousness of the new readership of the time, so much so that, in 1930, the term "*Bezbaroa Sahitya*" was coined by the readership of Lakshminath to pinpoint the distinctiveness of his writings. Along with other qualities, an inimitable prose style was attached with him by them as his personal stamp. His prose style was already recognized as an ideal one, certified by Banikanta Kakati, to be essentially read and imitated by everyone, who aspired to write in Assamese.¹⁰⁶²

Considering the size of the reading public of colonial South Asia, where the majority of the population was either illiterate or barely literate, Carlylean notion of literature as an address to a "whole nation" is inapplicable here. In practice, there remained little scope for the majority of the people to participate in the realm of literature and any rationalistic discourse. A new boundary line was drawn as a division mark between who could spell out the rational argument

¹⁰⁶¹ *Banhi*, Volume 20, Issue 8, 1930. An advertisement published in the last leaf of the periodical focused on humorous essays of Lakshminath Bezbaroa (Kripabor), as well as his column entitled *Kahudi aru Kharali*.

¹⁰⁶² Banikanta Kakati's essay "*Bezbaroa*" read in the sitting of the Bezbaroa Samiti, held at Presidency College, Calcutta, 1931. See *Avahan*, Volume 9, Issue 4, 1938 (1859 Saka), pp. 373-376. The essay originally appeared in the *Avahan*, Volume 1, Issue 5, 1930.

and who could not. Nonetheless, Lakshminath lived in a time when literature was appropriated to elevate the social-prestige of the emerging intelligentsia. Concomitantly, literature was offered the status of the most celebrated of all public arenas of the time. Literature provided the critique of the traditional society based on hierarchical order. It deployed itself to serve the psychological needs of the enlightened section, and thus tried to make it a substitute of religion.

Canonization of a Writer: Why Lakshminath

Youths of the times, as the intellectually and culturally advanced section of the society were in search of a literary and political platform for them. While conceiving one for that purpose, no one but Lakshminath was the immediate choice for them as the spearhead. Apart from his popularity as a writer which had made an impact on them, his engagement as the editor of the *Banhi* was the propulsion behind their choice. The *Banhi* provided him a public voice to enunciate the interests of the land and language, and as we have already discussed, became instrumental for his constant relationship with the land, from which he had been for long in separation.

After a few years, it was in the prime initiative of these youths, Assam stepped a pace towards taking active participation in the Indian National Congress-led nationalist struggle of India. Simultaneously, they showed their earnest longing to keep up with their agenda of regional linguistic identity of Assam. So, the youth's struggle took a distinctive two-tier turn. In the 1920s, with the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in the field of the nationalistic struggle of India, Assam's intelligentsia, and youths in particular discovered in him an iconic figure to celebrate as the leader and ideal in the realm of anti-colonial politics. But their search for a literary icon as the symbol of the regional linguistic identity was still unresolved, and the quest was still there. In 1924, while the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* offered its presidential chair to Lakshminath, it brought an opportunity for Lakshminath to enhance his acceptability among all sections of the

intelligentsia. Articulating the intention, Jatindranath Dowerah, who then supervised the printing work of the draft of Lakshminath's Presidential address for the conference, wrote in a letter to Lakshminath, that he should avoid criticism to the service holder Assamese and the domiciled Bengali in the speech, because the audience in the conference was largely comprised of the government servants, and he should remain "above criticism".¹⁰⁶³ Later he confirmed in another letter that the conference was a "huge success", and no one of the time could compete with Lakshminath's public image in Assam.¹⁰⁶⁴ Jatindranath wrote to him that people of Assam were eagerly waiting to welcome him in Assam.¹⁰⁶⁵

Not only the younger generation, but also among his cohorts in Assam, Lakshminath had some ardent followers and friends. Chandrakumar Agarwala was such an instance, who in 1920, wrote an impassioned letter to Lakshminath,

"Why can't you come to Assam, and cast your lot with us? We will elect you to the Assam Council or to the India Council. None of your wailings, Bez- Come, and do something you are destined for. You are wanted here and not in the jungles of Sambalpur."¹⁰⁶⁶

In another letter, in 1936, Chandrakumar again wrote to him that if Lakshminath were in Assam, he without any doubt could be a member of the Assam Legislative Council.¹⁰⁶⁷ Contrary to that, Chandrakumar's assessment of the leaders of the Assam Congress was critical

¹⁰⁶³ Jatindranath Dowerah's letter to Lakshminath on 13 December, 1924, Calcutta in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 255-257.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Pratapchandra Goswami, a chief patron of the *Assam Bandhav*, wrote that authors and leading figures like Padmanath Gohainborooah and Satyanath Borah were austere on their stand against the use of Kamrupi words in literary language, whereas, instead of the Assam Bandhav's dispute with the Banhi on standard print language, he mentioned Lakshminath with utmost reverence. Goswami, *Jeevan Smriti and Kamrupi Samaj*, 1971, pp. 114-120.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Jatindranath's letter to Lakshminath on 28 January, 1925 and 21 December, 1926 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 258, 266.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Chandrakumar's letter on 2 June, 1920 from Dibrugarh in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 180-181.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Chandrakumar's letter on 25 September, 1936 from Guwahati in Neog, *Patralekha*, pp. 198.

in tone.¹⁰⁶⁸ Jatindranath, in 1927, declared his stand against the political line the *Banhi* had taken at that time. He wrote to Lakshminath in a letter that politics was divisive and parochial, and such a sectarian political stand would deviate the periodical from its former independent tone. He believed that only Lakshminath had the capacity to retain the periodical as a platform of broader unitarian political line, which its management did not possess. If the periodical continues that narrow political line, it would lose its former distinctiveness, and simultaneously its acceptability among the people.¹⁰⁶⁹

