

**STATUS OF ASSAMESE WOMEN AS REFLECTED
IN *ORUNODOI*, THE FIRST ASSAMESE NEWSPAPER****Dr. Nabanita Kalita,**Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese,
N.H. College, Patacharkuchi, Assam, India**ABSTRACT:**

This article traces the status of women in Nineteenth century as reflected in the first Assamese newspaper *Orunodoi* in its first nine years i.e., from 1846 to 1854. *Orunodoi* is a precious historical document, mouthpiece of the American Baptist Missionaries, to find out the wit and intellect of the people of the Nineteenth century colonial Assam. This newspaper was first published in January, 1846 from Sibsagar, Assam. It was edited by Reverend Dr. Nathan Brown, a Baptist Missionary. *Orunodoi* is considered as the first monthly newspaper printed in Assamese language devoted to religion, science and general intelligence. Being the first Assamese newspaper, *Orunodai* opened the door of knowledge among Assamese people. This monthly paper has created a new era, named *Orunodoi* Yuga, in the world of Assamese language and literature and has given birth to a number of notable authors such as Anandaram Dhekial Pkukan, Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua, Nidhi Levi Farwell and many others. The issues related to women published in this newspaper is a precious historical document to lookback to the Nineteenth century colonial Assamese society.

KEYWORDS: Orunodoi, Newspaper, Women, Christian, Missionaries, etc.**INTRODUCTION:**

The contribution of the Christian Missionaries to Assamese language, literature and national life is undoubtedly memorable. One of the most important contributions made by the missionaries was the publication and circulation of the 'Orunodai' paper from the Missionary Press of Sibsagar in January, 1846. It was edited by Reverend Dr. Nathan Brown. *Orunodoi* is considered as the first monthly newspaper printed in Assamese language devoted to religion, science and general intelligence. Being the first Assamese newspaper, Orunodai opened the door of knowledge among Assamese at home and abroad and spread the mental horizon of Assamese people who were often called Chukar Vekuli (Frog lives in corner) (Sharma 256). This monthly paper has created a new era, named Orunodoi Yuga, in the world of Assamese language and literature and has given birth to a number of notable authors such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua, Balaram Phukan, Dharma Kanta Burhagohain, Gunabhiram Barua, Nidhi Levi Farwell and many others (Sarma 215). This newspaper was published by the missionaries for the purpose of propagating Christianity, although various topics were covered here. In addition to biblical translation stories, there were also history, archaeology, science, astrology, moral stories, biographies, nature stories, various news from home and abroad. Besides, Deodhai Assam Buranji, Kamarup Buranji and many other Buranjis were published here at regular intervals. The American Baptist Missionaries were pioneers in publishing the issues on social reform such as promotion of widow remarriage, women education, prevention of child marriage polygamy etc. The American Baptist Missionaries carried on propaganda of women education through their mouthpiece *Orunodoi*. In that time Assamese women were held in the highest esteemed in society but their gender roles were well restricted to the socio-cultural parameters of the contemporary society. Comparatively the women of the elite class had a better status but in general the status of women was limited to marriage, child producing and looking after kitchen, home and confined to certain social taboos only. Polygamy and domestic violence

caused by the growing habit of taking opium resulting the physical, verbal, emotional and economic abuse of the women sections in the society. Women need to look after all the household activities such as weaving, cooking, husking paddy, etc. like a servant in every household and as a result education for women was miserably neglected considering as dangerous for the society. Besides, there was a belief that no one would marry a girl if she could read and write.

OBJECTIVES:

The main objective of this study is to make a systematic analysis on the status of Assamese women in Nineteenth Century society as reflected in the pages of *Orunodoi*. Here study has been made on the first nine years of publications i.e. from 1846 to 1854. Although only a few articles or news published here, related to women, they are enough in understanding the status of women in Assamese society during that time.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The review of literature helps in understanding the area of study from a broad perspective. It helps the researcher to make a systematic study and to create a base for future research. Critics have assessed *Orunodoi*, the first monthly newspaper in Assamese from different viewpoints. However, most of the writings are published in Assamese language. Satyendra Nath Sharma in his book *Asomiya Sahityar Samikhyatmank Etibritta* (1981) writes about the contributions of *Orunodoi* in Assamese literature. Another renowned writer Maheswar Neog in his book *Asomiya Sahityar Ruprekha* marks how this newspaper continues its publication from January, 1846- 1883 and shaped Assamese language and literature. There is a brief note on *Orunodoi Yuga* in the book *History of Assamese Literature* by B.K. Baruah. It was published in 1978 by Sahitya Academy, New Delhi. In *Asomiya Sahityar Distripat*, Hemanta Kumar Sarma, the author, states that *Orunodoi* is a significant contribution by the Baptist Missionaries to Assamese society. However little discussions have been made on the status of women as reflected in the various issues of *Orunodoi*.

