5. Bringing Progress, 
Restoring Culture

In the 1870s an Assamese youth, Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864–1938), began his college career at Calcutta. Lakshminath came from a prominent gentry family which in the past had provided physicians for the Ahom kings. In the new circumstances of British India, the family’s elder sons had all proceeded to Calcutta for a college education. But the father, Dinanath, was grieved when Lakshminath, his third son, made the same choice. He had hoped that this younger son might carry on the family’s medical tradition. But like his brothers before him, Lakshminath did not wish to become a traditional healer.∞ In the manner of most of his contemporaries, Lakshminath’s sojourn away from home nurtured a dream of modern unmati (progress). Even as he married into the prestigious Bengali Tagore family and carved out a career outside Assam, Lakshminath Bezbarua constructed his public image as an Assamese patriot—a champion of the Asomiya language and its cultural heritage of devotional religion.

The Asomiya language’s print and literary efflorescence from the second part of the nineteenth century bore eloquent testimony to the self-consciously modern public which generated it. This public’s most visible constituent was the Brahmaputra valley’s élites. In colonial Assam that class, which provided both the Ahom and British regimes with their service gentry, was regrouping as a colonial intelligentsia. Its publicists wrote and imagined into existence a new Assam. The colonial state took almost a century to create modern transport, communication, and even a proper educational infrastructure for the region. In their absence Assam’s élites largely depended on
educational facilities in the nearest metropolis, Calcutta, the quintessential centre of commercial and cultural entrepreneurship. There they would “mess” together (sharing a house with a common kitchen rented by students from the same district or region) to acquire college degrees and a love of the motherland. In the colleges, bookshops, streets, and messes of Calcutta, they withstood the snubs meted out to them as provincial nobodies. There they found solidarity of brotherhood linked to region and mother-tongue.

Using the abundant and cheap infrastructure offered by the city’s presses and meeting-halls, a new Assamese public gradually formed, its goal being to create modernity for the homeland. Its members dreamed of creating progress and restoring the impressive cultural credentials that they glimpsed in Assam’s past. The ease and relative cheapness of print technology helped them to achieve their objective of creating a modern oeuvre for the Asomiya language. Their literary mission was accompanied by a reformist campaign to eradicate the stigma of opium consumption and thus of Assamese indolence. Just as they sought to replace the opium consumption of their fathers with temperate tea, they wished to substitute the vagaries of old-style religious heads with the deified figure of a historical spiritual leader. These publicists wished to restore local Vaishnavism to its pristine state under its founding father, Sankardeb. This, they hoped, would install Assamese Hinduism to its rightful place alongside other types of Indic devotional religion. That in turn would emphasize the gentry’s kinship with caste élites in other regions of the subcontinent, and its distance from Assam’s tribal and coolie population.

This chapter analyses how this regional élite engaged with notions of progress and patriotism as something that could be learnt in the colonial metropolis and transported home. Their tools were voluntary associations, clubs, public meetings, petitions, and pamphlets. Step by step they carried their task and its tools back to their homeland, to inspire an expanding audience and motivate younger generations of publicists with new aims and objectives. Education, religion, and culture served as the means to connect emerging regional and national identities and concerns, and as vehicles to achieve improvement and progress. To achieve their goal of progress, they initially sought state support. However, British obduracy on issues such as opium sales and the racism of tea’s emergent Planter’s Raj gradually drew this local agenda of progress away from a colonial vision of improvement and toward alternative nationalist dreams.
Education and Urban Mobility

In his memoir the Assamese official Harakanta Barua (1813–1900) described the ease of obtaining government employment in the 1820s. It was enough for his clerk brother to introduce him to the British district collector. Through much of Harakanta’s working life the colonial regime continued to rely on such informal networks of patronage and rank to staff its institutions. But from the late nineteenth century there was an increasing professionalization of government structures. Social connections remained important, but appointment to clerical and other “respectable” service jobs increasingly needed certificates. Even for the sons of mauzadars (revenue collectors), usually assured of succession, higher education was crucial to expanding social capital. Educated caste Hindu men were the most favoured for these new educational and service opportunities. The occasional scion of Muslim or Ahom gentry also obtained them. As yet, “tribal” names were few in the roll of educated employees.

Assamese gentry increasingly sought new education along western lines as the key to better jobs and speedier promotions in the colonial administration. Service jobs were important to augment family income and status. Relatively few Assamese households possessed connections or wealth of the magnitude of landed families in other regions. Even spiritual lords of the upper echelons, who possessed sizeable rent-free estates, often found it worthwhile to invest in higher education for their sons. Less well-to-do members of the gentry struggled to finance some amount of secondary education. Often a college degree was beyond their reach. Clerical remuneration from government employment was especially important for gentry households which possessed some land but few sources of cash income. Plantation clerkships provided other, albeit less coveted openings. Daughters were rarely sent to school until the early twentieth century, but many girls learnt to read and write the Asomiya language at home.

For the generations that succeeded Harakanta Barua, involvement with teachers, schoolmates, and urban life played an increasingly important role in their transition to adulthood. Despite the popularity of western pedagogy, the basics of reading and writing usually began in a domestic setting. During Harakanta’s childhood his elder brother taught him to read and write in Asomiya at home. By that time the political turmoil of the Burmese invasion had shut down
improving assam, making india

Assam’s toks and pathshalas (traditional schools). In later years Anandaram Dhekial Phukan’s cousin Gunabhiram Barua (1837–94) described how the family’s sons were taught the Sanskrit and Bengali alphabets at home, by older male relatives and specially appointed pandits. His Brahmin family’s close ties to Indic high culture explained these language choices. The father of Padmanath Gohain Barua (1871–1946) instructed him in Asomiya alphabets even before school began. His sister taught him to write with quills on banana leaves.

Proceeding further into the educational system necessitated a novel degree of interaction with colonial institutions. From the 1840s most high-status males attended, whenever possible, new institutions offering western education. A pioneering advocate of such education had been Anandaram Dhekial Phukan’s father, Haliram Dhekial Phukan (1802–32), who represented the cream of pre-colonial society. Well versed in Asomiya, Bengali, and Sanskrit lore as David Scott’s right-hand man, he had helped to establish the Guwahati Collegiate English School in 1835. The growth of these schools was slow. Unlike in Calcutta and Bombay, where colonial educational structures penetrated earlier and deeper, in Assam the starting age for institutional schooling remained late, depending upon available infrastructure and family resources. Padmanath Gohain Barua joined a lower primary school only at the age of eight. Officially the primary school syllabus, “reading, writing, fundamental rules of arithmetic, bazaar and zamindari accounts, and elements of mensuration (land surveying),” was intended for the lower masses of the population. In reality it was mostly the gentry that availed itself of such an education. Primary schooling was an investment that allowed genteel yet impecunious youths to qualify for positions as village accountants. Poorer and lower-caste students lagged in enrolment, needing to earn a living. Even among the gentry, only more affluent youths could afford to join the Middle English level, where instruction was in Bengali and English. Asomiya replaced Bengali as the official language in 1874, when schools began Asomiya and English instruction.

