

# Understanding Labhita as a Cultural Crusader Against Colonial and Patriarchal system: An Estimate on Female Protagonist depicted in the Play of Jyotiprasad Agarwala

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## ABSTRACT

*Labhita is one of significant plays written by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. It is a wonderful play about the outstanding moral and missionary spirit of an Assamese rural girl Labhita. He wrote it in September –October, 1947 and it was published in 1948. The play was first staged at Dibrugarh by the Art players society in 1947, when it was in manuscript form. The play rests on the backdrop of the Quit India movement of 1942 and the Second World War. In the preface of play Jyotiprasad declares that it has neither hero nor heroine in the play in the traditional sense of the term. He wrote this plays on a historic background of Assamese nation marked by diverse and complex context of the time. It draws parallel socio political upheavals. Jyotiprasad tried to project the drastic effect of the wars, imperialism through the play Labhita. In the critical context how people of Assam reacted to British colonialism, degradation of the moral values, socio political and economic exploitation have been projected in this play. Labhita, a spirited and nationalist girl is the representative of the Assamese nation under colonial domination. Labhita is an outstanding contribution to a political discourse, derived from the introspection and retrospection of Indian politics. Written in September-October 1947 i.e., just after the achievement of independence, Labhita brings into being a politically mature, courageous and visionary women character who had confronted troubles one by one in the process exposed the contradiction of the Gandhian volunteers, the coercive character of the colonial state and its beneficiaries i.e. the feudal Mauzader, the traditional revenue collectors in the village. Jyotiprasad shows the power of resistance, tolerance, courage, strength national morale and patriotism of Assamese masses through the play Labhita. Jyotiprasad decided to project such positive qualities of the Assamese nation through a girl and not a boy. He tried to bring out the social transformation through the marginal section of the society.*

## 1. Introduction

Jyotiprasad Agarwala, a political activist, a freedom fighter, a nationalist, a Gandhian, a socialist, a communist, an artist (a silpi) and a cultural genius was born in 1903 at the Tamulbari Tea-Estate of erstwhile Lakhimpur district of Assam. He was born in the noted Agarwala family, which had played a significant role in shaping the cultural ethos of modern Assam. The consciousness of the exploited masses in Assam. Jyotiprasad Agarwala was one of the architects of modern Assamese drama. In his plays modern Assamese drama achieves creativity and dynamism. Jyotiprasad wrote nine plays and out of these, six plays were published. They are – Sonit Konwari (1925), Karengar Ligiri (1937), Labhita (1948), Rupalim (1960), Nimati Kaina (1964) and Khanikar (1977) respectively. His other three plays, Sonpakhili, Kanaklata and Sundar Konwar are found only in fragments. Jyotiprasad Agarwala was a thinker. He was a man of ideas. He was also a man of action. During his time, he tried to put his ideas into action. In order to put his ideas into action Jyotiprasad Agarwala made use of the medium of culture. As a political activist and an artist he realized the importance of Cultural Revolution to awaken the consciousness of the exploited masses in Assam. Jyotiprasad Agarwala's most plays are named after the female protagonists. All female protagonists are projected as crusaders against the dominant discourse of anti culture in form of patriarchy, colonialism, exploitation and discrimination etc. Labhita is one of famous plays written by Jyotiprasad Agarwala it is about a courageous Assamese girl who stood against dominant discourse of patriarchal system

under colonial rule. The present paper is an attempt to unveil Jyotiprasad Agarwala's motive behind creation of Labhita as the cultural crusader against patriarchal system.

## 2. Objectives of the paper

Main objectives of the paper are

1. To Understand Jyotiprasad Agarwala's thought behind female character in the plays of Labhita
2. To unveil the role of Labhita against dominant discourse of patriarchy, colonialism etc.
3. To analyze the role of Assamese women in the national movement in the light of Labhita .

