

The Rise of Assamese Nationalism: An Overview of the Times of

Jyotiprasad Agarwala

Parismita Hazarika*

Dr. Debarshi Prasad Nath**

Abstract

Jyotiprasad Agarwala, one of the admired figures of Assam contributed a lot to the national history of Assam. His versatility in the fields of literature, art, culture and social life gave people a way to reevaluate the national life of Assam. His critical perceptions and creative geniuses accredited him an iconic status in the history of Assam. The gradual rise of Assamese nationalism with the issues of colonial rule, migration, socio-cultural assimilation and independence movement grounded a fertile platform for the stalwart icons like Jyotiprasad Agarwala. The researcher has examined all these issues of colonial Assam that shaped the thoughts and creations of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. This historical context shows how the forefathers of Jyotiprasad Agarwala became "Asomiya" from a migrant community by means of their fervent involvement in the nationalist discourse of Assam. Agarwala's upbringing too helped him to be a progressive minded writer and cultural icon of Assam.

Keywords:

Nationalism;
Cultural Icon;
Migration;
Middle class;
Asomiya.

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Author correspondence:

Parismita Hazarika,
PhD Scholar, Dept.of Cultural Studies,
Tezpur University, Sonitpur, Assam, India.
Assistant Professor, Dept.of Cultural Studies,
Assam Women's University, Jorhat, Assam, India
Email: parismitahazarika91@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903-1951) is appropriated as cultural icon by the Assamese for his significant literary and cultural contributions to the discourse of Assamese nationalism. The sense of nationalism reflected through his creations guides to critically assess the national life of Assam. The nationalism led by Agarwala proceeded through his hope on the glorious culture of Assam. However, behind such commendable contributions of Jyotiprasad Agrawala there were stimulating socio-political factors concerning the issues of

* PhD Scholar, Dept.of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, Sonitpur, Assam, India and Assistant Professor, Dept.of Cultural Studies, Assam Women's University, Jorhat, Assam, India

** Professor, Dept.of Cultural Studies, , Tezpur University, Sonitpur, Assam, India

colonial rule, migration, socio-cultural assimilation and Assamese nationalism. Therefore, in this paper, the researcher has tried to trace the historical significance of Assam during the times of Jyotiprasad Agarwala.

2. The Rise of Assamese Nationalism

The renowned literary person Jyotiprasad Agarwala came with his writing to the significant position in a very crucial time after the Yandabo Treaty of the British in 1826. From that period to twentieth century, Assamese Society had the impact of western education and life style, political instability, the freedom movement of India, the World War II, and deprivation of previous value and emergence of new value system. Jyotiprasad Agarwala tried to reform the Assamese society with his creative mind during that tough situation.

Assam continued a politically separate existence from India under the six hundred years rules of Ahom kingdom. It became the part of Indian political statehood under the unified rule of the British after the Yandabo treaty. Assam was an agriculture based state. The British rulers imposed the revenue system on farmers of Assam. Because of it the whole economic system of Assam became degraded that had negative impact on rich tradition of language and literature of Assam. The British rulers invited educated Bengali people from West Bengal in order to well conduct of administrative tasks. Because of the leading role of the Bengali educated people, Assamese language had to be eliminated from the court, office, educational institutions, administrations etc. and Bengali language had been occupying its position since 1836 to 1873. This critical situation brought distressed condition for the great tradition of Assamese language, literature and culture, because Assamese literature had an independent existence in the literary history of India and had an in depth and internalized principle on its existence. So the Assamese became determinant to acquire freedom. Therefore, there was a series of movements like the Non-cooperation movement, the Civil-disobedience movement and the Quit India movement to protect the nation from the hand of the colonial rulers.

The impact of the World War II (1939-1945) was very crucial on the Assamese society as there was collapse in the traditional agricultural system. The emergence of new value system worried the Assamese about the pathetic socio-economic-political condition of Assam, but a number of Assamese intellectuals were continuously fighting for new trend and tendency of Assamese Literature since nineteenth century to the twentieth century. On such a critical time, in the beginning of twentieth century Jyotiprasad Agarwala was born. He experienced the political instability of his contemporary time and later reflected the same in his creations.

2.1 Migration and Assimilation in Assam

Migration is a historical phenomenon in Assam. Large scale illegal immigration has already caused threat to the socio-political, economic aspect and national identity of Assam. The influx of tea garden labourers from the states of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, the East Bengal Muslim Peasants, the Nepalese for agriculture and also to serve as soldiers and office attendants, Bengali Hindu office clerks and professionals, and Hindustanis from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh as artisans, porters and office clerks are the significant waves of migration in the colonial period (Sarma 34).