The number of schools in Assam increased during 1884–85 from 1,656 to 1,800, and of pupils from 56,858 to 58,755. Most of this growth was at the primary level. In 1884 there were just nine high schools. By 1886 there were fourteen. In 1875 Assam had eleven normal schools to train teachers, some run by the government, oth-
ers by missionaries. The teacher-training schools run by the S.P.G., American Baptist, and Welsh Presbyterian missionaries mostly catered to members of their flock: pupils “from three aboriginal races, Mikirs, Garos, and Kacharis.” Well into the twentieth century Assam’s new educational institutions were few in number. High schools were in only a few towns. Because of this, the acquisition of colonial education necessitated sojourns beyond village and natal households. Kin and caste ties were tapped in the quest for accommodation. Even so, students faced hardship, sacrifices, and emotional dislocation over their scholastic years. Padmanath left home to attend the nearest high school, at Sibsagar, where he lodged with relatives. Lambodar Bora (1860–92) obtained no formal schooling until he was twelve, when a primary school opened in his village. When he proceeded to the Middle School at Tezpur he lived in a friend’s shed, where he cooked his own meals.9 Government reports darkly insinuated that “a boy who had no relatives or friends to take him in is almost compelled to find shelter in one of the quasi-monastic institutions, which are reported to be generally little better than brothels and dens of vice.”10 This insinuation referred to the practice of several satras (Vaishnavite monasteries) of housing schoolboys who assisted the celibate monks. There is no evidence that the warning had any basis other than British suspicion of monastic morals.

From the 1870s the government established a few student boarding houses. By 1883 nine were open, with a total of 127 boarders.11 The education report mentioned that “free lodging is supplied at the Government boarding houses, with some servants, and a master of the school is placed in charge with free quarters assigned to him; but the inmates make their own arrangements as to food and meals.”12 But these boarding houses, like the high schools, were too few to cater to the entire region. Also, public prejudices about common living across caste and sectarian boundaries remained strong. The difficulty of suitable accommodation explained “why so large a portion of the high school students are sons of government officials and of traders residing in the town.”13 This problem was much more acute for girls, since most parents were unwilling to send them away from home.

College education was an even more ambitious and expensive venture. Even well-to-do families whose sons had access to high schools hesitated before they sent their sons to college. College education was unavailable in Assam for a long time. For most of the nineteenth
century obtaining a college education necessitated a long, expensive journey and a long sojourn in Bengal proper. Government policy dictated, partly as economy and partly as ideology, that Assam should not require a separate infrastructure for higher education. Administrators believed that “natives of the province should resort to Bengal to prosecute their studies, and thus enlarge their minds by contact with a higher civilisation, than that an expensive Government college should be maintained for them in Assam.” In 1892 a landlord in Sylhet endowed the Murarichand College. Only in 1901 did the government establish the Cotton College at Guwahati.

A sojourn at Calcutta or Dhaka for college study meant a significant material investment, although the state provided small scholarships. Lambodar Bora financed his college education by teaching in a school in the remote Naga Hills, where better-qualified instructors were difficult to recruit. Upendra Nath Barua put himself through law college by working as a postal clerk. Other obstacles might block entry into the new urban world. Some families were reluctant to allow sons to cross local and ritual boundaries. After he passed the college entrance examination, Bolinarayan Bora (1852–1927) ran away to Calcutta with the help of a Bengali mendicant. When he won a prestigious Gilchrist scholarship to the Cooper’s Hill engineering college in England, his orthodox father forbade him to accept it. For the rest of his life Bolinarayan remained an outcaste to his ritualistic family after he crossed the ocean.

Many college-educated youths justified these fears when they transgressed ritual bounds. Gunabhiram Barua’s behaviour was deemed scandalous when he married a widow and joined the heterodox Brahma sect. In another departure from accepted custom, he sent his daughter to be educated at Calcutta’s Bethune School. Lakshminath Bezbarua married Pragya sundari Devi, a granddaughter of the Brahma reformer Debendranath Tagore. Incensed, his orthodox family contemplated a lawsuit. Bolinarayan Bora’s outcaste status was confirmed when he married a daughter of the Bengali civil servant and writer R. C. Dutt.

In 1841 Anandaram Dhekial Phukan had travelled to the Hindu School with an entire ship to himself and his retinue of Brahmin cooks and a Bengali clerk. The splendour of his lifestyle earned him the sobriquet “Assamese Raja.” Later generations of students had more modest means and little access to Calcutta’s élite society. The quasi-domestic camaraderie of the “mess” system, rather than family
or caste ties, helped them to adjust to urban life. As the historian Pradip Sinha notes, urban practices of dining together and commensality diluted caste norms to some degree for the young men who messed together.¹⁹ Padmanath described how new students had to brave the perils of steamer and train travel. They ate strange food in wayside hotels until they finally arrived at an Assamese mess in Calcutta. Often an address was the only information that the new students had about the city. There the comfort of familiar food and language was backed up by the expertise of seniors. The mess was an introduction to an “associational culture” that created bonds of mother-tongue and motherland.²⁰ Still, a chatra samaj (student community) remained circumscribed by caste and gender.²¹ It was entirely male, and lower-class students were mostly absent. Decades later, dormitories at Cotton College still segregated lower-caste and tribal students in separate buildings.²²

A comparison between Harakanta’s and Padmanath’s memoirs reveals a significant shift in emphasis from relationships founded on ties of kinship and social hierarchy to a stress upon comradely ties and relationships of affect. The new consciousness of a common language and nation developed alongside this shift. The Assamese student community in Calcutta led the way as it negotiated the infrastructure of urban modernity. By 1862 over 56 percent of all undergraduates in Calcutta colleges were from outside the city. After the 1870s the Bengali gentry founded four new colleges, Metropolitan Institute, Albert College, City College, and Presidency College (later Ripon College), whose affordable fees and lenient admission requirements attracted poorer, provincial students.²³ While Presidency College charged Rs 12 a month and missionary colleges charged Rs 5, new colleges such as Metropolitan charged only Rs 3.²⁴ Students from Assam, Bihar, Orissa, and East Bengal enrolled in these colleges in Calcutta. The mess became the chief space for socializing these provincial sojourners. It was managed on strictly democratic lines, and the “voice of the majority” was decisive.²⁵ The Congress politician Bipan Chandra Pal, who hailed from Sylhet, described in his autobiography how mess managers were elected monthly by all the students. Disputes were settled by a “court of the Whole House.”²⁶

Benedict Anderson’s notion of the “secular pilgrimage” seems opposite to characterize the sojourners’ experiences of the colonial city.
A college education and its attendant urban processes precipitated a perceptible shift in the Assamese gentry’s mental landscape. Harakanta Barua’s and Padmanath Gohain Barua’s accounts of their lives, written half a century apart, make this shift clear. Harakanta seldom mentioned educational experiences and friendships. Interactions with kin and social superiors were the main subject of his narrative. In contrast, Padmanath chose to structure the story of his life around friendships as well as his educational and associational life. His account shows how the creation of a homeland within the city fostered a strong sense of oneness of language and heritage. During their stay in Calcutta these young men articulated a sense of an Assamese nation. Later this consciousness worked its way back into Assam’s towns. Given the uneven urban development in British India, only a sojourn in teeming Calcutta could provide the excitement of urban modernity for Assam’s nascent intelligentsia, as it did for other provincial sojourners.

Like their counterparts from Bihar and Orissa, Assamese students often criticized Calcutta’s inhabitants as devoid of courtesy. Assamese and Oriya students were particularly scorned when they spoke in their own tongues, which Calcuttans likened to rustic Bengali dialects. Even courteous friends and well-wishers stumbled offensively on this sensitive issue of language. Lakshminath described how he became friendly with two Bengali youths who brokered his marriage with their cousin. They, and their famous uncle Rabindranath Tagore, while appreciative of Lakshminath’s literary talents, felt that they would be wasted if he wrote in Asomiya. They advised him to write in the Bengali language, since it offered greater scope for fame. To counter such accusations and to improve and modernize Asomiya, several young men, led by Chandrakumar Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbarua, and Hemchandra Goswami, formed the Assamese Students’ Literary (ASL) Club and sponsored weekly tea parties. Meetings, pledges, and oral perorations on bringing about Assam’s progress led to social improvement campaigns and print productions. The club’s paper Jonaki, started in 1889, soon superseded the Orunodoi as the periodical of note. Succeeding generations termed this the “Jonaki Age.” For Padmanath, the alienation engendered by city life and Bengali hegemony was countered by ties of affect created with improvement-minded peers. Even when this student community was dissolved by the imperatives of adult life and careers, the bonds
created during his existence in Calcutta endured through subsequent careers.

