UNIT 11 : TOWARDS MODERNISATION

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- describe the beginning of modern education in colonial Assam,
- discuss the development of print culture in colonial Assam,
- assess the role played by the Assamese middle classin colonial Assam,
- explain the debate which centered around the issue of language in colonial Assam.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units, you have learnt how the British entered Assam, gradually expanded their hold and consolidated their position with administrative re-organisations which even providedstability in the province after a considerable period of internal chaos and external aggression. But in the due course of their rule, the British exploited the natural resources, established modern industries with outside capital and labour, imposed heavy taxations, etc. There developed agradual dislikeness among the local people towards the colonial rule which resulted in a series of uprisings, rebellions and revoltsagainst the British.

However, the British with their own selfish motives tried to modernise the province. Modern education and printing press were introduced which brought about new ideas helping in the emergence of the middle class. These Assamese middle class played a vital role in regenerating the society in Assam. To run their administration as well as for beginning modern education, the colonial government used Bengali instead of Assamese, the local language. This colonial act of discrimination towards the Assamese language created a controversy in the province which can be called as the 'Language Debate'. We are going to study about all these aspects of the colonial rule in this unit.

11.3 MODERN EDUCATION

At the beginning of the colonial rule, the education system in Assam was in its traditional set up consisting of the *tols*, *pathsalas*, *madrassas*, *satras* where mainly religious education was imparted. The education imparted there made the people more irrational and god fearing rather than widening their mental horizon. The Assamese people were hence not conscious and articulate.

Besides, during the Ahom period education was confined mainly to the priestly class, aristocratic section and official scribes. It was not necessary to become literate to enter the services under the Ahom government as not much paper work was involved in the administration. As such many Ahom officials even those from higher rank did not have formal education.

But during the colonial rule, situation changed as education was the basic qualification for entering the servicesunder the colonial government. The erstwhile Ahom officials found themselves quite incompetent in the new administrative set up. They not only lost their earlier power and privileges, but also had to remain satisfied by holding small positions like *mauzadars*, *chaudhuris*, etc.

The offices of trust and responsibility had to be filled up with the people from the neighbouring districts of Bengal as they were educated and

had long acquaintance with the colonial administrative set up. These officials were known as *amolas* who soon dominated the administration of Assam. The earlier 'men of rank' were replaced by 'men of ability and business' from outside.

Introduction of modern education therefore became an issue of prime importance for the colonial government so that they can create a class of educated people in Assam who can fill up the government positions. This educated Assamese class will be attracted towards western ideology and institution and thereby probably becoming an ardent advocate of colonial rule. Already in 1813, the Charter Act had made it obligatory for the English East India Company to provide education amongst the inhabitants of its territories in India and had granted a sum of one lakh rupees annually for it. David Scott initially thought of retaining the traditional educational institutions. But after continuing this traditional educational system for few years, the colonial government felt the necessity of introducing modern education in Assam. It was Commissioner Jenkins who realized that Assamese people must be made a part of the administrative set up.Thegovernment must educate and train them to make them eligible for government services.But for imparting modern education in the newly established schools, English and Bengali language were used as the medium of instruction. Assamese language was thus disrespected which created a controversy. **Regarding this controversy we will study in the section 11.6**.



LET US KNOW

David Scott encouraged the oriental learning by advocating the expansion and improvement of the existing traditional system of education in Assam. He appealed to the Imperial Government of India for the establishment of *pathsalas* in Assam to cater to the educational needs of the Assamese people. In October, 1826 schools of the *gurukul* style were established by Scott with theapproval of the imperial government in different places like Gauhati, Nilachal,Naduar, Pati-Darrang, Hajo, Bajali, Sheela, Biswanath, Nagaon and Mangaldai. In theseschools, the medium

of instruction was Sanskrit. The curriculum consisted of themythological texts like the Ramayana, the Bhagavata as well as the study of Arithmetic,Medicine and Astronomy.

The colonial government established English medium schools at the Sadar Stations (district headquarters) of Assam.The first school of this kind was the Gauhati School established in 1835 with Mr. Singeras the Headmaster. At the beginning the school had an enrolment of 58 students which increased to 150 in 1838 and then to 340 by the end of 1840. Schools of similar kind were also established at Nowgong, Goalpara, Biswanath and Darrang. Later on these schools were made Anglo-Vernacular as English was found to be difficult both as a subject and medium of instructionfor the beginners. Hence, there were two independent departments, English and Bengali at Sadar schools.