As we have already seen, towards the last years of the 1920s, the Assamese intelligentsia showed their consensus to work collectively for construction of a broader foundation of the Assamese nationality. It was the call of the time that they, understating their difference of opinions, wanted to stand on the issue of larger unity of Assam. In 1931, Rajanikanta Bardoloi, who once took his stand against Lakshminath in a long debate on the issue of *Mahapurushiya* sect of Assam, wrote that they should articulate their views on behalf of the Moamariyas, who for long had to remain victim of groundless invectives. He argued that *gosains* of the *satras* were allegedly high-born, and belonged to Bhuyan caste, nonetheless, the disciples of the Moamariya *satras* were real *Mahapurushiya*.¹⁰⁷⁰ Even Padmanath Gohainborooah, presumed to be a rival of Lakshminath in literary pursuit, in 1936, while going through a critical phase of

¹⁰⁶⁸ Chandrakumar wrote, “Bishnu Medhi and Hem Borooah are organizing meetings. Tarun Phukan also may do the same. Nabin Bardoloi is swayed in between (*kakbakai phuriche*). Amiya Kumar Das was in timber business, at Tongla, now came out, probably will do works.” See Chandrakumar’s letter to Lakshminath on 6 June 1930 from Guwahati in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 188.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Letter of Jatindranath Dowerah to Lakshminath on 20 March, 1927 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 268-270.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Rajanikanta Bardoloi’s letter to Lakshminath on 15 February, 1931 from Dibrugarh in Neog, *Patralekha*, pp. 207.

his literary life, showed his faith in Lakshminath, and wanted his intellectual support in the moment.¹⁰⁷¹

It was his catholicity of mind, which produced wide acceptability of him even among those who took critical attitudes to him. In 1936, when Mohan Chandra Mahanta pointed out to Lakshminath that his certain remarks on Gopal Ata, a Vaishnava religious preacher, in his book on Sankardeva and Madhavdeva had aroused disappointment among the disciples, he immediately became ready to revise that section in the coming edition of the book. He wrote to Mahanta that he had no intention as such to give pain to others. He only wrote what he had already read. His unitarian vision of a nationalist wanted no division among the sects and communities.

“Let’s be united, forgetting or leaving aside the demerits of others. The call of the hour was for cordial relationship and peace.”¹⁰⁷²

However, time and again, his opinions on various issues have been questioned and contested by different sections of the intelligentsia of Assam. In 1924, while coming to preside over the annual session of Asam Sahitya Sabha in western attire, it disappointed a section of youths of the time. Similarly, Lakshminath’s moderate politics and critique of Jawaharlal Nehru at certain points of Indian National Struggle also produced dissatisfaction among the youths.

¹⁰⁷¹ Padmanath Gohainborooah’s letter to Lakshminath in November 4, 1936 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 212-213. Prior to that, Padmanath received a notice from the Director of Public Instruction, Assam regarding a complaint registered against him about the authenticity of certain comments made by him in a book. Padmanath sent a copy of the Director of Public Instruction’s letter to Lakshminath. Letter of G. A. Small, Director of Public Instruction’s, Assam to Padmanth on 8 October, 1936 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 212.

¹⁰⁷² Lakshminath’s letter to Mohan Chandra Mahanta on 10 March, 1936 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 39-40. However, no edition of the book was published in his lifetime, and Lakshminath could not make the necessary revision.

Towards the last years of his life, his stand in favour of Asam Sagrakshini Sabha also aroused dissatisfaction among the Assam Congress leaders.¹⁰⁷³

Banhi played a seminal role not only focusing on Sankardeva as founding father of Assamese nationality, but produced a group of energetic and dedicated followers of Lakshminath. By the 1930s, concerted attempts from the parts of the youths to study and celebrate him as a prominent literary figure became clearly visible. Inspired by the idea of Shakespearean Society, as early as in 1930, a *Bezbaroa Samity* was formed in Calcutta.¹⁰⁷⁴ Probably it was the first time in Assam a public sphere organization was conceived solely to study a writer, naming after him. The first meeting was held at the Physics Theatre of Presidency College of Calcutta and the sitting was presided over by Ambikanath Borah, then a professor of Assamese literature in Calcutta University. The *Samity* was initially formed of 33 members, all being the readers of his literary productions.¹⁰⁷⁵ Informing about the formation of the Society to Lakshminath, Jatindranath wrote that Banikanta Kakati will take the responsibility of the Society, and it was through a discussion of Banikanta on Lakshminath's literary merit and contribution, the Society will be inaugurated.¹⁰⁷⁶ Lakshminath was felicitated by the Samiti on 22 November, 1930.¹⁰⁷⁷

¹⁰⁷³ Borooah, Harendra Nath. "*Jatiya Ratna Bezbaroa* " in Devagoswami, *Bezbaroa-Prativa*, 1968, p. 380.

¹⁰⁷⁴ The Shakespeare Society founded in 1924 in St. Stephen's College of Delhi was the first of its kind in India, whereas the Shakespeare Society of Philadelphia formed in 1852 was conceived as the oldest. The society was combined with a high-brow sense of leisure with scholarly intensity. Dinner was followed by reading of Shakespeare. Each member was free to jump in with his observation. Discussion was left at the end of a scene of a play.

¹⁰⁷⁵ A report on the *Samity*, written by Laksheswar Sharma was published in the *Avahan*, January issue, 1930.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Jatindranath Dowerah's letter to Lakshminath, undated, January, 1931 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 275.

