

Renaissance in Assamese Literature

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ABSTRACT : *The paper entitled “Renaissance in Assamese Literature” attempts to highlight the growing sense of consciousness in the minds of the Assamese people. From 1813 to 1854, the year of Wood’s Despatch, this was the period when Assam was experiencing the beginning of a new phase of national life, being thrown into contact with the west. It was trade that had already brought the British salt merchants into Assam. When finally the British took over Assam it had been suffering for a long period from internal disturbances which were closely followed by the Burmese invasions. Education in the country in the early years of British rule was in a retrograde state. In 1837 when Bengali replaced the Assamese as the language of the court, the missionaries had just arrived in Assam. They took up cudgels against the imposition of the Bengali language. The near total darkness shrouding Assam from the outside world was gradually removed with the entry of the British who gradually broke Assam’s isolation by establishing new routes of communication. The educated elite of the time contributed largely towards the development of Assamese literature.*

I. INTRODUCTION :

The term “renaissance” was first used in a specific European context, to describe the great era from about the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, when the entire socio-cultural atmosphere of Europe underwent a spectacular transformation. The original meaning of the term was associated with the literary movement in Italy in the fourteenth century, which aimed at the revival of Greek and Latin learning, especially of the original Greek and Latin grammars. Diverse views have been expressed by scholars on the significance of the term “renaissance” and different schools of scholars have attempted to put forward widely varied definitions of the term^[1]. Through the word “renaissance” has definite European connotations, yet it happens to be the only word that comes nearest to expressing the complex socio economic and intellectual currents that swept through almost the whole of India during the second half of the nineteenth century. The impact of these new ideas was felt in Assam for the first time after this region came under British rule in 1826. A study of the major trends of the nineteenth century Assamese renaissance as a part of the general stream of new consciousness flourishing in Bengal in particular and in India in general would attempt to focus attention on some of the major characteristics of the Bengal renaissance that helped to shape the Assamese literacy consciousness in the nineteenth century^[2]. The progressive winds from the west entered Assam through Bengal, thereby enabling the region to emerge from the physical and cultural isolation into which it had lapsed during the long period of Ahom rule. Growing contact with western ideas coming through Bengal and the aspirations of the emerging Assamese middle classes for a greater share of jobs under the British, led to the growth of a new sense of national awareness among the Assamese people. The efforts of the American Baptist missionaries in the spread of vernacular press cleared the way for the development of a revitalized Assamese literature which, despite its five hundred year old heritage, lay in a state of stupor during the days of the Burmese invasion and in the early years of British rule^[3].

Impact of the Bengali Renaissance : It was noted with surprise in Samachar Darpan, dated 30 July, 1831, that within five years of coming under the British rule, some gentlemen in Assam had attained remarkable “success in their quest for knowledge”.^[4] From the time of establishment of British rule Assam was beginning to keep pace with other provinces of India in education and literary activity. Calcutta was the place to which Assamese students would resort in good numbers, particularly from the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century when the university of Calcutta became the premier seat of western education in eastern India. Thus the process of modernizing Assam in thought and culture began. In course of time Guwahati and Jorhat and some other towns of the province also became centres of intellectual development. In 1889 a band of young Assamese youths studying in Calcutta (now Kolkata) sought to emulate their Bengali counterparts in their creative zeal in literature by bringing out the well known literary journal, the *Jonaki* (Moonlight) which marked an epoch in Assam. Already, on 25 August, 1888, the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (association for promotion of Assamese Language) was founded at 67 Mirzapur Street, Calcutta. The *Sabha* soon set up its branches in several places of Assam and in Kohima in Nagaland. English and Bengali and to some extent also Sanskrit literatures were their main sources of inspiration. Assam in this way was blessed with three of her greatest modern writers Chandrakumar Agrawala (1867-1938), Lakshminath Bezbaruah (1868-1938) and Hemchandra Goswami (1872-

