

Understanding The Public Sphere and Women's Question in Colonial Assam: A Study in Its Initial Phases

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Abstract

Before the advent of the British, the public sphere did not evolve much in India to channelizing the grievances and thoughts of the masses at large. Any discussion related to the state, administration, or any area was confined mostly to the royal court. All the Hindu and Muslim rulers considered themselves supreme and they never sought public opinion. The rational public discussion and places such as coffee houses and salons as suggested by the Habermas as in Western Europe were almost extinct here. As far as Assam was concerned the growth of almost 170 years of Assamese print media is also linked with the rise of sub-regional nationalism. Most of the public debates that were taking place were taking media. So, print media have become an important aspect of the public sphere. The periodicals, starting from Orunodoi onwards had been publishing important topics of society, and women issues were women's issues being discussed there. So, analysing the 19th century is important to understand the questions that started on women's behalf to improve their position in the society.

Keywords: Public sphere, Women's question, Colonial Assam, 19th century.

1 Introduction

The term '*Public Sphere*' was imitated from the German term '*Öffentlichkeit*' and it has gained importance from the late 20th century. The term '*Public Sphere*' was first coined by German Philosopher Jurgen Habermas in his book '*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962)*'. Here, Habermas conceptualized the notion of the Public Sphere as "the sphere of private people who come together as a public to regulate against the public authorities by engaging in a reasoned and critical debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized and publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchanged and social labour" (Singh, 2012:633-42). For Habermas, the *Public Sphere* came into being to check power through rational and critical debates. It's notable that in his initial study Habermas was not very rational in case of defining the '*Public Sphere*' theory. He only defined the places like coffee houses in England, reading clubs in Germany as the bearer of the public sphere and the places were mainly captured by the bourgeois class of the people. For Habermas the '*Public Sphere*' is a bourgeois '*Public Sphere*' that excludes the poor and the uneducated, it only made sense if you had the money to take in or to contribute to the sphere in a meaningful way. Habermas '*Public Sphere*' theory faced several criticisms for its principle of giving much importance to bourgeois politics. With the ideological differences, the critics seem to vary (Singh, 2012).

Peter Glotz and Wolfgang Jäger agree, "Habermas theory does not conform to reality and it is therefore enabled to do justice to the contemporary form of mass democracy. They also said that Habermas's suggestion cannot contribute to improving present circumstances because they rest on a historically insufficient material basis and the application becomes stuck in a purely utopian attitude" (Hohendahl & Silberman, 1979:89-118).

Glutz and Jager argue from an ideologically fixed position. Their strategy is unmistakably aimed at characterizing Habermas's theory as 'conservative' and 'romantic' to discredit it politically.

It's no doubt more influential for the further development of Habermas theory is Luhmann's critique. According to him, "The concept of public opinion cannot simply reproduce organizationally because organizations depend precisely on that segmenting of consciousness, and therefore they can realize neither these structural premises nor the corresponding experiences on which rests the suppositions of a critical public opinion"(Hohendahl, 1982:256)}.

Habermas became the object of radical studentcriticism and they claimed that he represented the bourgeois ideology. First criticism comes from Oskar Negt and Alexander Klunge in their work *'The Public Sphere and Experience, 1972'*. They made a critical analysis of the Bourgeois Public Sphere based on Habermas but not relying unquestioningly on his categories. The search for an alternative that is for a proletarian counter Public Sphere has only the appearance of being highly organized, functional and efficient. They assured, "If one considers its true substance then it is not at all unified but rather the commutation of individuals 'Public Sphere' merely abstractly related to one another."(Hohendahl, 1982:263)}Another Marxist thinker Ulf Milde remarks, "Habermas proves himself a late bourgeois ideologue in that he must falsify the memories of heroic bourgeois illusions to extract from them what he wants"(Hohendahl, 1982:260)}.