Replacing Opium with Tea: Making Progress

For the young members of this new public there was an urgent task close at hand: to rescue the Assamese from the disgrace of being known as *kaniya* (lazy) opium eaters. Colonial officials summarily condemned the region’s population as “indolent sensual non-progressive beings” because of their “continued attachment” to “a single article of commerce, opium.” In the eyes of the jaundiced British observer, “kanee or opium [was] consumed by all classes, high and low, rich and poor, old and young, men, women, and even children.”

Opium smoking began as a Mughal-inspired fashion among Assam’s élites. As the antiquarian Benudhar Sarma observed, “during those days, among the things that denoted a dangariya [big man], one was the use of opium.” During the 1830s a medical survey found opium in use among 80 percent of the Assamese population. Expanding use gradually modified élite attitudes to this habit, especially as the availability of imported refined opium increased the possibility of addiction and diffused consumption across class lines. Maniram Barhbandar Barua initially distinguished between the older, aristocratic consumption of opium as a luxury, imported from beyond Assam’s borders, and the subsequent prevalence of local cultivation and consumption. He expressed indignation at only one class of opium eaters: “low people as Doomnees, Gorianees and Mereonees [Dom, Goriya, and Miri women].” Rather than condemn opium per se, he condemned popular dissemination. Opium’s moderate use remained acceptable for upper-class males for a while. Through the nineteenth century opium continued to be widely consumed, not unlike *bhang* (hashish) elsewhere. It enjoyed religious sanction through the *kaniya sabhas* (opium assemblies) of local Vaishnavism. High-caste norms frowned upon rice beer and other kinds of alcohol, tea was still an urbanized, expensive good, but opium was familiar, and tolerated.

British attitudes to opium were divided. Well into the 1890s colonial medical opinion held to its necessity in malarial areas and its
improving assam, making india

efficacy for stomach remedies. Yet many district officials viewed Assamese opium use in a negative light, as one of the worst “social evils” in the countryside. They echoed Maniram’s argument that opium consumption by peasants and lower-class women was the ultimate proof of social disorder.57 This moral disapproval set the stage for a ban on local opium cultivation in 1861, but consumption was still permitted. Officials hoped that local peasants would turn to plantation labour to earn the cash needed to buy imported opium. In this manner the colonial morality on opium consumption stood revealed as a mere platitude. Instead of a sincere opposition to opium, the ban on cultivation was inspired by a dual set of economic imperatives: to provide labour for plantations, and to increase excise revenue.38 Opium sales to cash-strapped peasants helped to promote colonialism’s two most important commodities, tea and opium. Officials sought to mask this agenda with a vocabulary of temperance, thrift, and industry—virtues absent among the Assamese, in their judgement.

With support from American Baptist missionaries, segments of local opinion gradually coalesced against the cynical colonial policy on opium. In its very first issue in 1846, the Orunodoi published an approving report about a meeting of Sibsagar’s gentry on opium prohibition.39 Its anti-opium stance shows that these missionaries did not hesitate to oppose the British state on matters of conscience. Also, the Baptists had another motivation to oppose opium’s continuance. They gleefully reported a government penalty imposed on the Auniati Gosain for his condoning of opium cultivation.40 The mission’s temperance campaign was encouraged by its satra rivals’ links with opium.

The Vaishnavite institutions’ encouragement of opium use infuriated young Assamese reformers, some of whom were already critical of the satras’ religious exactions upon the peasantry and called for a return to an original, pure, devotional faith. Hemchandra Barua (1835–96) powerfully expressed these sentiments in his play Kanitva Kirtan (Song of the Opium-eater). When it appeared in 1861 this play introduced into Assam the genre of didactic social drama, already familiar to the Calcutta urban public but new to Assam. Dramatic works in the Asomiya language were so far limited to handwritten religious texts. Gosains wrote religious dramas as a sign of devotional virtuosity. Their works followed in the tradition of
Sankardeb, the Vaishnavite founder, who had composed a number of devotional one-act plays called Ankiya Nat. Satras regularly performed religious-themed compositions upon festive occasions. In contrast, Hemchandra Barua’s secular play was a modern, reformist innovation which other young writers emulated with plays that advocated widow remarriage, lampooned new Bengal-inspired fashions, and portrayed legendary figures from a heroic past. The dramatist himself was a self-professed atheist with a minimum of formal education. He articulated a pungent critique of high-caste superstition and clerical corruption through an idiom of rational scepticism. The play’s title, Kaniyar Kirtan, alluded to the kirtan, the Vaishnavite genre of devotional song. The play itself was a cautionary satire about Kirtikanta, a rich mauzadar’s son whose frequent enjoyment of the opium assembly, in the company of a lewd woman and a hypocritical bhakat (monk), reduced him to utter poverty. In consequence, Kirtichandra was unable to pay his revenue dues to the government, took recourse to stealing, and finally died a repentant death in prison. This plot was clearly inspired by the Victorian temperance tracts which missionaries circulated. However, it also marked the first appearance in print of a long-standing folk tradition of lampooning religious authority, personified by the gluttonous, tyrannical monk. Hemchandra gave this tradition a new significance when he linked it to a critique of the opium consumption that his generation viewed as morally reprehensible and socially wasteful. Scenes set in colonial institutions such as the revenue office and the prison framed this narrative of degeneracy and redemption in which the author declared, “The opium-eater has destroyed the Assam homeland.” The moral message garnered patronage from the reform-minded. Despite the government’s ambivalence on opium, Utsavandana Goswami, a deputy inspector of schools, financed the first printing. Its second edition was supported by another official, A. C. Campbell.

Even after the play gained approval from high quarters, the colonial state’s forked tongue on opium policy continued. It encouraged the sale of imported opium, which was more refined than the banned domestic variety and caused a more pronounced degree of addiction. In 1874 the state introduced retail sales at licensed outlets. In that year 5,070 shops received a license to sell opium. Opium sales, excise revenues, and consumption sharply rose. The price almost tripled,
from Rs 14 in 1860 to Rs 26 in 1879 and Rs 37 in 1890. For the Indian government in 1870–71, of 51 million pounds in revenue, 8 million was from opium sales.\textsuperscript{44} Once the imported opium was sold in Assam, excise revenues increased. By 1880 opium was the highest contributor to state coffers.\textsuperscript{45} Of Assam’s excise revenue of Rs 19 lakhs, more than Rs 15 lakhs was from opium sales.\textsuperscript{46} Still, the state looked the other way: “it is impossible to be strict among the Assamese where the habit has grown inveterate, nor is there any sufficient evidence to show that opium is generally consumed to an extent which is injurious to health.”\textsuperscript{47}

