

Identity, Indigeneity and Excluded Region: In the Quest for an Intellectual History of Modern Assam

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Abstract

If Indian intellectual history focussed on the nature of the colonial and post-colonial state, its interaction with everyday politics, its emerging society and operation of its economy, then how much did/ does North-East appear in this process of doing intellectual history? North-East history in general and its intellectual history in particular is an unpeopled place. In Indian social science literature, North-East history for the last seventy years has mostly revolved around separatist movements, insurgencies, borderland issue and trans-national migration. However, it seldom focussed on the intellectuals who have articulated the voice of this place and constructed an intellectual history of this region. This paper attempts to explore the intellectual history of Assam through understanding the life history of three key socio-political figures – Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Chandraprabha Saikiani. Their engagement at the turn of the twentieth century with ideas for the future North-East region in general and Assam in particular is parallel to the formation of the Indian nation state. Research on the writings and works of these socio-political figures is analysed to address what North-east history can contribute to the intellectual history of India and how essential is it in the field of indigenous studies?

Keywords: Intellectual History; Indigenous Studies; North-East India; Assam; Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Chandraprabha Saikiani

1. Introduction

The beginning of twentieth century brought numerous changes in social, political and territorial map of Assam. The India Council Act, 1909 increased the representation of Indians in central and legislative councils while the Assam Legislative Council was created in the same year, with 34 seats under the Government of India Act, 1909. (Previously Assam was part of Legislative Council of Eastern Bengal and had only 5 seats). In the Government of India Act 1919, the strength of Assam Legislative Council was increased to 53 members. The emerging new constitutional framework granted a separate administrative identity to this region. Along with it, it provided opportunity to the people of Assam to shape the future aspirations of this region. The significant event about the rise of modern Assam is that the men and women who laid foundational stones for future Assam were also the people who also wrote extensively about it. This paper identifies three major personalities of Assam – Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Chandraprabha Saikiani who were three stalwarts all starting to become active in social, political

and public sphere from the 1920s. Gopinath Bordoloi, who was active between the 1920's to 1950s, is regarded as 'Lokpriya' the most popular leader who was instrumental in the integration of this region with Union of India. Rabha, a Bodo, who joined the Revolutionary Communist Party of India was also a very famous cultural personality of Assam and popularly known as 'Kalaguru'. The third was Chandraprabha Saikiani a great women leader who organised women towards the national movement and created a feminist consciousness both in colonial and post-colonial Assam. Even though their constituency differed, Bordoloi, Rabha and Saikiani not wrote extensively about the society, politics and gender issues but also constituted an intellectual history of this region.

2. Writing Intellectual History of an Excluded Region

Assam – a state in North-East India – and its multiple leaders were instrumental in unifying the region from within and assimilating it with a greater Indian identity. However, these contributions were marginalised by leading historians both local and foreign. Chandra (2009), Metcalf and Metcalf (2006), Bayly (1999), Curtis (2008), Sarkar (2014) and others who have documented Modern Indian History, have failed to acknowledge the developments taking place in Assam in general and North-East in particular. Guha (2010), Kapila (2010), Khilnani (2016) identified and recognised several socio-political cultural and reformist leaders of modern India but representation of leaders from North-East are missing. Similarly works on nationalism by Masselos (1993), Thapar (2016), and Habib (2017) have undermined national movements occurring in this region. Forbes (1996) that traces the contribution of women in Indian society barely mentions women leaders from Assam and their contribution in the socio-political, cultural development of India and Assam. Other texts such as Markovits (2002) makes a passing reference to North-east region and Banerjee-Dube (2015) projects the state of Assam from the administrative perspective either by highlighting the presence of Congress members in Legislative Assembly or how administrative zones of Assam were created after 1935 Act. The leaders from Assam who have mobilised people, firstly, against the British rule and secondly, for the unity and equality of communities of this region are quietly excluded from these accounts of history.

Scholars working on Assam and North-East have portrayed this as a region of conflicts (Hazarika, 2000; Mahanta, 2014; Freddy 2017; Bhaumik 2009); region of bio-reserve and land of forest economy (Purkayastha 2016; Saikia 2013; Dikshit and Dikshit 2014) while others who have captured the history of Assam (Goswami 2012; EA Gaiti 2006; Baruah 1986; Goswami 2015; Talukdar 2020; Gohain 2020) have narrated it in chronological sense. Does under-representation of people and its leaders from North-East in the modern Indian history suggest an accidental negligence? Can we do an intellectual history of this neglected North-East region which was brought under Excluded and Partially Excluded Tribal Areas under Government of India Act, 1935 and The Government of India Act (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas) Order, 1936 and continues to be marginalized in majority of academic discourses till this day?

