

CHAPTER - VI

Public Works and Social Welfare activities of the zamindars of Mechpara Estate

6.1. Brief history and genealogy of Mechpara family

Like other zamindari of erstwhile Goalpara district of western Assam, Mechpara was also carved out of Bijni Raj kingdom. According to tradition, due to the intrigue of Thana Kamal Lochan, an official of Bijni kingdom, Mechpara estate was formed as a separate zamindari during the rule of Raja Mukunda Narayan.¹ Thana Kamal Lochan is said to have been the founder of this estate, who got this right from Mughal Emperor. But there were diversity in opinion on the issue of foundation of Mechpara zamindari. According to Buchanan, one Bhagadatta Das was the first zamindar of the Mechpara estate.² On the otherhand, Koch Bihar History has opined in reverse as Khan Choudhury Amanatulla mentions, that Mechpara zamindari had a chronological disparity of the rule of Mukunda Narayan and Thana Kamal Lochan. In fact, Mukunda Narayan was the king of Bijni from 1758-1788 and on the contrary Thana Kamal Lochan is said to have been founded the Mechpara estate in the closing decade of 15th century.³

Due to paucity of documents, it is too difficult to find out the actual founder of the zamindari of Mechpara. After close examination of the different views, one can be convinced that a Mech or Koch leader founded this zamindari. Majority of the scholars, like, E.A.Gait, Khan Choudhury, Rajen Saikia and some others, have agreed that Thana Kamal Lochan was, perhaps, the founder of Mechpara family preceding to the foundation of Koch kingdom by Viswa Singha.

Santo Barman prepared a genealogy in his Ph.D Thesis, entitled, 'Zamindari system in Goalpara District during British rule', where he has shown that Thana Kamal Lochan founded the Mechpara estate in the last quarter of the 15th century, which was conquered by Koch king Viswa Singha in the first quarter of 16th century.⁴ It may be presumed that after the fall of Parikshit Narayan, the last independent ruler of eastern Koch kingdom alias Koch Hajo kingdom, Mukunda Ram, the fourth generation of Thana Kamal Lochan was conferred with the zamindari of Mechpara estate by the Mughal Emperor in the middle of 17th century. Mechpara pargana was a frontier track of Garo hills, for which the Garos occasionally raided the plain and took away many inhabitants of the pargana leaving some others slain. The ruler of Bijni estate failed to provide protection to their *prajas* of plain of Mechpara pargana, which pushed the Mughal authority to think for the safety of the people of the plain. As a result, Mukunda Ram was installed as the Choudhury by issuing Farman in this effect with especial objective to withhold the Garo raiding. As a token of allegiance to the Mughal authority, the Choudhury of Mechpara ought to pay nominal tribute to the Mughal in the form of kind, such as certain number of elephants and precious wood, called *Agar*.⁵

E.A.Gait mentions that Viswa Singha was recognized as the head of the twelfth leading families of the Mech or Koch. Probably, Gabara was one of them⁶ His son Khana alias Thana Kamal or Kamal Lochon (1447-1504) succeeded him and Kamal Lochan was succeeded by his son Megaram as the head of the family (1504-1561). Gobindaram was son of Megaram who succeeded his father in 1561 and held power till 1621. Again Gobindaram was succeeded by his son Mukundaram as the head of the family in 1621-1674.

It was Viswa Singha who founded Koch kingdom subjugating the twelve families of the Bhuyans. Perhaps the local Bhuyans were put under strict control by the Koch kings till they exercised overwhelming power on the kingdom. But after the disintegration of the Koch kingdom, the Bhuyans, traditionally, raised their head again and availed the opportunities relinquished to them by the Bijni king through their incompetency to maintain law and order in the kingdom. The Mughal Emperor entrusted Mukundaram, the hereditary Bhuyan of Mechpara family with the zamindary of the pargana by issuing Farman. Mukundaram was succeeded by his son Sobharam in 1674 and ran the zamindary until 1730 and was succeeded by his son Ronaram. He was very courageous and patriotic person, who had involved in quarrel with the British Resident in Goalpara. Ronaram attacked the Headquarter of Resident Bailey with five hundred Barkandazes. His attempt was repulsed by the British leaving casualties of 50 Barkandazes and Ronaram was dethroned. His zamindary was confiscated but later on his son, Mahiram was recognised as the Choudhury by the British, due to fervent prayer of the mother of Mahiram. He was succeeded by his son Prithiram Choudhury who was said to be the last powerful zamindar of Mechpara estate.⁷ He was conferred with the title of Raibahadur by the British Governor General for his service rendered to the British during British expedition to Garo hills.

After the death of Raibahadur Prithiram Choudhury, dissension among his sons brought the estate to the condition of dismemberment. Disputes arose among his seven sons regarding succession to the estate leading to its partition among his sons. Four of the sons-viz, Khagendra Narayan, Udhab Narayan, Kamal Narayan and Bhadreswar Narayan took among themselves *1/11* *anna* interest of the estate, while other three i.e

Bholanath , Tilaknath and Lokanath agreed to take the remaining *5/ anna* interest⁸ In the subsequent years *5/anna* was further divided into *2/anna* and *3/ anna* shares among their successors. Likewise, the *11/ anna* interest was also further divided into *6/ anna* and *5/* interest.

The perpetual family quarrel had utterly ruined the management which involved the tenants in all kinds of difficulties. The situation became so menacing that the British administration had no alternative but to place the estate under the Court of Wards under Section 9.5(a) of the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 and the provision of the Bengal Court of Wards Act, 1879. On fourth April, 191, A.J.Laine, the then deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district assumed the charge of the estate on behalf of the Court of Wards. Even after Indian Independence and the departure of the British, the state of affairs of Mechpara estate did not improve and it was continued till 1956 when zamindary system was abolished by the government of Assam.⁹

It appears from the forgoing discussion that Mechpara zamindary was a creation of the Mughal administration with a view to offer proper resistance to the Garo intruders to the plain of the Mechpara pargana. The Mughal Emperor Bestowed the zamindar of Mechpara with the title of Choudhury with especial privileges as being the frontier pargana. After accession to the Dewani of Bengal by the East India Company, Mechpara estate came under the Company along with the other estates of Western Assam. Mechpara estate entered into the Permanent Settlement during the time of Lord Cornwallis. The British Government conferred the title of Raibahadur to Prithiram Choudhury for his outstanding service rendered during the Garo expedition. On 19th July Lord Canning, the Governor General of India granted him a Sanad.¹⁰

Due to the family strife The Mechpara zamindary came under the administration of the Court of Wards. The estate was divided among the successors of the family and the state of affairs of the family continued as before till the abolition of zamindary system on 14th April, 1956.