1928). These three writers established Assamese as a modern India language, a worthy sister of Bengali and Oriya, Urdu and Hindi and Gujarati and Marathi^[5]. Chandrakumar Agrawala, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, and Hemchandra Goswami are called the *Trimurti* (Trinity) of literary renaissance of Assam. The romantic poets of the *Jonaki* and post *Jonaki* era were influenced to a great extent by their counterparts in Bengali viz. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Biharilal Chakravarti and Nabin Chandra Sen who were in turn influenced by Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats and others, “in their approach and attitude, subject and content, and also style and diction.”^[6] Chandrakumar Agarwala was born on the 28 November, 1867 in a place called Brahmajan in the Kalangpur *mauza* of Tezpur subdivision. He was the second son of Haribilash Agarwala (1842-1916). The florescence of the Assamese romanticism actually began with him the founder-editor of the *Jonaki*. Dimbeswar Neog writes: “The *Orunodoi* and the *Jonaki* were practically the organs of the two movements, the former against the usurpation of by the Bengali (language) and the latter for the recoronation of the Assamese after her restoration^[7]. Through the volumes of *Jonaki*, Chandrakumar proved his mastery over Assamese poetic writing. In his first few poems appearing in the first volume of *Jonaki* in 1889, namely *BanKunwari* (The Wood Nymph), *Jal-Kunwari* (the mermaid), *Niyar* (The Dew-Drops), his spiritualization and worship of nature is apparent. In his poem *Prakriti* (Nature) one finds the intellectualization of nature. Like Shelly, Chandrakumar was also a worshipper of beauty which is evidenced by such poems as *Sundar* (The beautiful), *Saundarya* (Beauty) where he frankly admits “Worship of the Beautiful is the play of life” He also showed the paganism of Keats in such exquisite poems as *Madhuri* (Sweetness) and *Kisori* (The Maiden). The humanitarian note in Chandrakumar becomes prominent, through his poem *Manav Bandana* (Man-Worship). His revolutionary spirit shows itself very clearly in his poems *Bin-Bairagi* and *Pratima*. He also wrote a large number of highly reflective poems on spiritual and philosophic subjects like *Viswa Bhawariya* (the player in the theatre of the Universe), *Moi* (The self), *Pratima* and his love for the poor and downtrodden is shown in *Tezimala*.

Lakshminath Bezbaruah was the fifth son of Dinanath Bezbaruah an Extra Assistant Commissioner. With the first nothing less than his famous farce *litikai* (The Page) which reprinted in 1890 in book form. *Kripabor Baruar Kakatar Topola*, (The Assamese Pickwick Papers of Charles Dickens) which appeared in book form in 1904 brought immense fame to the writer. *Padum Kunwari* (The Lotus Queen), which appeared in the third volume of *Jonaki*, was also reprinted in book form in 1905 and was his second work. His essays *Kamat Krititwa Labhibar Sanket* (How to win success in work), *Dinanath Bezbaruah Jiboni* (the life-sketch of Dinanath Bezbaruah), *Bakhar* (The Gem) appeared in booklet form in 1903, 1909 and 1914 respectively. *Kripabor Baruar Obhotoni*, the second instalment of Assamese Pickwick Papers was published in 1909 and his comic works *Nomal*, *Pacani* and *Shikarpati Nikarpati*, all appeared in 1913. Bezbaruah who was called the father of short stories wrote *Surabhi*, *Sadhu Kathar Kuki* and *jonbiri* in 1909, 1992 and 1913 respectively. He published his beautiful poems, both comic and serious, *Kadam kali* in 1913 and his historical dramas Chakradhwaj Singha, *Jaymati Kunwari* and *belimar* (The Sunset) in 1915. His *Bharotvarshar Buranji* (History of India) and Bhagawat katha (Talk about *Bhagawat*) published in 1910 and 1950 respectively, were meant for instruction to children. His *Jonaki*, in prose and verse, Burhi Air Sadhu (Grand Mother's tales) and *Kakadeuta Aru Natilora* (Grandfather and Grandson) published in 1910, 1911 and 1912 respectively are Assamese folk-tales written in a very interesting style for young children. He also wrote Sankardev and *Mahapurash Sri Sankardev Aru Sri Madhavdev* in 1911 and 1914 respectively thereby rendering a great service to the causes of Assamese Vaishnavite literature. He reveals himself as a patriot in his poems and songs *Mor Des*, *Assam Sangit*, *Bin Baragi* and *Amar Janambhumi*.^[8] Bezbaruah was one of the most versatile writers with an all embracing genuine and wide knowledge and for sympathy for men and their ways of life. He was a poet, an essayist, a novelist a dramatist, a critic, a satirist and what not. He was easily one of the most comprehensive spirits in modern Indian literature.^[9]