In Britain itself public opinion and medical expertise began to be concerned about the dangers of opium consumption. In 1868 the Pharmacy Act restricted the sale of opium in Britain to professional pharmacists. From 1874 the Anglo-Oriental Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade opposed the British diffusion of opium in India and China.\textsuperscript{48} Eventually, in 1893, the pressure of British prohibitionist opinion caused the creation of a royal commission to enquire into opium use in India. The Assam hearings extended over a week. A large number of witnesses were summoned to Calcutta, including British government officials, planters, and several members of the Assamese gentry. The European witnesses asserted that Assam’s common people had always believed in the medical efficacy of opium, and that it would be cruel to prohibit all opium sales, as reformists had urged. Assamese planters echoed this opinion. These arguments hinged on the nature of work and the common worker’s habitual use of opium. The veteran planter Samuel Peal told the commission that he used to pay his local labour force over half their wages in opium.\textsuperscript{49} The commission’s star witness was Assam’s excise commissioner J. J. S. Driberg. He argued that opium was a locally important medicine, that “rightly or wrongly, the people certainly believe [opium] to be an antidote against fever, malarial diseases and bowel complaints.”\textsuperscript{50} In a strange contradiction of the usual view that the Assamese were indolent and weak because of their opium-eating habits, Driberg asserted, “A man who has had his opium will do his work, whether in the garden or in the field, much better than a man who has not.”\textsuperscript{51}

At the other end of the spectrum were men such as Gunabhiram Barua and Upendra Nath Barua, who represented the ASL Club of Calcutta. Keen to rehabilitate Assam and its people from the drug,
they vehemently denied that opium had any medicinal properties against malaria, dysentery, or black fever. According to them, opium eating was losing social acceptance. In contrast to Driberg’s tale of how a habitual opium eater was able to be summoned for any arduous task, they declared that nowadays such a man was one “who commits all sorts of vices, and he is looked down upon.”52 In the past opium had been widespread in Assamese society, “either to treat some disease, or for pleasure,”53 but respectable people now opposed it. These members of the ASL Club also argued that opium use was dangerous since it reversed the natural gender order: “Everyone must have heard that it is opium that has gone to make man woman, and woman man in Assam.”54 Upendra Nath Barooah even translated Hemchandra Barua’s Kaniyar Kirtan into English and presented it to the commission to show the strength of anti-opium sentiment among Assam’s new public.

Nonetheless, there was no simple dichotomy between the British advocacy of opium and opposition from locals. This was clear from the evidence given by two Assamese tea planters, Jagannath Barua and Munshi Rahmat Ali. Jagannath Barua (1851–1907) was the president of the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha, Upper Assam’s leading organization of landholders. He declared that opium was necessary to treat many diseases. Prohibition would bring great hardship to opium users.55 His planter colleague Rahmat Ali observed, “Well-to-do or respectable people have given it up, and the coolies who cannot avoid it must take it.”56 In Ali’s view Assam’s poor tribal labourers, Mikirs and Kacharis in particular, depended on opium to sustain the hard manual labour that brought them a livelihood, and would suffer immensely if it were suddenly unavailable.

Jagannath Barua, colloquially known as B. A. Jagannath, was a well-known figure, Upper Assam’s first college graduate and an early member of the ASL Club who subsequently received the prestigious rank of Rai Bahadur from the British government. His disagreement on this matter with other Assamese gentry educated in Calcutta illustrates the social complexities created by colonial policy. He declared that if opium sales were ended, people would not tolerate more taxes to replace the excise gap. Under his leadership in 1884 the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha appealed for revocation of the opium cultivation ban to avoid increased taxes.57 Unlike British planters, local non-white planters (and other landholders) did not enjoy revenue con-
essions: they held their lands at ordinary rates. The Jorhat Sarva-
janik Sabha’s opposition to opium prohibition was therefore due to
fear of a revenue shortfall which the state might seek to rectify with
additional taxes. For these local landholding élites the supposed
moral degradation of the opium-consuming labouring classes was a
small price to bear for a lower tax burden. In Jagannath Barua’s
words to the commission, “At the present moment, it is the people
who take opium who pay the tax. If opium is abolished, the whole
population will have to bear the cost.”

In both Britain and India, by the late nineteenth century represen-
tations of opium had changed. Once regarded merely as a stimulant,
it was now condemned as a pernicious drug. Advocacy of its stimulat-
ing and medicinal qualities rapidly lost ground before criticism of its
addictive, harmful ones, particularly as technological advances en-
abled its refinement to dangerously pure levels. From the mid-nine-
teenth century Assam’s reforming public agitated against opium, but
local opinion remained sharply divided. The peasantry stayed indif-
gent to the progressive message of the élites. Tea coolies obtained
ready supplies of alcohol and opium from the Marwari traders’ shops
on every plantation. Yet most élites, concerned about the economic
costs of reform, were willing to sacrifice the health and well-being of
working-class opium eaters. For instance, the tea planter and opium
merchant Haribilas Agarwala, influenced by his ties with the reform-
minded intelligentsia, advocated the gradual easing out of opium,
but not an outright ban. In 1894, after interviewing a host of individ-
uals and organizations, the Royal Commission retained the status
quo for British India on opium. It declared, “The movement in
England in favour of active interference on the part of the Imperial
Parliament for the suppression of the opium habit in India has pro-
ceeded from an exaggerated impression as to the nature and extent of
the evil to be controlled.” The operation of this Royal Commission
on Opium underscored the complex institutional attitudes to opium
consumption. The colonial state undertook the role of opium pro-
curer. Its ostensible agenda was to curtail consumption, but in reality
it connived at exactly the opposite result. The commission’s ultimate
failure to act was mainly due to the overarching importance of opium
revenues to the British Empire.

Despite the state’s failure to act, the anti-opium campaign in As-
sam only increased in force. A majority of young people gradually
joined its ranks. The deputy inspector of education noticed the generation gap on this issue: “Every pathshala [school] boy is taught to hate opium eating and I have never come to know of any instance of a schoolboy being addicted to that vicious habit.” The eradication of the Assamese opium eater became inextricably associated with the task of bringing progress. Eventually the Assamese students in Calcutta renamed their asl Club the Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (abuss, or Society for the Progress and Regeneration of the Asomiya Language). Their ambitious objective was to regenerate Assamese language, literature, and society. In pointed refutation of their elders’ habits, they met, temperately, at a weekly tea party. Over the next few decades their tea-drinking sessions gradually spread into the homeland. They ousted the opium of the caste Hindu (although not the rice beer of the tribal peasant). While participation in the older opium assembly revolved around religious sociability, the new public was bound by ties of affect to bhasa (language) and des (homeland). The young men of the abuss returned to Assam from their colleges in Calcutta as clerks, schoolteachers, writers, and struggling lawyers. Back in their homeland they proselytized against opium at the same time as they preached love of mother-tongue.

By the early twentieth century opposition to opium constituted the essential link between Gandhian nationalism and the local desire for progress. The socialist poet and Gandhian nationalist Jyotiprasad Agarwala was the grandson of the pioneering Kaya trader-turned-Assamese, Haribilas Agarwala. In the past Haribilas had invested his profits from the opium trade in a tea plantation at Tamulbari (Tezpur). In a neat instance of historical symmetry, his grandson Jyotiprasad became a major figure among the nationalists campaigning for freedom from opium addiction and foreign rule. While school and college students harangued women, elders, villagers, tribal, and coolie brethren against this social evil, an innovative mail-order trade advertised remedies for opium addiction on book jackets and in newspaper advertisements. A fiery woman activist and school-teacher from a lower-caste background, Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901–72), was the first to move an anti-opium resolution at a public meeting in Assam, that of the Asom Chatra Sanmilan (Assam Students’ Conference) at Tezpur in 1919, with the eminent Bengali seer Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy in the chair. By the 1920s the
Congress-led anti-opium political campaign received prominent coverage in the region’s first well-established vernacular newspaper, the Asomiya, financed and run by the Agarwala clan. Columnists drew parallels for readers with the larger international battle against opium spearheaded by the League of Nations, and with Chinese struggles. At the local level, under Chandraprabha’s leadership the women activists of the Mahila Samiti (Women’s Association) organized public awareness campaigns about opium’s ills. One global commodity, tea, flourished in the Assam garden. But it was the fight against another, opium, which allowed the Assamese imagination to locate itself within a larger global and Asian community which envisioned modernity and progress through “self-strengthening.”