In the article, *"Feminist Theories on the Separation of the Private and the Public: Looking Back, Looking Forward"*, Ulla Wischermann said, "The topic of 'private/public' has been continuously debated in various scholarly discourses for several years"(Wischermann & Mueller, 2004).Before Habermas's also this debate intensely preoccupied the women's movement and feminist research. They were mainly debated about the disintegration of the category of gender and this was the main apprehension in the second wave of feminism. But the system of two sexes and the categories of private and public lose their relevance in the works of post-modern feminist writings. The post-modern feminist thought beyond these courses of equality and difference and it introduces new possession and ways of thinking. They are keenly aware of differences, exclusions, and hierarchical relationships and tried to politicize them(Wischermann & Mueller, 2004:184-97)}.

The first traces of the public sphere in India emerged from the late 18th century. Some British policies were accountable for creating the atmosphere of establishing the public sphere in India. Initially, these policies were introduced by the government to set up a group of Indians who could at least be capable of administering low ministerial staff. Education was also introduced for that purpose only. But the positive sign is that the very smaller number of people who acquired English Education comes across with the ideas of Renaissance, Enlightenment, and French revolution and it also helped them to generate a public opinion. As a result of this, different types of the public sphere as a form of National Association like Congress and organization like Bombay Association, Madras Association took shape as a voice of the Indian. The introduction of the railways in the British regime also helped people to come closer and develop a public opinion. It reduced geographical distances and made the journey easier. Like the railway, the introduction of different segments of newspapers- English, Anglo- Indian and Vernacular proved to be a significant bearer of public opinion. The newspaper created a new type of public sphere that generated both public opinion and also became the mouthpiece of public grievances. It also helped in the growth of the national consciousness among the Indian peoples. Later on, the national movement also became the most important forum for the public

sphere(Ali, 2001:2419-25)}.

The scenario of nineteenth-century Assam was not much different from the pre-colonial Indian society. In this century the Treaty of Yandabo between the British and the Burmese brought to an end to the six hundred years old Ahom monarchy and established the British rule in Assam (Goswami, 2008:176)}. Before 1826, Assam was politically separated from the mainstream Indian culture. So, British rule helped Assam in merging with the greater Indian culture.

2 Objectives

1. To find out how colonialism worked as a determining factor in the emergence of the public sphere in Assam.
2. To discuss how women issues and women's questions were articulated since the late 19th century.
3. To glimpses the society's view regarding the position of women in Public Sphere.

3 Methodology

The methodology followed in the study is descriptive, historical and analytical. Both primary and secondary sources are taken into account for the preparation of the article. The primary sources are relevant newspapers, periodicals, journals, and autobiographies. Secondary sources include published books, journals, periodicals, and unpublished thesis, and dissertations of the different universities that have been used. Relevant websites and browsers were also consulted in the preparation of this topic.

4 Discussion

The newspapers and the organizations became the organs of propaganda of social reforms and became the centres of critical discussion of religious and social problems. Press became the powerful weapon in building Indian nationalism and the nationalist movement helped to reach these to the greater audience. Similarly, different organizations became an effective platform for the discussion of social reforms and it also led to exposing the evil practices of society like sati, widow remarriage, female infanticide, and many others(Ali, 2001).

For the colonialists, the degraded condition of Indian women came to stand in for the inferiority of Indian culture and declared the entire cultural tradition as retrograde. So, they started reforms to bring about changes in the life of Indian women. To justify their rule on colonial Indian subjects, British led to an ideal relationship between men and women. James Mill was the pioneer among them. In his book, *History of British India* (published in 1826) claimed that the position of women in a society is the indicator of how civilized society is. By saying that he pointed that Indian woman had faced so much suppression during the cruel rule of the past. All of his ideas are based on the text 'Manusmiti' translated into English by Halhed as 'Code of Gento Laws'(Forbes, 2004:10)}.

