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Understanding Cultural Nationalism in Assam: Perspectives from the Plays of Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava

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Abstract

In a contemporary phase of competing ethnonationalism, Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava continue to remain relevant to Assamese society. This is proven by the simple fact that every artist from Assam never let go of the opportunity to establish their allegiance to Rava and Agarwala. Unquestionably, the two most revered cultural heroes of Assam provided a way forward for a more inclusive Assamese society. The fertile contexts provided by the Indian Freedom Movement, the world wars, the Russian Revolution, and the Chinese Revolution and the cultural heritage of Assam shaped their vision and understanding of nationalism and their eclecticism. Music and theatre were two of the most powerful mediums through which they chose to communicate with the masses. This paper aims at critically assessing the concept of nationalism in select plays of Agarwala and Rava. The plays *Khanikar*, *Lobhita* and *Kanaklata* by Jyotiprasad Agarwala and, *Krishak* and *Sapon Kuwali* by Bishnuprasad Rava have been selected to understand the context of the then Assamese society and the rise of Assamese cultural nationalism. The plays of Agarwala gave a new impetus to Assamese nationalism by celebrating the cultural heritage of the Assamese. This was done more or less in the manner and tradition of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. On the other hand, in Rava's ideology, the unique heritages of each of the ethnic communities of Assam should find a reflection in the greater collective of the Assamese society, where all the communities would have the same sense of dignity. Though the names of these two artists are very often rightly uttered in the same breath, there is a need to separate and understand the important differences that mark their viewpoints. These cultural icons were not the proponents of chauvinism and ultra-nationalism, rather their cultural nationalism celebrated inclusivity and secularism. The paper concludes by contextualizing Rava and Agarwala's views in the backdrop of the rising tide of cultural nationalism in different parts of the country at that time.

Keywords: Nationalism, ethnonationalism, cultural nationalism, nationality.

1. Introduction

Assamese nationalism is a contentious issue in the contemporary socio-cultural life of Assam. Two of the most popular cultural icons who are often used to evoke an inclusive sense of Assamese nationalism are Bishnuprasad Rava and Jyotiprasad Agarwala. The fertile contexts provided by the

Indian Freedom Movement, the world wars, the Russian Revolution, and the Chinese Revolution and the cultural heritage of Assam shaped their vision and understanding of nationalism and their eclecticism.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903-1951), born to a wealthy and illustrious Marwari family in Tezpur and Bishnuprasad Rava (1909-1969), born in Dhaka when his father, Raibahadur Gopal Chandra Rava was posted there in the British Police, are considered two of the greatest icons of Assamese nationalism. The form of nationalism encouraged by Agarwala focused on highlighting the past glory of Assam. Therefore, Sankaradeva, the reformer of Assamese society and the propagator of the 16th– Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam and his indelible mark on the land, inspired Agarwala to propose a sort of inclusive nationalism based on Assam's history. Bishnuprasad Rava too was inspired by the cultural and ideological zeal of Sankaradeva. Rava experienced the real condition of his native society and this inspired him to be dedicated to Indian culture as he saw the strong linkages that connected different cultures and societies of the country. Readers and critics belonging to different ideological leanings have all attempted to appropriate Rava and Agarwala in their own discourses of nationalism. The creations of Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava lend themselves quite easily to a reading of nationalism at two levels – nationalism inspired through the Indian Freedom Movement and a brand of cultural nationalism that was unique to Assam. This paper aims to critically assess the concept of nationalism in select plays of Agarwala and Rava. The plays *Khanikar*, *Lobhita* and *Kanaklata* by Jyotiprasad Agarwala, and *Krishak* and *Sapon Kuwali* by Bishnuprasad Rava have been selected to understand the context of the then Assamese society and the rise of Assamese cultural nationalism. Though the names of these two artists are very often rightly uttered in the same breath, there is a need to separate and understand the important differences that mark their viewpoints. We will attempt to historicize Rava and Agarwala's views in the backdrop of the rising tide of cultural nationalism in different parts of the country at that time.

2. ***Nationalism in Assam: the historical context***

Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava were born at a critical time in the beginning of the twentieth century and experienced the political instability of their times which shaped their ideologies in exceptional ways as reflected in their creations and activities.

The political instability of Assam intensified after the establishment of British rule in 1826 through the Yandaboo Treaty, following the Anglo-Burman War. The independent status of Assam has often been claimed since pre-historic ages; in fact, this had always been a matter of pride. But British colonialism subjected the Assamese to humiliation. In fact, "Assam was largely unknown to the outside world until the British arrived in 1826" (Saikia, 2006, p. 38). Consequently, the Assamese society underwent several important political, economic and cultural changes under the rule of the British which eventually and indirectly led to the emergence of Assamese nationalism.