The arrival of the Marwari people is one of the considerable occurrences among them. However, their migration was there since pre-colonial period. They dominantly engaged in the tradings of Assam. Nawaranga Ram Agarwala was the forefather of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. His decision to come to Assam from Marwar was one of the historically significant events. It had given the Assamese society a legendary person like Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Nawaranga Ram's pursuit of livelihood helped to stay him in Assam and the acute sense of business and hard work made him admirable by the British. After Nawaranga Ram Agarwala, his son Haribilash Agarwala inherited his legacy. At that time, the Agarwala family was perhaps the richest family in Assam.

In the ways of assimilation to the Assamese culture, marriage and adaptation of Vaisnavism worked most effectively to the Agarwala family. Nawranga Ram took *Sarana* in a local sattrā. They participated in the Vaishnavite rituals and functions. Haribilash Agarwala took the initiative in printing *Kirtan*^{*}, *Ratnawali*[†], *Bargeet*, *Bhatima* etc. These activities helped to bring the family close to the Vaisnava communities. (Baruah 9)

Chandra Kumar Agarwala, the son of Haribilash Agarwala was the pioneer of the *Jonaki* era of Assamese literature. Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Hemchandra Goswami-the three pioneers of *Jonaki* were inspired by romanticism. Therefore, they introduced romanticism in Assamese literature. They taught the Assamese to perceive the past and indigenous life with a new vision. It brought a new milieu to the literary and intellectual domain of Assam. At the time of making the film *Jyomoti* Jyotiprasad Agarwala brought the romantic ideology close to the national movement. The romanticism introduced as

* *Kirtan Ghosha* was composed by vaisnava saint Mahapurush Sankaradeva. It is a composition of poetical works with the philosophy of Ekasarana religion.

† *Ratnawali* was written by Sankaradeva's disciple Madhabadeva.

literary ideology became the ideology of life for Jyotiprasad Agarwala. The national movement participated by Jyotiprasad Agarwala became fertilized by the romanticism called by the pioneers of *Jonaki*.

The close relation of the Agarwala family did not last with the British due to the constant success of the family in business. They became the competitor for the British. By the time of the “Swadeshi movement” of India, the Agarwala family stood against the British. It was the time of their internalization of Assamese nationalism whereas most of the Marwari businessmen living in Assam went against the common people. Many organizations were formed in this period to protect the dignity of the Assamese. The Tezpur Riot Sabha of 1884 was prominent among those newly formed organizations. The pioneer of this organization was Haribilash Agarwala (Nath 340) and the organization raised voice for decreasing the revenue of farmers in Upper Assam.

Thus, Agarwala inherited the intellectual and socio-cultural background of his family.

2.2 Rise of the Middle Class in Assam

Assam had been occupying an independent status since the prehistoric time. But it was the British colonialism for which it had to leave behind independence for several years. The British East India Company signed the Yandaboo treaty in 1826 with Burmese and according to the treaty Assam went into the hand of British. Assamese society suffered several fundamental changes under the rule of British that finally led the emergence of “Assamese nationalism”.

This nationalism which began to emerge from the second half of the nineteenth century with the growth of an educated elite in Assam, gradually came to be dominated and led by the Assamese middle class, which emerged as the hegemonic class in this region (Baruah & Sharma 19).

Assam is an agricultural based society. The socio-economic life of Assam was centred on agriculture. But under the rule of British the farmers of Assam had to face lots of hurdles in their lives. The increasing amount of tax and extraction of their land by British for launching tea garden threatened the economic condition of the farmers. These distressing changes created dissatisfaction among the farmers. It compelled them to rebel against the British government. At the same time hindrances created by the British to the elite class of Assamese to continue their supremacy made them rebellious against the British government.

In the later part of nineteenth century an educated middle class was emerged among the elite people of Assam. They were advance in their thought and economically developed by enjoying certain amount of facilities under the British rule. They became a hegemonic group in Assam. There were certain reasons for the hegemony of the Assamese middle class. The Assamese society was agricultural society at that time. There was hardly any regional bourgeois in Assam and most of the people were illiterate. Therefore, it made possible for this class led by the intelligentsia to influence the whole society. “The late emergence of middle classes amongst the other ethnic communities gave the Assamese middle class not only hegemony but it also made it the most advanced middle class of the North-East”(Baruah & Sharma 20).