3. Doing Intellectual History of Modern Assam

Many scholars (LaCapra 1992; Gilbert 1971; Pollock, 2008; Kapila 2010) working on India argued for exploring intellectual history of India through understanding the ideas of individuals located in a particular context with a transformative capacity. Pollock uses Indology, Orientalism and Sanskrit Knowledge System towards arguing for an intellectual history of India while Kaviraj, attempts to answer the question on how to have an 'Indian' thinking before colonialism. The previous section

highlighted the need for doing an intellectual history of North East India: how to think about the historical forms of consciousness of this region before and after national movement in India? One such prospect is to attempt an analysis of the socio-historical *contexts* in which different personalities of this region and their ideas have emerged and secondly, the socio-historical *changes* these personalities established. There is a plethora of regional histories, biographies of leaders, description of land and its culture are written in vernacular but many of these not envisage the history of ideas and its transformative ability.

This paper focuses to initiate a discourse towards writing intellectual history of Assam by evaluating some prominent figures whose contributions marked a new era in this region. Gopinath Bordoloi (1890-1950), Bishnu Prasad Rabha (1909-1969) and Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901-1972) were recipients of colonial education yet visited traditional paths to resolve the issues they encountered. These leaders were thinkers, activists and writers – a combination not peculiar to these three individuals. Few others too contextualised and intellectualised the issues pertaining Assam. In the early twentieth century, prominent leaders like Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938), Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya (1853-1936), Ambikagiri Roychoudhury (1885-1967), Jyoti Prasad Aggarwala (1903-1951), Bishnuram Medhi (1888-1981), Bimala P. Chaliha (1912-1971) contributed immensely to the growth of an Assamese nationalism and its history and culture. It is also necessary to mention about the existing linguistic consciousness that was generated by the middle class intelligentsia who opposed the imposition of Bengali language by the British. Many stalwarts such as Haliram Dhekial Phukan (1802-32), Dinanath Bezbarua (1813-95), Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59), Gunabhiram Barua (1834-94), Hem Chandra Barua (1835-96), Rajanikanta Bordoloi (1867-1940) and Kanaklal Barua (1872-1940) led that movement. But this movement largely remained an elite movement within Assam (Mahanta, 2013: 3-10). However, Bordoloi, Rabha and Saikiani can be stated as a true embodiment of socio-political awakenings. During the colonial and post-colonial period when this region was experiencing turmoil, they stood firm scripting new chapters in socio-political history. Their work and agitation have given courage and hope and shaped the collective consciousness of North-East in general and Assam in particular. Their views expressed in multiple writings were often competitive and sometimes complementary but it created a united Assamese consciousness across various identities.

The reason for the selection of these leaders amongst the pantheon of leaders to study the intellectual history of modern Assam are: firstly, all three leaders represent different groups within the leadership of Assam. Gopinath Bordoloi belonged to the group of leaders for integration of North-East with Indian Union, emphasising on the idea of Assam and India with language and ethnicity; Bishnu Prasad Rabha belonged to the group of rebel leaders who represented indigenous tribal issues (indigeneity) and Chandraprabha Saikiani belonged to the group of leaders for social and cultural issues and represented the gender question. Secondly, the selected three leaders have written extensively on multiple issues but have a divergence in politics, culture and society. Thirdly, selected three leaders were contemporaries who witnessed and contributed to both colonial and post-colonial Assam.

4. Gopinath Bordoloi: The 'Lokpriya' Political Thinker

Gopinath Bordoloi was a thinker, politician, astute statesman and the first Chief Minister of Assam. The 1920s and 30s were the decades of his political tutoring and 1940s to 1950 were the decades of his political craftsmanship. Bordoloi was born in Nagaon district of Assam in 1890. His father was a doctor and he was sent to Calcutta where he qualified as a lawyer. From the initial days of practice, he was trapped between his profession and devotion for the nation. Bordoloi

revered Tarunram Phookan- a nationalist leader who guided him to national movement. When he met Gandhi for the first time in 1921 while he was practicing law at Guwahati Bar Council, Bordoloi steeped himself in Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. Soon he became the Gauhati Town Congress Committee on 2nd September, 1921. He was elected a delegate to Indian National Congress and participated in Congress Session in Ahmedabad.