British colonialism was responsible for introducing the system of monetization in Assam and this widened social and economic inequity by creating two sections – the privileged and the under-privileged. "Those who had money became the owners of means of production. Whoever possessed more money acquired more wealth and thereby occupied a higher position in society"

(Nessa, 1985, p. 62). Therefore, the educational and other facilities provided by the British entertained the privileged section in Assam and this privileged section emerged as the new middle class of Assamese society. The class of Assam consisted of tea garden owners, lawyers, teachers, owners of business establishments and service holders. However, until 1850s they stayed away from being involved in the contemporary issues of colonial Assam. It was only in the later part of the nineteenth century that they entered the socio-political scene of Assam (ibid, pp. 59-76).

Initially the newly emerged middle-class was either ignorant or chose to remain blind to the impact of colonial domination in Assam and the hardship faced by the farmers due to the taxation system, monopoly over business establishments, and extraction of land for setting up tea gardens. Rather, they played it safe by appealing to the British for necessary changes. At the same time, the farmers of Assam rebelled against the British because of their hardships. The native elites were quite disappointed about the fact that their social and economic supremacy was now in decline. However, as in other parts of India, a sense of distrust gradually seeped into the middle-class of Assam, forcing them to reconsider their uncritical belief in colonial rulers subsequently to spur them to rebel against the British and this forced the middle class enter the socio-political scene of Assam.

In the nineteenth century the British rulers showed great dependence on the Bengali and middle-class people for government service and collection of tax respectively. The migrant Bengali middle class was seen as an appendix of the colonial administrator and emerged as a competitor to the Assamese middle class for jobs and professions. Eminent author Hiren Gohain writes:

From the 1840s 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, 1983, p. 633)

Though the domination of the Bengali middle class posed a threat for the Assamese, it is at the same time mainly because of the Bengalis that the Assamese were introduced to a sense of nationalism. The Assamese youths who went to Kolkata for higher studies were influenced by the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Bengali educated elites raised a voice against the conservativeness of the Bengali Hindu society. At the same time, a part of the Bengali elites in Kolkata reinforced a form of conservative Hinduism and a reaffirmation of some orthodox traditional practices who were mainly mobilized under the leadership of Raja Radhakanta Dev. The modern worldview and English education were appreciated by them, but they could not think of any change in their orthodox religious faith (Gohain, 2014, p. 657). This same conservativeness was reflected in the writings of Ratneswar Mahanta and Bolinarayan Bora of Assam. In the writings of Ratneswar Mahanta, one can notice for instance that he would encourage women for education within the family while at the same time, compelling them to keep on with their household responsibilities (ibid).

Cultural nationalism is often marked by the vision of a national identity based on the history and cultural heritage of a particular community or a group of people. Jelena Petkovic (2011) opines these cultural theories understand the formation of a nation based on cultural continuity and thus they perceive national identity as almost inseparable from the issue of cultural identity of a people. About the role of intellectuals in cultural nationalism, E.T. Woods points out:

The key agents of cultural nationalism are intellectuals and artists, who seek to convey their vision of the nation to the wider community. The need to articulate and express this vision tends to be felt most acutely during times of social, cultural and political upheaval resulting from encounter with modernity (Woods, 2016, p. 1).

In the nineteenth century, Assamese cultural nationalism was distinct and different from other variants of cultural nationalism that were in vogue in other parts of the country. Through his comparative study of Bengali cultural nationalism and Assamese nationalism, Debarshi Prasad Nath (2014) argues that Assamese cultural nationalism was not exclusivist. Referring to Sajal Nag's identification of the three trends of Bengal Renaissance in 19th century as the Rammohan, the Hindu College and the Ramakrishna tradition, Nath said that though the Rammohan tradition was reformative one, "the cultural renaissance of this group remained confined within the framework of Hindu upper class and the agenda of change permitted by colonialism" (2014, p.155). Noted intellectuals, Hiren Gohain and Amalendu Guha, were critical about the cultural nationalism of Assam under the influence of the Bengal Renaissance. Amalendu Guha (2006) makes the colonial state responsible for the growth of a sense of deprivation among the Assamese by encouraging the dominance of Bengali immigrants whereby the Bengali language became the official language of Assam. Like Guha, Hiren Gohain (2014) also holds the colonial masters responsible for Assamese nationalism, but slightly differently. He argues that newly educated Assamese youths realized the need to value their mother tongue through the assertion of the Bengalis for their own language. In the first part of the nineteenth century, there was a crisis faced by the Bengali language because of the dominance of English and this had scared the Bengali elites. The European nation was determined to eliminate all traditional knowledge and values from India. The Bengali intelligentsia feared that the English language would soon be imposed on the Bengalis as their national language. This kind of fear was expressed in the speeches delivered by Akshay Kumar Datta in 1834, Ramnarayan Tarkaratna in 1853, Kaliprasanna Singha in 1860 and so on. Akshay Kumar Datta expressed his fear in the speech delivered at a meeting of Basberiya village on 30 April in 1834. He said:

Amra porer sasoner adhin rohitesi, porer bhasai sikhita hoitesi, porer atyachar saja kortesi...tahardiger bhasai edesher jatiyo bhasa hoibek...(qtd. in Gohain, 2014, p. 660).