These newly emerged educated middle class people were responsible for growth of Assamese nationalism. The domination of Bengali educated people and the sacrecity of employments made them dissatisfied to the colonial rulers. As an outcome-

From the 1940s onwards the middle-class had led a revolt against the Bengali domination of the administration and culture of Assam. They had looked forward to an assured, gradual transformation of Assam into an Assamese-speaking state under their leadership, and to the enjoyment of the fruits of their hegemony. (Gohain 633)

Thus Assamese nationalism was initiated as a reaction to dominance of Bengali-speaking middle class in the colonial administration of Assam. The nationalism led by Assamese middle class people played the role of dominant nationality in Assam. Therefore the agenda of the Assamese middle class could able to do emotional integration in Assam for the sake of the nation. The socio-cultural system led by this nationality became one sort of obligation over rest of the population of Assam. They were responsible for formation of many organizations like Assam Association (1903), Assam Chatra Sanmilan (Assam Students’ Conference, 1916), Asom Sahitya Sabha (1917) etc. for nurturing their nationality.

Assam Association, one of the political associations of Assam was formed in 1903 and started to be functioned after two years of its formation. Assam Association raised their voice on behalf of the entire state. It believed in constitutional way of movement for which it made resolution first and then appealed to the British government. But their effort was unable to raise voice for subtraction of terrible economic condition of the farmers of Assam. Under the rule of British the farmers of Assam had to pay more taxes for which their economic condition was degrading day by day. In the first part of twentieth century there was enormous success in the industrial ground based on tea, oil, natural resources etc. But all those were centred on profit oriented production. As a result of it common masses were neglected from the shares. Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s family belonged to middle class people and became the owners of tea garden. In spite of being a member of the proprietor family of tea garden Jyotiprasad Agarwala had a different notion toward the

labourers of the tea gardens. He worked for better condition of the life of tea garden labourers for which he had to earn the ire of his family.

The initial aim of the Assam Chatra Sanmilian was to serve for nation by improving language and literature of Assam. They were also aware to revive some intangible cultural practices of Assam. Therefore, it was their discion in the second summit that all the students of Assam would wear tradional headgear while coming to school. A few numbers of students practiced it among which one can definitely take the name of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. On the other hand through different cultural activities Agarwala was associated in the cultural nationalism of the Assam Chatra Sanmilian.

Thus Agarwala was involved in the nation building agenda in the colonial period.

2.3 National movement of India and its impact on Jyotiprasad Agarwala

The inspiration gathered through national movement of Assam shaped the political and cultural ideology of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. The inspiration of Non-cooperation movement motivated Agarwala to take admission in the national school established by Chittaranjan Das as sign of non-cooperation with the British government. He completed his matriculation from the national school in 1921. Thus his creative writings too were inspired from the times of Non-cooperation movement. He states in the preface of *Sonit Konwari* (1925) about the national inspiration encouraged in him by the Non-Cooperation movement which motivated him to explore traditional music in his plays. The critic Dhiren Bhagawati has accurately said, "Like Orpheus, Jyotiprasad Agarwala with his musical and poetic skills ignited the fire of patriotism among the masses and enchanted them to throng the freedom movement" (Bhagawati 40-41). *Sonit Konwari* definitely introduced the idea of national identity glorified by a uniquely Assamese tune in the music.

The Civil-disobedience movement of Assam also had active participation of the students. Jyotiprasad Agarwala was also closely associated with the Civil-disobedience Movement of India. It is the intervention of the Civil-disobedience movement that Agarwala has been projected as a leader of the freedom movement in Assam. Later it was the time of Quit India movement (1942) from which Jyotiprasad Agarwala emerged as a mass leader who enthused the people with fiery speeches for absolute sacrifice for the cause of freedom. (Dutta 3)

3. Conclusion

It is the historical background of pre-independent Assam which largely shaped the thoughts and creations of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. This historical context shows how the forefathers of Jyotiprasad Agarwala became "Asomiya" from the establishment of their business in Assam to their involvement in the nationalist discourse of Assam. Jyotiprasad Agarwala was inspired by his forefathers and many other nationalist figures. His upbringing and socio, political and cultural context of Assam helped to shape him as a national icon. In brief, this context paved the way for progressive minded writers and cultural activists like Jyotiprasad Agarwala. His intervention added new meaning and flavour to the existing tradition of Assamese literature.

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