So, the colonialists presented tradition from a different point of view and the nationalists approached the question of tradition from a completely different viewpoint. This difference of viewpoint regarding tradition was discussed by Partha Chatterjee in his article, "Nationalist Discourse on Women Question" as the emergence of two spheres. One sphere was the material sphere, the sphere of science and technology, the statecraft and economic sphere and it was all right to adopt the ideas of western civilization in this domain. So, Indian

nationalists accepted the material sphere introduced by the colonial state. The other sphere –is the spiritual sphere, according to them the spiritual sphere of the orient was far more superior and it referred to Indian culture in the high moral ground. In this realm, women had to play an active role as nurturers. So in the inner domain, the nationalist did not want to accept the colonial intervention. The home emerged as the representative of the spiritual sphere and the outer world was perceived as the material sphere (Chatterjee, 1989:622-33)}. The conservative section within the nationalist block did not want to negotiate with the colonial state regarding women issues. The trend was started by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and later on this same was carried forward by the various other leaders. Therefore national agenda mostly tried to subjugate female sexuality and the women's demand for freedom. It requires the sacrifice of female lives and bodies to a cause that violated the interests and desires of individual women. It expects women to conform to a national construct in which men reigned supreme. The nationalist leaders take aside the exploitation faced by the women as a part of social practices that had been continuing for generations. For them, the ultimate aim is to win freedom first and women's issues could be taken up later. They did not want to compromise with the colonial government and some aspects of their life and struggle were taken as pure and private (Vaid, 2010:233-40)}. So, in this instances led to rise of the new patriarchal system in India.

What the role played by the women in the new patriarchy also needs to be discussed. Neither westernized nor the oppressed object of indigenous patriarchy became the point of discussion. What emerged over time, the new middle class associated with itself a more developed and more evolved outside sphere that truly being represented by the Western world since it meant a command over English. The virtues of freedom now link with natural sovereignty. Freedom is not only political freedom but spiritual freedom which led them to practices the social custom that has been a part of Indian culture for a long time. Some modern ideas and practices are also adopted from western culture. This was the background in the time when nationalist ideologists emerged regarding women. A very important change came about rather than continuing the fixing of feminine and masculine qualities, the home and world came to be projected as binaries and the material and spiritual sphere came to be explained as the complete opposite. One could be controlled by the colonial regime unwillingly that other could not be touched by the western values. Since it belongs to the private domain is meant to control by self. Now women came to be projected as goddesses and mothers and emphasized on complete eradication and sexuality of the outside world. In the article, “*Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India*” Partha Chatterjee said, “The new patriarchy was also sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the ‘new’ woman was quite the reverse of the ‘common’ woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. So, they restricted the women to acquired western education as they believed that it is the doorway to the new world” (Chatterjee, 1989).

At that time people of Bengal experienced full advantages of English education and also captured several affluent jobs in the British regime. So, to fulfil the demands of bureaucrats, the British brought large numbers of trained Bengali people into Assam and set them in the place of traditional aristocrats. Extra privileges were given to them and made Bengali the official language in 1837 and it remained so till 1873 (S. Barua, 2003). The aspirations for a greater share of jobs under the British also grow among the Assamese aristocrat's genre. They understand that English education was the only navigator of their destination. At that time no higher educational institute was present in Assam. Calcutta University was the only reachable higher institute for the educated Assamese youth. During

their visit to the city of Kolkata for higher education, they were under the influence of the Bengal Renaissance (Banerjee, 2006:23)}. This inspired Educated Assamese youth for taking remedial action for the crucial customs that existed in Assamese society, especially against women. The arrival of Baptist American Missionaries into the Assam in the Nineteenth Century carried significant changes in the Assamese culture. They also brought the printing press. This later became the basic vehicle for starting the social debates. Journals like Orunudo, Jonaki, Banhi, Jayanti, Mou, Assam Bandhu, Ramdhenu, Usha, Chetana and Aluchoni became an important tool in spreading social awareness. With the other issues of the society, women related discussions also got prominence in the pages of these periodicals. The importance of these social debates is that they led to change the idea of conjugality and domesticity. The growing importance of widow remarriage, restriction on child marriage, polygamy, and female infanticide, and consciousness for the female education reflected that side only.

So, the factors like Western English Education, Bengal Renaissance, nationalist discourse, and Christian Missionaries and the rise of the middle class can be termed as the agents of formulating women's questions which was also instrumental in the public sphere in the Nineteenth century Assam.