(We are ruled by other nations, we are educated by other language, we are tolerating the dominance of others.... the language of the dominant country will be our national language.)

Their concerns inspired the newly educated Assamese youths of Kolkata to articulate and assert a similar sense of nationalistic feeling in nineteenth century Assam (ibid). At the crucial time of the dominance of Bengali as the official language, the American Baptist Missionaries came to Assam as a savior of the Assamese language. Tilotoma Misra perceptively observes on the contribution of the American Baptist Missionaries:

The efforts of the American Baptist Missionaries in the spread of education among the masses and in establishment of a 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 (1816-24) and in the early years of British rule in Assam (Misra, 1987, p. 3).

With the interest of the propagation of Christianity, the Missionaries epitomised a revolution of literary formation of the Assamese language and that played a significant role in influencing a number of enthusiastic western educated young intellectuals of Assam. These young intellectuals contributed to the foundation of modern Assamese literature starting with the publication of *Arunodoi*¹¹ (in 1846 by the Christian Missionaries) to the publication of *Jonaki*¹² in 1889. "One young Assamese youth Anandaram Dhekial Phukan who claimed to be the harbinger of the Modern Age, in his polemical work 'A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language' had fervently opposed the imposition of the Bengali language in place of Assamese" (Saikia, 2007, p. 5). Despite his loyalty to the colonial administration, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan made relentless efforts with the constant support of the American Baptist Missionaries for reinstatement of the official position of the Assamese language in 1873. The formation of *Asomiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha* in 1888 further promoted a sense of cultural nationalism in Assam.

People respond to an adverse cultural situation in two different ways. By an adverse situation we refer to a state of affairs when one feels that one's identity as a cultural group is under serious threat. Either one may choose to rigidify one's views and become fastidious about maintaining differences and uniqueness. On the other hand, one may choose to respond to the same situation by practicing greater inclusivity in thought and practice. It is remarkable that Agarwala and Rava responded to this crisis in Assam's cultural life by positing the idea of a more comprehensive and inclusive Assamese society. As against a parochial sense of caste and religion specific nationalism of some contemporary thinkers of their times, Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava posited a secular and progressive view of Assamese nationalism.

The advent of the British, the onset of colonial modernity, the language crisis and the incessant flow of people from outside the region meant that the Assamese felt that they were faced with two kinds of problems. Firstly, there was a fear and dread of the 'outsider', the quintessential other who was going to take over the lands and resources of the indigenous populace. The other being the fear and anxiety faced by the communities of Assam, particularly the tribal communities of Assam, was the feeling of being deprived of their rights and entitlements.

Assam's history has been about a series of migrations of one community after the other. The Ahoms, because of whom Assam has been projected to have a glorious past, is a migrant group. Edward Gait states that the Ahoms belonged to the great Tai or Shan race who entered the land of Assam in the thirteenth century (2005, p.66). As Lusome and Bhagat (2020) say, "... Northeast has been known for in-migration and the conflicts arising from the influx of migrants". However, the speed of migration induced by the British was scary for the middle class, to say the least. At a point in time, when the Assamese would have had justifiable reason to turn hostile to the foreign 'other', Jyotiprasad Agarwala reminded the Assamese of the strong cultural connection between Assam and the rest of the country that had existed from ancient times. This was a remarkable feat without doubt. Agarwala reminded the Assamese about their great cultural heritage and dreamt of taking it to the world stage. His approach was to assimilate the best of elements from around the world with select elements from Assamese society to ensure that there was a healthy and creative exchange, leading to the enrichment of Assamese culture. This is reflected powerfully in

Agarwala's *Joymoti*, (1935) the first Assamese film ever made. On the other hand, Bishnuprasad Rava emphasized the need to allay the fears and anxieties of the tribal communities. In Rava's ideology, the unique heritage of each of the myriad communities of Assam should find a reflection in the greater collective of the Assamese society, where all the communities would have the same dignity. One can notice this aspect in his poem ' *Tribal! Jag Tribal!* (Tribal! Wake up Tribal!)-

Tribal! Jag tribal!

Tiyagi ghumoti tor koutikoliya...

Jagibo lagibo toi Kachari Mikir,

Khasi, Rava, Garo, Miri, Kuki, Naga, Bir...