ANALYSIS:

The contribution of *Orunodoi* reflect nineteenth century Assamese thought and consciousness is great and memorable. It has brought to light the wit and intellect of nineteenth century Assamese mind for which *Orunodoi* has occupied a distinctive place in the core of every Assamese. During this colonial period, status of Assamese women was not very upwards. Most of them were deprived of formal education in the public institutions and as a result they were illiterate. Assamese women had to suffer a lot from the evils of child marriage, widowhood and polygamy and so on. Assamese widow, as their marriage had taken place at an early age, had to live a very miserable life after the death of her husband. *Orunodoi* in its different sections, covers various news related to women. Various stories about women were naturally incarnated or various conversations about women were published. Issues like child marriage, death after eating opium, conversion of religion, widow remarriage etc. were published here at a regular basis.

In this paper attempt has been made to make a systematic analysis on the status of women on that colonial period through the news/ stories published in *Orunodoi* from 1846 to 1854.

In the first year of May (1846) *Orunodoi* published a news on women title 'Kaniya Manuh Ejani Marar Katha' (death of an opium eater woman) (Neog 36). Here is a description of how a young woman died tragically as a result of 'kani' (opium) eating. Although the main

purpose of this news was to make the general reader aware of the plight of human beings from 'Kani', but it also reveals the status of women in the society of that time. In this story it is stated that the husband of the dead wife was also an opium eater, convicted as a thief, who sold his wife along with his daughter to a Muslim man for some money. After the death of that Muslim man, the woman and her daughter had to suffer a lot as there were no one to look after them. The society also rejected her and kept her aloof for staying in the house of Muslim. Later on, this distressed woman had taken shelter in the house of a Missionary at Sibsagar. However, after a couple of days she died of a deadly disease. After her death no body come forward for her cremation, as she was isolated by the society. The missionary did her cremation. From this story it has cleared that during that colonial period a section of Assamese female also consumed opium like their husband. Besides, during that period female were abused by male as a consumable item. This proves that the place of women in the contemporary society was very low. In the story it has become transparent when the opium eating husband sold his wife along with his daughter for money to a Muslim man. This story also highlights the distressing picture of the position of women in the Assamese society during that period.

Another news on woman title 'Bibah Nahowakoi Sowali Ana' (keeping the girl without getting married) (Neog 191) was published in the December issue of the second year (1847). Here the news speaks about mostly the Hindus of Assam who had kept girls as wife without getting married. The news also narrates how a few Assamese ill minded people used to take properties from the would-be husband.

'Tate dusta manuhbore sarure para sowali dim buli anek draiba bastu khai, pase dibar samayat ane kisu adhik dim bulile purbe khowa lowa khini misa mati nakoi khoja to loi diye, sei karan sowalir para gosar lagi dhan bhari kheti batir danya pari manuh bor bar dukhiya hai' (Neog 191).

(There are some cunning people who often takes/seek things or eat a lot of food making a promise to give his daughter to the hand of the other person but broke his promise when found another man who is willing to give him more and becomes a victim of lawsuit and poor)

In this context it has been revealed that in the society of that time there are many evil-minded people who dare to exploit others keeping his daughter in front, in the name of marriage.

In the April issue of the third year (1848) of the Orunodoi, a news item was published under the headline 'Bibhichar Bisayak' (On the subject of adultery) (Neog 224). Here, all those involved in immorality and adultery are advised to stay away from adultery or adulterous activities. Among them the concept of women is also specially depicted. Common men are asked to avoid the company of adulterous women in this way:

"He putra mor bidyar bakya man di suna aru mor budhir bakyat kaan diya, kiyano byabhisarini tirotar mukhar para mou olai aru tai telatko o snigdha bakya kai, kintu tair abhiprai nagadanar nisina tita aru duiphale dhar thaka daar nichina tikhna. Tair bhari mrityulo jai aru tair bhairir khoje patalaloi niye..." (Neog 225)

(Son, listen carefully to the words of my wisdom, and pay attention to the words of my mind, because the honey comes out of the mouth of adulterous woman and she speaks softer than oil, but her intention is as bitter as a 'nagdana' and as sharp as the two sides sharp edged sword. Her fists go to death and her fists leads to hell.)

In these lines it is clearly visible that during that time also there were women having such adulterous nature. And these women were often abandoned by the society for their misdeeds. Besides, gender biasness was quite visible in Assamese society during that time. In addition, in the Assamese society of that time, the girl child was given a lower status than the boy child and the girl child was not given any benefit for the sake of education and this is reflected clearly in this article.

“Kintu asomiya lok sakale sibilakar kanya santanak eko gyan nisikai, lorar mone gyan labar ji rupe jogya sowalir mano tulla rupe jogya, eteke, ubhayake gyan dile bisesh upakar darshiba”(Neog 227)

(But Assamese people do not give wisdom to their girl child. As boys are fit for learning girls are also equally fit. So, both are to be provided the knowledge of wisdom and only then society can progress)

This is how the author suggests to provide education for both boys and girls and insist that the progress in society would be possible only through the spreading of knowledge. This writes up has a significant contribution in the development of women education in Assam.