¹⁰⁷⁷ See entry on 22 November, 1930 and 7 March, 1931, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

Lakshminath, then living at Sambalpur, though showing his reticence to the attempt, attended the meeting.¹⁰⁷⁸ He, while addressing the members of the *Samity*, made a self-assessment of him as an anthill, a negligible one, compared to the contemporary figures of India like Rabindranath, the real genius of literature.¹⁰⁷⁹ However, as we have already observed, he as writer, already had produced numbers of enthusiastic readers and ardent followers, and they always argued that in comparison to Rabindranath's role for the upliftment of the Bengali literature, his contributions for the development of a literature like Assamese was far more significant. It was at their initiative, on 29 December, 1931, Lakshminath was felicitated at Sibsagar, on the occasion of the annual session of *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, the prime literary forum of the Assamese nationalists of the time. Concentrating on the details of the felicitation ceremony, we can explore a story of canonization of a writer-hero. An altar was founded and decorated according to the *Vedic* manner, where Lakshminath was offered to be seated. Invocation songs were performed by a few girls. Then, he was presented with a felicitation letter written on *sanchi* bark, kept carefully in a box made of ivory.¹⁰⁸⁰ That was the first occasion when any living literary personality in Assam was offered such veneration.¹⁰⁸¹

¹⁰⁷⁸ Lakshminath's letter to Jatindranath on 10 February, 1930 from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 21-23.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. "*Bezbaroa Samitit Mor Bayan*", *Avahan*, Volume 2, Issue 2, 1930, p. 198-201. He even evoked laughter on the literary merits of his own creations. "*Nobel Prize*", Lakshminath Bezbaroa, *Banhi*, Volume 19, Issue 3, 1930.

¹⁰⁸⁰ *Asam Sahitya Sabhat Bezbaroar Abhinandan*, *Avahan*, Volume 3, Issue 3, 1931.

¹⁰⁸¹ A smaller section of the intelligentsia was of the opinion to offer the proposed ovation to Padmanath Gohainborooh, but considering the greater acceptance of Lakshminath among the literati of the time, the preference went for Lakshminath. Mentioning no one's name, Benudhar Rajkhowa, a close friend of Padmanath, wrote on the occasion that the candidature of another for such veneration had not so much acceptability among the readership as of Lakshminath, because the contemporary readership had been greatly fascinated by Lakshminath. However, the 1935 session of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* subsequently offered a similar kind of honour to Padmanath Gohainborooh.

Making a hero of Lakshminath is traceable in the whole framework of thought prevalent in the time. It was a time for the intelligentsia, as social actors, to bring forth a collective self into its formation, and they needed some cultural symbols for that. In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, while they undertook the project of writing heroic history to prop their imagination of nation and region, they were constantly in search of such ideals both in the past and present. Appropriation of the Joymoti narrative was part of this project, Lakshminath himself being one of the initiators of the remaking of the story. Corresponding to the redefinition of the Joymoti narrative as the oppressed people's passive resistance to a tyrant ruler, the story of Lachit Barphukan, the militant leader in the time of the Ahom rule was interpreted as a warrior hero's extreme love for his country. Lachit's valiantly fought battle against the Moghul was presented as a region's indomitable thirst for independence. Both became meaningful in terms of the contemporary politics of Assam and India. In 1926, Tarunram Phukan, the Chairperson of the Reception Committee of the Congress session held at Pandu, eulogized Lachit's heroic battle against the imperial army of Aurangzeb and cited Joymoti's sacred sacrifice as the symbol of passive resistance.¹⁰⁸² Subsequently in 1934, the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan* took a resolution to observe *Beer puja* all over the province, which included ceremonial adulations of heroic figures of the past and present. Anandaram Borooah, a Sanskrit scholar, the first ICS officer from Assam, who met his untimely death in 1889, was chosen from the present to place among the heroic personalities of the past.¹⁰⁸³ In the meantime,

¹⁰⁸² *Report of the Indian National Congress Forty-first Session Gauhati (Assam)*, 1926. Madras: General Secretary, All India Congress Committee, 1926, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸³ As an Indologist, Anandaram Borooah's achievement was paramount, who earned fame among the European Indologists through his pioneering works on Bhavabhuti, ancient Indian geography and compilation of a Sanskrit-English bilingual dictionary. But it was for prevalence of the ideology of *jatiya bhasa* and *jatiya sahitya* among the vernacular intelligentsia, and nationalism as dominant motivating ideology of the time, Lakshminath's fame surpassed him, and he emerged as prominent iconic figure in modern Assam.

the genre of biography was employed by the intelligentsia in equivalence to the historical narratives for mapping an ideal view of the Assamese identity.

What had impelled the contemporary reading public and literary organizers to choose Lakshminath from many others to elevate may arouse curiosity. Perhaps, it was a moment when the intelligentsia as a whole tried to search in the career of a writer the trajectory of its own life. It was their attempt to show that the society as a whole made an attempt to find self-confidence and motivation for itself, through the glorification and institution of a writer as a national icon. The colonial government of India never showed its willingness to offer an official recognition to Lakshminath as a writer. In 1935, when a public demand was raised to offer a literary pension to him, it was benignly rejected on the ground of financial non-viability.¹⁰⁸⁴ The same year, instead of being elected for the second time to chair the annual session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha, he refused it, and proposed the name of Banikanta Kakati instead.¹⁰⁸⁵ In the same year, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, an enthusiastic follower of him, gave another dimension to his literary creations by producing Assam's first movie on the basis of *Joymati*, one of his historical plays. Lakshminath, with his wife, came to inaugurate and watch the premier show of the film held at Raunak Mahal in Calcutta from Sambalpur. Lakshminath, in the diary recorded his immediate response to the film,

¹⁰⁸⁴ In the entire period of colonial rule, two from Assam were offered literary pensions, the only kind of government recognition a writer could expect then. Though the 1933 annual session of *Asam Sahitya Sabha* requested to the Government of Assam through a resolution to offer Lakshminath Bezbaroa a literary pension, the Department of Public Instruction informed the Sabha that “*While recognizing that Bezbaroa's literary merits deserves recognition, Government in view of the present financial condition of the province regret inability to grant with a pension*” Hazarika, Atulchandra. *Asam Sahitya Sabhar Ruprekha, 1917-1977*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1977 p. 62. In the career of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, in 1927, it was for the first time provided Rs 1000/- as government assistance to hold its annual conference at Goalpara presided by Tarunram Phukan. Ibid, p. 55.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Chandradhar Borooah's letter, the principal secretary of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* on 15 November, 1935 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 297-298.