His role in awakening political consciousness

He was awakener of consciousness of the people who believed "When an individual of a society respects the freedom of another and tries to work with goodwill, democracy becomes effective" (Baruah, 1992: xvi). He searched for the evolutionary process for the integration of this region without much bloodshed. He foresaw the relevance of freedom of all, not just an individual, and establishing of an effective democracy as a perennial process that prepared the grounds of this region. His contributions in carving out a distinct identity for the people of North-East and Assam ran parallel throughout his struggle for this region. He played a key role in organising the first All India Congress Session at Pandu in 1926. Bordoloi was the Additional General Secretary. Due to his active role in Congress party, after the expansion of Assam Legislative Council under 1935 Act – Gopinath Bordoloi was elected to the council as an opposition leader in 1936-37. Soon he became Premier of Assam in 1938 after Sir Sadullah was ousted. During the Second World War, Bordoloi resigned from the post and was jailed for his active role in National Movement. After the war in 1946, he was once again elected as the Premier of Assam and the first Chief Minister of Assam in independent India in 1947.

He penned down his ideas in various books, letters and newspaper articles addressing multiple constituencies on issues related to religion, dharma and karma, advice to young men and women of the region and father of the nation. While he was in jail, Bordoloi wrote various texts such as *Shree Ram Chandra*, *Buddha Dev*, *Jesus Christ*, *Muhammad*, *Tarunram Phukan* and *Mahatma Gandhi*. *Onahakti Yug* (Free from Attachment) is a text that depicts his political knowledge (Publication Board, 1979). The issues of hill people of Assam were his main concern. This concern is reflected in his article 'Our hill brethren of Assam' (Bordoloi in Baruah 1992: 152) where he highlighted the concerns of people in eastern most regions North-East Frontier. Bordoloi writes about these issues, and more, that is thoughtful and exhortative.

Administrative positions and role in Constituent Assembly

Gopinath Bordoloi has contributed immensely in shaping the Indian Constitution as a member of Constituent Assembly representing the North-East region. He was made Chairman of North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee that was constituted to monitor the regional realignment and provide safeguards to the tribal population. He was also Member of Rules of Procedure Committee and Member of Advisory Committee. During this time, he made three key speeches in the Constituent Assembly. The first one was on 18th July, 1947 where he mentioned the changes in the Assamese population due to the inflow of migration and proposed changes in the current representation of Assamese people. The second speech was made on 5th August, 1949 where he alerted the Assembly towards the special financial difficulties encountered by Assam. The third speech was made on 6th September, 1949, as the Chairman of North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee. In this speech he highlighted the existing tribal situation in Assam (Bhattarcharya, 1986). His major contribution was in creating Tribal Autonomous Councils that safeguarded the rights and cultures of tribal in this region (Stuligross, 1999). He was the initiator of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution that was committed to empower the Autonomous District Councils in matters relating to occupation or use of land, management of forests, use of water course, regulation of the practice of jhum, establishment of

the town or village committees and inheritance of property. The report was submitted while submitting the report on 26 July 1947, Bordoloi said on the sense of exclusion:

These areas were formerly entirely excluded areas in the sense that none from the plains could go there and contact them. That was the position till 15th August 1947, when India became Independent. The foreign rulers till then had in these areas power to send out of the place any one they desired. Again, some of these areas were war zones. During the war, the then rulers developed in the mind of these tribal people a sense of separation and isolation and gave them assurance that at the end of the war they will be independent states managing their affairs in their own way. (Publication Division, 1979: 01).

Apart from his commitment towards the tribal people, Bordoloi was deeply committed towards eradication of untouchability in Assam. His thoughts on North-East and concerns for the plight of people both in colonial and post-colonial and protection of identity and integration of North-East region into Indian Union is apparent in his writings and actions.