Jagibo lagibo, toi jag

Lo-so ag vag;

Patibo lagibo nawa-mel

Jag tribal...(2008, 161).

(Tribal! Wake up tribal! You have to compromise your old sleep. The Kachari, Mikir, Khasi, Rava, Garo, Miri, Kuki, Naga and others have to wake up. You have to be there in the forefront and create a new horizon.)

Unified, they would have their unique heritage come to life in the greater collective. This greater collective would not bulldoze over the cultures of the ethnic minorities but make them feel wanted. The prerogative for accommodating the numerically smaller ethnic minorities in the greater collective would be that of the ethnic majority. And this should be done without effacing the identity of the minorities.

Imperialism and capitalism helped to widen the already existing fissures in society. Thus, Rava felt that there was a need to explain to the people the reason behind their pitiable state and to make them understand the exploitative machinations of capitalism. Unless they were made to understand these, it was possible that they would turn their anger towards other communities in the region, seeing them as potential competitors for limited resources. Assamese nationalism could only survive by including the concerns of all sections of people living in Assam. This exploitation that was so widely rampant in Assamese society needed to be talked about in a simple language that the common man could appreciate. For Rava, literature and the arts were mainly meant to serve to spread this message amongst the common masses. Agarwala, in contrast, emphasized the importance of the ideal of beauty as a precondition for a healthy society. However, we would do well to remember that for Agarwala, the ideals of beauty and aesthetics could never be divorced from the real challenges facing society. It should be pointed out that all of these ideas associated with the two icons' concerns were not mutually exclusive. Without fail, both of them alternately highlighted all these aspects at different stages and through different art forms. But our contention is that they were predominantly concerned with these issues that we have mentioned.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala's creative writing turned consciously political from the time of the Non-Cooperation Movement. He states in the preface of *Sonit Kuwari* (1925) about the inspiration he derived from the Non-Cooperation Movement which motivated him to express distinctive features of Assamese culture in Assamese literature, art, and music (2013, p. 3). Regarding the politics and ideology of Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Dhiren Bhagawati has said, "Like Orpheus, Jyotiprasad Agarwala with his musical and poetic skills ignited the fire of patriotism among the masses and enchanted them to through the freedom movement" (2012, pp. 40-41). *Sonit Kuwari*, of course, was not about the representation of fiery patriotism. It definitely introduced the idea of national identity glorified by a uniquely Assamese tune in the music. Though Bishnu Rava experienced the Non-Corporation Movement at the young age of eleven, the impact of the movement is discernible in his social play, *Krishak*, where Rava highlighted the emerging national consciousness among the youths of Assam.

The Civil-Disobedience movement inspired both Agarwala and Rava. During this phase, Rava warned the exploited masses against the exploiters through his poetic and lyrical compositions. Jyotiprasad Agarwala actively took part in the freedom movement of Assam since the time of the Civil-Disobedience movement. At the time of the Quit India Movement (1942), Agarwala was at the forefront of the movement. In this period, Jyotiprasad Agarwala emerged as a mass leader who could enthuse the people with fiery speeches for absolute sacrifice for the cause of freedom (Dutta, 2012, p. 3).

3. Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava on Cultural Nationalism

The socio-cultural and political context shaped by the dominance of the Bengali middle class in Assam helped Jyotiprasad Agarwala to understand the growing tensions in his motherland. On the other hand, the migration and gradual assimilation of Agarwala's forefathers to Assam itself was a great example of harmony and integration. That was also a time when there was rising enthusiasm among the masses of Assam towards liberation from colonial power. All these provided a fertile space for Agarwala to form his perspective on Assamese nationalism. The inspiration that was responsible for arousing Bishnu Rava's sense of nationalism is somewhat different from Agarwala's. Of course, the same instability afflicting the socio-political life of Assam motivated Rava also to be dedicated to the nation, but the consciousness of the Assamese middle class and the rise and gradual growth of the communist movement in India inspired Rava to form his ideological foundations. In spite of his birth in a rich family, Rava preferred to live a life among the common masses. One malady that he saw that afflicted the Assamese society was the ever-widening gap between the tribal and non-tribal ethnic communities of Assam. He was devoted to bridging this gap, teaching both groups to be self-critical. The essence of Assamese nationalism for Rava was based on the assimilation of elements from both tribal and non-tribal cultures. The progress of both these groups was dependent on the progress of the other. As long as both these groups understood that their destinies were intertwined, there was hope for the Assamese society. Agarwala went abroad for higher education and his sojourn in the West helped him to visualize a new shape for Assamese culture. On the other hand, Bishnu Rava's deep understanding of rural life in Assam helped him to visualize Assamese culture in a new light of intercultural

harmony. Therefore, their unique experiences of life influenced their respective visions of nationalism.

