

## Manifestation of Nationalist Consciousness in the Plays of Jyotiprasad Agarwala

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### ABSTRACT

Jyotiprasad Agarwala is one of the most distinguished creative giants of Assam. His writings and activities contributed to the culture and society of Assam have accredited him a distinct position. His literatures are imbued with the reflection of contemporary issues of his time. Here, we can mainly refer his play *Labhita* that has reflection of Indian nationalism, Assamese nationalism and the cultural nationalism pertaining many issues of colonial India. *Labhita* is a play written in the later part of his life. His realistic thoughts and perspectives are very clearly rendered in this play. It represents the situation of India before independence and at the time of World War II. The rising social awareness, nationalist consciousness and dominance of a section of "Asomiya" society are reflected throughout the play. The conflict between conservativeness and modernity in rural areas of Assam due to rise of nationalism is one of the notable issues in the play. The play depicts the sense of nationalism among the common people. The courage of Assamese women and their bold participation in the national movement are the core of the play. It also shows how the people from Assam served for Indian nation by forgetting their regional differences. The researcher has studied all these issues of colonial Assam with the understanding of nationalism in the play. Reflection of such socially striking issues can be one of the possible reasons behind use and appropriation of Jyotiprasad Agarwala in the nationalistic discourse of Assam.

### 1. Introduction

Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903-1951), one of the distinguished creative writers and cultural icons of Assam has been assigned distinct position by revolutionists, critics and readers. Agarwala's interventions in the fields of plays, songs, poems, short stories, novels, children's literature and articles added new significance and flavour to the existing tradition of Assamese literature. Literary creations as ways of bringing revolution towards Assamese society helped him to be revered figure in the cultural history of Assam. Hence, he is appropriated within the framework of different discourses of nationalism that have emerged in recent years from different perspectives.

Manifestation of Indian nationalism, Assamese nationalism and cultural nationalism is core significance of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's plays. Therefore, an attempt has been made in the present study to analyze the distinctive reflection of nationalist consciousness (of all three kinds) in the play *Labhita*.

#### 1.1. Nationalism in Assam

Assamese nationalism is the outcome of colonial intervention of the British. Assam went under the rule of British in 1826 through Yandaboo Treaty and became the part of Indian political statehood under the unified rule of the British. It had brought few challenges to the agricultural based rural lives of Assam. Imposition of the revenue system on farmers degraded the economic system of Assam. On the other hand the leading role of the Bengali Middle class in administrative tasks with due invitation of the British rulers caused a threat to the existing socio-economic and political orders of Assam. Bengali language had been occupying official language status of Assam since 1836 to 1873. The Bengali educated people acted as an addition of colonial rule in Assam. Thus they

became a contestant to the Assamese middle class in the field of employment. As a result of it Assamese nationalism was started as a response to imposition of Bengali language and supremacy of Bengali-speaking middle class in colonial administration of Assam. This rising sense of nationalism finally helped the Assamese to be part of Indian freedom movement in its different phases.

### 2. Jyotiprasad Agarwala and His Plays

The *Jonaki* age was the era of romanticism in Assamese literature. *Jonaki* is a literary era named after the Assamese periodical *Jonaki* in 1889. Jyotiprasad Agarwala's literary excellence was shaped by romantic enthusiasm of this age and it got gradual growth during the subsequent phases of Assamese literary history. Jyotiprasad Agarwala emerged as the playwright with his play *Sonit Kuwari (Princess of Blood)* which was composed by him when he was in his teens. The play *Sonit Kuwari* introduced new modes of stage direction, setting and music. Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Nimati Koina (Silent Maiden)* is a lyrical play. Jyotiprasad Agarwala's play *Rupalim* depicts people's protest against monarchy. Most of the critics and readers of Assamese literature consider *Karengar Ligiri (Palace Maid)* as one of outstanding masterpieces of Jyotiprasad Agarwala (Sarmah, 2007 and Baruah, 2003). The play *Kanaklata* depicts the sense of nationalism among the common people. The bravery of Assamese women and their bold participation in the national movement are the core of the play. It also shows how the people from Assam participated as a whole in the freedom movement by forgetting their cultural bigotry. Portrayal of the contradiction coming out of the existence of western values and Indian glory that made people uncritical about "self" is major concern of the play *Khanikar (Sculptor)*. The blind belief on recognition from the west made people of Assam unable to identify their native culture.

Therefore, there was a situation where many Assamese people were discouraged by their natives towards dedication of Indian art and culture. The challenges faced by the artists of Assam due to such ailment of the times make *Khanikar* one of the pioneered plays in Assam.

However, in the following discussion the play *Labhita* by Jyotiprasad Agarwala has been selected to assess the nationalist as well as social consciousness of the Assamese during the colonial period.