Hemchandra Goswami was a poet, critic and general essayist, whose voluminous *Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki* or ‘Typical selections from Assamese Literature’ published at the instance of Asutosh Mukherji from the University of Calcutta forms a landmark in the study of early Assamese literature, just as the *Hem-kosa*, an etymological dictionary of Assamese compiled by Hemchandra Baruah was until recently the most authoritative dictionary in Assamese language.^[10] Hemchandra Goswami was born on 8 January, 1872 in the Gouranga *Satra* at a place called, Dhekial in the Golaghat sub-division.^[11] Hemchandra's services to literature was of a different nature. His *Phulor chaki* was a collection of poems called *Biswas*, *Bahi*, *Mon Sangsarat Sukh Nai*, *Stuti*, *Bijuli*, *Prakriti* and *Prakriti Stuti* which were all published in the *Assam Bandhu* between the years 1885 and 1886. His poems *Meghdoot*, *Dipawali* and *Eti Kataksha* were published in the issues of the *Assam Bandhu* between the years 1886 and 1887. In 1889 he composed the first Assamese sonnet *Priyatomar Chithi*. Some of his other poems like *kako Aru Hiya Nibilao*, *Anandaram Baruar Swarga Yatra*, *Pua*, *Kakuti*, *Epahi Padum*, *Haha Kanda* and *Dhora Pora* were published in the various volumes of *Jonaki*.^[12]

Undoubtedly, the impact of Bengali on the life and culture of the Assamese people was published was substantial. The process which began since the closing years of the Ahom rule continued without any break till the close of the nineteenth century. In spite of their animosity against linguistic domination, the intelligentsia was not slow in adopting Bengali dress, customs, usages and even food habits.^[13] The worship of the deities like *Durga, Kali, Chandi, Annapurna* etc. became common not only in public but also in private residences, “occasionally in the accompaniment of *jatra* or dance-drama parties from Bengal.”^[14] Orthodoxy continued to be the order of the day, but its rigidity gradually relaxed. Conservative Maniram bewailed: “By the reduction of all castes to the same level, the people are labouring under the deepest grief and mortification”.^[15] Gunabhiram Baruah wrote that while proceeding to Calcutta for higher studies Anandaram had his hair cut very short; he also took with him the *salagram* or the family deity and offered *puja* regularly. He also took with him a Brahmin cook named Sridhor to cook his food as it was a taboo in those days for a Brahmin to take food prepared by a non-Brahmin.^[16] This practice was discarded on his second visit to the Presidency since his stay at the metropolis had already changed his outlook. Assamese pupils of orthodox families were seen studying side by side with the students of other communities which was at once time considered highly objectionable.^[17] Learning of a foreign language and going abroad was unthinkable in the early British period.^[18] Even a social reformer like Hemchandra Baruah had to study English without the knowledge of the members of his family.^[19]

II. CONCLUSION :

Stress was laid initially on unfolding of the rich heritage of the past by the collection and publication of materials, literary or otherwise, lying scattered and uncared for in different parts of the province. The process begun by Nathan Brown was followed up by Chandrakumar Agarwala, Kaliram Baruah, Sibanath Bhattacharyya, Hemchandra Goswami, Kaliram Medhi and several others. Through the pages of *Assam Bandhu, Jonaki, Bijuli, Bahi* and *Alochani*, Gunabhiram Baruah, Ratneswar Mahanta, Sovaram Chowdhury and others threw light on the aspects of the history and culture of Assam. Hemchandra Goswami’s collection of over two hundred manuscripts, both Sanskrit and Assamese and his publication of the *Purani Asom Buranji, Darrang Raj Vamsavali* and particularly *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Assamese Manuscripts* in several volumes laid the foundation of Assamese history on a firm basis.^[20] The contributions of these and a few others, both Assamese and non-Assamese, backed by the untiring efforts of the benevolent Commissioners Jenkins and Henry Cotton prepared the ground and sowed the seeds which germinated and bore fruit early in the next century.^[21]

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