“Pleased with (the) show. Delighted to see sprightly Dalimi in flesh and bones in the film. My fancy (is) realized. His film is a success barring the sound defects and other minor shortcomings.”¹⁰⁸⁶

During that decade, he was offered public ovations in many localities of the Assamese-speaking area of the Brahmaputra valley. Even his visit to Assam appeared as news headlines in the Assamese newspapers and periodicals of the time, mentioned as an *utchav*, festival and celebrated as the victory of Lakshminath.¹⁰⁸⁷

O Mor Aponar Desh: Song of own Desh and Bhasa

The process of elevation of Lakshminath as a literary hero was parallel to recognizing a song composed by him by the contemporary intelligentsia as the *Jatiya Sangit* of Assam. Both contributed to each other in their making. In the first decade of the twentieth century, when Bankimchandra’s *Vande Mataram* song in Bengali had acquired rapid circulation, and began to be translated to the several languages of India.¹⁰⁸⁸ A satirical essay appeared in Assamese with the title *Bandematarang*.¹⁰⁸⁹ Lakshminath wrote the essay in his pseudonym of Kripabor. Being written in the 1870s, and already being composed in music in the following decade by Rabindranath, the *Vande Mataram* song had to wait for its popularity till the political appropriation of the song by the Swadeshi agitators of Bengal. During the movement, the agitators sang the song in the streets, and used the words *Vande Mataram* as a slogan. Even

¹⁰⁸⁶ See entry on 10 March, 1935, *Diaries*, Tezpur University.

¹⁰⁸⁷ “Sri Lakshminath Bezbaroar Bijoy-Pujabandhat Asam Agaman”, *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, Volume 4, Issue 6, 1930 (1851-52 Saka). Lakshminath left Calcutta for Assam on 21 September, and stayed until 30 October in Assam, being felicitated by various organizations and educational institutions in Assam, and receiving warm greetings everywhere from the people. *Diaries*, Tezpur University

¹⁰⁸⁸ Its translation to Tamil came out in 1905, done by Subrahmanya Bharati. It was translated to Marathi in 1897, to Kanada in 1897, to Gujarati in 1901, to Hindi in 1906, to Telugu in 1907, to Tamil in 1908 and to Malayalam in 1909.

¹⁰⁸⁹ *Usha*, Volume 1, Issue 5, 1906.

Rabindranath performed the song on the Raksha Bandhan day of 1905 A. D. to propagate the idea of the Swadeshi. The song's notation was written by Pratibhasundari, a niece of Rabindranath and Prajnasundari's elder sister. Sarala Devi of the same Tagore family had a role in popularizing the song, because she performed the song in the platform of Indian National Congress's annual session in 1905, though with slight alteration of the words to serve a pan-India consciousness instead of the former meaning of the Bengali nation.¹⁰⁹⁰

Lakshminath, in his essay caricatured the original slogan, and transformed it to *Bonda Matarag*, meaning a male cat cries, and *Bandi Matarag*, meaning a slave or prisoner utters, or shouts. He in the essay argued that being written in Sanskritized Bengali Bankim's slogan of national unity was incomprehensible to the Assamese people. So, Assam needs a slogan, or *jatiya chiyar* of its own in Assamese. Assam had such *chiyar* or slogan to use in religious festivals like *Tithi*, *Bhaona* and *Barsabah*, but the need of the time was to coin new slogans to use in modern public spaces like *Sabha*, *samiti*, *andolan*, *asphalan* and such. Lakshminath's demur was regarding not much to the song but against the slogan. As a matter of fact, Lakshminath's refusal, though with a little sarcasm, to utter the slogan was in a way related with the Assamese intelligentsia's political stand of the time. They, at the one day, were determined to keep their regional linguistic identity intact, and wanted to make it stronger, and on the other hand were ambivalent about the Bengali intelligentsia's anti-colonial stand of the time. Recent scholarship has shown that during the first decade of the twentieth century, the Utkal Sammilani of Orissa publicly banned the *Vandemataram* song, for which the Sammilani

¹⁰⁹⁰ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has shown in his study on the song *Vande Mataram* that while composed by Bankimchandra in the 1870s, he wrote of the *sapta-koti* or seven crore worshippers of the motherland, which referred to the entire population of Bengal Presidency. In the 1905 Banaras session of Indian National Congress, it was sung with an alteration. Keeping in mind the population of the British India, 'seven-crore' was replaced with 'thirty-crore'. Bhattacharya, Sabyasanchi. *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song*. New Delhi: Primus, 2013, p. 69.

leadership were called “sycophants”, who felt no solidarity to the cause of Indian National Congress. The Sammilani leadership, nonetheless, impressed by the slogan of economic Swadeshi or economic right, was in no way in agreement with the anti-partition movement of the time, which masked a radical anti-colonial politics within it. They constantly declared their non-political stance and, coming away from the initial support of the Swadeshi movement tried to distinguish between the Swadeshi movement and anti-partition movement of Bengal.¹⁰⁹¹

Taking into account the Assamese nationalists’ similar stand on the separation of Bengal, it seems that though Lakshminath, in a satirical tone made a mild complaint about the comprehensibility of the slogan, it masked the Assamese nationalists’ ambiguous attitude towards the Swadeshi movement.¹⁰⁹² As a way of asserting their own commitment to the regional linguistic identity for Assam, already in 1897, Lakshminath in one of his speeches of the series entitled *Asamiya Bhasa*, invoked the audience to pronounce the slogans “*Jai Asamiya Bhasar Jai*”, and “*Jai Asam Deshar Jai*”, which respectively celebrated the victory of the Assamese language and the land of Assam.¹⁰⁹³ In 1913, he composed a poem on historical memory named as “*Asam Sangit*”, which repeatedly enunciated the exhortation, “*Jai Aai Asam Bol,*” or “Pronounce the Victory of Mother Assam”.¹⁰⁹⁴ In 1915, a slightly altered version of the slogan as “*Jai Jai Asam* ” was used in his historical play *Chakradwaj Singha*, which

¹⁰⁹¹ See the chapter “The Odia Political Subject and the Rise of the Odia Movement ” in Misra, Pritipushpa. *Language and the Making of Modern India: Nationalism and the Vernacular in Colonial Odisha, 1803–1956*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹⁰⁹² As we have already seen in a previous chapter, he too was a strong supporter of the ideology of the economic Swadeshi.