“Babus,” Local Entrepreneurs, and “Coolie” Subjects

In his autobiography Lakshminath Bezbarua recollected that tea was the usual beverage offered to visitors in his boyhood home during the 1870s. Such lavish use of tea was then rare in rural homes. Reflecting on his own childhood in the second decade of the twentieth century, Benudhar Sarma observed that sah-pani (tea made with hot water) was too expensive except for special guests and that his modest household usually drank fresh cow’s milk from their own animals. This practice contrasted with that of the Bezbaruas and other wealthy families who early adopted “Calcuttiya” consumption mores. The use of tea was widespread in Calcutta, as shown by the AsL Club’s “Tea Party” meetings in the 1870s. By the 1920s brewed tea was commercially available in many Assam towns. At Shillong, the hill-station capital, Khasi women traders sold cups of hot, sugared cha (tea) at the Bara Bazaar market.

But in domestic settings in the early twentieth century, tea was not yet cheap enough for mass consumption on a large scale. Tea became the ubiquitous Indian beverage for élites and commoners alike only after independence, when domestic sales rose to rival exports in volume. In earlier decades among ordinary Assam households, it was in homes connected to its production where tea was most likely to be daily consumed. These included coolie households, which received a tea-dust ration alongside an equally low-grade ration of cheap rice as part of their remuneration. Low-grade tea was also widely available.
as a perquisite of employment in the households of mohurirs (clerks) and other supervisory staff on the Assam plantations.

Plantations recruited these clerical and supervisory employees from local Assamese and Bengali-speaking families. The majority came from the middling and upper castes, which sent the majority of students to Assam’s schools. These plantation jobs seldom demanded a high school diploma. Reports by the education department bemoaned that as soon as they learnt the rudiments of reading and writing and reached middle school, students abandoned their school education for these clerical jobs. It was “a general complaint of schoolteachers that many of their pupils, when raised to the higher section, leave in order to get appointments.” Plantation clerkships were less prestigious and paid less than equivalent government positions. But since the demand for government jobs far exceeded the supply, these supervisory openings provided useful incomes for sons of the poorer gentry. Tea supervisory jobs included those of the burra mohurir, who wrote letters and kept accounts; the hazra mohurir, who counted how many coolies were working and in the evening gave them their daily wages; and the godown mohurir, who gave out new materials and tools, and weighed tea leaf. Native doctors formed another segment of this supervisory babu class. The majority were Bengalis, since Assamese medical students were as yet few in number. New European planters were cautioned about the difference in social standing between these caste Hindu employees and their subordinate coolies. Edward Bamber’s account of tea plantation life observed that these babus had “on account of their caste and occupation, a social status to which the pay they are drawing is no guide.” Bamber warned novices that these garden babus were the “middle classes” of local society, even if the most senior clerk earned a mere Rs 20 a month. These supervisory staff owed their relatively high status in local society to their caste position and the respectable nature of their work. They were “styled in the vernacular by a phrase which may be translated as ‘respectable classes,’” in contradistinction to the coolies. In 1896 one such clerk, Durga Prasad Majumdar Barua, wrote the comic play Mohurir, which sympathetically portrayed a tea plantation clerk who existed on Rs 15 a month and was bullied by his British manager. In his account the oppression of coolies received short shrift, preoccupied as he was with the interests of his own class.

The largely negative feelings of Assam’s local élites toward tea
labourers received wide public dissemination through an essay on the coolie published in 1887. Its writer was the former Calcutta student Bolinarayan Bora, now an engineer educated in England who co-published an Asomiya periodical, the Mau, from Calcutta. Bolinarayan was an ardent believer in British rule as the harbinger of modernity for a benighted Assam. He supported the plantation system as an essential part of this modernity. But he scorned coolies as uncivilized savages and refused to believe the stories of their sufferings which the Bengali press had disseminated. Bolinarayan’s essay graphically revealed the disdain with which many locals regarded coolie newcomers: “Reader, listen, to what manner of creature the coolie is, and how it lives. That whose body hue is blacker than the darkest hour of the night, whose teeth are whiter than even pounded rice, in whose home are to be found bird, pig, and dog, in whose hand is a bilati [foreign] umbrella, and in whose hands are held a hoe and basket among the tea bushes, that is what is called a coolie.” What the historian Tony Ballantyne and other scholars have called the delusion of Aryanism then overtaking South Asian élites is visible in the way Bolinarayan distanced his readers from the darker-skinned migrants whom they encountered in the Assam countryside. His essay relegated coolies to animal status. Simultaneously, Bolinarayan ridiculed the coolie adoption of western dress while they existed in filthy living conditions. Coolie consumption of meat, opium, and alcohol formed another mark of lowly status.

Bolinarayan’s distasteful invective was reflective of another strand of opinion among Assamese élites: faith in the modernity which tea enterprise represented. Well-known intellectuals and social reformers such as Gunabhiram Barua remained silent about the “new slavery” linked with tea progress. Instead they exalted the egalitarianism which colonialism claimed to promote. Paeans to the colonial tea industry were common in Asomiya works used as school readers, such as Padmanath Gohain Barua’s Assam Buranji, first published in 1899. This first generation of Assamese publicists mostly concurred in the colonial claim that British rule in Assam had replaced pre-modern slavery with free labour. Paradoxically, this claim placed Assamese élites in opposition to a growing body of outside observers, especially Bengali intellectuals, who widely disseminated their knowledge of the semifeudal modes of coercion on tea plantations.

As Bengali observers critiqued the violent and inhumane tea sys-
tem, they reverted to metaphors of bondage to expose its evils. The initial exposés of the tea industry’s abuses came from Bengali missionaries who visited Assam in the 1870s to proselytize on behalf of the modernistic religious organization the Brahmo Samaj, which had its headquarters at Calcutta. Ramkumar Vidyaratna was one of these missionary visitors. Horrified by what he saw and heard of coolie conditions, he sent a searing exposé of planter abuses to the Sanjibani, a newspaper in Calcutta. His article was followed by another English-language account of tea oppression by a Brahmo missionary, Dwarkanath Ganguli, Slavery and British Dominion. The title itself was a pointed rebuttal of British libertarian pretensions. Rather than the idyllic picture of Edenic redemption that planters claimed, the book recounted appalling details of coolie oppression. Yet another Brahmo activist, Gagan Chandra Home, wrote a novel in 1888, Kuli Kahini, widely compared to Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Bengal’s vernacular newspapers such as the Dacca Prakash, Shome Prakash, Hindoo Patrika, Amrita Bazar Patrika, and the Sanjibani took up the cause of the Assam tea coolie. They printed a steady stream of articles, editorials, and letters that protested against planter atrocities, coolie kidnappings, and ill-treatment. This issue offered nationalists an opportunity to flagellate colonial institutions on irreproachably humanitarian grounds. Their anti-colonial and anti-planter sentiments were echoed on the Bengali stage. Theatres in Calcutta staged a number of plays which attacked oppression by white planters, whether on Bengal’s indigo plantations or Assam’s tea plantations. The best-known was Dinabandhu Mitra’s Nil-darpan, followed by Dakshinacharan Chattopadhyay’s Cha-kar-darpan. These plays impelled the British to institute the repressive Dramatic Performances Act in 1876, which empowered the Bengal government to prohibit performances it deemed unsuitable for public viewing.