6.2. Developmental works of Mechpara family

So far public welfare activities are concern, mention must be made of the name of RoNaraam Choudhury, Mahiram Choudhry and Prithiram Choudhury, who were involved in the benevolent works for the welfare of their subjects. Due to unavailability of sources nothing can be said about how much public welfare activities were carried out by the ancestors of RoNaraam Choudhury. After Prithiram Choudhury, his descendants, like Khagendra Narayan Choudhury, Nagendra Narayan Choudhury, Bholanath Choudhury, and Jotsna Choudhury were remembered for their outstanding public welfare activities

Ranaram Choudhury was a very courageous and patriotic zamindar who could not accept the British domination on him. He was the first Assamese who raised armed protest against the Imperialist British Paramount power. He didn't hesitate to attack the British Resident in Goalpara with 500 Barkandazs. Though he failed in his objective but did not bowdown his head to the British, rather he fled to Garohills where he died like Mirqasim, the deposed Nawab of Bengal who fought against the British for the independence of Bengal but fled to Nepal being defeated where he died. But his action encouraged the freedom fighter to fight for the cause of the motherland. The anti British attitude of the people of this region got their inspiration from the courage of Ronaram. The British Government dethroned him and his zamindary was confiscated and Mechpara pargana was attached with Rangpur collectorat. Ronaram is remembered by the people of Assam for his valour and heroic attempt to

drive out the British from Assam. In the subsequent period the freedom fighters of Assam drew inspiration from his action in driving out the British from India. Of course Ronaram was not given due tribute what he deserved and the Assam history has not make proper justice to him.

Mahiram was recognized by the British as the successor of Ronaram because of the request of his mother but not before 17th February, 1813, he was handed over the charge of the zamindary.¹¹ He often fought against the Garos who frequently raided the plain of the Mechpara pargana. With a view to strengthen the defence of the capital he shifted it to Joleswar from Tikkriquilla, a place bordering Garohills. As Garo incursion posed the greatest threat to the people and the estate, he decided to stop it once for all. Having shifted Headquarter across the Zinjiram River to make it invincible for the Garos who afraid of river, Mohiram Choudhury took offensive and invaded the interior of the Garohills, with the help of British forces and annihilated the raiding force. The Garo raiders were forced to surrender and acknowledged the subjugation of the Mechpara zamindary. Thus, Mohiram stopped Garo incursion to the plain. He was a pious zamindar who made land grant to Modan Mohan temple of Rajbari for its maintenance.¹²

Prithiram Choudhury was the ablest zamindar of Mechpara family, who received the title of Raibahadur from the British Government for his outstanding service to the British. He loved his subjects like his children and efforts were made for all round development of the estate.

Foundation of Lakhipur town: One of the important achievements of the rule of Prithiram Choudhury was the foundation of a new township for the capital of Mechpara estate, known as Lakhipur. Prithiram was also called Lakhi Narayan for which the new town came to be known as Lakhipur. The new township Lakhipur was founded with modern

planning after the model of Koch Bihar town. The construction of the roads and plantation by side of it were done to add the beauty of the town. He devoted much attention to the beautification of the new town for which he opened a fruit garden in the centre of the town. The roads were inter connected with each other and were done like that of the Koch Bihar town. In the subsequent time, Lakhipur developed as a educational and business centre of this region.

The settlement of the people in the town of Lakhipur is itself a testimony of the farsightedness of zamindar Prithiram Choudhury. The *Amlapatty*, *Barkandaz para*, *Brahman para*, and *Halowa para* of the present day Lakhipur are refreshing the memory of the planning of Prithiram Choudhury for the settlement of the persons related with the estate's affairs. Brahmans were the influential citizens of the society were employed in the estate administration and as pujari of the estate. They were allotted land for their settlement in town. Amlapatty was the residential place of the estate official, who was accommodated in the capital town. Barkandaz were the sepoy's of the estate who were allotted particular land for settlement. The business community, known as Hira, was allotted separate land for their settlement called *Hirapara*.¹³ They carried trade with the Garos. In the western corner of the town the Muslim people were allowed to settle down, who were basically cultivators. The Tribal people who were engaged in the cultivation of the *Halkhamar* (agricultural farm) of Royal house were allowed to settle in the outer part of the township. As they were engaged with *Hal*, i.e (plough) their village was called the *Hallowapara*.¹⁴ They had to look after the elephants of the zamindars.

Construction of roads: Besides the roads constructed in Lakhipur town, Prithiram Choudhury constructed many roads for the development

of the communication between the Estate capital and the Kutcheries. Under his patronage roads from Lakhipur to Zamadarhat, and Lakhipur to Jaleswar, were constructed. For the convenience of the devotees of Joibhum Kamakhya temple, a road was constructed from Lakhipur to Jaipur. He constructed another road from Lakhipur to Karaikata for the better communication of the devotees of Siva temple of Karaikhowa.¹⁵

Prithiram Choudhury was patron of learning who founded a primary school in Goalpara. This can be learned from the Report of A.J M. Mill on Assam in 1853, who mentions that there are 10 schools in Goalpara district, of these the Goalpara school was supported by the local fund, subscribed by the zamindar of Mechpara.¹⁶ It indicates that Goalpara school was founded before 1853 during the administration of Prithiram Choudhury, who ruled from 1822 to 1874. The school was promoted to Middle School in 1868 and subsequently to High School. The School came to be known as Prithiram Choudhury High School. Initially Bengali, English and Persian were taught in the School and Assamese became medium of instruction in 1936, when it was introduced as the official language in Goalpara district. Presently Prithiram Choudhury High School has been promoted to Higher Secondary School, which has played an important role in the spread of education in this region.¹⁷

Although the zamindari of Mechpara was partitioned among the successors of Prithiram Choudhury into two parts, /11/ *anna* share and /5/*anna* share, known as *Baro Taraf* and *Chota Taraf* respectively. Some of the family members of both the lines of successors initiated various benevolent works and contributed tremendously to the socio-cultural development of Goalpara as well of Assam. Bholanath Choudhury and

his son Jotsna Choudhury from Choto Taraf and Khagendra Naraaya Choudhury, his son Narendra Narayan and Nagendra Narayan, Udhab Ram and his son Rajendra Narayan, Jatindra Narayan and Surendra Narayan from Bara Taraf did lot of public welfare activities for the benefit of the subjects. They initiated in foundation of schools and colleges, temples, dargah, granted land to the religious shrines, like temples, satras, dargahs etc. Apart from, they also constructed roads, tanks, temples and educational institutions. Besides, the family members of Mechpara made huge contribution to the socio-cultural development, like literature, language, architecture, sculpture, painting, music and drama, etc. Not only that, the Ranis and other female members of this family did not lag behind in the contribution to the socio-cultural development of the region. The Nari Mukti Andalan got a new dimension with participation of the Ranis and other female members of Mechpara family.

Khagendra Narayan Choudhury of Eleven *anna* share adopted developmental schemes for Lakhipur town. He chalked out plan to convert Lakhipur to a leading town of Western Assam. He constructed new palatial buildings in Lakhipur by the Chinese architects and engineers and also carried out scientific plantations. Roads were repaired and new roads were constructed within the jurisdiction of the capital town. For cultural development, he encouraged expansion of education. He extended help in foundation of educational institutions. He invited some educated Bengali families from Calcutta and allotted land for their settlement. Among the immigrant Bengali families, Baroda Haldar was prominent, because of his daughter; Basanti Haldar was married to Chittaranjan Das of Bengal, the famous freedom fighter of India.¹⁸

6.3. Contribution to the development of Assamese literature

Mechpara family was well acquainted with the Bengal Renaissance, lead by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 19th century. As stated earlier that most of the Zamindar families of Goalpara had their second residence in Calcutta. Mechpara zaminder was not exception, they had their rented house at Kalighat of Calcutta, where most of the family members enjoyed their urban life and Children of this family educated in various institution of Calcutta. Being influenced by Bengal Renaissance, some members of Mechpara family felt the need to adopt policies for the development of the Socio-Cultural life of the people of Assam in general and Goalpara in particular. Zamindar Nagendra Narayan Choudhury of Mechpara was the torchbearer of this noble job. He was highly enlightened and famous littérateur of Assam who acquired huge experiences on Bengali literature by his long association with the literary world of Calcutta. He came in close association with many famous personalities of Calcutta, like the famous musician Sachin Dev Barman, K.L.Saigal and many others. He enrolled himself in the A.S.L. club of Calcutta too.¹⁹

In his early life, Nagendra Narayan Choudhury started his literary works in Bengali. He wrote his diary in Bengali. His inducement in the literary works inspired other family members of Mechpara estate. His brother, Jatindra Narayan induced himself in literary work. He wrote two books of poetry in Bengali names “Anjali” in 1320 and “Banful” in 1322, (B.S.)²⁰.