¹⁰⁹³ “*Asamiya Bhasa*”, Eighth Lecture delivered at the seventh annual meeting of Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha, *Jonaki*, Volume 7, Issue 4, 1897 in Saikia, Nagen, ed. *Jonaki Collection, 1889-1899 & 1901-03*. Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 2001, pp. 823-828.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. “*Asam Sangit*”, *Banhi*, Volume 6, Issue 12, 1915, pp. 617-619.

portrayed a victorious battle of Assam against the imperial Moghul army.¹⁰⁹⁵ Evidently, Lakshminath's critique of the *Vande Mataram* slogan, and attempt to replace it with a few others were motivated by his idea of Assam's distinctive identity within India. During the decade of 1910s, to whatever extent motivated he was by the mother image of Assam could be better imagined by a letter written by him to Hemchandra Goswami,

"The bitter experiences of my life were many, though they may not be like your recent ones. Yet I am not disheartened, because I am sent by Him (God) to work for Him and Him alone, and doing so, I will be working for Mother Assam, although she holds in her womb countless upstarts, villains, cut-throats, along with countless pious persons and innocent children as lofty and pure as God's angels."¹⁰⁹⁶

But being a visionary and a romantic by spirit, he added,

"Bright day is in sight for us all."¹⁰⁹⁷

It will not be proper to say that the Assamese intelligentsia of the time was not swayed by the growing consciousness of Indianness. Contrary to that, the same issue of the journal *Usha*, the only one in Assamese being published at that time, contained a song by *Sri Ha*, which appealed to the "*Bharat Santan*", the descendents of Bharat to make them conscious towards the phenomenon of gradual emergence of a nation. The song expostulates their benign acceptance of increase of taxes imposed by the imperial government and urged them to raise their voice against such injustice. It declared that nobody should wait for divine justice, and should come forward for the assertion of their rights.¹⁰⁹⁸ Moreover, Lakshminath published his Assamese

¹⁰⁹⁵ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Chakradhwaj Singha*, Author: Howrah, 1915 (1837 Saka).

¹⁰⁹⁶ Lakshminath's letter to Hemchandra Goswami from Calcutta on 1 August, 1913 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 316-317.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁸ *Usha*, Volume 1, Issue 5, 1906.

translation of Marsden's History of India in 1907, for which he had to write a part on the history of Assam.

In 1910, Lakshminath wrote a song *Mor Desh*, which subsequently appeared in the journal *Banhi*. Later in 1913, the song was included in his collection of poems and songs *Kadamkali*. While published in the *Banhi*, the song contained the name *Sri Kripabor*, as its author. An instruction to perform it in the English note was also added. The song's authorship, assigned to a putative author, has essentially raised a question about to what extent the authorial instruction was serious. However, the song had to wait some years to be composed in music. During this period, though musical composition of the song was attempted by several persons including Ratnavali, Lakshminath's own daughter, it had to wait for long to be performed before a public gathering, and get appreciation from the audience at large. Benudhar Sharma, in a letter, referred to the song's public performance in the annual session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha's Dibrugarh session in 1924. He wrote that until then, they were not aware of the song's actual beauty and energy. He further mentioned that he had requested Ratna, Lakshminath's daughter to compose the notations of the song and to publish it in the *Banhi*.¹⁰⁹⁹

It was in 1928, in the annual conference of the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan*, while the song was performed by some youths, the audience showed their affiliation to it in standing posture. The music of the song on the basis of the western folk music was composed by a group of youths associated with the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan*. Though the song was performed along with a few other songs of patriotic spirit, the conference assigned it a special status of the *Jatiya Sangit* of Assam, and performed it to conclude the conference. Since then, it became more or less customary to perform it as the concluding song of any nationalistic public gathering of Assam,

¹⁰⁹⁹ Benudhar Sharma's letter to Lakshminath on 14 January (Magh Bihu), 1925 in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 282-283.

in which the audience's participation and standing ovation was claimed. Lakshminath recorded his own reaction to the song's elevated public status as concluding song or national anthem of Assam. Expressing his gratification as an author, he noted that as a tree cannot make any claim to a fruit produced by it, similarly an author does not possess any control on the reception of his creations. Once created, literary works belong exclusively to the domain of the readership or the audience.¹¹⁰⁰

As we have already discussed in the introductory chapter, *jati* in Assamese alternately meant caste or nation, whereas both the Assamese regional consciousness and the greater Indian consciousness without any contradictory claims were conceived as emerging nations. Accordingly, *jatiya sangit* denoted in Assamese any songs of patriotic and nationalistic imagination. Since the early twentieth century it became conventional for the journals and periodicals in Assamese to publish such songs with the title "*Jatiya Sangit*". The term was mostly a descriptive category, and indicated the patriotic subject matter of the songs. Even in 1948, immediately after India's independence, a collection of songs entitled *Jatiya Sangit* was published in Assamese. It had 112 numbers of songs composed by various authors. The *Jana Gana Mana* by Rabindranath and *Vande Mataram* by Bankimchandra, categorized as the *Rashtriya Sangit* appeared in the first page of the book. It also contained four songs, two from Khasi and another two from the Gorkha Language with the Assamese translations of the songs.¹¹⁰¹ Significantly, the collection was compiled and edited by Atulchandra Hazarika, one of the organizers of the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan* in the 1920s. But with the course of time, a shift in the meaning of the term took place, and the meaning of *Jatiya Sangit* was restricted to

¹¹⁰⁰ Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. "*Samarani Sangit*", *Banhi*, Volume 18, Issue 3, 1929 (1851 Saka), pp. 134-135.