By contrast, many Assamese élites in the late nineteenth century still defended the tea enterprise, and by extension the planters. They claimed that tea ameliorated the lives of Indian peasants and regenerated Assam’s economy. On the condition of coolies they were mostly silent. The only substantial contribution on this topic was Bolinarayan Bora’s hostile piece in the periodical Mau. It did publish a dissenting note on Bora’s sentiments, written by Lakshminath Bezbaru, the noted timber merchant and Asomiya litterateur, then based in Sambalpur (Orissa) and Calcutta. As yet, his was the lone
local voice to acknowledge that the Assam garden was built upon migrants’ life blood. Since Assam still lacked a sustainable newspaper culture, the entire tea coolie debate took place in Calcutta papers. Hemchandra Barua’s short-lived Assam News, published from Guwahati, did address the coolie issue, but only to protest the inconveniences that locals suffered when mistakenly impressed for labour. It remained silent on migrant coolies. Bolinarayan Bora’s condemnation of “our newspaper writing friend of the coolie, the Bengali babu” expressed the tension between these two factions of the colonial intelligentsia. Unlike Bengali intellectuals, nineteenth-century Assamese publicists saw themselves as weak and lacking in influence. In their eyes the policies of the British state so far represented Assam’s best possibility for progress. For now Assam’s élites, far from condemning the plantation system, still sought a place in the colonial sun.

While many sons of the Assamese gentry moved into urban employment and residence, their families maintained a base in the countryside. Brahmin and other noncultivating proprietors who had lost labourers with the end of slavery entered into sharecropping arrangements for their lands. The Auniati and Dakhinpat Gosains, the largest landowners in the Brahmaputra valley, held large estates on the Majuli island, cultivated by Mishing tribal peasantry. As the tea fervour spread, lawyers, traders, and retired clerks bought land with their savings. William Nassau Lees observed, “The natives . . . many of them, especially the court officials, are going in for tracts of lands at Rupees 2–8 an acre in the neighbourhood of villages, with a view of leasing them out to the ryots.” Local peasants and time-expired tea labourers both entered into such leases.

Some among the Assamese gentry ventured into the tea industry. Mostly they were hampered by lack of capital. They also lacked access to the privileges that the colonial state offered to British entrepreneurs. Racial barriers made it impossible for them to join white planters in organizations such as the Indian Tea Association. The often precarious economic condition of these local élites made it difficult to withstand slumps in tea prices. A British official noted that during the difficult years of the 1860s “a large number of respectable natives burnt their fingers in tea speculation and have been shy of retiring into any other since.” But since tea was practically the only outlet for economic entrepreneurship, others succeeded them in shouldering its risks.
vice or professional earnings were used to buy tea lands. For instance, the revenue clerk Rudram Bordoloi held title for forty-five bighas at Haiborgaon (Nagaon), and smaller plots in other areas. He established a tea plantation on some of his land. Similarly, Sheikh Danish Mohammad, a lawyer, used his savings to start a small plantation on forty-five acres. Often petty planters leased additional land from the government or from big landlords. Debeswar Sarma got his start when the Auniati Gosain leased him land from the satra’s considerable holdings near Jorhat. By 1903 fewer than 20 of the 112 estates in Sibsagar and Jorhat were in local hands. While British firms employed an average of 1,000 coolies (distributed among several gardens), native gardens usually had between 10 and 150. The biggest local planters were Jagannath Barua, with 400 coolies who worked 800 acres (he held 2,811), and Bisturam Datta Barua, whose 173 coolies worked 246 acres (he held 823).

The Khongiya Baruas, the tea dynasty founded by Bisturam Barua, were the most successful among Assamese entrepreneurs. Bisturam began by supplying seeds to big colonial firms. As mauzadar of the Thengal area near Jorhat, he was able to coerce local Kachari peasants to grow tea on his lands. This was a quasi-feudal relationship that had Bisturam extracting unpaid labour from poor tribal clients. Since Assamese planters like Bisturam lacked resources to set up factories, they usually had little option but to operate as subsidiaries of bigger British-owned gardens to which they supplied tea leaves and seeds. This strategy was risky, since big planters could arbitrarily increase or decrease quotas and set prices as they wished. The Khongiya Barua family managed to establish a secure hold only because of its long-term subordinate relationship with the powerful British managing agency Williamson, Magor and Co., which helped Bisturam set up a tea factory with its obsolete equipment.

Assam’s development as an imperial tea garden fostered hopes among its élites that all-round prosperity would follow. They resented any attacks on the industry as a threat to the prospect of achieving it. Yet locals began to chafe under the arbitrary racialism of the white planter establishment. Irrespective of status, every native was forced to stand at attention if a white person passed by. Since plantation grounds were closed to outsiders, villagers were compelled to take long, circuitous routes. Assamese planters were at the mercy of British tea firms to process and sell their harvest. From the
1880s the state granted a small degree of local self-government to Indians through the creation of municipal boards and legislative councils on which a few seats were elected. But since nominated members and the tea lobby’s representatives together opposed substantive reform, these bodies were even less effective in Assam than in other regions.

By the early twentieth century many among the Assamese gentry openly critiqued the Planter’s Raj. Mahatma Gandhi’s visit to Assam in 1921 made his teachings widely popular throughout the region. Influenced by Gandhian reformism, Assamese nationalists condemned the racist, exploitative practices of European planters and in particular their treatment of migrant coolies. In 1924 the newspaper Asomiya ran pieces on the exploitation of workers on British plantations as many as six times over a period of three months. Subsequently, in 1926 the Indian National Congress held its 41st annual session at Guwahati. Congress volunteers dedicated themselves to promoting temperance and reformist agendas among plantation coolies even as British planters sought to thwart them. The colonial state obstructed Congress and Communist attempts to unionize tea workers for as long as it could. As many more middle-class political activists encountered planters’ repression and arrogance firsthand, they became highly critical of the British-run tea industry and of colonialism. Many, like Sankar Chandra Barua and Kushal Konwar, left plantation clerical jobs to join the nationalist cause. Still, for the majority of Assam’s gentry, the hope of progress and modernity from the tea enterprise, independent of colonial control, remained essentially inviolate.

Print, Progress, and Devotion

In his autobiography Padmanath Gohain Barua graphically described the genesis of the first Asomiya novel. His messmates at Calcutta, when they realized that there was not a single modern novel in the Asomiya language, locked him in until he finished writing his historical novelette Labori. Thereupon they passed around the hat for the publishing expenses and rushed to the nearby Samya press to print the book, aided by a handout from Phukan, Majindar & Co., an Assamese trading firm based in Calcutta. In this hand-to-
mouth manner Padmanath and his messmates in Calcutta created the first self-consciously literary texts for modern Asomiya. Under the auspices of the ASL Club and abuss they aimed to fashion a modern print culture for the Assamese people.

From their abodes at Mirzapur, Harrison, and Middleton Streets in Calcutta, these youthful publicists addressed their peers in the city, and beyond it in Assam. They established informal networks to disseminate ideas, periodicals, and pamphlets. Their writing quality varied, since fervour often outstripped inspiration. Money was always short, but the youthful promoters were ready for immense sacrifices. Padmanath Gohain Barua almost bankrupted himself when he used his meagre reserves to publish the periodical Bijulee.95 As the literary scholar Francesca Orsini observes, the colonial intelligentsia used language and literature as the means to define and communicate their agenda for progress. These then became metaphors for the nation: the strength of literature showed the strength of the nation, while the life of the language was the life of the nation.96 The abuss subsequently sprouted branches all over Assam as members finished their studies in Calcutta and returned home to begin their careers.