Rava's involvement in communism changed his nationalist consciousness. The revolutionary philosophy, views and thoughts of Marxism revolutionized his nationalist consciousness. He made an unwavering attempt to arouse the marginalized and the oppressed Assamese masses with the ideology of class revolution through his passionate speeches and literary creations. He saw that modern Assamese literature did not have references to the lived experiences of the working class. The aristocratic life of the elite classes and their conflict in day-to-day life was what mostly occupied the space of literature. Rava's interest was in the emancipatory dimensions of literature and cultural texts. He considered Sankaradeva's literary creations as reflecting a deep concern for the common masses. This inspired him to propose a cultural nationalism based on Sankaradeva. The philosophy of non-violence and equality proposed by Gandhi and the ideology of communism, Rava found to have been already introduced to the Assamese masses by Sankaradeva back in the 16th century.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala too envisaged a bridge between the culture promoted by Sankaradeva (*Mahapurusiya Sanskriti*) and the larger identity of the Assamese. The new vision to appropriate Sankaradeva as an icon of Assam was led by Lakshminath Bezbaroa who underlined the immense contributions of Sankaradeva towards social, spiritual and cultural reforms. The foundation of Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism was essentially the *Ek Sarana Nam Dharma* (a monotheistic spiritual order), but Agarwala emphasized the consciousness of Indianness in Sankaradeva's thought without its religious dimensions. He understood the necessity of the integration of the non-Assamese Indian migrants in Assamese culture by attracting them to Assamese art, literature, music and culture.

4. Nationalism in Jyotiprasad Agarwala's Plays

Jyotiprasad Agrwala's plays are a distinctive reflection of his views of nationalism. In this regard, his plays like *Lobhita*, *Kanaklata* and *Khanikar* can be referred to. Jyotiprasad Agarwala's realistic play, *Lobhita*, was written in the latter part of his life. Hiren Gohain is critical of the context of the play where the playwright has depicted Lobhita and her villagers as being aware of the communist activities. But during 1941-42 communism had yet to find its way into the remote villages of Assam (Gohain, 2013, p. 32). Regardless of Gohain's observations, it can still be stated that the play does well to expose the role of imperialism in the exploitation of the masses. Significantly, one unique feature of the play was the absence of a definite story as the playwright had turned the Assamese nation and society as the central characters of the play in the context of colonial India as well as World War II.

Indian national sentiment was fostered with the transformation of agriculture with land ownership systems of *Zamindari*, *Ryotwari* and *Mahalwari* systems. This material transformation of Indian society had profound social, political, cultural, and psychological consequences for Indian society. The dominant section of the society was not concerned about the problems of the common masses as they were working on behalf of the interests of the colonial masters. During this period the life of the common people became difficult and turned worse in the wake of World War II and

imperialism. To save their lives, the helpless poor took shelter in the houses of *Mauzadars*. The play *Lobhita* depicts the plight of the poor people from the Phulaguri village of Golaghat district. Lobhita, a common village girl, young and sympathetic, took shelter in the house of the *Mauzadar* who was subjected to ill-treatment meted out to her by the *Mauzadarni*, the wife of the *Mauzadar*. The cruelty of the *Mauzadarani* forced Lobhita to leave the *Mauzadar's* house and the experience made her aware of her social condition and the nationalist consciousness as means for social emancipation.

Being inspired by Gandhi's ideology of secularism, Agarwala did not encourage conservativeness and opposed religious chauvinism. This is reflected in the character of Golap Baruah, the Congress volunteer and Elahi Bakhsh, a common Muslim man who offered shelter to Lobhita after she was brutalised by the military men whereas Gopal denied doing the same for fear of societal rules.

During the World War II, Lobhita served the injured soldiers as a nurse. She also became a member of the Azad Hind Fauj led by Lieutenant Baruah in Assam and stood against the British who finally sacrificed her life for the nation. Jyotiprasad was inspired by the real-life incidents of martyrdom of Kanaklata Barua and Bhogeswari Phukanani while developing the character of Lobhita. Lobhita is depicted as a character with modern temperaments but she is equally respectful to her traditional values, yet not orthodox. She has been presented as a singer of Bangeet who would aspire to leave this world by hearing a song glorifying Assam on her death bed. In the character of Lobhita the ethos of Indian and Assamese nationalism was never in conflict.

Agarwala's incomplete play, *Kanaklata*, based on the historic event of Kanaklata's supreme sacrifice for India's freedom could have been a milestone for the modern Assamese drama (Baruah, 2015, p. 145). The play begins with a detailed description of the stage set at Kalangpur in Tezpur where the Assamese youths are getting ready to perform *Huchari* on the occasion of *Bohag Bihu*³¹. The gloom of colonial rule has not been able to ruin the enthusiasm of the youths. Their preparation gains momentum with the active collaboration of a group of Mishing youths which highlights the multi-ethnic ethos of Assam. The protagonist of the play, Kanaklata, who had already been a part of the Association of Peace (*Santi Bahini*), was equally enthusiastic about the celebration of *Bihu* and was offended by the Congress volunteers' decision not to celebrate *Bihu* showing her deeply rooted cultural associations. The whole narrative of the play depicts that nationalism evolved in the context of the Indian Freedom Movement took the turn of cultural nationalism.