H.H Bregnold, the General Manager of Mechpara Estate, did splendid contribution to the socio-cultural development of this Region. Due to his initiative, a library was opened at Lakhipur. A good number of books were collected from different places are preserved in the library. The Lakhipur library and Lakhipur Club provided valuable contribution

to the literary development by creating new literatures. An ambitious project was chalked out by the educated family members of Mechpara estate to develop Lakhipur to a modern town. Under his guidance, efforts had been made for economic development of the estate through opening a tea garden in Nidanpur. He even tried to export wild *Nalkhagra* (wild bush like small bamboo) to Calcutta paper mill to earn money, but he did not succeed. Unfortunately, he was opposed by the orthodoxy Brahmin of Lakhipur, as well as by some members of the Royal family. Being dishearten Brignold went back to London in 1917 and development plans of the estate were left out with his departure.²¹

Nagendra Narayan Choudhury often held meeting with Jatindra Narayan, Kaliram Medhi and some others littérateur and discussed about the development of Assamese literature. Though, Nagendra Narayan born and brought up in Bengali atmosphere with in Rajbari and out side, from his child hood he was curious enough for learning Assamese and gradually, he inclined towards Assamese language and Culture. Of course, his close association with the Assamese friends, like Tarun Ram Phukan, Kaliram Medhi,, Bisnu Ram Rabha and some others, influenced his life and thinking in great extent. No doubt, his matrimonial relation with Ahom Raj Kumari, Prafullabala, the daughter of prince Keshab Chandra Singha, the grand son of last Ahom king, Chandra Kanta Singha, exerted great influence on Nagendra Narayan Choudhury to be complete Assamese in spirit and action. Since then, he devoted himself for the development of Assamese language, literature and culture.

In the matter of re-establishment of Assamese language in Goalpara district, Nagendra Narayan Choudhury played a very remarkable role. Assam was annexed to British Empire in 1826; after signing of the treaty of yandaboo with the Burmese. Initially, the British

Company Government annexed lower Assam and 1838, the upper Assam also brought under the British rule. But the British administrator in Assam was guided by the Bengali officials, who misled the British that Assamese language was a branch of Bengali. As a result Bengali was made official language in Assam from-1836. In the wake of continuous protest of Assamese intellectual and Missionary, Assamese was re-installed as official language in 1873 in Assam except Goalpara district. Nagendra Narayan Choudhury took part sincerely in the movement launched for re-introducing of Assamese as official language in Goalpara. It was due to opposition of the zamindara of Goalpara district, Assamese was not introduced as official language of Goalpara, like rest of Assam in 1873, and rather, Bengali was continued as before. This was because of their close relation with Bengal for which they advocated for continuation of Bengali as court language. It is needless to mention that most of the zamindars of Goalpara district had their second residence in Calcutta and had matrimonial relations with zamindar familis of Bengal.¹⁹

Their estate officials were mostly Bengali who had guided them in running administration as well as in private family affairs. The landed aristocracy of Goalpara region were under great influence of their Bengali Amlas, consequently, they inclined towards Bengali language, culture and literature. Unlike the other zamindars of Goalpara; Nagendra Narayan Choudhury, the only zamindar of this region, loved Assamese language, culture and traditions. He was a true Assamese in spirit and left no stone unturned in re-establishing Assamese as language of Goalpara.

It is to be mentioned here that the landlords of Goalpra were not only the ardent supporters of Bengali language and culture, they also wanted Goalpara district to be a part of Bengal province. Despite the vehement opposition, the Government of India attached Goalpara distri

with Assam in 1874, which was beyond their acceptance. Still the landed gentry did not seat calm and continued their efforts of bringing back Goalpara to Bengal. They spoke Goalparia (Assamese) at home but educated in Bengali. They organized themselves into an association, called "Land Lord Association of Goalpara" in 1918 and efforts were made in creating public opinion in favour of Bengali. Even, under leadership of Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua, Public meetings were held to aware the people of Goalpara to voice in favour of Bengali language. Prabhat Chandra Barua funded in publishing Bengali Monthly "Prantibashir Jhuli" to spread Bengali language and culture in protest against the Resolution adopted in Assam Sahitya Sabha Session held at Dhubri in 1926. The Pro Bengali sentiment gave birth of "Prantibashir Jhuli" which used to criticize the Pro Assamese, and the Assamese Society and Culture.²⁰

Before publishing "Prantibashir Jhuli" The Land Lord Association of Goalpara under leadership of Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua led the Pro-Bengali Movement. Even, a deputation of Goalpara zamindars submitted a memorandum to lord Chelmsford, the Governor General of India who was in official tour in Assam and stayed in Amingaon in 1921, urging him to amalgamate Goalpara district with Bengal Province.²¹

While Nagendra Narayan Choudhury of Mechpara family opposed the demand of the Goalpara Land Lord Association, other members of his family, Bholanath Choudhury and Rabindra Choudhury, supported the Association. But the demand of the pro Bengali group was vehemently opposed by the tribal people of Goalpara like-Rabha, Bodos and the Goalpara Sanmilan, an organization of the indigenous people of Goalpara.

After Dhubri, session of Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1926, in the reaction of the anti Assamese attitude of the Bengali people of Dhubri, led by Zamindars Association, inspired some Assamese intellectuals to initiate a pro-Assamese movement in Goalpara to re-establish Assamese as an official language and Medium of Instruction. Dr. Dinonath Sarma, the Dewan of Sidli estate took the responsibility of publishing a Magazine in Assamese to popularize Assamese language and culture in Goalpara. It was Nagendra Narayan Choudhury for whom-Denanath Sarma could publish the first issue of "Awahan" in 1929 in Calcutta, a Assamese Monthly. Nagendra Narayan Choudhry bore all the expenditure of its publication. The Awahan is said to have been a milestone in the history of Assamese literature and Culture. Nagendra Narayan Choudhry loved Assamese from the core of his heart and devoted himself for the development of Assamese culture and literature. Nevertheless, he was- criticized by his close associates and family members and his fellow landed gentry of Goalpara. He was even looked down satiring him that he loved wife's tongue Assamese instead of mother tongue Bengali. He spent a lot of money for the publication of Awahan, for which he even sold the ornaments of his wife to meet the cost of the publications of the Awahan.²²

He was a great writer, *littérateur* dramatist, storywriter of Assam. He used to publish regularly his story writing in Awahan. Awahan gradually became very popular among the Assamese people. It created a new age and a set of new *littérateurs*. It published various kinds of articles, story, novel, poetry, prose and traveling account keeping in view the need of the reader. The publication of Awahan was a great contribution of Nagendra Narayan Choudhury towards popularizing Assamese literature. He was a great *littérateur*, and he had close

association with the outstanding literateurs of Assam. Laksmminath Bezbarua, Tarunram Phukan, Gopinath Bordoloi, Gyanichibhram Barua, Durgeswar Sarma, Raghanath Choudhury, Mahadeb Sarma, Bisnuram Rabha, Jatindra Duara, Gyananath Sarma, Ambhika Bora and Some others.