5. Bishnu Prasad Rabha: The Revolutionary Utopian

Bishnu Prasad Rabha (1909-69), beloved icon of Assam was a multifaceted genius in the socio-cultural and political realm of 20th century Assam. He was, amongst other things, a stage and film actor, painter, singer, dancer, film director, theatre artist, freedom fighter, thinker and communist revolutionary. It was owing to his extraordinary talent in the world of arts that he is known as Kalaguru – ‘Master of the Arts’ – an epithet that has come to identify only a select aspect of his multidimensional personality. This appropriation of Rabha as a cultural icon has remained the most powerful ascription for him in Assamese consciousness while planting him firmly in the category of venerable and legendary personalities from Assam.

The people’s Kalaguru: A literary and cultural icon

As noted earlier, the groundwork for a distinctive literary tradition of Assam has been built in the late 19th century itself: Rabha enriched this by creating many poems, songs, essays and other literary pieces. He also wrote many folk tales such as *Kopal*, *Lakhimi Kuwori*, *Ajogor Kuwori*, *Rangi Rangdoi*, *Ribriboni Sosowoni* and *Maoriyasarwn Jwhwalao* and amongst his well-known stories are *Sonpaahi*, *Mamir Haar*, *Hiyar Pung*, *Agni Sanskar*, *Jaal Case*, *Kuri Bosoror Jail* all of which have been translated into English (Sarma et.al, 2019). *Mising Koneng* is his better known novel. In describing this artist’s ideology, Phani Sarma, illustrious theatre artist and movie director of Assam (himself bestowed with the epithet of ‘Natasurjya’), had noted that Rabha thought a political party can give birth to a community or a country but only an artist can imbue life to them (Sarma, 1989). All the 52 chapters in Das (1989), including Sarma’s, variously celebrate Rabha as an artist, a ‘Guru’, an itinerant traveller, a ‘worshipper of beauty’, a people’s artist, a convivial and lovable person etc. What is pertinent is that each of these chapters written by eminent personalities of Assam reflect the writer’s pride in her/ his association with this cultural icon of Assam and hail Rabha’s creative genius and intellect.

Apart from being a literary gem of Assam, Rabha was a good researcher whose *Bano Kobang* portrays the life worlds of various indigenous Assamese communities of Assam while his other non-literary works include *Axomiya Kristir Hamuh Abhax*, and *Atit Axom*. His understanding of culture was way beyond the traditional notion of it as being ascribed a lofty ideal. In placing culture “squarely in the foundation of life, the constant cycle of production and reproduction of man’s material existence” (Gohain in Sarm et al 2019: 12; emphasis added), Rabha

exhibits a far richer nuance than that of culture than a typically middle-class view of it as a “flowering of the spirit” (ibid). This nuanced understanding also shows his masterful grasp of tribal life and its associated material inscriptions which are foundational for any research work on indigenous people of the region. Deeply influenced by Srimanta Sankaradeva’s teachings of Vaishnavism as a way of life to the exclusion of caste, creed and religion, he is also credited with bringing Bargeet and Sattriya dance out of the confines of the sattras; he is also deemed an authority on Kamrupi music that he is thought to be a progenitor of along with Jyoti Prasad Agarwala (Sarma et. al 2019: 138).

The revolutionary peasant leader

As a comrade, Rabha wrote many revolutionary various songs and poems in support of communism (Hazarika and Nath: 2017: 64) between 1940-1950 along with songs that reflected nationalism, humanism and wished for the ‘dawn of a new age’. His revolutionary spirit was apparent in his anti-imperialist activities during his college days in Ripon College in Calcutta and later in Victoria college of Cooch Behar from where he was expelled for being having actively participated in the Independence movement of 1930. He was a prophet of optimism and gave a message of new exhilarating truth about human bondage. Rabha makes a clarion call against exploitation:

*Ye freeminded farmer, youth, warrior, With new mind of the Panchayati age;
Fellow workers shall fight with you all wars.
Know which enemy hides in your shadows
And break off that parasitic bloodsucking Kuber’s head*

(Rabha; [trans Barua] in Sarma et al 2019: 163)

A people’s leader, “who came to the centrestage of peasant mobilization and rapidly acquired a much popular and powerful image of legendary leader” (Saikia, 2014: 280), Rabha had joined the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) in 1948 and remained committed to the Marxist ideology which earned him the title of ‘Sainik Silpi’ (Artist in Arms) (Biswas, 2015; Gohain, 1982).