Khanikar by Agarwala is a play set against the critical times of 1929 to 1940. The play depicts the conflict among the Assamese middle-class over traditional Assamese values and the Western mode of life and exposure. The Eurocentric attitude hindered the middle-class from understanding and appreciating their own art, culture and tradition objectively. In such circumstances, Nabin, a character from *Khanikar*, is discouraged by his family to go abroad to learn art and architecture. But he managed to make it after a lot of struggles and achieved international recognition. Nabin was equally dedicated to Indian art who would complete the statue of Sita of the *Ramayana* which drew great appreciation and praise in Europe. Nabin's nationalism is based on a convergence of Western and Indian artistic inheritances. His cultural nationalism sees Assam's past as being intimately and intricately connected to India's cultural past where his exposure to the West enriched his artistic self.

Jyotiprasad presents another set of characters who had a fallacious understanding of Indian art and philosophy such as Kalpana Kumar Baruah who is a pretentious and vain artistic philosopher and Mr. Bhayin (Mr. Bhuyan) who is a blind follower of Western life to the extent of changing his Assamese surname from Bhuyan to Bhayin. He is so much impressed by anything Western that he would dismiss the value of Indian art and culture causing a conflict with Nabin. Bhayin, however, is not a flat character in the play. As stated by Satyendranath Sarmah, Jyotiprasad Agarwala leaves a space of sympathy for the character of Mr. Bhayin as well (Sarmah, 2013, p. 69). Mr. Bhayin stands by Nabin till the end despite his strong disagreement with Nabin's decision of pursuing art instead of other subjects. It is important to note that Jyotiprasad has created a character like Bhayin to show how it was never too late to instil a sense of cultural pride in oneself. The play has the objective to promote cultural nationalism through the Assamese language, literature, art, and heritage of the native land.

5. Bishnuprasad Rava on Nationalism

Bishnuprasad Rava's contributions to Assamese nationalism have been legendary. He came to be deeply influenced by the Communist ideology which had its impact on his writings. His aspiration to form a classless and inclusive society with all the ethnic communities as a unified force provoked many critics like Arun Sarmah to term Bishnuprasad Rava a "revolutionary artist" (Sarmah, 2007, p. 22). The period of political exile^[41] provided a great opportunity for him to understand the lives of the common masses and thus he shaped the artist in him with lived experiences.

Being associated with the political movements, it was natural to reflect his nationalist thought through the plays (Das, 2008, p. ?). Rava's plays have depicted the Indian Freedom Movement as well as the rural realities of Assam (Sarmah, 2007, p. 23). *Krishak* and *Sapon Kuwali* are two of his significant plays.

Set against the backdrop of 1942 and the post-independent period of Assam, the play *Krishak* depicts the life of Madhab Chandra Choudhury who takes active part in the Freedom Movement from his student days and tries to unite people from his village against the colonial rulers once he was suspended from the college for taking part in the Quit India Movement. His activities were declared unlawful by the British which forced him to flee. He continued his anti-British activities secretly and got caught and imprisoned. Getting released, he resumed his studies and completed his I.Sc and then M.B.B.S. The play depicts the suffering of the villagers who were encouraged to think critically through the interventions of Madhab. However, the play ends not with melodramatic triumph but with the compulsions of ideological compromises on the part of the protagonist.

One can find an ideological resemblance of Madhab with that of Bishnuprasad Rava himself, though Rava never compromised with his ideological stand. This apart, Rava's vision for an independent Assam after India gets her freedom is directly reflected through the character of Madhab. At the same time, Rava depicts the social and economic pressure on the individual in post-independent Assam which can compel one to give up one's ideology.

The play *Sapon Kuwali* is devoted to the freedom movement of India. Here an urban aristocratic family's determination to maintain the ideology of their family-head shapes the story of the play

who had died following police torture as he had participated in the procession of the Quit India Movement. Sewali, a budding singer whose songs reflect the vision for independence who depicts the miseries of the poor people in society. Deuti, a thirteen-year-old boy, along with his friends are also inspired by the ideals of nationalism and freedom. Deuti even leads a procession chanting "Vande Mataram", "Mahatma Gandhiji ki Jay" (Victory to Mahatma Gandhi), "Congress Zindabad" etc., because they believed that freedom would bring "Rama Rajya" (rule of justice and happiness) to the country.