Apart from publishing of Awahan, Choudhury wrote many short stories, Proses, traveling accounts, dramas etc. and these were published in Awahan and other magazine. His potentiality as a writer was come out in Awahan. He founded Awahan and Awahan discovered litterateur choudhury from zamindar Choudhury. Assam Sahitya Sabha edited a book collecting his short stories. His writing was centred on the poor villagers and tribal society. He reflected the socio-economic picture of the villagers, their habits, customs superstitious believe, social oppressions. His story like 'Pohari' Juni love, Dhanbhoral etc were on the tribal life. Choudhury though was Zamindar but he lived a simple life having close relation with common people of the society. His writing induced his love and feeling on the oppressed people. His short stories, like "Ostadji", "lahar," "Vijaya," "Dodurba", "Binar Jhankar" "Pratigya Paribartan", "Adhikar Dabi" etc, were on the urban life. His notable creations were "Parchim Kamruper Kayashtha jati", "Bodo-Jatir Katha", "Monipuri Pauranik Nritya", "Sangeet Chiyahi", "Prabasir Sanglap", "Ahom Bhasar Puthi" etc. He also wrote many dramas, travelling accounts and biography. His drama Ranaram was on the life story of Choudhury RaNaraam, Kumbha Mela and Agra visit was his travelling accounts. His smirthigrantha was a valuable evidence of the events of contemporary time.²³

His untiring efforts, devotions, love, sacrifices and hard labours enriched the treasure of Assamese literature "The blue print of the

development of Assamese language and literature was prepared in Calcutta in the house of Nagendra Narayan Choudhury located in 4 B. Nafar Kundu Road, Calcutta 3. The planning of the Assamese Sahitya Sabha Session, Publication of the book under Assam Sahitya Sabha, Planning of dance etc., was decided at Kolkata house of Nagendra Narayan Choudhury. Assamese scholars' and litterateurs like Jatindra Nath Duwara, Raghunath Choudhury, Nalini Bala Devi and many others met him at Calcutta house. He was frequently met famous musician of Hindi Film Sachin Dev Barman, artists, like Saigal and Prithiviraj Kapoor in his Calcutta house.²⁴

History of Assam Sahitya Sabha has conceived the important contributions of the members of Mechpara family. Nagendra Narayan Choudhury has made outstanding contributions to Assam Sahitya Sabha for which he has occupied a high position in the history of Assam Sahitya Sabha. As a tribute of his love for Assamese literature and language, Nagendra Narayan was elected as the President of the Assam Sahitya Sabha Session, held at Sibsagar in 1931. He presided over the Sangeet Session of 16th Session of Assam Sahitya Sabha held at Tezpur in 1936.

His impressive Presidential address in Sibsagar Session of Assam Sahitya Sabha revealed his love, affection to the Assamese language and culture

Nagendra Narayan Choudhury felicitated the great comedylitterateur- of Assam, Laksminath Bezbarua with the title of '*Rasaraj*'.²⁵ Another family member of Mechapara estate-Rabindra Narayan Choudhury was elected as President of the Reception Committee of the 13th Dhubri session of Assam Sahitya Sabha held on 1926. Khagendra Narayan Choudhury and his mother Sarala Priya Devi induced in literary works. Goalpara was the host of 1918 Sahitya Sabha

Conference in which Jatindra Narayan Choudhury of Mechpara estate was the president of the Reception Committee. Again Bholanath Choudhury of then Mechpara estate presided over the Reception committee of Goalpara session of Assam Sahitya Sabha, held in 1927.²⁶ These are some of the examples of the contributions made by the family members of Mechpara estate to the development of Assamese literature and culture

The relation of Mechpara family with Assam Sahitya Sabha was rooted in after one year of the constitution of Assam Sahitya Sabha. "The history of Assam Sahitya Sabha will remain incomplete without focusing the history of the contribution of Mechpara family to it."²⁷

6.4. Role of Mechpara family in freedom movement

Usually, the landlords and native rulers of India were ardent supporter of the British government throughout the country during freedom movement. When Mahatma Gandhi started Swadeshi movement in 1920 people started boycotting British goods, English school and started using native goods and native schools. The zaminders and rulers of Indian subcontinent extended their allegiance to the British master. All the Zaminder of western Assam sided with the Government except Nagendra Narayan Choudhury of Mechpara estate, who secretly encouraged Swadeshi movement in his estate. His attitude was expressed through his writing. References of Swadeshi movement were found in his short stories, like boycotting the British goods, foundation of Mahila Samity, organization of volunteers, hand spinning, weaving, use of Swadishi goods etc. His stories like "love", "Durbhedya", "Osompurna," "Aain", have conceived such references. Nagendra Narayan Choudhury encouraged Swadeshi Aandalan and the people were asked to boycott foreign goods and use native one. Inspired by the Bengal Chemical

factory, founded by Prafulla Chawki, Nagendra Narayan Choudhury founded a Soap factory in Calcutta to produce soap locally. Many local people were employed in his soap factory. He encouraged the people for spinning and weaving to meet up their own need. He tried to encourage local made cloth, match, ink, dhup, colour, gunpowder and wooden furniture. Thus, he also created some scope of local employment

6.5. Contribution to Naraimukti Andalan

The year 1926 is very much important in the history of Assam Sahitya Sabha because of the birth of “Assam Mahila Samiti” under the banner of Assam Sahitya Sabha. The decision was taken in the 13th session of Assam Sahitya Sabha held at Dhubri in 1926, in the wake of the demand for separate women’s origination.

Until 1926, there was no woman organization in Assam. A handful of Assamese educated women taking part in the literary works and some of them participated in the meeting of Assam Sahitya Sabha. The Assam sahitya Sabha, in its every session, constituted a women cell to discuss the way and means of the women awakening. In Nowgong session of Sahitya Sabha held in 1925, Chandra Prabha Saikianee, the leader of “Narai Mukti Andalan of Assam” participated and she delivered an exciting speech for the women of Assam urging them to come out of the cage by breaking its wall and fight for their right and liberty. She criticized the existing *parda* system and the exploitation of the women by the man dominating society. She raised the question as to how they create literature keeping half of the citizen in the confinement. Her exciting lecture awoke the dormant consciousness of the women and a new spirit and awakening was glazing on the faces of the women present there.²⁸

As a result of the demand of Chandra Prabha Saikianee, a resolution was passed at Nowgong Session of Assam Sahitya Sabha to form Assam Mahila Samiti and Chandra Prabha Saikianee was authorized to take initiative to form the Samiti. In Dhubri Session of Assam Sahitya Sabha, held in 1926, President Benudhar Rajkhowa inspired Chandra Prabha Saikianee to convene the First Session of Assam Mahila Samiti.²⁹ She was guided by Nagendra Narayan Choudhury, Mahadev Sarma, Bhuben Chandra Dutta and many others for which the First Session of Assam Mahila Sabha was held in Bijni hall, where a Committee was constituted with Chandra Prabha Saikianee as a secretary. Thus, the Assam Mahila Samiti came in existence in 1926.