¹¹⁰¹ Hazarika, Atulchandra, ed. *Jatiya Sangit*. Shillong: Chapala Book Stall, 1948. The collection contained a song *Vande Mataram*, composed by Nalinibala Devi, a woman poet of Assam in the influence of Bankimchandra's song.

denote Lakshminath's *Mor Desh* song only, it being referred to as *O Mor Aponar Desh* song. Some customary practices regarding where, when and how the song will be performed became part of it, and these were to be strictly followed.

Thus, Lakshminath's song *Mor Desh* was instituted by the Assamese nationalists to the status of what in English was called the National Anthem. Ironically enough, it was towards the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Assamese intelligentsia became aware of the power and spell of the National Anthem of England on the English people. In 1885, as part of the jubilee celebration of Queen Victoria's reign, "God Save the Queen" song was performed in band in many administrative centres of Assam, where the people had to display their respect to the song in a standing ovation.¹¹⁰² Birinchi Kumar Borooah, noticed the impact of the "God Save the Queen" song on "*O Mor Aponar Desh*". He perceived soft and sweet music in both. The English song embodies loyalty to the queen, whereas the Assamese song was devoted to motherland and mother tongue. He pointed out that it is free of antagonistic feelings to any other nation. India is always divided in regards to nation, and language is the core to this division. So, the song eulogizes mother-tongue as well as the land.¹¹⁰³

In the first decade of the twentieth century, popularity and impact of the *Vande Matarm* song had inspired the Assamese intelligentsia to explore patriotic and nationalistic themes through songs. In fact, towards the last years of the first decade of the twentieth century, the Assamese poets had made a departure from the early forms of devotional and love songs, and chose to

¹¹⁰² According to the colonial Report, in Shillong the vernacular version of the Anthem was performed by the local Bengali inhabitants of the place before the Chief Commissioner of Assam. See *Jubilee Pamphlet: Jubilee Celebration Throughout India, The Reign of Queen Victoria*. Calcutta: Englishmen Press, 1887, p. 256. At Sibsagar, it was played by the Frontier Police in a band, when the 'vast crowd' joined in 'defeating shouts of loyalty and enthusiasm'. (Ibid, p. 257)

¹¹⁰³ Borooah, Birinchi Kumar. "Bezbaroar Jatiya Kavita" in Devagoswami, *Bezbaroa-Prativa*, 1968. pp. 241-244. The essay originally appeared in *Banhi*'s special Bezbaroa issue, (Volume 26.)

concentrate on the genre of patriotic song, Lakshminath being a pioneer of the genre in Assamese. In the 1920s, patriotic songs came to be used by the Congress volunteers of the Non-Cooperation movement to arouse the people's attention towards the movement, which certainly encouraged a section of poets to write such songs. It is in this background Lakshminath's song's musical notation was composed. Soon the technology of mechanistic reproduction not only provided it a fixed form, but reinforced the popular access of it.

After independence, when *Jana Gana Mana* by Rabindranath was recognized by the postcolonial state as the official National Anthem of India, both songs came to be sung with some mutual adjustments, without making any contesting claims between the two. To designate the *Jana Gana Mana*, and to maintain its difference from the Assamese song, the Assamese nationalists had already coined a term *Rashtriya Sangit*, and it is still in vogue. In fact, the Assamese nationalists at no point of the time were ready to make any compromise with their regional linguistic identity, and the trajectory of Lakshminath's song is the story of making of this identity. Even on the eve of the independence, a section of Assam's intelligentsia marked out that Rabindranath's geographical imagination did not recognize Assam in his *Jana Gana Mana* song. They pointed out that Assam or the entire North-East part of India was hardly mentioned in the song. The absence was often interpreted in terms of mainland India's lack of concern about Assam and the region, and also as the symbolic of the postcolonial Indian state's marginalization of the developmental interests of the region.¹¹⁰⁴ This writer can recollect that in the 1980s, when Assam went through an agitation on the issue of illegal migrants, some sections of the agitators articulated their protest through their refusal to participate in the *Jana Gana Mana* song, and prefer to sing the *O Mor Aponar Desh* in the public gatherings. Thus,

¹¹⁰⁴ Even the officers of colonial administration were used to describe Assam through the metaphor of Cinderella of India, "the poor girl in her slovenly clothes". Cotton, Henry. *Indian and Home Memories*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1910, p. 243.

refusal to sing a particular song, and engagement with another became significant to understand one's ambivalence between two identities. It was the time, when *Jai Aai Asam* slogan coined by Lakshminath acquired wide currency, which has been customarily being used by the Assamese nationalists to proclaim their attachment with the land.

Being a proclamation of one's attachment with mother Assam and the euphonious mother tongue, Lakshminath's song celebrates the ideology of mother tongue and motherland. It renders the poet's deep emotional bondage with his *desh* and *mat*, land and language, which for him are incompatible in the world. Lakshminath chose to write the lyrics in a simple unembellished style. Unlike the *Vande Mataram* song, it never aroused any controversy in religious lines, because here Assam is conceived simply as mother, or *Aai Asami*, and none of the female deities of Hinduism has anything to do with this mother.¹¹⁰⁵ The first stanza addresses the beautiful and dearer motherland as mellifluous and fertile land, and in the second the mellow tone of the mother tongue has been invoked. The last stanza is again an invocation of the birth place or the mother Assam, in which the poet expresses his deep longing to see her face again and reiterates his insatiable desire for that. Obviously, the desire to see her face may have some roots in the poet's long separation from the birth place. However, the song does not present the territorial imagination of the poet about Assam. He only refers to its fecundity, and throughout the song, land becomes synonymous with the language. Land and language both are imagined as *aai*, a mother figure, the life giver and benevolent protector.