## 3. Method and materials

It is a historical and analytical study. Logic used here both deductive and inductive. Most of data used here from secondary sources like books, references etc.

## 4. Plot of the Play

The play begins with a pathetic and critical situation took place in Phuloguri, a village located near the Lahorjan aerodrome. The Lahorjan aerodrome and its surrounding places are severely damaged and affected by Japanese air-raid in 1942. In the air-raid several inhabitants were killed and many of them found to be severely injured. Baneswar Baruah, father of Labhita is one of inhabitants of Phuloguri is killed in the Japanese air-raid. In this situation inhabitants of Phuloguri village and other surrounding of Lahorjan aero dram had to face another trouble and that is an order from the British

government to vacate the village as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup> British government was about to make the mentioned area a convenient location for the British soldiers to fight against Japanese army. So people of that area were ordered to leave their villages. The order worried the people and left their villages. But Labhita, daughter of late Banerwar Baruah who is highly spirited and courageous girl protested the order of the British government and refused to leave her birth place and paternal home. Labhita stood against the authoritarian rule of the British government and challenged the order to move out of her village. In the second act of the play, Golap led Labhita to the house of Mauzadar, who works for the British government through collecting revenue from the landholders. Labhita was brought to stay in the house of the Mauzadar. But she could not stay there peacefully due to severe discrimination and humiliation of the wife of Mauzadar. Labhita had to face insult, discrimination from of the wife of Mauzadar, Gaunbura (village headman). This opportunist and reactionary section was not concerned with the ongoing national movement for the independence of India. They praised the British government and played the role of local exploiting class. Labhita is a courageous and nationalist girl. She is unhappy to see the exploiting character of these local devotees of British government. She dares to criticize those exploiting people. The village headman calls her a communist since in this period the undercurrent of communist movement is found to be going on.

In the third act, Labhita is found to be driven out of the house of Mauzadar. She becomes shelter less. In this condition Labhita has to face another trouble. She is encircled by drunken and intoxicated militants on the way out of Mauzadar's house. They attempted to rape her. But fortunately she has been rescued by a police officer from the hands of brutal militants. After then Labhita is sheltered in the house of one Elahibox, a poor but kindhearted old man who takes care of her as a daughter. Here Labhita happens to meet Golap, her lover. Golap expresses his inability to take her to his house for fear of his own family and society because his family will not permit him to marry a girl residing in the Muslim family. Elahibox requests Golap to accept Labhita as his wife. But Golap failed to do so. Labhita is highly astonished to hear such version of Golap. She reacts and sharply criticizes him. Labhita says that a Golap has not right to claim himself as a young man of the present age because he does not have the courage and spirit of protest against social injustices and religious obscurantism. She asks Golap to go out of her way of life and decides to take her own way. Labhita gives up the house of Elahibox in search of a new way and new course of life.

In the fourth act, Labhita is found in a new form. She is found to be a nurse in the wartime medical hospital at Kohima. She has got a new shelter and new identity here and involved herself in the service of nursing injured soldiers with missionary spirit and indomitable stamina. But in this period another burning situation takes place at Kohima due to severe attack done by Japanese army. It completely over powered the United British force through bombarding continuously at Kohima town. Many soldiers of British force are killed. In this attack Labhita including other staffs of hospitals become

captives of Japanese army. There is the Azad Hind Fauz of Subhas Chandra Bose in the Japanese army. The objective of Azad Hind Fauz was to drive out British imperialism from India with the help of Japanese army and in this period the quit India movement was going on under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Labhita along with a host of others have to join I.N.A. Labhita, while fighting for the independence of India succumbs to British bullet and in the meantime, Labhita planted Indian flag on the land of India. She breathes her last while listening a patriotic song.