Mechpara Zamindar, Nagendra Narayan Choudhury played a very conspicuous role in formation of Assam Mahila Samiti and its growth and development. He helped Chandra Prabha Saikianee, while she came to Calcutta to raise fund for Mahila Samiti. Choudhury not only sheltered her in his residence at Calcutta but also gave her all possible help in collection of money for it. According to personal Diary of Nagendra Narayan Choudhury, Chandraprabha was assisted by him in collections of subscription from Rani of sylhet, Rani of Jalpaiguri, Raja Ashru, and from many others in Calcutta. Chandra Prabha, thus, organized fund for *Mahila Samiti* and popularized the *Narai Mukti Andalan* in Assam.³⁰

Rani Prafullabala Choudharinee of Mechpara estate, the wife of Nagendra Narayan Choudhury, led the “*Narai Mukti Andhalan*” after Chandra Prabha Saikianee. She was brought into the arena of Assam Mahila Samiti and ‘Narai Mukti Andalan’ by her husband, Nagendra Narayan Choudhury. The Assam Mahila Samiti chalked out plan for emancipation of Assamese women through spreading female education and bringing awareness among the women. Prafullabala Choudhuranee presided

over the Jorhat conference of *Assam Mahila Samiti*, held in 24th March, 1929. Commenting on the performance of Prafullabala Choudharinee as president of Jorhat Conference, Nirupama Borgohai has mentioned in *Abhijatri*, that the hard labour of Chandra Prabha has become successful with the successful conduct of conference by Prafullabala.³¹ Her successful conduct of Jorhat Conference, won lot of appreciations of the leading women of Assam including Ratna Kumari Raj Khowa, wife of Benudhar Rajkhowa. Prafullabala, in her presidential address threw the challenge against the male dominating social system which touched the hearts of the women attending the meeting.

Appreciating the performance as a leader and the influential presidential address of Prafullabala, famous littérateur Chandra Kumar Agorwala wrote in his article. "The rich lecture she delivered as president is an indication that if she involve in literary work she would be a successful litterateur".³²

As a progressive woman, Prafullabala contributed a lot to Assamese literature. Due to her efforts the Painting of "Lova Kusha Yudda" of Harihar Bipra was discovered and published in *Awahan*. Prafullabala served longtime for the *Assam Mahila Samiti*. A letter was found in Mechpara Zamindar family written to Prafullabala by Chandra Prabha Saikianee in 1949, by which she invited Prafulla Bala Choudhuranee to attend Dibrugarh Session of Assam provincial Mahila Samiti.

After Prafullabala, some other women from Mechpara Raj family also served to the Narai Mukti Andalan. Among them, Rani Joytikana Choudharinee, wife of Zamindar Jotsna Choudhury related with this organization. She also opened a weaving school, where she employed many women.³³ Her daughters in law, Dipali Choudharinee, wife of

Zamindar Phalguni Choudhury was also involved in this “Narai Mukti Andalan.

The Assam Mahila Samiti played an important role to bring an awareness among the illiterate women of the orthodox society. It tried to infuse the mind of the illiterate and oppressed women of Assam with their natural right and honour. It is due to the continuous efforts on the part of Assam Mahila Samiti the society of Assam began to realize about the right and honour of the half citizen of the state. As a result, gradually the status and position of the women in the society developed day by day. The *Assam Mahila samiti* is encredited for spread of education among the women and removing of the *parda* system. The contributions of the Mechpara family cannot be denied in the history of the *Narai Mukti Andalan* in Assam.³⁴

6.6. Contribution to Cultural Field

(a) Architecture

Present Lakhipur town is the creation of Mechpara Zamindar Prithiram Choudhury. It was the last capital of Mechpara estate. Lakhipur was selected as capital considering its naturally secured atmosphere, guarded by river Gara in the North and Jinjiram in the South. It is to be mentioned that the Garos feared to cross the river that is why Lakhipur was considered invisible for the Garos.³⁴

As mentioned earlier, Lakhipur town was erected on the model of Koch Bihar town. Roads were constructed straight inter connecting each other throughout the town. Rain trees were planted both side of the roads. Debdaru trees were beautifully planted on the front side of the palace which added exquisite beauty of the *Rajbari*. Garden of mango trees was founded in the centre of the town. The Royal palace built by Prithiram Choudhury was destroyed by earthquake in 1897 but the remains are still

conspicuous to speak the glory of the past. On the wall of main palace a statue of peacock was engraved which added the beauty of the *Raj Hawli*.

There were temples, *Sarai*, head *Kutchery*, hospital. *Vidyalaya*, tanks, residences for the estate officials, place for keeping Royal elephants etc. in the capital town. Royal Kul Devi temple Madan Mohan was near the palace. But the original temple was destroyed by the earthquake of 1897. The present temple was constructed in the subsequent year with wood and tin.

The palace of Mechpara Zamindar in Lakhipur made of wood and tin with outstanding craftsmanship speaks the glory of the Mechpara Raj family. Though the building has been made of wood and tin, the sculpture and decoration of the double storied building attracts the attention of the visitors. These are the witnesses of the glorious architectural and sculptural specimen of high craftsmanship of the feudal age.

One of the shareholders of Mechpara Estate, "*Tin Anni Tarafdar*" had two storied building comprising five rooms in each storey. There was another house ahead of the main Rajhawli-dwelled by *Barkandaz Amlas*, called the *Dewri house*. Tied security arrangement was followed and the security personnel were patrolling the Rajhawli day and night.

On the open field, in front of the Rajhawli, there was main *Kutchery* of the estate and the hospital. By the side of the hospital, there was "*Rangamanch*, "Stage Room" for drama and entertainment.

On the main gate there were two small houses and a statue of Peacock on the wall of the houses, which beautified the views of the gate. There was a high building bordering the house of *Barkhdaz* called "*Toskhana*" used for entertainment. The Zamindar family enjoyed dances; songs and the guest artists from abroad were welcomed. The

building was built by the architect, brought from China. The present Circle Office of Lakhipur was the office of the Court of wards. Although, the architecture and sculpture of the Mechpara Estate was inferior to that of the zamindars of Bengal, still the remains speaks of the glorious history of Mechpara Raj family and the architectural and technical development of the feudal age.³⁶

(b) Contribution to the Natya Andalan of Assam

It was in the first decade of the twentieth Century, the Natya Andalan is said to be began in lakhipur under Royal patronage of Mechpara family. After the foundation of Lakhipur Club in 1918 the *Natya Andalan* (Movement of Theatre), opened a new chapter in the history of the cultural development of Goalpara in particular and Assam in general. Many members of the raj family participated in the drama and theatre and acted as in different roles. Kiran Chakraborty, Nripendra Narayan Choudhury, Nagendra Narayan Choudhury, Jatindra Narayan Choudhury and many others played role in various characters in the Dramas, those staged in Lakhipur *Manch* and earned huge reputation.³⁶

Reputed actress of Hindi Cinema, Mena Kapoor was the grand daughter of zamindar Nagendra Narayan Choudhury of Mechpara estate and daughter of Bikram Kapoor. She has made huge contribution to the drama, theatre of Assam as well as to Indian Cinema. She was closely associated with the *Natya Andalan* of Lakhipur and played role in different capacities in the theatres those were staged in Lakhipur. She expressed her experience of the Natya Andalan of Lakhipur stating that staging Drama was a regular practice in Lakh where family members of the zamindar took part.³⁸

Participation of female character in Drama and Theatre in Lakhipur was the best gift of the Mechpara family to the Natya Andalan of Assam. Mechpara family was advanced in their outlook. They took initiative in the participation of the women in Stage Theater in such a period of time when the conservative society did not allow the women to go out of the four walls of the house. Nagendra Narayan Choudhury was the pioneer in this regards because for his constant endeavouring, the women were inducted in the Theatre and Drama and performed in the stages.