There too grew a demand for schools in the villages. This demand gained momentum as written land deeds (*pattas*) were provided by the colonial government which made the common people eager to learn reading and writing as they might be deceived by the *amolas*. The village schools were mostly of vernacular (Bengali) medium for which teachers were brought from Bengal. In these schools the curriculum included elementary reading, writing and arithmetic.

The schools were established not only because of the efforts of the colonial government, but also due to the role played by the Christian missionaries and fund generously provided by the local people. The American Baptist Missionaries were most active in the Brahmaputra Valley. They established schools in different places and played the pioneering role in restoring Assamese language to its rightful position. The Welsh Calvinistic Mission started spreading education in the Khasi-Jayantia Hills and later on extended their activities in other hilly areas of Assam. Local people showed eagerness towards establishing schools as education was the required qualification for securing government jobs.

In 1873 George Campbell, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal introduced Assamese as the language of the schools and courts in Assam. Initially it

was introduced in the primary schools. Till 1880s as Assamese books were not available, education in the middle and high schools were provided in the Bengali language. It was further enacted that where Assamese books were not available, teaching at all the levels of school must be done either in Bengali or English. Besides, for technical terms if proper Assamese word was not available, Bengali words should be used.

The introduction of Assamese language provided a great impetus to the growth of primary schools in Assam. In 1871-72 there were 204 primary schools in Assam and the number rose to 1,351 in 1882-83. Then in between 1897-1902, the number of primary schools rose from 2800 to 3534 with a corresponding increase in the number of students from 83,000 to 103,541. A number of lower vernacular schools also were formed as intermediaries between primary and middle schools.

At the end of the 19th century, the number of aided middle english schools in Assam was 56 and unaided was 23. The number of government high schools in both the Valleys rose to 10. Out of these schools 5 were aided with 935 students and remaining 5 were unaided with a numerical strength of 937 students. Still, no higher educational institution was there in the province.

For higher education students used to go to Calcutta. To cater to this need the Gauhati School in 1865 was upgraded to a collegiate school by addinga collegiate section to it with an annual grant of 12000 rupees. But this experiment was a failure because very few students used to clear the entrance examination. Hence, maintaining the collegiate section was not economically viable and was abolished after few years.

Finally, in 1901 the Cotton College was established at Gauhati which was affiliated to the Calcutta University. The college was named after Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton who played a leading role in the establishment of this higher educational institution.Frederick William Sudmerson was the first Principal of Cotton College. Initially, there were 39 students in the college and 5 Professors including the Principal.From the academic session of 1929-30 girl students were also admitted in the Cotton College. During that academic session, there was only 1 girl, but the number rose to 75 in 1940-41.

By beginning of the 20th century, professional and technical educational institutions were also established in Assam. In 1900 the John Berry White Medical School was established at Dibrugarhunder complete private initiative. TheEarle Law College was established at Gauhati in 1914.At Jorhat the Prince of Wales Technical School was established in 1927 for which donation of 1 lakh rupees was provided by the family of Jagannath Barua. From 1917 onwards demands were also raised through representations and petitions for the establishment of a separate university in Assam. Finally, the colonial government decided to establish a university at Gauhati by an Act of 1947.However, the Gauhati University was established after independence in 1948.



CKECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q.1. In which year the Gauhati School was upgraded to a collegiate school?

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Q. 2. Name the first Principal of the Cotton College.

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Q. 3. In which year the Gauhati University was established?

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11.4 PRINT CULTURE

Theemergence of print culture in Assam was another colonial development which owes a lot to the American Baptist Missionaries.The missionaries established the first printing press in Assam, the *Baptist Mission Press* at Sadiya which was shifted to Sibsagar. From there they published *Arunodai* (Dawn of the Day), the first Assamese monthly news-magazine in January, 1846 under the editorship of Nathan Brown. This monthly magazine continued its publication till 1880 under the successive editorship of Brown, Danforth, Whiting, Bronson, Mrs. Ward, Clark and Gurney.