Some notable characteristics of Colonialism that helped in framing women's question (19th century):

- ***Domesticity:*** The home was one of the considerable sites of discussion in colonial India. The nationalist leaders proposed it as a revered site. The concept of a happy family gained popularity and demand for women's education increased to fulfil the need for a smart and active mother. The spirituality and sacrificial attitude of women admired by all and the concept of motherhood are extremely cherished by the nationalists (Chaudhury, 2009:296-97)}.
- ***The idea of nationalism:*** The Assamese nationalist also tried to make use of the ideas of pan-Indian nationalist discourse. At the same time, it searched for some new angles on its own. The concept of Joymati Konwari was visualized to realize that demand only. Now all women were encouraged to take the same path as Joymoti who was appeared as the symbol of both sacrifice and devotion. In his PhD thesis, "*Rebuilding the Nation: The Discourses on the Women's Question in Colonial Assam C. 1884-c. 1926*" Bipul Chaudhury said, "the concept of Asami Aai too evolved as a provincial version of Bharat Mata who represented the utter sacredness of the Assamese nation" (Chaudhury, 2009:258-59)}.
- ***Conjugality:*** Like in the other parts of the country Assamese middle-class genre also felt the need for adding some new values in conjugality. They had given importance to teach women some new ideas of the world that they can get a perfect companion to share their ideas in the different aspects of life (Chaudhury, 2009:299-300)}. In his PhD thesis, "*Rebuilding the Nation: The Discourses on the Women's Question in Colonial Assam C. 1884-c. 1926*" Bipul Chaudhury remarks, "In most cases, it was the men who were expected to be a teacher as they knew the modern world, and women were expected to be a student whose duties were still confined to the domestic arena" (Chaudhury, 2009:298)}. Though women were presented as the companion of men their position was still not evolved as equal to men. They just stand as active listeners who lived by the grace of men and in the shadow of men.
- ***Patriarchal values:*** In the early part of the 19th-century religious domination and the

subordination of Hindu women were very strong and distinct. The Neo-Vaishnavite and the process of Hinduisation during the Ahom rule led to the development of the patriarchal system in Assam. Chastity and sexual purity of women were highly preserved in the new system. The restriction was made on the free movement of women. The practices like Gadhan (bride-price) and keeping the son-in-law in the house of father-in-law's house (Ghar-jowai) had lost the values, widow-remarriage became prohibited, and free movement of women too restricted (Ajit Kumar, 2018:30). Hindu religion covered mostly all the people of Assam as an umbrella to carry them on one platform (Chaudhury, 2009:290-291).

Discussion on Social Issues in the pages of 'Orunudoï': Question's on conjugality.

In 1846, the first Assamese monthly journal – the *Orunudoï* was published by the American Baptist Missionary in Sibsagar. Apart from the motive of spreading Christianity, the journal also helped to create a public opinion on the current social issues like women's education, child marriage, and widow remarriage, and polygamy. Contemporary Assamese elites who came under the influence of the Bengal renaissance published their articles on the pages of *Orunudoï* (Goswami, 2008). Like in the rest part of India, most of these men were members of the upper castes. So, it is obvious that their concern was only stuck on the issues from the Upper caste society.

In support of female education, Gunabhiram Barua said that the prime duty of the parents is to educate sons and daughters equally. Both have the right to learn and it is also approved by the *Shastas* (Maheswar Neog, 1983:949-50). He found nothing bad about Shudra's practice of widow remarriage and requested the Brahmin to follow the same. Because he thought that the practice could have removed the sinful act committed by the widows (Maheswar Neog, 1983). In this regard, Gunabhiram Barua had preserved the same idea as Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. The book, "Caste, Widow-Remarriage and Reform of Popular Culture in Colonial Bengal", is written jointly by Sekhar Bandopadhyay and Sumit Sarkar mentioned Vidyasagar's views regarding widow remarriage. As "Vidyasagar was also concerned with the patriarchal notion of control over female sexuality and family discipline but afraid of the threat of illegal sex. So, he tried to add them into the socially legitimate channel through marriage" (Chakrabarti, 2006:149-152).