Jatindra Narayan Choudhury, another zamindar of this family also made valuable contribution to its development. Women from Zamindar family like Snehlata Choudharinee, Lily Choudharinee, Yuthika Choudharinee, Nirupuma Choudharinee, and Shanti Choudharinee acted in the stage along with other like Pirikiti, Khuku, Latifa, Feli, Haripriya and some others.³⁹

Nagendra Narayan Choudhury was famous dramatist and writer at that time who wrote numerous dramas on various stories. Some of his dramas were selected and staged in different rangamanch of Lakhipur. The most important Dramas, those staged in Lkhipur for public entertainment written by Nagendra Narayan Choudhury, were Basanta. Pramila, Oirabat Hathi, RaNaraam and Shiv Mandir.⁴⁰ The most popular actors of the period were Nripendra Narayan Choudhury, Salendra Narayan Choudhury, Prafulla Das, Sudangsha Chakraborty, Dharmeshwar Ghose and Rajni Kanta Singha. They were directed and encouraged by Nagendra Narayan Choudhury and local actor Kiran Chakraborty.

Arun Chandra Choudhury, the only living successor of Mechpara Family expresses his experience on Nagendra Narayan Choudhury who was Writer, Producer, Director and Actor of Drama. He told about the life

and works of the hero of Mechpara family and the martyr of Assam, RaNaraam. An act was played on him where Rajkumar Indra Narayan Choudharinee, Amalendu Choudhury, Tribendra Narayan Choudhury, Jaisree Choudhury, Tuku Barman, Amitabha Choudhury, Dev Kapoor and Mena Kapoor performed. Due to the efforts of Nagendra Narayan Choudhury 'Samrat' and 'Basanta Rani' staged in Rangamanch. Arun Choudhury was influenced by the ideology of Nagendra Narayan Choudhury such an extent that he went to Bombay to learn photography and worked there with famous Cameraman Sudhir Majumdar. Later on, he acted as Assistant Cameraman in the cinema like "Jog Biyog", "Uleroth" in Calcutta. He was associated with the film "Puberan" which was awarded silver medal.

Arun Choudhury with the help of some actors of Lakhipur founded "Anchalik Sangeet Natak Samaj" in Lakhipur. The 1st Drama Festival was organized in Lakhipur under the banner of Lakhipur Anchalik Silpi Samaj. The then Chief Minister of Assam Mahendra Mahan Choudhury participated in this festival.⁴¹

Thus the Natya Andalan in Goalpara developed day by day, due to the devotion, love and encouragement of the Mechpara Family and occupied an important place in the Natya Aadalan history of Assam.

(c) Music

Mechpara Zamindar Family closely connected with Music and Drama equally. Involvement in music began from the successors of Raibahadur Pritiniram Choudhury. His grand son Jatindra Narayan Choudhury was not only a litterateur and painter but was also reputed singer. His son Sourendra Narayan was a good operator of piano. Monindra Narayan Choudhury, the living successor of Mechpara family is a good singer who himself has written many songs and composed

music for them. He was an artist of All India Radio; Shillong Station in 1950.⁴¹ Arrangement of musical programme in Raj hawli was a traditional act of most of the zamindar families of western Assam. It was an aristocratic fashion pursuit from the zamindar family of Bengal. It is already mentioned that all the zamindar families of Goalpara district had their second residence in Calcutta for which they were well acquainted with the cultural development of Bengal under the patronage of zamindars in their respective estate. In pursuance of this, like other zamindars of Goalpara, Machpara family also arranged Musical Night in Rajhwali. Singers, Jatraparties from Bengal as well as from locality were invited to attend the programme for public entertainment.

For the teaching of music one Mostan Gama, a Punjabi musician was employed who taught music to Zamindars family members. Till to the partition of India he performed his duties in teaching in Lakhipur.

Mena Kapoor, the grand daughter of Nagendra Narayan Chourhury was a famous play back singer, who sung for the film in Bombay. In early life Mena Kapoor learned music from Nagendra Narayan Choudhury. Due to her enthusiasm, she came to Bombay and became famous playback singer. She performed as play back singer of Hindi and Bengali film.⁴³

According to Arun Choudhury, Mena Kapoor's mother used to sing Assamese rhymes and Kritan while she was in Bombay. Mena herself joined her mother in the singing which impressed famous singer Manna Dey, who had close relations with this family.

Another artist of Mechpara family was Rani Sabita Davi of Abhayapuri, who was niece of Khagendra Narayan Choudhury of Mechpara estate. She acted as the secretary of the Assam State committee

of All India Sangit Academy. It was for her efforts, first Bihu Celebrations was observed in Abhayapuri.⁴⁴

(d) Development of Painting

Painting was developed as a hobby for some of the members of Mechpara Family. A hall for the purpose was built in Rajbari which is still existed, where painting was practised. We find the influence of Bengal on painting of Mechpara Family. Kalighat of Calcutta, the centre of artistic activities of Bengal was the residence of this family, for which they came close contact with the painting of Bengal. Besides this, the involvement of painting was considered as aristocratic tradition. Thus, some of the members of Mechpara Family were attracted to painting. Expert painters were employed in Rajhawli for the training of the family members about the technic of drawing and painting.

Nagendra Narayan Choudhury and his brother Dinendra Narayan Choudhury educated in the art of drawing and painting from Calcutta Art School which also inspired the new generation of Mechpara family. Initially, Dinendra Narayan was tried to send to Japan for the study of drawing and painting but he refused to go there. Ultimately, he studied painting in Calcutta. He became good painters and has done many portraiture paintings of legendary events and heroes. His narrative painting on a “tribal way of living” received wide appreciation and admiration of the viewers, which is still seen in Rajhawli of Lakhipur.

Shadan Bhowmic of Dhubri was employed in Mechpara Rajhawli to train painting for the children of the zamindar family. As a result, some of the members of the family have been enriched with the experience of the art of drawing and painting. Mention may be made of them are, Jatindra Narayan Choudhury, Snehlata Singha, Nirupama Singha, Kanika

Singha, Bholanath Choudhury and some others. A painting stand is preserved in Rajhawli which is said to have been used by Bholanath Choudhury.⁴⁵

Zamindar Jatindra Narayan Choudhury published a book in Bengali "Chitraparichaya" describing the painting and drawing, portraited by the artists of the family member of the Tin Anni-branch of Mechpara Zamindary. The first volume contains the descriptions of 51 portraits but the 2nd volume is untraced. Unfortunately, only few of the portraits are in the disposal of the Rajhawli.