## 5. Background of the Play

The plot of the play is constructed on the background of socio-political turmoil created by two world wars, domination and discrimination done by British imperialism. In this burning context of society, Labhita brave Assamese girl proceeds forward by facing thousands of troubles and tranquillities. She is the unique and outstanding product of a period marked by unsteadiness and uncertainties. In such burning context Jyotiprasad Agarwalla shows the indomitable spirit, national morale and sense of patriotism through a girl Labhita who observes her life, time and space from the realistic point of view. Through the struggle of Labhita, Jyotiprasad projects spirit, stamina and nationalism of Assamese youths.

Labhita is one of most outstanding masterpieces of Jyotiprasad. It is different from his other dramas in the context of plot, technique and characterization. The play is composed on the historic background of the Quit Indian Movement of 1942 and socio-economic, cultural and political upheavals of the post Second World War. Jyotiprasad Agarwala, in the preface of the drama, declares that Labhita is a play without any fixed plot and hero, heroines in particular like dramas in general. He himself has written that there is no plot and characterization in this play in the conventional senses.<sup>2</sup> The power of resistance, tolerance, courage, spirit, stamina, patriotism and national morale of Assamese people are projected in this play. But why Jyotiprasad Agarwala decided to show such positive qualities of Assamese people through a girl not a boy is also an important question. Did Jyotiprasad Agarwala try to disclose the revolutionary and fighting zeal of Assamese women on the plea of exposing national morale of Assamese people in general (?) In order to have the answers of these questions it is necessary to discuss the women characters, gender related issues and cultural and anti-culture urge of women in this play.

## 6. Estimate on the Character of Labhita

**Labhita** : Labhita is a courageous and spirited Assamese girl who has shown indomitable spirit, patience and fighting zeal till her heroic death in the battle ground of the liberation of own motherland. Labhita the supreme manifestation of all women characters in dramas of Jyotiprasad Agarwala is the unique and extraordinary instance of courage, tolerance, strength and dedication. After the tragic death of her father Banerwar Baruah Labhita has to face a chain of troubles and tranquillities from the British imperialism to local exploitative class. She has been tossed by the flood of untoward events. But even after having faced by thousand of troubles she loses

no self esteem and self restraints and proceed forward with high determination and self confidence and without any fear and hesitation she stands with the grim reality. In this context an example of her courage and determination can be cited as follows:-

**Labhita** : "We will run, run the government for a thousand times, It is our country our land our rivers our hills our sky everything is ours yes, I was confined to all domestic world in the villages..... Now, we will run the government why should we not run the government? All of you the police, guards, magistrates, big officers - now all of you will act as per the order of the village masses. Till date, you have exploited us tooth and nail with the help of the white officials. Now we will not leave you. You understand? I see how you can take away the flag from our hand."<sup>3</sup>

It is a historic declaration of an Assamese girl, the representative of revolutionary and exploited masses who shows their demonic zeal in the freedom movement for the independence of India. Labhita being the representative of freedom aspirant masses clarifies the political right and justifiable dignity of people even under the British imperialism. Jyotiprasad Agarwala projects such strength, self confidence and nationalism through a girl not a boy. He tries to show those vibrant and fighting spirit and stamina of women through Labhita which he fails to show through Sewali, Rupalim, Kanchanmoti etc. So, Labhita can be considered as the higher development of women characters created by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Labhita is active and vibrant in both private and public. She is highly conscious of her position, self existence in every situation and space. She never submits herself to any undesirable situation with tear but faces the situation with logical stand and determination. In the time of the Second World War, the British government ordered the people of the village of Labhita. All villagers except Labhita left village their homeland. But Labhita refused to leave her birth place. Labhita said, she is not afraid of the guns or the British soldiers. She declared that she would prefer to die in her parental home in her village and no authority can divest her right to live and die in her own home and land. Such spirit and indomitable courage is not found in other women characters in plays of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Labhita is a distinct and unique stamp of the common people of the nation who were exploited and discriminated by the British imperialism and local exploiting class. Being the sentry and representative of deprived and exploited masses, Labhita stands face to face against the local exploiting class and British power.