One of his contemporaries Hemchandra Barua remark is important on this ground. He asserted that both man and woman had faced the same kind of suffering. So, both had the right to remarriage. He was against polyandry. He used to say that man and woman is the best companion for one another. So he insisted to provide equal knowledge to them (Arupjyoti Saikia (re-ed.), 2004:1086).

In the thesis of Ajit Konwar, he remarks that the women from Assam had shared their opinions in *Orunudoï*'s page on the subject of women's education. But their thoughts never rose beyond the ideal devoted wife (Ajit Kumar, 2018:57). In her article (published in *Orunudoï*) entitled '*Stri Sakalar Kartabya Karma*' (Duties of Women) Padmawati Devi has emphasized that God has created both men and women. Men are by nature brave and stronger than women but it doesn't reflect the weakness of women. She also emphasized that women must know well of using their husband's money. Such qualities can be acquired barely from education. Another woman Bishnupriya Devi gave the justification by showing her concern for education as education help woman to remind her duty. She further emphasized that it is not bad for women to come out of their houses and travelling around the world. She again said that Women should see the world to acquire more knowledge to strengthen her mind (Arupjyoti Saikia (re-ed.), 2004:243-44). Both for Padmawati and Bishnupriya Devi education was an

essential instrument for women to run home perfectly.

So, *Orunudo* was the first platform where the initial question related to women was framed as this periodical started querying about the behaviour and nature perceived by a woman. *Orunudo* helped in the growth of the mental horizon of the Assamese people. Before *Orunudo*, most of the Assamese were unable to imagine the lifestyle of the outer world. *Orunudo* had connected Assamese people with the new world beyond their preloaded knowledge. The most essential contribution of *Orunudo* was that it helped in the rise of several prominent writers who published articles on social issues in the pages of *Orunudo*. So, apart from other contributions like language development, literary development, it created a public sphere where people can distribute their knowledge on different grounds. Through their articles, some of the prominent writers offered their views on conjugal practices. They emphasized widow remarriage, education for girls, problems of polyandry, and child marriage, these were also new experiences for the Assamese people. In the earlier instances there was no platform like *Orunudo* and also had no evidence of discussing on the social ground. The home is taken as utterly private without any outer interference so when Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua advocated for widow remarriage and child marriage, the conservative section of the society were fully upset with them as they did not want any intervention on their customs. Because it reflected their distinct identity as they always try to set them separate from the rest. Moreover, they were not ready to degrade their position by adopting the customs of the dishonoured. So, confrontation was started but this was not able to keep aloof Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua from their earlier stand. They remained firm in their position and Gunabhiram Barua set an example in the society by marrying a widow, Bishnupriya Devi and Hemchandra Barua remained unmarried after the death of his wife. Their attempts influenced to a large extent the liberal youth. They came up and raised their voice against these. By their initiation and participation, girl's education became expedient in Assam (Aparna Mahanta, 2008).

Public Sphere and Social issues (after Orunudo)

The Assamese students receiving higher education in Calcutta in the late 19th century were influenced by the intellectual consciousness that took place in Bengal under the impact of the Renaissance. In 1857, they organized Gyan Pradayni Sabha, Goalpara Hitssadhani Sabha, Asam Desh Hitasadhani Sabha (1855), Upper Assam Association (1880), Barpeta Hitosadhini Sabha (1855), Tezpur Rayot Sabha, Jorhat Sarvajonik Sabha that came in the early phase of the 19th century (S. P. Barua, 1983:86-87).

Though these were mainly political organizations, social issues also got importance in their discussions.

The press had given much importance to social issues. It added new values and new norms in the society. Especially, it became the bridge to communicate with the common people. The prominent writers of the nineteenth century generated a sense of social awareness among Assamese people that also inspired them to re-examine the behaviour of the society.