However, the paintings preserved in Rajhowli and the Chitraprichaya itself are the evidences of the pursuance of the art of drawing and painting by the family members of Mecpara Family. Practice of painting, drawing and illustration was a traditional act of the Mechpara Family.

Like the painting of Kalighat of Calcutta, the artist of Mechpara family illustrated portraits of the different Gods and Goddesses with colour painting. The basic Characteristics of the art of Painting are manuscript miniature. We find some specimen of the portraiture painting in Rajbari of Mechpara. The illustrated paintings are mostly religious. Some of the secular paintings were also executed. The portraiture paintings found in Rajbari are as Sri. Sri. Kamakhya Devi, Dhruba, Durga, Sita, Debdasi, Karna Kunti etc. The art and painting illustrated by the Mechpara family members are of various characters. Some portraits are classical and religious and some others are secular. Among the religious portraiture painting is Kamakhya Devi in Mahabirvab, Dhruba, Durga, Balmiki Sita, Har-Parbati. Among the legendary arts, mention can be made of Behula Lakhindar, Damayanti, Urbashi, Janmandha, Mira,

Pundarik Mahashita, Ahalla, Sayambar of Radha, Bettasur, Dusmanta hunting etc.

Among the secular portraiture those are mentioned in Chitraparishaya of Jatindra Narayan Choudhury are Rupdhup Chitragada, Monajit, Mayamukti, Ashok swapna vilas, Bidya Obidya, Anusashan, pragyan Progati, Jambubati, Kailas Gunjuri Sagar, Kirat Arjun, Purbi Rajini, first meeting of Sabitri Tilak Sita etc. Among the artists Nerupama Singha is the only living character who is residing in Calcutta. "Monajat" illustrated by Saurindra Narayan Choudhury was presented to Sir Sadullah, the chief Minister of Assam. His illustration of Mahatma Gandhi in the pose of Spinning with charka was presented to Moti Bora, Revenue minister of Assam which is now hanging on the wall of Assam Assembly house. According to local source a painting on "Goalini" executed by Kanika Choudhury was presented to famous Thakur family of Calcutta. Snehlatta illustrated portrait on "Jaymati" is preserved in Assam State Museum.

The Assam Sahitya Sabha in its Guwahati Session acknowledged and admires the artistic activities of the family members of Mechpara Family in fine arts and awarded them for their valuable contributions to the field. Accordingly, Saurendra Narayan Choudhury was given 1st prize, Nirupama Singha second and Snehlata Choudhury fourth.⁴⁶

One important characteristics of the paintings of Mechpara family, notwithstanding, some shortcoming, the illustrations lay in the fact that the narrative sense of the popular mythological topics are depicted in connected sequence and the figures are made big and small according to the necessity of the story. The technique and finishing applied to the illustrations and illumination of the painting reflected the Bengali influence on the paintings with some local elements naturally entered.

6.7. Contribution to Religious field

Most of the zamindars of the Mechpara estate were pious in heir religious attitude. From the time of the founder of Mechpara estate Thana Kamal Lochan down to the last Zamindar of this family made huge contributions to the religious field of the estate.

Initially, the Mechpara family was *Vaisnavite* and followers of *Mahapurusia sect*. The first zamindar of Mechpara estate adhered to the vaisnavism from one Narahari Thakr who was Satradhikar of Barpita Satra. Since then to the time of late Raja Bahadur Prithi Ram Choudhury, the family followed the Mahaparusia faith propagated by Srimanta Sankar Dev.⁴⁷ There are a legend about the foundation of Balijan Satra. According to Baneswar Dev, the Satradhikar of Balijansatra that after embracement of Vaisnavism, zamindar Thana Kamal lochan wanted to bring “*Padasila*” (footwear) of sankar Dev which was preserved in Barpeta Satra. But his proposal was vehemently opposed by the disciple (Bhakta) of the Satra. Surprisingly, the Satradhikar received a Devine message in dream that the “*Padasila*” be split-up and to give away one part to the zamindar. Indeed, he found the pada sila Splited and gave a part to Thana Kamal lochan accordingly. Since then, the part of *Padasila* was kept in Rajbari till the time of Rana Ram Choudhury. But contrary to their true faith Rana Ramm Choudhury used to perfom Sakti puja like Goddess Durga, Kali, and Parbati etc. It was said Rana Ram engaged continuous war with Garos for which he required blessing of the Devi Durga and Kali to win over it. As he started Shakti Puja at Rajhawli he shifted *Padasila* to ensure its sanctity from Rajbari to another place where it was setup founding Satra called Bapurbhita Satra according to the Vaisnavate manner. Radha Kanta Thakur was employed as its satradhikary and to take care of the holly Padasila.⁴⁸

There is a legendary story about the embracement of Shakti faiths by the Mechpara Zamindar". It is said that once one of the ears of the zamindar was torned away by an elephant while he was coming home from abroad. So, he was suggested to perform the Puja of the mother, "Goddess Durga" by a Pandit. Whatever may be the reason, the Mechpara family converted to Shakti belief during the time of Rana Ram Choudhury. In fact, the ancestors of Mechpara family had been believer of Saivism.

After RaNaraam, his son Mahiram Shifted Satra from Bapurbhita to Balijan and granted three thousand bigas of land for its maintainence.⁴⁹ The Satra is still functioning and descendants from Narahari line are functioning as the Adikary. Subsequently, the Zamindars of Mechpara founded more satras and extended help in spreading vaisnivsim in this region.

According to local sources, Mechpara zamindr founded the Baguan Satra, Baikuntapur Satra, Narayanpur Satra and Nalna Satra. The family Diety of Mechpara Family was Madan Mahan. The temple of Madan Mohan was built near Rajhawli and regular Puja was being offered by the Rajfamily.

Celebrations of Durgapuja with great pomp and glamour were a source of public entertainment under Royal banner. The Royal tradition regarding celebration of Durga puja is still being observed in Lakhipur. In pursuance to the Royal tradition during Durgapuja a colourful procession is being brought out with an open sword in hand in the style of a Barkandaz with sepoy uniform right from *Shashti*, the day of the installation of the Diety on the *Mondap* to *Dashami*, the day of Bisharjan.

There is an old Siva temple in Lakhipur which stands as an evidence to prove that the zamindar of Mechpara had been the believer of *Sivate cult* originally. It is said the Zamindar house built a beautiful temple in Lakhipur and Gopal Das, a Sage was employed as the pujari of the Siva temple who offered puja regularly. The zamindar bore all expenditure of the temple including the salaries of the pujari. The Royal house spent lot of money for the construction of the temples.