It is evident that the song's career is attached more with the Assamese regional identity rather than with the anticolonial movement of India. Initially it was never the intention of the Assamese nationalists to displace the *Vande Mataram* song with *O Mor Aponar Desh*. Even

¹¹⁰⁵ A group of schools in Assam, known as Jatiya Bidyalay, emphasizing on the ideals of secular and linguistic nationalistic goals, everyday performs the *O Mor Aponar Desh* song in the morning session in lieu of any religious prayer.

at the moment of instituting it as the *Jatiya Sangit*, or the National Anthem of Assam in 1928, the conference of the *Asam Chatra Sanmilan* was rife with the slogan *Vande Mataram*. The song *Vande Mataram* was also performed, as the youths and organizers saw no conundrum in it. But towards the 1930s, a certain degree of discontentment and threat was prevalent among a section of the intelligentsia for the future of Assam. It is in this moment, Lakshminath wrote in a personal letter,

“We don’t need “Vande Mataram”. In this respect, I have support for your proposal.”¹¹⁰⁶

Maheswar Neog, a reputed scholar of Vaishnavism, as well as on Lakshminath Bezbaroa noted that the irrelevance of the *Vande Mataram* song was questioned at the time was grounded on monotheism of Vaishnavism.¹¹⁰⁷ Lakshminath, in the same letter wrote,

“Without any bias to any difference of opinions, we must stand unitedly. Otherwise, we cannot survive. Sri Sankar is the essence of Assam.”¹¹⁰⁸

As we have seen earlier, Lakshminath, in this phase of life, emerged as a supporter of the *Asam Sangrakshini Sabha*, founded in the initiative of Ambikagiri Raychoudhury and publicly declared that the Indian National Congress would not protect the interests of Assam.

Lakshminath died, but the song’s journey was going on. After independence, Lakshminath’s *Mor Desh* song was never offered the official title of *Jatiya Sangit* of Assam, nor a substantial claim for such recognition came to the fore. Without any government recognition, it gradually came to be referred to as the sole *Jatiya Sangit* of Assam. The former meaning of the term in Assamese to denote any patriotic song withers away, and it becomes restricted to denote the particular song of Lakshminath. It was as late as in 2013, amidst the celebration of the 150th

¹¹⁰⁶ Lakshminath’s letter to Mohan Chandra Mahanta on 10 March, 1936 from Sambalpur in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, pp. 39-40.

¹¹⁰⁷ “*Toka-Ka*” in Neog, *Patralekha*, 1968, p. 329.

¹¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

birth centenary of Lakshminath, the song's unofficial journey came to the surface, and then only the song was offered the status of the state song by the government of Assam.¹¹⁰⁹

Concluding Remarks

The thesis tries to examine different aspects of colonial modernity of South Asia, particularly Assam, in which Lakshminath Bezbaroa's life largely serves as a representative of the time. Starting the journey with the life of Dinanath Bezbaroa, Lakshminath's father, it explores the coming of modernity in Assam, and its interaction with various aspects of tradition. Focusing the quotidian lives of the people it tries to understand the processes through which modernity tried to transform the society.

The study shows that modern education and print were the instruments which became crucial for emergence of a new literate community in South Asia, which eventually tried to assert their hegemony among the larger illiterate masses of the society. It relates such acts of the modern intelligentsia with the coming challenges met by the intelligentsia in their lives and livelihood, which in Assam, was constantly being articulated through their paranoia for being extinct. It, through the instance of Lakshminath, shows that the intelligentsia's celebration of regional identity was deeply linked with their explorations of livelihood in service, commerce and industry like tea. Their constant contestation with the colonial policy of deprivation and exploitation, as well as competition with other regions became instrumental for their engagement with regional identity formation in Assam. It was a complicated journey, which alternately had to negotiate with caste, religion, ethnicity, and the diverse social world of

¹¹⁰⁹ In response to a petition under the Right to Information Act (2005), submitted on 21 May, 2013, by Arupaballabh Goswami and Biswadeep Neog, it came to the fore that the song till then had not been offered any official recognition as such to be used as *Jatiya Sangit*. Letter of the Deputy Secretary, Cultural Affairs, Government of Assam, No. CAD 104/2008 Part 4/87, dated 14 June, 2013.

Assam, often stamped by the colonial state and the emerging intelligentsia as a backward region, expressed through the gendered metaphor of Cinderella.

Focusing on the colonial modern situation of Assam throughout the study, it shows that until the late 1930s, the Assamese intelligentsia showed its ambivalent relation with colonial rule as an agent of improvement and modernity. Instead of their experience with colonial exploitation and deprivation, and already being involved with the Congress-led nationalist movement, they were unable to play a driving role for transformation of the society as a whole. Standing aloof from the rural masses, the immigrant industrial labour population and such marginalised sections the colonial intelligentsia of Assam largely exercised their rationalism for attainment of personal professional goals. Failure or complicity in which sometimes led them to take a spiritual subterfuge, often projected by the intelligentsia as the opposite of the material aspects of life, explained in terms of the unpolluted inner domain. In Assam, the intelligentsia further produced a narrative of Bengali plot against Assamese language and culture, and thus made a compromise with the more fundamental question of colonial exploitation. The situation was further complicated by the upper caste Hindu intelligentsia's attempt to keep their cultural distance from the vast non-Aryan population of the region. By the 1930s, though a section of the intelligentsia came forward with a call for a much inclusive kind of nationalism, it remained confined within the print public sphere, and no social and political movement was part of it. Similarly, questions related to women's political rights found expression in contemporary literature, but in practice, emancipatory efforts were circumscribed within certain enclaves. Thus, what was liberal, secular and rational were always compromised by conformity to traditional authorities.

The study tells a different story of colonial modernity in Assam from earlier historian like Amalendu Guha, who taking 'European Renaissance' as a point of reference argues that the effect of 'Assam Renaissance' was weak and limited, and modernity in Assam was an

‘incomplete project’, because the middle class of Assam was a ‘rickety’ one.¹¹¹⁰ Making a departure from the Renaissance analogy and transition narrative, this study explores the forces operative behind the emergence of cultural and political identities and formations in Assam. Focusing on the life of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the study presents a far more complex story of modernity, which destabilizes the idea of an all-inclusive singular modernity. It shows that urban and modern facilities that persons like Lakshminath and Bholanath enjoyed were somehow linked not only with their devastation of forests and exploitation of laborers, but also with their compromise to act as agents of colonial exploitation. Modernity experienced by an urban professional class is essentially different from what modernity meant for people used to work in domestic services or in timber depots. Experiences of modernity vary by class, caste, gender, religion and region.