After losing her homeland Labhita is found in the house of Mauzader. She gets a temporary shelter in the house of Mouzader. But unfortunately, she had to leave the house of Mauzader due to inhuman treatment of the wife of Mauzader. But Labhita understood the cruel and exploiting character of this native feudal opportunist's class. She critically exposes the exploitation by the native capitalist class in convenience with colonial Government. At one point the issue of the communists' demand for distribution of the surplus resources among the

poor emerges as a point of contestation between Labhita and the feudal beneficiaries. Threatened by such demand when the local feudal elements like the village head says that the comfort of living under the reign of the British Queen has now been taken away by the Gandhian and communists, Labhita very angrily says that the heavenly comfort of a few has been possible at the misery of the common masses. She also courageously narrates the exploitation carried out by the village headman in the pretext of collecting revenues for the colonial rulers.<sup>4</sup> In such way Labhita as a revolutionary spirit and cultural crusader stands against imperialism and capitalism which according to Jyotiprasad Agarwala are deadly enemies of beauty and culture.<sup>5</sup>

Through Labhita Jyotiprasad Agarwala tried to examine the sense of social responsibility, socialistic and egalitarian conception of Assamese women. At the same time he exposes another character of women through the wife of the Mouzader, who fails to understand the pathetic condition of a poor girl Labhita. So, Jyotiprasad Agarwala shows the political culture of new class socio-cultural and ethical values of Assamese people in the colonial period in his play Labhita. Jyotiprasad Agarwala in this play examines the socio-political transition, political culture and political socialization process of Assamese people in general and it is interesting to know that such remarkable transition and political development have been exposed through a girl. In the vortex of freedom movement, World War II socio-economic and political discrimination, exploitation of some native people in the convenience of colonial rule and coercive character of British government common people lose faith in non-violent ideology of Gandhi. In this transitional phase Assamese masses decided to liberate the nation with the help of radical means and method. Labhita represents the political culture and transitional political character of Assamese people in many instances. Her patriotism is not confined to or circumscribed by any formal allegiance to the mainstream National movement as she retorts in front of a few policemen in the beginning of the play: "I have not enrolled my name in Gandhi's register." Labhita like many other poor villagers is victim of the colonial government's eviction drive during the war. From the outset she is portrayed as a bold, outspoken girl who functions as the voice for the voiceless". This is how Jyotiprasad Agarwala through rebel genius Labhita the discourse of feminism is firmly projecting in the large canvas of nationalism. Labhita's political ideology and humanism is not confined within the periphery of National movement for the independence of India. Her mission is not liberate the nation only from the British imperialism but also she wants the society to be free from all short of anti-cultural forces like dogmatic beliefs, communalism, conservatism, etc. She like Kanchanmoti, Sewali does not submit herself to the space created by males. She is to sacrifice herself for the sake of own motherland. In the matter of the national interest, She has no any attention to compromise with her individual interest. She proceeds on fighting against the miseries and refuses the love of Golap, a narrow mind communal and conservative youth. She dismisses

the love of Golap and asks him to live his individual life as follows:-

**Labhit:** "A man born today cannot become a modern man by virtue of his birth. Even today your mind is something like that of a man born some decades ago. You have neither moral courage to call the spade nor have the courage to do the thing what you yourself deem to be right."<sup>6</sup>

Labhita is the symbol of true Assamese self and she acquires the generative gearing and dynamism from the adversities of life. But she is neglected by the greater society including her lover. At the same time she has been helped by men like the police officer who rescued her from the hands of Japanese soldiers, Ellahi Box, a Muslim gentleman who treated her as his daughter and gave her shelter at his home and at the same time Labhita has to suffer from miseries due to inhuman treatment of the woman like the wife of Mouzadar. She is the representative of new woman of Assamese progressive masses. Since the early inception, Labhita is found to be active and vibrant in public sphere. Her 'self' and existence is always conscious of the interest and happiness of common people. She serves the deprived and affected people of her nation either as a nurse or as a fighter. Her sense of deep patriotism and nationalism can be understood from following statement ---