Portrayal of Deuti's dream in the play is significant in many ways. Deuti dreams that several women labourers in the paddy fields would mobilise themselves to take revenge against the British for killing Kanaklata, Bhogeswari Aideu and Phehuli Kuwari. The women who would dance with Deuti belong to various ethnic tribe *Miri, Rava, Bodo, Deuri, Mikir, Kamrupi*, and the ethnic Assamese from upper Assam.

Bishnuprasad Rava's cultural nationalism is about the joyous celebration of ethnic diversity; which is adequately reflected through Deuti's dream. Therefore, the critic Arun Sarmah opines that the scene of Deuti's dream expresses Rava's urge of imprinting an image of a vibrant multi-ethnic Assam that formed the greater identity of Assamese society. (Sarmah, 2007, pp. 23-24).

Though Assam apparently presented a rosy picture of multiculturalism, objective analysis enables us to see the domination of one community over the rest. The Assamese middle class became a hegemonic class in the nineteenth century and the entire phenomenon of Assamese nationalism started to be dominated by this group of people. On the other hand, there was the emergence of new middle classes among the ethnic communities of Assam. The Assamese middle class was relatively an "advanced" middle class of the region; therefore, they played the role of a dominant nationality in the region. The tribal communities of the region obviously wanted to be a part of the Assamese nation while maintaining and preserving their cultural uniqueness. But the unsympathetic exercise of power and imposition of ideas, values, and culture over ethnic minorities by the Assamese nationality came in the way of realizing Rava's dream of a unified Assam. The ethnic elite minorities protested against this, yet at the same time, they did not demand separation. But it was overlooked by the Assamese nationality. Bishnuprasad Rava's contextual understanding of such issues motivated him to propagate multicultural ethos, rather than absorption or dominance. He emphasized the interdependence of the communities to ensure a stronger foundation for Assamese nationalism. He believed, rather, together all the communities should direct their anger against imperialism and capitalism. This is the innate message conveyed through the dream of Deuti in *Sapun Kuwali*.

Both Agarwala and Rava introduced a sense of cultural nationalism emerging in the wake of the Indian Freedom Movement. Highlighting the pride of Indian culture and tradition in general and of the Assamese in particular, both of them used these plays as means to enthuse nationalist feelings among the Assamese.

As in the plays, Agarwala and Rava's notion of cultural nationalism found similar expressions in their songs and poems as well. Their songs and poems, some of which were used in his plays became popular among the masses as protest songs and songs of resolve to fight for freedom. The songs of the play *Lobhita* by Jyotiprasad Agarwala powerfully reflected nationalistic passions-

Biswabijoyi nawa jowan

Biswabijoyi nawa jowan

Saktisalini Bharatar

Olai aha, olai aha

Santan tumi biplabar .

Samukh samar samukhate

Mukti junjaru husiar

Mrityu bijoy karibo lagibo

Swadhinatar khuli duwar... (2013, p. 196)

(O world conquering youths! You are the sons of the revolution of powerful Mother India. Be prepared, for the war is close! Freedom fighters, you have to overcome death to open the doors of freedom!)

Another song 'Luitar akasat torar torawoli' motivates one with the same spirit –

Luitar akasat torar torawoli

Parat deepawalee tejere mor-

Ai nakandibi,

Thapana tejere banti dilehi

Lora-sowalie tor.

Lachitar dinare jola juyekora

Ai o' numuwa nai...(ibid, p. 209)

(The stars twinkle in the sky of the river *Luit*. The bank of the river is soaked in my blood. O' Mother, stop crying! Your children have lit the lamp in your altar with their blood. The fire ignited in the days of Lachit Borphukan^[51] is yet to be extinguished.)

He tried to ignite patriotic zeal among the youths by citing the examples of Lachit Borphukan, the great Ahom warrior who had defeated the Mughals. Jyotiprasad felt that the Assamese youths inherited a great legacy of heroism to fight against colonialism. His inspiring song would soon become part of the revolutionary anthem:

Saju ho, saju ho, nawa jowan!

Saju ho, saju ho, nawa jowan!

Toi koribo lagibo agnisnan!

Jiwan jouwan

Kori pranpon

Rangoli kori de ronangan...(ibid, p. 175)

(Be ready, youths of the day! The time is nigh when you must take a fire bath. Lay down your life and redden the battlefield with your blood.)

Bishnuprasad Rava also composed powerful songs of patriotism to revolt against the oppression by colonialism. One such poem is recited by Arun in the play *Krishak*.

Utha bir kotodin thaka

Aru kola ghumotit

Utha bir kotodin enedore

Thaka aru

Kola ghumotit.

Hoise samay mohariboloi

Poradhinatar gos ubhaliboloi. (2008, p. 305)

(Wake up, o brave! How long will you continue to sleep? Wake up, o brave! How many days will you sleep in this way? The time has come to uproot and destroy the tree of domination.)