Assam *Bilasinee* (The first journal started by an Assamese) was published 25 years later to *Orunudo*. The editor of the paper was Sri Duttadev Goswami Sattradhikar of Auniati Satra (S. P. Barua, 1983:99).

In 1872, a group of Assamese students who were obtaining education in Calcutta organized the 'Asamiya Chhatra Sahitya Sabha (Assamese Student Literary Society) in Calcutta (S. P. Barua, 1983:97). Though it failed to gain patronization it opened the way for

the 'Asomiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha' or 'Society for the Development of Assamese language' which was set up in Calcutta on 25th August 1888. The group of students who organized the society was Laksminath Bezbarua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Hemchandra Goswami, Kanaklal Barua, Ramakanta Barkakoti, Benudhar Rajkhowa, Padmanath Gohain Barua, Anandra Chandra Agarwala, Durga Prasad Majindar Barua, Satyanath Bora, Lambodar Bora, Sonaram Choudhury, and Rajanikanta Bordoloi (Puzari, 2016:21-22)}.

The organization also released a mouthpiece name 'Jonaki' on 9 February 1889 from Calcutta. The main purpose of this paper was the development of Assamese literature. Apart from the literary works, discussions related to women also took place on the pages of Jonaki which provided information about the views of society regarding the position of women (S. P. Barua, 1983:102)}.

The Assam Mihir was a bi lingual paper in Assamese and Bengali published in 1872 from Guwahati (Puzari, 2016:20)}.

During the middle of 1891, a group of Assamese students living at Pratap Chandra Chatterjee Lane at Calcutta withdrew their support from Jonaki and Asomiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhani Sabha and formed a new organization, 'Asamiya Sabha or Assamese Literary club' published a new monthly magazine called 'Bijuli' as their mouthpiece printed at the Kripasindhu Press, Balram Street, Calcutta. Benudhar Rajkhowa, Krishna Prasad Dowerah, and Padmanath Gohain Barua were great contributors to the literary works that emerged in the pages of Bijuli. The contribution of Bijuli towards the society is needed to be discussed. Large number of the pages were full on the issues of contemporary society. Sometimes articles on political issues were also published in the pages of Bijuli (Sharma, 1986:95)}.

In 1898, another English weekly 'The Eastern Herald' appeared from Dibrugarh, In 1882, Hemchandra Baruah published his weekly, Asam News, Manik Chandra Barua published another weekly, 'Asam', Radhanath Changkakoty published an English Weekly, 'Times of Assam' in 1895. These journals and weekly also became the experimental of the public sphere in the 19th century Assam (Saikia, 2019:60)}.

Early Debates on Women's Education in Assam: Question's on Domesticity

The subordinate position of women in the 19th and 20th-century Assamese society did not have much difference from the pre-colonial society. It is assumed that women needed strict control as they represented the family's honour. The system of *Pardah* or *Orani* or veil was another important characteristic of the 19th century Assam. In her autobiography, Nalinibala Devi gave a detailed account of this practice (Devi, 1976).

This was the scenario in Assam in the 19th century when missionaries started working for the establishment of girl's schools. The conservative Assamese people feared the approach of the Christian Missionaries and denied women education by saying that it will destroy the very nature of Assamese society.

The debate takes place in the pages of *Assam Bandhu* (1885-86) *Mou* (1886-87) and *Jonaki* (1889-1916). They mostly debated on the topics like- 1. What roles have to be assigned to the Assamese women? Is education essential for them? And what is the nature of women? (Ajit Kumar, 2018:60)}