The study shows that literature is not a fully autonomous field as has been often taken and projected of it, politics remaining undercurrent in it both as an institution, and inherently as form and content. So, study of an author’s life essentially demands a larger canvas and issues to be taken into account. The study points out to the facts that in the colonial regime, literature served as a subterfuge to politics, through which the intelligentsia articulated their critique of colonial rule, and their aspiration for being an independent nation. Nation in the modern sense of the time is negotiated with caste, religion and region, thus transforming its western connotation of the term to a certain degree.

It explores the emergence of linguistic nationalism, and its negotiation with literature, religion and culture. It shows that the colonial state’s role, their imposition of administrative borders, and their instruments like census, map etc. became determining factors in shaping such regional identities in South Asia. Philology and ethnology, the twin pillars of scientific knowledge of

¹¹¹⁰ Guha, Amalendu. *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, Society, Polity, Economy*. Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi & Company, 1991, pp. 206-216.

colonial time, largely constructed the mind-set of the intelligentsia, and they tried to see the identities as fixed structures. The study explores the emergence of the ideology of mother tongue in the South Asian context, while questioning the contradictions and limitations of it. Mother tongue is often projected as a founding pillar of the imagination of a language community. Being defined as the natural language of the people, mother tongue also refers to language variations according to place, class, caste, gender, ethnicity and what not. Its fluidity is problematic to handle with. The study has addressed the regional contestations between *Ujani* and *Bhati* Assamese, and thus tries to show that even the speakers of one language community, do not speak the same mother tongue. However, living in an age of emergence of linguistic nationalism, and championing it as a foundation of a political community, Lakshminath's emphasis was with language as unity, while he undermined and tried to overcome issues related with language variations. However, to effectively deal with the historical pressures of multilingual situations and language- diversions, he had to make and unmake his notion of *jatiya bhasa*. The study also shows that Lakshminath's expatriate and truly cosmopolitan life simultaneously wrote the critique of the ideology of mother tongue. Exile is a theme explored in the study in the sense to question the notion of stable national identity of a person.

It examines the impact of new technology of print in intellectual cultural life of a region, and the intelligentsia's role in modernization of vernaculars and their handling of literature both as humanistic and national discourse. Print emerged as the chief organ of the intelligentsia's reformist activities of the time, through which they tried to negotiate with modernity. It also addresses the larger political and economic issues under the pressure of which the intelligentsia chose to dedicate towards upliftment of vernaculars and focused on language as identity. The study shows that Lakshminath and his contemporaries' imaginings of Assamese was bounded within language as medium of education and as administrative language of the region. They

did not go far beyond it, and never demanded equal status of it, for instance, with Hindi. Conversely, several Assamese nationalists including Lakshminath were proponents of Hindi as a common language for emerging India. The study shows that the nationalists of Assam saw no contradiction with Indian nationalism. In this, Lakshminath and his contemporaries' stance was just opposite to the stance of most of the Tamil nationalists, who questioned the emerging notion of Indian nationalism.

The intelligentsia in Assam, as elsewhere in South Asia identified religion as one of the core areas of their identity formation as well as the deep binding force of unity, and tried to appropriate with their newly acquired values such as equality and democracy. The study unearths that the intelligentsia's attempt to modernize and assert religion as a binding force was controlled by their engagement with caste. However, given the diverse and multitudinous culture of Assam, it was only partly possible for them to mobilize language and religion as the founding ground of a wider nationality.

The study also concentrates on reading and rereading of Sankardeva, a medieval Vaishnava preacher by the intelligentsia, and their attempt to project him as the founding father of the Assamese nationality. It shows that in doing so, the intelligentsia redefined the borders of the Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism in Assam as an inclusive category. Their understanding of Sankardeva and his literary creations were largely controlled by their idea and engagement with identity formation. However, in Assam, such an attempt to adapt to *dharma* as a crucial factor of identity formation was far more liberal and open-minded in character than in some other regions of South Asia.

Emergence of the public sphere being a major issue, the study argues that towards the 1930s, it remained exclusively a male domain, and education and marriage for women etc. were discursive formations largely constructed by males. From the nineteenth century women's

issues like widow marriage, age for marriage of women and even domestic works, cooking etc. came to the fore, and on which were debated mostly by males. However, it was women like Prajnasundari, Lakshminath's wife, who tried to negotiate with gender by creative appropriation of mundane acts like cooking. However, with the gradual appearance of women in public life, in the 1930s, women's participation in the public sphere as well as in suffrage came to the fore.

Literary modernity, whether to be explicitly linked with print and modern education is a question addressed here. It tries to ask whether the literary modernity in Assamese was a complete disjuncture or continuity. The study focuses on intelligentsia's attempt to write literary history and their exploration of antiquity as crucial for understanding the modernization of vernaculars in South Asia. It also focuses on their conscious handling of genres like novel, biography, historical play, short story and such. The study deals with Lakshminath's attempt to use literature for history making, for instance, how literature was made part of the nationalistic imaginings of the time. However, one point that is not sufficiently dealt with in the study is how literary compositions like novel, short story, poetry, biography etc. can form historical archives.

The study takes its departure as a whole from most of the earlier studies on Lakshminath in perceiving him as a process of making and remaking, and concentrates on such processes. It further shows that an individual life like Lakshminath does not end with his physical death alone. He, as a regional national icon in the sense of Carlylean notion of hero as author, still continues to possess a life, being written and transformed time and again. Finally, the study deals with the biography of a song composed by Lakshminath, and argues how the symbolic becomes a driving force to inspire people's imagination and engagement with their land and language.

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