## 2.1 *Labhita*: Reflection of Nationalism

Agarwala's *Lobhita* is a realistic play written in the later part of his life. His ideological perspectives are very clearly rendered in this play. There is a criticism against *Labhita* that the play is not based on reality. The play conveys that Labhita and her villagers were aware about the communist activities. But during 1941-42 communisms was not so widespread in the remote villages of Assam (Gohain 2007, 32). In spite of the criticism, it can still be affirmed that the play has depicted how imperialism provoked the movement of the Assamese in that period. The Assamese nation and the Assamese society are represented here as central characters of the play. It talks about the situation of India before independence and at the time of World War II.

Labhita is a character having social and political consciousness. Jyotiprasad Agarwala knew many women political activists through the experience of the movement of 1942. All those experiences inspired him to create a character like Labhita. It shows the women of Assam as having the strength and courage to protest the insolence of the police.

There was a transformation of Indian agriculture under the rule of British. It introduced peasant ownership of land and large-scale ownership. "This transformation of the land relations was the most vital link in the chain of causes which transformed the whole pre-capitalist feudal economy of India into the existing capitalist economy" (Desai, 1948, 33). On the other hand during the British rule the people of Assam were living a life of uncertainty with the simultaneous impact of the World War II and imperialism. There was no dominant power in favour of common Assamese masses in such condition. The powerful sections were loyal to the British rulers to protect their self interests. The story of the *Labhita* represents this condition of Assam created by colonial intervention. The story of the play starts at Fulaguri village of Golaghat district. This village is affected both by British imperialism as well as the World War II. Labhita loses her father and home because of the war and she takes shelter at the *Mauzadar's*<sup>1</sup> home. Labhita's concern towards common masses compels her to pass a time of misery in the home of the *Mauzadar*. She is ill treated by the *Mauzadar's* wife (*Mauzadarani*) who is unable to understand the miserable situation of the common people. The character of the *Mauzadarani* represents the mentality of the emerging capitalist class of Assam. Her cruelty compels Labhita to leave the *Mauzadar's* home. This incident provides a new social

awareness to Labhita and it also shapes her nationalist consciousness.

There were few youths who did not have courage to oppose the conservative characters of the society and thus to stand against the social injustice. Golap Baruah, the Congress volunteer represents that group of youths of Assam. He is unable to provide shelter to Labhita as she is abused by military-men. She stays at Elahi Bakhsh's house. Jyotiprasad Agarwala tries to convey the message of kindness of some people irrespective of their religion by portraying the characters like Elahi Bakhsh, a common man of Muslim community. This incident also reflects the influence of secularism on Jyotiprasad Agarwala.

The common girl Labhita has the nationalist feelings towards her nation. That is why she becomes a nurse to serve the victims of the war. Her participation in the movement of Azad Hind Fauj led by Lieutenant Baruah finally gives the courage to fight against the British. The death of Labhita, in the play, throws light on the sacrifices of the lives of common masses for the sake of their nation.

Assamese women of pre-independent period came forward for protecting their nation as there was less discrimination between men and women. Kanaklata Baruah and Bhogeswari Phukanani were the significant examples in front of the Assamese. Their stories of scarifies inspired Jyotiprasad Agarwala to idealize the characteristics of Assamese women. Therefore, he adapted the character of Labhita from among the common village girls to inspire the generation of his times.

The lesson taught by the ailments of the times motivates Labhita to accept all challenges passed through her life. She criticizes Golap for not standing by the truth for fear of society. Thus, Labhita provides evidence of the rise of feminist consciousness. Labhita criticizes the domination of the powerful section of the villages over the poor classes. Her voice is a symbol of immense concern against the hegemony of the newly emerged privileged class of the native land.

The nationalist consciousness of the Congress volunteers was not able to come out from the constrictions of self interests in all the times. They could not think of the entire nation as a community. Therefore, the social stratification became an essential acceptance for them. Golap is representative of those nationalists of pre-independent Assam.

Labhita valued the glories of the Assamese culture too. This is evident from the singing of *Bangeet* by her in the first visual of the play and her aspiration to leave this world by hearing a glorified song of Assam before her death. There was a need to look back to the past of Assam to find out some glories of Assamese culture in order to inspire the Assamese towards nationalism. Therefore, the character of Labhita shows the significance of such historical glories. Her character thus is able to portray the sense of Indian nationalism, Assamese nationalism and the rise of cultural nationalism.

## 3. Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> Mauzadar is an administrative official responsible for a Mauza in British Assam.

The plays of Jyotiprasad Agarwala are the repository of rising nationalist and social consciousness of the Assamese since colonial period. These were the plays to motivate the Assamese to be dedicated towards the nation during its critical time. Agarwala's constant involvement in Indian freedom struggle and the experiences gathered through its subsequent phases helped him to write a play like *Labhita*. The growth of

cultural nationalism in Assam since colonial period with the respect to past cultural glories is also evident in the play. Thus the nationalist consciousness reflected in Agarwala's plays provides a space to the critics, activists and readers to authenticate an association between their ideology and that of Jyotiprasad Agarwala in the changing socio-cultural context.

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