The Mechpara family arranged Melas and Festivals for public entertainment with Royal expenditure during Durga puja. The local source has furnished informations about the holding of Mela and festivals under Royal patronage at the time of Durgapuja and Bura Buri's Mela. Famous artist of Indian film, Meena Kumari wrote in her book "Lakhipurer lamba Katha" about these festivals which she attended.⁴⁹

On the occasion of Puja and Mela Musical programmes, game competitions and other entertainment programme were undertaken by the zamindar house. Local and guest artists performed their musical programmes which gave immense pleasure to the local audiences. "Jalsha" were held bringing singers from outside like, Calcutta, Lucknow, Kanpur and Punjab. Local artists delivered their music with their traditional musical instrument, like, *Dotara*, flute, drum, *Khunjhuri* etc.⁵⁰

The Mechpara Zamindar spent lots of money for the spread of religion and public entertainment. They made land grant to different satras and temples. As mentioned, 3000 bigas of land was granted to Balijan Satra. Zamindar Katiram Choudhury assumed the full responsibility of Jaibhum Kamakha temple (Sunarai). He granted 364 bigha land and Rs-968 yearly for the maintenance of the temple. After abolition of Zamindary system the Govt. of Assam took the responsibility of the temple and continued granting the said amount for the salary of the

pujari.⁵¹ Mechpara zamindar granted eight bigha lands to Shyamrai Satra established in Goalpara. We find the reference of the donation of 60 bighas of land to Baguan Satra.⁵² A road was constructed from Lakhipur to Jaibhum Kamakhya temple for the convenience of the devotees.

Thus, we find Mechpara Zamindars played a vital role in the matter of spread of religion and helped the subjects in their religious activities.

6.8. Contribution to the expansion of Education and learning

As we find that in the Second half of the 19th century a composite educational policy had been adopted by the British Indian Govt. throughout the country. The western model English education with secular syllabus and curriculum was followed in India. Higher educational institution like colleges and universities were founded in the big cities like Calcutta, Madrass, and Bombay. The new educational policy was expanded gradually in other parts of India. All categories of schools, i, e Primary, Middle and High schools were established in the last quarter of 19th century throughout the country including some parts of Assam.

The landed hierarchies of the country specially the Zamindars of Bengal took initiative in the introduction of educational system in their respective estates. Pursuing the foot steps of Bengal zamindars, zamindars of undivided Goalpara District of Assam took initiative in the establishment of schools for the spread of western education among their subjects. Zaminders of Gouripur Raj Estate first established school in this region. Gradually all the zamindars of western Assam started establishing educational institution in their respective estates.

The motives behind the establishment of schools, Madrassa and Sanskrit tols by the zamindars are: firstly, the Mughal Emperor encouraged the zamindars to take public sevice for the benefit of he

subjects, for which they were granted rent free land or deduction from jama.; secondly, pressed by the demands of the government and stressed further by the need of the subjects, zamindars participated in some agricultural development works; thirdly, some of them to satisfy their religious sentiments or craving for perpetuation of their names, built roads, bridges and *serais* and liberally maintained them; fourthly, responsibilities conjunction with the individual philanthropic zeal of some of the zamindars account for the public welfare works.⁵³

The zamindars of Western Assam, being the follower of Bengal zamindars endeavoured in public welfare activities. Some of them established educational institution to display that they were not behind to other zamindars regarding spread of education in their estate. Secondly some of the Zamindars felt the need of educating their subject for the progress of their estate. As expected by the framer of Permanent Settlement, some of the zamindars felt the need to expend a part of their income for the welfare of their subjects.

Like the other landlords of Western Assam, the Mechpara Zamindars felt the need of educational institutions for expansion of education among their *prajas*. Prithram Choudhury was an enlightened zamindar who did lot of benevolent works for the welfare of the subjects. He was patron of education and learning and founded schools for the education of his subjects. He is said to have founded primary and Middle schools in Lakhipur and Goalpara. The school founded in Goalpara was promoted to High School in 1868 that came to be known as Prithiram High school. It was the premier educational institution of this region and played an important role in spreading education in this backward region of Assam. He died in 1874.⁵⁴

Ananda Ram Barua, the famous educationist of Assam was a student of Goalpara School during the period of 1861-186 as mentioned in his biography, edited by S.K Bhuya. During this period his father, Garga Ram Barua served as Sadar Amin of Goalpara district and Anandaram Barua read in class v & vii in Goalpara schools. This indicates that there was a Middle English school in Goalpara before 1861, and might it have been founded earlier of 1853, as primary school by Prithiram Choudhury and later on promoted to High school. Probably, the name Prithiram was attached with the Goalpara High School to convert it to Prithiram Choudhury High School.⁵⁵ According to the report of A.J.M. Mill, dated 1853, there were 10 schools in Golapara District. He mentions them as –

1. Goalpara 2. Mornai 3. Kamarptah 4. Lachipoor 5. Juggeegopha 6. Singhamara 7. Kakripara 8. Bilasipara 9. Dhobree 10. Garaw School. It is presumable that Goalpara School and Lakhipur School were founded by Mechpara zamindars in the fiftieth of Nineteenth Century.

In addition to the financial help extended to the poor and meritorious students for their higher education, Tarun Ram Phukan, the freedom fighter of Assam and Minister, (after independence of India) studied his Bar at Law in London from 1901-1905, with the financial assistance of this family, because of his friendship with Bholanath Choudhury, son of Prithiram Choudhury of Mechpara estate. Tarun Ram Phukan, after his return, encouraged the members of zamindar family to go for higher study in abroad. Inspired by Phukan, Satyandra Narayan went to London for study Bar at Law. He returned home becoming Barrister, with an English spouse. After him, Rajendra Narayan also got his Bar at Law from London. Nevertheless, the family member of Mechpara Zamindary extended full co-operation to the aspirants of higher

education. Besides, Tarun Ram Phukan, Dr. Naraes Choudhury studied Medical Science and became Doctor, Annada Prasad Choudhury and Ghaneswam Thakur were also provided financial assistance. Anada Prasad Chakraborty won gold Medal in the agricultural exhibition in Dhubri.

The most important contribution ever made by the Machpara Family to the expansion of Higher education in this region was the foundation of Bholanath College at Dhubri, the district Headquarter of Goalpara district in 1946. Mechpara Zamindar, Jotsna Choudhury contributed one lakh rupees and 52 beghas land for the foundation of the College in the name of his father Bholanath Choudhury for which it came to be known as the Bholanath College. The college founded on 16th August, 1946 and its classes started in the residential building of Mechpara zamindar at Dhubri in ward No.1 under present Dhubri Municipality, along with some temporarily shed made with tin and bamboos. The College affiliated to Calcutta University until the foundation of Gauhati University in 1948.⁵⁶ Bholanath College, thus established in the pre independent period, was only College in western Assam, which played a very significant role in the expansion of higher education in this region. It was the only higher educational institution in lower or western Assam. Thousand of students have made their career bright and secured high position in the society by educating in this higher educational institution. The college produced high profiled figures of educationist who achieved high status and reputation in national and international arena.

Furthermore, Mechpara Family inspired higher education by giving stipend to the meritorious and poor students for their higher studies. In

1934 Kalipada Sen, who passed Matriculation with fame, was given Rs. 20/- per month as scholarship for higher education.⁵⁷

The students passing Matriculation examination with First division from Prithiram Choudhury High School were awarded Prithiram Award, by Mechpara Zamindar family. The topper of Goalpara district in Matriculation examination was awarded Khagendra Narayan Award which comprised of a Gold Medal. Apart from, two students having 1st division from Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley were awarded scholarship by the Mechpara zamindar family.⁵

6.9. References

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