Rabha sought to balance his utopian idealism that he described in his writings about a free and just society and his political career which had quite a few ups and downs. Although a darling of the masses, he was often on the targeted list of the administration whether during British rule or independent India – he was even branded an ‘anti-national’ during the Sino-Indian Conflict (Talukdar, 2014). His shifting fortunes sent him to long spells underground but his popularity across the length and breadth of Assam did not dwindle. It is a telling commentary on his times and milieu that Rabha and Bhabananda Dutta who jointly contested the General election of 1957 from the Kokrajhar Parliamentary Constituency were defeated by the Congress contestants Dharanidhar Basumutary and Rani Manjula Davi which shows that Rabha’s “ideology of socialism as well as equality was yet to find wide acceptance among the people of Assam,” (Hazarika and Nath: 2017: 65). He ultimately was elected from the Tezpur Legislative Constituency in 1967 but he was to pass away just two years later on 20 June, 1969. This suggests that a passage of considerable time was required till his acceptance in active political sphere. Further, although, he straddled the elite Assamese as well as the tribal landscape with unprecedented popularity, he challenged the dominant section of the society and promoted egalitarianism thereby scripting an alternate history for downtrodden people. “...in spite of some confusions that still remain about his role and message” (Gohain, in Sarma et al 2019 *Foreword*: 13), Rabha’s contribution to the intellectual history of Assam in his unique way is unquestionable.

6. Chandraprabha Saikiani: The 'Abhiyatri' Crusader

As crusader for women's education and rights, Chandraprabha Saikiani's was both a torchbearer and an icon of her times who became synonymous with the feminist movement in Assam which was, in her days, still in an inchoate state. Despite her iconic status as both a crusader for women's rights and as a woman leader in the National Movement, Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901-1972) remained somewhat in the margins of the regional, literary and political consciousness till Pushpalata Das's biographical *Agnisnata Chandraprabha* (1998) and Nirupama Borgohain's acclaimed novel *Abhiyatri* (1995) (which won her the Sahitya Academy in 1996) which was made into a teleseries by the same name by PPE (North-East) Doordarshan Guwahati.

A champion of girls' education, women's association and a literary stalwart

Chandraprabha had always championed the cause of education – she had established a school at Akeya for girls' emancipation at the age of 13. What is remarkable about Saikiani's understanding and leadership in this search for women's rights is her recognition that women's emancipation is entwined with women's education. As a woman writer in the early twentieth century, Saikiani had inherited a very circumscribed intellectual space: Deka (2013) notes that in precolonial times, *education and literature were sole preserve of men* and it was social taboo for women to "read or even touch the handwritten manuscripts or so called *puthis* (Deka 2013: 18-19 citing Mahanta 2008).

She overrode these limitations through an unbridled confidence in her self-belief which was nurtured after she joined as a Headmistress in Tezpur Girls' ME School. There, under the tutelage of Kironmoyee and Paramananda Agarwala – Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's influential parents – and in the company of stalwarts such as Omeo Kumar Das, Chandranath Sarma and Jyoti Prasad himself, Chandraprabha's understanding of women and their socio-cultural position deepened. She became one of the first women figures in public speaking when, aged 17, she had delivered a rousing speech enumerating the evil effects of opium in the Assam Chatra Sanmilan session in 1918. Kironmoyee further inspired her to organize Mahila Samitis (Women's Associations) for the upliftment of women which was to become her passion and life-long dedication.

In this context, Bora (2015) notes that the Mahila Samitis of Assam (the first of which were established in Dibrugarh in 1915 by Hemaprabha Das) were initially just local associations formed mainly in the urban centres and confined to discussions on education, culture and music among the elite *bhadramahilas* (respectable women) of upper castes. However, Chandraprabha and others like her understood the organizational power of such associations and worked at grassroots level. Chandraprabha in a fiery speech in the Nagaon session of Assam Sahiya Sabha encouraged the women to break the barriers that separated them from the men during the sabha – essentially their *purdah* – and step to the limelight. Her tumultuous personal life, increasing participation in these Mahila Samitis and eventually her life as a satyagrahi when she courted arrest made it impossible for her to continue her teaching job but it was only the beginning of another chapter of her illustrious life when she worked on issues like education, child marriage, *purdah*, widow remarriage, political participation, untouchability, discrimination. Her own personal life represented a lot of these issues (she had a child out of wedlock as her suitor, who was of a higher caste, refused to acknowledge their relationship) while her writings also addressed many of these burning issues. She was acutely aware for the power of language and hence used language efficaciously in her writings in *Ghar Jeuti* (the light of the house) which was the first women's magazine published monthly in Assamese between October 1927 and 1931 and later in *Abhijan* and *Abhijatri* (1947) – the mouthpiece journals of the *Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samiti*.