Both for the traditionalist and educated persons the home is the only space for women. They again emphasized that women had no role to play outside the homes. In his PhD thesis

entitled, "Society and Patriarchy in 20th Century Assam: Chandraprabha Saikiani and Her Experiences (1901-72)" Ajit Konwar discusses the early debates over women's educations that took place in the journals like Assam Bandhu, Mou and Jonaki. As an example in his article entitled '*Tirotar Ban Ki*' (What is the duty of a wife?) published in Mou, Balinarayan Bora argued that the place of learning for girls is home (Ajit Kumar, 2018:63)}. It means the only duty consigned to women is to maintain peace in their homes. This type of view had been preferred by the conservatives towards women. This also shows the utmost nature of the upper caste who considered that women need protection and seclusion as they are loaded with the responsibility of upholding their caste identity. They did not accept the idea of girls leaving the seclusion of home and intermixing of the caste. As only the women's home changed after marriage, so measures were taken to stop them from assorting with the men from a lower caste. So, all roles and regulations imply to fulfil that demand only. As an example, in his article entitled *Stri Shiksha* (Women Education) published in Assam Bandhu, Purnakanto Sharma had rejected the need for education for women because they had to attend their marriage at the age of eleven, and at the age of thirteen or fourteen they would become mothers (Ajit Kumar, 2018:62)}. So, what time is left for her education? He had never sought to delay the marriage time of a woman. In his article, Tentenu Amar Upaiki? (Then what shall we have to do) Published in Jonaki, Panidra Nath Gogoi emphasised that it become disastrous to have educated girls as they can create havoc for the family's peace (Ajit Kumar, 2018:64)}.

In that case, both Bolinarayan Bora and Purnokanto Sharma had termed as same as the prominent Bengali poet Iswar Gupta. He assumed that education could destroy the feminine nature of women. It will be producing unreligious women who again opposed the decision of their families. He also criticised the step of Bethune Society in the same way as Bolinarayan Bora and Purnokanto Sharma had criticised the stand of liberal thinkers like Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Bora. Iswarchandra again said that the women in the older days were virtuous and bound by the religious codes. By attacking Bethune he said that Bethune alone had destroyed all feminine qualities of Indian women and he was too frightened by thinking that education would produce the women who only hold their books and ignored the things that had happened around them and speak the language of England. The most disastrous thing would happen when they went to Bazaar by themselves and bargained with the vendors (Panjani, 1988).

The Conservative section of the society is always uncared for the pain and sufferings of their daughters and sisters. For them, women are only a tool full of obligation which directed the very nature of their tradition. So, limitations were set on their movement. At that time there were no popular novels in Assamese. So the literates of that time had to rely on Bengali kinds of literature. The conservatives expressed their fear in the use of Bengali books like '*Kamini Kumar*', '*Subhadra-Haran*' and '*Rukmini -Haran*'. In their views, if the women read these books, subsequently it can restrain them from their wifely duties as women will be fantasized about the romantic husband as similar as Kumar, Arjun, and Krishna (Aparna Mahanta, 2008:22)}.

They accepted the fact that the school is the doorway to the public arena. So, they did not want to allow girls to win their first triumph in the public sphere.

5 Conclusion

The Social reforms that took place in the nineteenth century Assam suggested the existence of the lower position of Women in society. From the debate on the women's

education that took place in the public sphere, we come with the idea that conservatives considered women's sphere as 'home'. Though the many liberal advocates like AnandaramDhekialPhukan, GunabhiramBarua offered their views in favour of women's education but was unable to set proper idea about the duty that should be given by an educated girl. Gunabhiram started his Journal 'Assam Bandhu' for spreading liberal views towards social issues (his liberal motive is visible from his choice of getting married to a widow and providing education to both his wife and daughter), but his motive remained unclear and unsuccessful as most of the disrespectful articles on women's education were also published in the pages of his journal. LakhminathBezboah highly gets appreciation for his literary contribution but his idea towards women's education only represented conservative views on education. As in the pages of Jonaki, he advocated separate courses for boys and girls. When in Bengal, women are fully aware of their rights and write very sharply for equal education to both boys and girls but few Assamese women writers wrote in the pages of periodicals that had adopted the same tune of the conservatives. But a good sign is that these periodicals advocated for the enhancement of some ideological change in terms of framing women's nature as mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law. It too led to change of conjugal rights as they raised several questions regarding widow remarriage, child marriage, female infanticide, women education, polygamy, and the status of a woman in the society. So, it somehow led to add some liberation in improving women's position in the society.

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