However, this new Asomiya vernacular milieu lacked capital, both symbolic and material. In an absence of rich zamindar (landlord) patrons, members of the Assamese intelligentsia depended on their own slender resources. While they did try to harness what remained of traditional patronage networks, doing so had limited potential. Traditional wealth was represented by the pre-colonial aristocracy and the spiritual heads of the Vaishnavite satras. Most of the old aristocrats had fallen on hard times. By contrast, the continuing wealth and authority of the major satras, their traditional connections to scholarship, and organic ties with gentry intellectuals did bring some degree of involvement with the new print culture. Hemchandra Goswami, from a Gosain family, took a leading role in obtaining satra patronage for literary ventures. Through his efforts the wealthy Auniati Gosain made a substantial donation when the region’s key literary organization, the Asom Sahitya Sabha, was instituted in 1917.97 Even before the Calcutta print productions in Asomiya took off, the Auniati Gosain established the Dharma Prakash Press as a counterweight to the new kind of cultural patronage that missionaries had initiated. But without a viable machinery of
production and distribution, the Gosain’s serial productions had brief lives. The administrative report of 1888–89 mentions, “One new paper, a monthly Assamese, Assam Tara printed at the Dharma Prakash Press at the Auniati Satra in Sibsagar, and treats of religious, historical and literary subjects.” Earlier, in 1883–84, another satra periodical, the Asom Bilasini, had faded away.98

From the 1870s various small presses appeared in Assam itself.99 The major centres of this publishing enterprise were Goalpara, Nag-aon, Guwahati, Sibsagar, and Jorhat. They included the Assam News Press, the Chidananda Press, and the Hitasadhini Press.100 Their publications supplemented the Asomiya works that appeared from presses in Calcutta. The Assam-based presses operated on shoestring budgets and usually required authors to cover their own costs. An exception was made if the education department prescribed a work as a school textbook, a form of indirect state patronage that helped cover the publication costs for well-known works such as Gunabhiram’s Assam Buranji, as well as translations of traditional didactic works such as the Hitopadesa.

Among Asomiya-language periodicals the best-known was the Jonaki, first published at Calcutta in 1889 and then at Guwahati from 1901. Others were the Bijulee, which first appeared from Calcutta in 1890 and then from Shillong, and the Babi, which appeared from Calcutta in 1909 and then from Guwahati. The Sadhana appeared for a few years in the 1920s in Guwahati under the aegis of the All Assam Muslim Students Association. These were weekly or monthly periodicals with a limited circulation and print run. Nonetheless, as one disappeared another took its place. The Asomiya was a weekly that was the first vernacular newspaper to circulate all over Assam, from 1918 to 1947. It had deeper financial reserves than its predecessors thanks to its owners, the Agarwala business clan.

Without well-honed distribution and publicity channels, Assam’s periodical and book trade was mainly conducted through the post office. Prospective readers ordered a book to be delivered through the post and had to pay postage costs in addition to the cover price. This discouraged many purchasers. The historian and poet Surya Kumar Bhuyan (1894–1964), himself a prolific writer, bemoaned the small reading public and the slow progress of literature: “The Assamese author publishes a book at a loss, and he is naturally shy in repeating his financially unprofitable experiment by publishing an-
other book. To ensure a large circulation of his book, the Assamese author has to adjust the manner and matter of his writings to suit the mind of all readers ranging from the most highly educated scholar down to his semi-illiterate countrymen.”

Commercial logic also played an important role in shaping the contours of Assam’s print culture. The same accessibility of print that encouraged intellectuals to engage in literary production also allowed the wide dissemination of cheap copies of religious texts. Many authors turned to the devotional genre of Asomiya publications, which offered better sales prospects than literature. Literary and social reformist texts by the new intellectuals, despite their prominence for future literary scholars, actually accounted for a minority of Asomiya publications. Vernacular readers preferred to buy printed versions of older, devotional texts, such as Vaishnavite scriptures such as the Bhagavat Purana. Although the satras continued to produce copies of handwritten religious manuscripts, those had limited scope. A new variety of devotional text — cheap editions of Vaishnavite scriptures and commentaries published by small local presses — were the most common printed material entering the Assamese home. The Orunodoi carried an advertisement for two works by the Vaishnavite saint Madhabdev, published by the Dhekial Phukan family’s Calcutta New Press. Another pioneer in producing devotional printed works was the Dharma Prakash press in Jorhat. Steady demand for religious texts encouraged other, more commercially motivated presses to publish them. Businessmen such as Haribilas Agarwala showed their piety by financing the printing of canonical Vaishnavite scriptures. Another entrepreneur, Harinarayan Dutta Baruah (1907–58), was able to establish a successful publishing and bookselling business based on the publication of such texts.

This spread of devotional print culture accompanied and accelerated a transformation of religious belief and practice. In the Brahmaputra valley, where large landed proprietors were few in number, wealthy Gosains (monastery heads) wielded both spiritual and temporal influence over their flock. As notions of contract and good government provided an expanded basis for British authority, Gosains, the upholders of an indigenous social order based on cosmological concepts, proved important to the state through their role as local landlords. British administrators resolved the practical issues of rule as they developed links with these localized nodes of religious
authority. These links helped to legitimize and sustain colonial state power. But by the late nineteenth century the popular acceptance of Gosains as omnipotent arbiters of social and religious authority was assaulted through abstract, overarching systems of print and associational culture.

Through the agency of print, older forms of authority gradually lost ground, while newer kinds of sacred authority came to the fore. Wide circulation of the textual message of Vaishnavism went hand in hand with a gradual dilution of the “godly” veneration of the Gosains. Popular oral culture often lampooned the stock figure of the bhakat (monk) as the epitome of corruption through its proverbs and folktales. This oral satirical tradition was newly disseminated through the medium of print. Writing such as Hemchandra Barua’s play *Kaniyar Kirtan* criticized monastic corruption and linked it with the evils of opium consumption. Lakshminath Bezbarua in his popular satires went even further by lampooning the awe-inspiring figure of the Gosain, the spiritual lord of Assamese Hinduism, as part of his call for a devotional reformation.

While portraying Gosains as mortal men with mortal failings, these publicists invoked the name of Sankardeb, Vaishnavism’s legendary founder, as the fount of Assam’s unique cultural, religious, and literary traditions. Frequently these intellectuals needed to challenge competing versions of history which questioned the distinctiveness of Assam’s religious heritage. For instance, the *abuss* waged a long struggle against British officials who had described the Bengali saint Chaitanya as the Vaishnavism’s founder, with Sankardeb a mere follower. Their campaign to rehabilitate Sankardeb eventually triumphed, as the Census Report of 1911 acknowledged: “One point in connection with the Vaishnavism of Assam is worth considering, i.e., whether Sankardeb its founder, drew inspiration from Chaitanya, the great reformer of Bengal, as stated in the last two Census Reports of Assam. The Society for the Improvement of the Assamese Language has taken up the issue and strongly objects to the accounts hitherto given. It claims that Sankardeb was anterior to Chaitanya in birth and reforms.”