However, even in the pre-Arunodai period the print media of Bengal had an influence on the educated Assamese minds. The absence of journalism in Assam was filled up by the newspapers and periodicals in Bengali andEnglish published from there. These newspapers and periodicals like *Samachar Darpan*, *The Friend of India*, *Somprakash*, etc published news items on the different issues of Assam thereby arousing public consciousness. These newspapers and periodicals had a great popularity in the province resulting in its increasing circulation.

But after the publication of *Arunodai*, many newspapers and magazines, both in English and Assamese were started to be published in Assam. But these newspapers and magazines were published on a monthly basisand were short lived. The end of 19th century witnessed the appearance and disappearance of many suchnewspapers and magazines like the *Assam Bilashini*, *Assam Dipika*, *Goalpara Hitasadhini*, *Assam DarpanMau*, *Asam Tara*, *and Chandrodaya* amongst others.

The *Assam Mihir* was the first weekly newspaper of Assam published from Gauhati which lasted only for a year from 1872-73. The *The Assam News* was the first Anglo-Assamese weekly published from Gauhati in 1882 under the editorship of Hem Chandra Barua which spread useful knowledge and information as well as aroused the public opinion on problems of common interest.The weeklies like the *The Assam*, *The Advocate of Assam* and *Assam Bilashini* were national in tone.However, the weeklies like the *Assam Banti* and *The Times of Assam* were moderate in nature.

The *Assam Bandhu* edited by Gunabhiram Barua and published from Nagaon in 1885 tried to widen the mental horizon of the Assamese people by publishing articles on arts, science and subjects of general interest. The monthly magazine *Mau* edited by Harnarayan Bora spread advanced and progressive views on the burning issues of that period. There was also pro-government newspaper like the *The Englishman*.

The *Paridarsak* was a Bengali fortnightly published from Assam in 1886. Then weekly Bengali newspapers like the *Silchar*, *Srihatta Mihir*, *Srihatta Darpan*, etc were also published in the province. The *Silchar* under

the editorship of Bidhu Bhusan Sen played a key role in moulding public opinion by covering all the important social and political events of that time. Later on the *Paridarsak* andthe *Srihatta Mihir* got amalgamated under the new name *Paridarsak-o-Srihattabasi*.

The *Jonaki*, a monthly Assamese magazine was published from Calcutta in 1889 under the editorship of Chandrakumar Agarwala followed by Hem Chandra Goswami, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Kanaklal Barua and Ratnakanta Barkakati. This magazine was non-political in character and brought about a literary awakening in Assam. Its publication was discontinued from Calcutta in 1893, but it was again published from Gauhati in 1901 under the editorship of Satyanath Bora.

During the 20th century, the three monthlies the *Usha*, *Banti* and *Alochani* lasted for several years. But the missionary mouth-piece *Dipti* and the English weeklies like the *The Eastern Herald*, *The Citizen*, *The Assamese Chronicle* and *The Assam Herald* went out of circulation after a short period due to lack of funds, printing problems and lack of public support.

The Bengali weekly the *The Surma,* published in 1911 under the editorship of Chandrodoy Vidyavinode and later by Bhuban Mohan Vidyanarva, played a crucial role in arousing public consciousness amongst the people of the Surma Valley. In the year 1919 Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury from his *Aruna* press at Gauhati published *Chetana*,a magazine with nationalist tone which provided a platform to the young talented writers of Assam like Raghunath Choudhary, Surya Kumar Bhuyan, Gyannath Bora, etc for publishing their articles with a nationalistic approach.

The development of print culture in Assam resulted in the publication of newspapers, magazines, etc which played a vital role in creating awareness amongst the people of Assam by highlighting the important issues.This in turn led to the publication of the news on the issues of Assam in leading national newspapers like the *Hindu Patriot*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and *The Bengalee* amongst others.



CKECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q. 4. Name the first Assamese monthly news-magazine.

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Q. 5. Name the first weekly newspaper of Assam.

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Q.6. Who was the first editor of *Jonaki*?

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11.5 ROLE OF THE ASSAMESE MIDDLE CLASS

The concept of middle class is urban one and had its origin in Europe. It originated after the decline of feudalism and emergence of commercial and industrial bourgeoisie in the newly developed towns and cities. It emerged in the West as a result of economic and technical change and people of this class were engaged in trade and industry.

However in India, the middle class emerged because of changes in the administrative structure and legal institutions. For consolidating their rule, the British needed local people having administrative and professional skill. As such they created a middle class amongst the Indians educated on modern lines and having professional qualification to serve their administrative set up in the country.