Although her creative writings had strong but embryonic feminist leanings, these were often circumscribed by the ethos and the social restrictions of her times. Yet, there is serious self-reflection and a vocal assertion of securing women's rights in her novels such as *Pitribhitha* ('Ancestral Home') and *Doibajna Duhita* ('The Astrologer's Daughter') which established her credentials as a woman writer in the intellectual history of Assam.

A Gandhian social activist

It is well attested that Chandraprabha Saikiani had superb oratory skills – her speeches on opium ban in 1915; her clarion call to women to break out of their barrier in 1925 and her rallies in which she collected funds for Satyagraha are all cases in point. In translating her *Jail Kahini* (Jail Stories) Medhi (2020:91) notes of her life writing that “Saikiani constructs her subjectivity as a young charismatic woman through the trope of public speaking (probably the only female public speaker in some of those meetings) in the provincial conferences of contemporary public associations”. Deeply influenced by Gandhi who she met in 1921 when the latter visited Assam, Saikiani became a pivot for organizing women in non-cooperation movement and the ensuing freedom struggle courting arrest and breaking law on many occasions.

There are two striking issues here regarding the intellectual space that Chandraprabha Saikiani first inherited and then expanded: first as Deka (2013: 23) notes, it was often the case that women writers themselves would delineate their roles and boundaries through such writings and secondly, most of the writings of upper caste women focused on upper class problems and issues. Unlike most such writers who came from a familial background of education, Chandraprabha Saikiani was from a non-literary and non-upper class/caste familial background. As such, her crusader role for women's education and rights assumes greater significance and establishes her as the “most remarkable example of women writers as agents of social change” (Deka, 2013: 24). Post-independence, Saikiani played an active part in the socio-political space and was inducted as a member of the Backward Classes Commission, 1953 for eradication of discrimination. Like Rabha, Saikiani too contested the 1957 General Elections as a Congress candidate, and tellingly, like Rabha, she too lost which possibly proves that their thoughts, deeds and lives were anachronistic for the times. Saikiani was conferred with the Padma Shri in 1972 just before she passed away for social work and has been featured recently by BBC Hindi as an iconic woman leader of India who helped remove purdah and untouchability in Assam.

7. Conclusion

North-East history in general and its intellectual history in particular is an unpeopled place. In Indian social science literature for last seventy years, North-East history has mostly revolved around separatist movements, insurgencies, borderland issue and trans-national migration. However, it seldom focused on the intellectuals who have articulated the voice of this place and constructed an intellectual history of this region. This paper attempted to explore the intellectual history of Assam through an understanding of three key socio-political figures –Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Chandraprabha Saikiani. Their engagement at the turn of the twentieth century with ideas for the future North-East region is parallel to the experiences of Indian nation state. Bordoloi, as a key architect of North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas and later as Premier of Assam scripts an inclusion of excluded areas in the political history of India. Bishnu Prasad Rabha, a humanist artist philosopher from a tribal community, composed revolutionary songs on utopian humanism that reflected the ‘dawn of a new age’ for this excluded region and Chandraprabha Saikiani, a feminist thinker questioned gender hierarchy that was morally justified and socially legitimate – what role does gender have in

the political and social order, what kind of society it should be and what role did women have in nation building were some of the questions she raised.

Lastly, it is to be noted that any acceptance of an identity is often an obfuscation of other identities; identification of Bordoloi as a 'Lokpriya' or beloved statesman; of Rabha as a 'Kalaguru' and of Saikiani as a feminist social worker banks on many appropriations of nationalist, cultural, regionalist, feminist discourses while hinting at a rejection of others. This paper has attempted to examine the role of these figures in a particular socio-historical context and highlights their relevance in shaping the social milieu of Assam in the past century. Writing intellectual history of the excluded is a task in itself. However, this paper through the ideas of these three prominent figures who constituted an identity based approach using history as a larger context has given some hope to attempt an intellectual history of North-East India.

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