Through such campaigns these young publicists placed the fifteenth-century figure of Sankardeb at the centre of modern public veneration. They extolled the foundational role that Sankardeb and his disciples played in the development of Assamese culture and civilization, particularly the Asomiya language. The variety of Vaishnavite
texts in print showed Sankardeb’s importance as the pioneer who created Asomiya as a literary language. Gentry publicists created a literary canon and envisioned themselves as the saint’s heirs, whose writings would usher the Asomiya language and Assamese society into a “modern age” and prove Assam’s cultural distinctiveness, particularly vis-à-vis Bengal. To support their assertions they cited Indological scholarship which held that Asomiya derived from Sanskrit, as did Hindi, Marathi, and Bengali. Publicists used this linguistic genealogy to reiterate that the Asomiya language was “a sister of Bengali and not a daughter,” an implicit denial of Bengali linguistic historicity and superiority.

This genealogy concealed the fact that a large part of Sankardeb’s oeuvre was originally composed in another language, Brajabuli. Similar to Sanskrit and Pali, Brajabuli was a literary language, not a spoken one. It first gained prominence in the works of the fourteenth-century poet Vidyapati, in the Mithila region of Bihar. After him Brajabuli became popular as a poetic medium for devotional poets in northern and eastern India. Sankardeb’s use of Brajabuli signified his close connections to this wider pan-Indian culture of bhakti religion and devotion to the god Krishna. But for the most part Assamese publicists elided Sankardeb’s use of Brajabuli. Despite their eagerness to cast Sankardeb as an important figure in the canon of Indic devotional religion, they chose to underplay his use of a transregional linguistic idiom.

This elision sprang from the publicists’ mission to acquire a higher status for the Asomiya language. Without the long historical pedigree for literary Asomiya that Sankardeb’s writings provided, they were not confident that they could challenge the attribution of an inferior dialect status. When cast as the language of sacred worship, Asomiya became a formidable ingredient in assertions of the unique local identity of Assam. One writer asserted, “The religious books are in this language. So long as there will be Hindu religion and Hindu society, Assamese will be the language of Assam.” While publicists enthusiastically participated in imagining a larger Indic sacred landscape that encompassed previously marginal sites such as Assam, they simultaneously articulated a strong desire for local cultural particularity.

By the turn of the century Sankardeb moved from text to spiritual ancestor. Even as publicists glorified the unique heritage of Assamese Hinduism derived from Sankardeb’s teachings, they recognized the
shortcomings of the monastic satra institutions and their heads, the Gosains. Some began to openly criticize Gosain pomp and authority, oppression of disciples, and discrimination against lower castes. They viewed these practices as unsanctioned deviations from Sankardeb’s egalitarianism. By the early twentieth century an organization dominated by non-Brahmins, the Sankardeb Samaj, established itself as a popular rival to the satras. In the name of a return to Sankardeb’s original faith, the Samaj offered an alternative to satra rituals. For instance, it introduced a simple marriage ceremony independent of the customary Brahmin priest.

An important figure who sought to revive and modernize Assamese Vaishnavism was Lakshminath Bezbarua. His involvement with Vaishnavism stemmed from his father’s close ties to the Kamalabari Satra. Lakshminath’s memoir recounts the crucial importance of this devotional faith to his upbringing. But after leaving Assam for his college education at Calcutta, Lakshminath began to revise the uncritical attachment to the satra culture that had characterized his childhood. In particular, his exposure to the Vedantic faith of the Adi Brahmo Samaj, the modernized Hinduism espoused by his Tagore in-laws, proved critical. Influenced by the Brahmo Samaj, he sought to integrate the teachings of Vedantism with the seemingly pure, egalitarian faith that he associated with Sankardeb. Through most of his adult life Lakshminath embarked upon a recovery of Assamese Vaishnavism’s past through writings that celebrated Sankardeb’s life and teachings. Through these writings he also advanced a strong claim to place Assamese culture and devotional religion at the centre of a larger Indic universe.

Lakshminath’s essay “Asomiya Bhasa aru Sahitya” (1910) purported to be about Assam’s language and literature. In reality it was a history of the Assamese people, whom he depicted as spiritual heirs to ancient Hindus. The most significant section of this essay covered the period from the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-sixteenth. Lakshminath characterized this era as the “age of revival of learning and Renaissance in Assam, as in Europe.” For righteous India (dharma-pran Bharatvarsha) and Assam, he traced a cultural renaissance that differed from that of Europe. Rather than the arts, the Indic renaissance’s key elements were the reformation and propagation of knowledge and learning (gyan vidya) and righteous religion (dharma sanskar). Lakshminath declared, “Everything for Hindus is
mingled with dharma, so how is it surprising that their cultural renaissance and reformation takes the form of righteous religion?"\(^{112}\)

His lengthy list of Hindu spiritual leaders included the Buddha, Shankarcharya, Ramanuja, Ramanand, Kabir, and finally Assam’s own Sankardeb. In his view the spiritual life of India’s Hindus reached a zenith with Sankardeb’s Reformation in Assam.\(^{113}\)

Apart from this seminal essay, many of Lakshminath’s other writings helped shape the contours of a modern neo-Vaishnavite religion. An influential series of articles published in his periodical *Bahi* provided devotional discussions, biographies of Vaishnavite holy figures, and historical information about the satras. Lakshminath also used the genre of satire to great effect in his reformist efforts. Under the nom de plume of a bumbling figure called Kripabor Barua, he published a large number of satirical essays in serial form.\(^{114}\) In these satirical essays Lakshminath lampooned monks and even some revered satra heads. Stung by this, the powerful Auniati Gosain publicly rebuked him and stopped financial assistance to *Bahi*.

Within the close-knit circle of Assamese sojourners in Calcutta, Lakshminath gained fame for his public celebrations of Sankardeb’s *tithi* (birthday).\(^{115}\) These fetes derived inspiration from his Tagore in-laws’ commemoration of Brahmo festivals, and popularized a new form of public ritual that focused on the individual saint. In 1924, when the book-trade entrepreneur Harinarayan Dutta Baruah compiled a new version of the *Assam Buranji* chronicle, he added a chapter on the historical role of Sankardeb.\(^{116}\) Subsequently Dutta Baruah collected and edited the writings of Sankardeb and his followers, as well as publishing a number of old Vaishnavite manuscripts stored by satras.

In 1934 Lakshminath’s fame as a religious thinker led to a prestigious invitation from the learned Gaekwad ruler of Baroda (in western India) to present a series of lectures about Sankardeb. Lakshminath was overjoyed. He hoped that this recognition could rescue Assam from opprobrium as the land of “opium-eaters” and “lawless barbarians from the hills.”\(^{117}\) Instead Assam would become known as the “land of Sankar bhakti,” an important part of Indic civilization and religion.\(^{118}\)

From the late nineteenth century the efforts of Lakshminath and other publicists brought Sankardeb a new role as Assam’s cultural and spiritual icon. They sought to restore Sankardeb to his rightful place as
Assam’s representative within a lineage of Indic bhakti saints that included Chaitanya, Kabir, Nanak, Tuka, Mira, and others, drawn from different regions. While Sankardeb and other Vaishnavite preachers such as Madhabdeb, Damodardeb, and Harideb reached public deification, the Assamese satras lost most of their political and economic power, becoming instead custodians of the region’s cultural and spiritual heritage. Lakshminath and other publicists discarded an older kind of identity that was dependent upon an established relationship with sacred geography and ritual boundaries. Instead they turned to an identity grounded in the newly minted categories of culture and progress. Paradoxically, this refigured identity was itself placed within an invented archaism of Bharatvarsha-India as nation. The bhakti saint Sankardeb became a potent symbol of local particularity within a pan-Indian pantheon of heroic spiritual icons.