**Labhita:** "Go on fighting till the last drop of blood - the prestige and the glory of the Assamese and the whole of Hindustan are at your hands - got on."<sup>7</sup>

Jyotiprasad Agarwala through the life long struggle of Labhita shows how imperialism, capitalism and patriarchy work in parallel as anti-culture forces. Labhita with radical will power and outstanding spirit stands against all sort of socio-political and gender injustice. Labhita rises above the gender discourse and plays a significant role in the socio-political process. At the same time it is mentioned above that she suffers in the hands of both men and women and a few men has the contribution to her life. But at the same time it is important to note that Jyotiprasad Agarwala's humble effort to project the nationalism and national moral of Assamese nation through a central women character is a praiseworthy task.

Labhita is one of significant plays written by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. It is a wonderful play about the outstanding moral and missionary spirit of an Assamese rural girl Labhita. He wrote it in September –October, 1947 and it was published in 1948. The play was first staged at Dibrugarh by the Art players society in 1947, when it was in manuscript form. The play rests on the backdrop of the Quit India movement of 1942 and the Second World War. In the preface of play Jyotiprasad declares that it has neither hero nor heroine in the play in the traditional sense of the term. He wrote this plays on a historic background of Assamese nation marked by diverse and complex context of the time.<sup>8</sup> It draws parallel socio political upheavals.

Jyotiprasad tried to project the drastic effect of the wars, imperialism through the play Labhita. In the critical context how people of Assam reacted to British colonialism, degradation of the moral values, socio political and economic exploitation have been projected in this play. Labhita, a spirited and nationalist girl is the representative of the Assamese nation under colonial domination. Labhita is an outstanding contribution to a political discourse, derived from the introspection and retrospection of Indian politics. Written in September-October 1947 i e, just after the achievement of independence, Labhita brings into being a politically mature, courageous and visionary women character who had confronted troubles one by after the other in the process exposed the contradiction of the Gandhian volunteers, the coercive character of the colonial state and its beneficiaries i e the feudal Mauzadar, the traditional revenue collectors in the village. Jyotiprasad shows the power of resistance, tolerance, courage, strength national morale and patriotism of Assamese masses through the play Labhita. Jyotiprasad decided to project such positive qualities of the Assamese nation through a girl and not a boy<sup>9</sup> He tried to bring out the social transformation through the marginal section of the society. Women were a marginalized section in the contemporary patriarchal social system. Jyotiprasad wanted to bring out the social revolution through those people who were out of the hegemonic power structure.<sup>10</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Labhita is a dramatic projection of the real story of colonial resistance of a rural girl, hardships and adversaries experienced by people languishing at the periphery of nationhood. She is the critic of all sorts of anti culture like imperialism, feudalism, patriarchy and any sorts of domination, exploitation .Labhita being the representative of the freedom aspirant masses clarifies the political right and justifiable dignity of people even under the colonialism. She is active and vibrant in both private and public domain. She is conscious about her position, self existence in every situation. She never submits herself to any undesirable situation with tears but faces it with logical stand determination. Such spirit and indomitable courage are not found in other women characters depicted in the plays of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Labhita is a distinct and unique stamp of common people of the nation who had been highly exploited and discriminated by both British imperialism and local exploiting class. Labhita is the prospective pioneer of the cultural reconstruction. Jyotiprasad projects the issue of women empowerment in the discourse of nationalism, struggle against the anti culture in forms of gender discrimination and other socio political and economic exploitation. Jyotiprasad through the life long struggle of Labhita shows how imperialism, capitalism and patriarchy work in parallel as anti culture forces. Labhita with radical will power plays an outstanding role of a prospective pioneer of cultural reconstruction.

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