In the April issue of the sixth year (1851) of the Orunodoi another article was published titled: ‘Ejani Christian Tirotar Bibaran’ (The Story of a Christian woman) (Neog 561). Here the author is Nidhi Levi Farwell. In this write up he writes about his dead wife, Abbi Thuku. She was the first Assamese woman converted to Christian. The main purpose of this news was to glorify Christianity. However, it also reported that Assamese women (Ahom girls) had converted into Christianity. The news also mentions various deeds done by Assamese women of that time through Thuku’s statement to help the poor people of the locality. Although the intention of the author was to spread the message of Christianity among the readers, through this article it is known that an Assamese Ahom girl converted to Christian. Here the author also writes about the speech of Thukur:

“He priya, amar mandalir rakhyake kowar dare. Mandalir dukhiya lokak upakar karibale ami ki karim. Tumi hole sakari kara dhanere kisu diba pariba, kintu mai ki dim. Jadi tomar dhanake deo teo tate mai eko upakar kara nahol; ei nimitte mai eake karo, kisuman eri, palu aru hahh kukura puhi, take besi ji pao take dim” (Neog 562)

(Oh dear! as stated by our group leader, what can I do for the welfare of our poor people of the group! As you are in service you can give some money but what can I do? If I give your money, then how can I do welfare. So let me do some farming work of silkworm and ducks and selling them, whatever I get, will give them.)

In the January issue of the Ninth year of Orunodoi (1854) a story appeared under the title ‘Bidhabar Bibah’ (Widow’s Marriage) (Neog 1089). The news sent by an Assamese man living in Calcutta reported that the daughter (widow) of Nabin Chandra Mukhopadhyay of Balbharpur village in Medinipur district of Bengal had wholeheartedly married the son of a noble Brahmin named Bipra Das Chakaravorty. The author also urges the Assamese people to do pious deeds like widow remarriage and warns that this will eradicate foeticide and adultery from the society. He even prays to the merciful Gods for the introduction of this practice in Assamese society.

“Eteke ami ekanta mane dayar sagar sarba karta jagat iswarat prarthana kariso, jen ei su niti amar desato chali ei desar sahiba nowara pap sakal dur hai. He dayamay param iswar, tumi asom desat ene din ketiya kariba, je tat thaka sakalowe ei sakal kathak asudh hen nebbabi tomar suniyam sakalak pratipalan Kariba” (Neog 1089)

(Therefore, we sincerely pray to the God of the universe, the ocean of mercy, that these noble deeds will continue in our state and the unbearable sins of this state will disappear. O! most

merciful God, when wilt thou bring such a beautiful day upon the people so that they will not admit it as unhealthy practice rather, will accept it as healthy practice.)

The Assamese society in Nineteenth century was not at all free from many social evil practices where women were the most sufferer owing to child marriage, widowhood and polygamy. As a result, on most of the occasions women, especially the widows, had to live a very miserable life. This may be reason behind the publication of this news of Medinipur. This news seems to have played a significant role in the introduction of widow marriage in Assam.

In the March issue of the Ninth year of Orunodoi (1854), a news item was published in the form of a letter entitled “Asom Deshar Juba Musalman Sakalak Prati Nibedan Patra” (A letter of intent to all the Muslim Youths of Assam) written by Robert Blend Paduri Chahab (Neog 1117). In this letter also there were number of women related issues were addressed specially to the Muslim youths. Addressing the Muslim youths, Paduri Chahab writes that men and women are equally created by God and as such women had the equal rights. Opposing the tradition of polygamy among the Muslims, Paduri Chahab writes:

“Isware munih tirota duyoko samane srajise, sei karan teor agya ase, je pratyek manuhe kebal ekojani he tirota biya karaba pai, aru tirota sakaleo ekotahe giriek laba pai, ei ritit koi sarah hole bar beya aru pap hai. Aru purush bilak marile jenekoi jibatma thake, tenekoi tirota sakalaro thake. Ei karane sahiyal aru bhal manuh samaste tirotak barkoi man kare, aru teo bilakak bar mridu aru komal katha kai; kintu bhayatur aru saru samanya manuh bilakehe tirota manuh sakalak loghu amarjat aru kathor byabahaar kare.” (Neog 1117)

(God has created both man and woman equally compatible, that is why He has the advice, that every human being should marry only one woman and woman should also do the same. It is considered as sin, if it is violated. Since man and woman have the same soul after death. And this is the reason why virtuous men always treat their wives with respect and it is only fools and immoral husbands who treat their wives without any respect and show ruthless behaviour towards them.)

In the write up of Paduri Chahab clearly stated that the status of women was very low in the contemporary Assamese Muslim society. It also focusses that the tradition of polygamy was exist in Muslim society during that time. That is why Paduri Chahab urges all the youths to show respect and to treat woman equally as man.

CONCLUSION: The aforesaid study reflects a momentary vision of the society of the colonial Assam as well as the status of women specially. Indisputably it is a new area of study encourages the future researchers to fill a big gape in social history of Assam. From this study it is observed that in Nineteenth century, the status of women in Assamese society was very pitiable. Although a small number of articles related to woman were published in *Orunodoi*, most of them have vividly displayed the poor status of Assamese woman of that period.

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