Like Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rava, considered the youth power in the villages of Assam as the source of the greatest strength and therefore, he would try to inspire them through his songs. The marching song used by Rava in the play *Krishak* is one such example:

Mukti junjar soinik ami

Moriboloi bhoy nai-

Morim morim pran boli dim

Bola sawe aguwai

Mukti junjar soinik ami (2008, p. 307)

(We are the soldiers of freedom. We do not fear death. We will sacrifice our life. Let us move together. We are the soldiers of freedom.)

As against Rava's dream of a complete political overhaul of the system, Agarwala supported the idea of a cultural revolution emerging from the villages of Assam. His songs represent this sense-

O' amar gaon.

Amar gaonr man rakhi

Moriboloi jao ami

Moriboloi jao.

Bharpur tamolere

Seujiya patharere

Durate jiliki thaka

O' amar gaon.

Deshar hoke moribo para

Amar gaonr deka lora

Dekeri nahay pas para

O' amar gao... (2013, p. 194)

(O' our village, we are ready to die protecting the prestige of our village. The abundance of betel nut and the greenery of the paddy fields enhance the beauty of our village. The youths of our village can sacrifice their lives for the nation.)

Being well-acclaimed music composers and lyricists, both Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava intended to give an indigenous flavour to the Assamese modern music. The old, traditional folk tunes of Assam got a facelift through the modern songs of Agarwala and Rava without losing their spirit and essence. Sankaradeva's *borgeet* 'Suno suno re suro' was transformed into the marching rhythm of 'Luitor Parare Ami Deka Lora' by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Moreover, the music of the cultural icons reflected their sense of pride in the musical heritage of Assam.

Conclusion

The medium and idioms in which Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava tried to articulate their perspectives on Assamese nationalism were very close to the common masses. Their experiments in the field of theatre and music were genuine attempts to make every resource of the nation available for the Assamese in a manner that could help the common masses identify with the nation. They highlighted almost all the themes of their philosophy- love for the motherland, the need for cultural assimilation, unity and brotherhood among the people through these cultural tools.

The absence of a common language, culture, and identity was felt by the Indians when faced with colonialism. This awareness has caused the emergence of many forms of cultural nationalism. There was Hindu nationalism as part of the revivalist movements of the colonial period that saw the formation of *Arya Samaj*, and the *Brahmo Samaj*, and their refashioning and redefining of Hinduism as a religious tradition, is an example of a form of nationalism at that time (Athreya, 2016, p. 4). Hindu nationalism thought of the diversity of India as a great hindrance to creating a unified nation. Therefore, Appadurai (1996) has opined that Hindu Nationalism is a middle-class, high caste project of cultural homogenisation. As against this form of cultural nationalism, Agarwala and Rava's advocating of cultural nationalism is quite unique. The exceptional experiences of Jyotiprasad Agarwala in the west and the experiences of Bishnuprasad Rava in the villages of Assam are responsible for forming their understanding of a unique model of cultural nationalism, with subtle differences from each other. They are on the same ground regarding the ideology of harmony and assimilation. Rava wholeheartedly urged for inter-regional integrity. Agarwala aspired for inter-regional integration as the outcome of extensive cultural, intellectual, and national progress that would inspire people to accept the larger identity of India as a nation. They were not the proponents of chauvinism and ultra-nationalism, rather their cultural nationalism celebrates inclusivity and secularism. These are the unique perspectives of Jyotiprasad

Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava that have provided key foundations for the formation of Assamese nationalism.

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Notes

[1] *Arunodoi* is an Assamese periodical published in 1846. The journal signalled the advent of an era. In fact, the era marked by this magazine paved the way of Assamese literature towards modernity.

[2] *Jonaki* era is the age of romanticism in Assamese literature, coinciding with the publication of the Assamese magazine *Jonaki* in 1889.

[3] *Bihu* is the national festival of Assam. Among the three *Bihus* of Assam *Bohag Bihu* is observed in mid-April. It is the celebration of the Assamese New Year. *Huchari* is performed in this festival. *Huchari* is a kind of group performance which is performed in the courtyards of the villagers.

[4] Bishnuprasad Rava disguised himself from 1948 to 1952. He coined this phase of life as 'agyatobash' (exile) in his essay 'Agyatobashar Katha' (The Experiences of Exile). He went to exile in order to experience the lives of the common masses. This was probably inspired by the Long March of Mao.

[5] Lachit Borphukan was one of the chiefs of the Ahom military in the days of the Ahom king Udayaditya Singha. Lachit Borphukan is known as a great patriot of Assam because he thwarted the attempts of the Mughals to invade Assam even though he had to make huge sacrifices in the process.

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