Same situation prevailed in Assam.**As stated in the section 11.3**erstwhile Ahom officials were found to be quite incompetent, rather a burden for the colonial administration.Hence, by providing modern education, an educated class was created which filled up the government positions and emerged as a middle class. Besides, the modern education, print culture along with other factors also helped in the growth of Assamese middle class. Apart fromthe government job holders, there were businessmen, lawyers, amongst others who too were a part of the Assamese middle class.The Assamese businessmen then mostly comprised of the tea

plantersandtimber merchants like Maniram Dewan, Manik Chandra Baruah, Bholanath Baruah, Jagannath Barua, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Kali Prasad Chaliha, Sheikh Sahanur Ali, etc.Leading lawyers wereKamala Kanta Das, Ram Prasad Das,Mahendra Mohan Lahiri, Kamini Kumar Chanda, Nobin Chandra De, Krishna Chaudhuri, etc.

The newly emergedmiddle class imposed new social values in the Assamese society. Caste barrier was there and for its removal Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya, a Brahman by birth torn away his sacred thread, used the small stone image of Lord Vishnu (*saligram*) as paperweight and publicly ate food cooked by non-Brahmans. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Baruah and Gunabhiram Barua championed the cause of women liberation. Gunabhiram himself married a widow after the death of his first wife thereby promoting the widow remarriage. Kamini Kumar Chanda was a great advocate of female education and fought against untouchability, caste system, etc.

Issues like opium addiction also drew attention of the middle classes.Representations were made by the Assamese intelligentsia like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Haribilas Agarwala amongst others before A.J. Moffatt Mills in 1853 to save Assam and its people from the evils of poppy cultivation and opium addiction. During the visit of Viceroy Northbrook to Assam in 1872, Jagannath Barua and Manik Chandra Barua unitedly urged him to speedily complete the construction of railways in Assam for the development of its natural resources.

Haliram Dhekial Phukan through his writings in the Bengali periodicals and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan through his articles in *Arunodai* urged the people of Assam to make cultural contact with Bengal andfollow the Englishmen to gather knowledge as well as to expand their mental horizon. Bolinarayan Bora through *Mau* urged the Assamese younger generation to not remain satisfy with minor government jobs but to qualify themselves for higher offices under the colonial government.

Under the leadership of themiddle class, the poor ryots raised their voice against the land revenue measures of the colonial government by organising popular assemblies known as the *Raij Mels* in Assamese

language. Dinanath Bezbarua, Ghanshyam Barua, Manik Chandra Baruah and others representing the Assamese middle class belonged to the families of *Mauzadars* and the land revenue measures affected their landed interest too. As such they joined hands with the peasants to fight against the British. Haribilas Agarwala formed the *Tezpur Ryot Sabha* in 1884 to ventilate the grievances of the ryots of that area. The *Nowgong Ryot Association* was also formed in 1886 with the same objective.

Other than the ryot associations, various socio-political associations were formed by the Assamese middle class. The *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha* and the*TheAssam Association* were most prominent one and Jagannath Barua played the leading in the formation of these two associations. Some othersocio-political associations were the *Jnan Pradayani Sabha*, *Shillong Association*, *Asom Desh Hitaishini Sabha*, etc. These socio-political associations emerged as the representative body of the Assamese people. The leaders of these associations through peaceful and moderate means raised voice on the socio-political issues of Assam and placed petitions and memorandums before the colonial government.

For the restoration of Assamese language to its rightful place, the middle class played the leading role in association with the Christian missionaries. **Regarding this we will study in detail in the next section.**With notable contributions from the middle class the Assamese literature developed a lot during the colonial period. The notable literatures of that time like Lakshminath Bezbarua, Hemchandra Baruah, Chandrakumar Agarwala, and Jyoti Prasad Agarwala amongst others were from the middle class. Organisations like *Assam Literary Society* (1872) and *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (1888) were formed by the middle class intellectuals for the development of Assamese language and literature. Along with raising their attention and voice on the burning issues of Assam, the Assamese middle class also kept their eye on the national issues. They did not remain aloof from the national politics. Representatives from different socio-political associations of Assam did attend the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress. Under the leadership provided by the middle class, the Assamese people like their Indian counterpart participatedin the Indian

freedom movement from Swadeshi to Quit India. Even Maniram Dewan who attempted to spread the Revolt of 1857 in Assam was a representative of the Assamese middle class.

The Assamese middle class although was a colonial creation soon became the most articulate section of the Assamese society providing leadership in all its socio-cultural, economic and political activities.



CKECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q. 7. Who played the prominent role in the formation of the *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha*?

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Q. 8. Who formed the *Tezpur Ryot Sabha*?

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Q. 9. In which year the*Nowgong Ryot Association* was formed?

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11.6 LANGUAGE DEBATE

From 1826 to 1873 Assam and Bengal were placed under one administrative unit.For running their administration in Assam the colonial government used Bengali as the official language as official staffs were recruited from the neighbouring districts of Bengal. Further, while introducing modern education, Bengali was made the medium of instruction along with English. These colonial measures threw Assamese language into the background.

From the Assamese perspective this phase of negligence towards Assamese language is considered as the dark segment for Assamese language, literature and culture and hence provoked the people of the province to defend the pride of their own language. Despite the strong oppositions made by the Assamese people, the colonial government strongly believed that the Assamese language was nothing but a version or offshoot of the Bengali language.

However, attempts were made by the Assamese people to restore the Assamese language to its rightful position by denouncing the predominance of the Bengali language. In this regard, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan submitted a petition to A. J. Moffat Mills during his visit to Assam requesting the colonial government to restore the Assamese language in the courts and schools of Assam.

Further, Dhekial Phukan argued that to promote education in Assam it was quite important to provide education in vernacular language, means the Assamese language. He even requested Mills to publish the books of different western and Indian languages into Assamese so that the people of Assam could also have access to the western progressive ideas.

Already in 1849, for the benefit of the Assamese children, Dhekial Phukan published a primer in Assamese language called *Asamiya Lorar Mitra*. Through his pamphlet titled 'A Few Remarks on the Assamese language and on Vernacular Education in Assam' (1855), he pointed out the defects of adopting the Bengali as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam.

Besides, Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Baruah also advocated for the re-imposition of the Assamese language to its rightful status. He composed a number of books in Assamese language like *Axomiya Byakoron, Adipath, Pathamala, Axomiya Lorar Byakoron*, etc. which were later on used as textbooks in the schools of the province. The credit for composing the first exhaustive Assamese dictionary *Hemkosh* also goes to him.

The American Baptist Missionaries also opposed the imposition of the Bengali language in Assam. The real reason behind this was that English was not a familiar language in Assam and hence, the Christian Missionaries in order to propagate Christianity in the province were compelled to learn the vernacular language (the Assamese language). From Sibsagar they published *Arunodai*, the first Assamese monthly magazine to promote vernacular language and to serve the western progressive ideas amongst the people for an intellectual awakening.

In addition to the religious books, the Christian Missionaries started to publish grammar, dictionaries and other text-books in Assamese language.They strongly advocated that instructions in the schools of Assam should be given in the vernacular language. They opined that the Bengali text-books should be used in Assam until the full supply of the Assamese text-books could be made.

The missionary efforts were led by Miles Bronson (a linguist), Mr. Cutter, A. H. Danforth, William Robinson, etc. In 1839, William Robinson published a grammar book in Assamese language. Miles Bronson compiled 'A Dictionary in Assamese and English' and published the same in 1867 from Sibsagar to promote the Assamese language. Interestingly, some renowned personalities of Bengal also recognized the separate identity of the Assamese language and hence, contributed towards its growth and development. It was due to the selfless efforts of Asutosh Mukherjee, Assamese became a subject of Post-Graduate study in Calcutta University. Even A. J. Moffat Mills was convinced that the Assamese language should be restored in Assam. He opined that an English youth was not taught Latin until he was well grounded in English and in the same manner an Assamese should not be taught a foreign language until he knew his own language. Finally, the various efforts made from different concerns gained success whenGeorge Campbell, the Lieutenant Governor, of Bengal on 9th April, 1873 declared that Assamese language should be reintroducedin the schools and courts of Assam.



CKECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q. 10. In which year the *Asamiya Lorar Mitra* was published?

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Q. 11. Who composed the *Hemkosh*?

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Q. 12. Who compiled the 'A Dictionary in Assamese and English'?

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