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The Humanist Heritage of Assamese Literature
(From the Beginning to the Independence)

SHIVAJIT DUTTA

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Doomdooma College, Rupai Siding, Tinisukia, Assam, India
E-mail:shivajitdutta@gmail.com



SHIVAJIT DUTTA

ABSTRACT

Heritage is that of the past the pulse of which is felt at present. In this sense the scanty Assamese literature produced during 8th to 12th century bears sheer historical significance, but can't be called heritage. The 13th century Assamese literature mostly patronized by non-Aryan kings more or less fall in the same category, the only exception being Madhav Kandali's "Saptakanda Ramayana". But, the first literature that can be properly termed as "heritage" with profound humanist content is undoubtedly that produced in 15th and 16th centuries by Shankardeva and Madhavdeva, the Assamese counterparts of the pan-Indian Medieval Neo-Vaisnavite Bhakti movement. The Shakta literature popularly known as "Panchali Literature" is also a heritage but can't be bracketed as "humanist". The examples of the two Gurus continued to remain direct forming influences until the 18th century in both prose and poetry particularly in the prose biographies of the Gurus. Alongside, developed the purely this-worldly literature called "buranjis" (histories) by the Ahoms in this century. The emergence of the new educated middle class corresponded with the birth of modern Assamese literature. The first Assamese journal "Arunodoi" published by the Baptist Missionaries from 1846 streamed Western modern ideas into Assamese literature. But, the greatest impetus to the humanist tradition was given by the journal "Jonaki" published from 1889, which bears the influence of the European Romanticism and Liberal Humanism enhanced by patriotism of the freedom movement and the middle-class individualism. But, a mature bourgeois humanism was impossible for the nascent, weak, dependent middle-class and its adherence to the medieval Neo-Vaisnavite ideas, particularly its sense of resignation and that of the other world, significantly diluted the humanist content. But, when the Romantic literature gave way to realist, modernist and leftist literatures in post-Independence period, and the current of humanism did not fail to flow in different forms even through these new channels.

Keywords: Assamese, humanist, heritage, Arunodoi, Jonaki

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Introduction

What does one mean by heritage? It must be something of the past the pulse of which is felt even today, those things of the past which our present socio-cultural life still inherits. The history of Assamese Literature can be traced back to the 8th century. But, not all literatures produced since then form parts of the heritage of Assamese Literature. Further, the humanist content of Assamese Literature commenced at a much later date, that is, since 15th century, and it continues to flow till date in diverse forms and shapes as consequences of diverse influences and socio-historical ambience. In this paper, the author proposes to trace the humanist heritage of Assamese Literature from the beginning till the Independence along with the diverse socio-historical factors behind it.

The Dawn: Charyyapadas and Others

In that sense the Charyyapadas, the first literature in Assamese, supposed to be composed in the period from 8th to 12th century AD, are of sheer historical significance and academic interest in the line of linguistics; but no heritage at all. Similar is the case with Baru Chandidas' "Krishna Kirtana" and Ramai Pandit's "Sunya Purana". Indeed these two indicate considerable progress of Aryanisation and Sanskritisation in this part of the country during that period.

13th and 14th Centuries: The Patronised Literature: Saptakanda Ramayana

In the 13th century two non-Aryan kings _one the Kamata king Durlabhnarayana, a Kocha, and the other, the Barahi king Mahamanikya, a Kachari _ patronized compositions of both original works and translations. The first patronized Hem Saraswati to write "Pralhad Charit" and "Har-Gauri Sambad"; Kaviratna Saraswati to write "Jayadratha Badha" and Rudra Kandali "Satyaki Pravesha" It will be rather hard to find traces of influence of these works in subsequent Assamese literature. But, Madhab Kandali's "Saptakanda Ramayana", the first of its kind in India, composed under the patronization of Mahamanikya in the 14th century has been a long-standing influence in our socio-cultural life.

The Shankara Era: Sunrise of Humanist Content

But, the first Literature the deep-seated humanist content of which has still been a never-failing source of inspiration and guidance for the participants of literature and culture in Assam, is undoubtedly that which flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries in the hands of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva. As leaders of the Assamese counterpart of the Medieval Indian Neo-Vaisnavite Movement, these two stressed upon "bhakti" which could effectively turn the table on the oppressive air created by the "tantra-cult" and Brahminism in those times. They taught the lessons of equality of all human beings irrespective of caste, class or religion along the path of bhakti and "nama-Kirtana", and thereby showed the common people the way of coming out of the iron grip of exploitation and oppression. With bhakti the individual had direct access to God; the oppressive intervention of a priest was not required now.

"Kirtan Ghosa", "Bhakti-Pradip", "Gunamala", translations of the first, second, tenth, eleventh and twelfth books of "The Bhagavata Purana", seven Ankiya Nats or one-act plays(the first examples of Assamese Drama), a number of Borgeets (religious songs still popular in the state) etc are some of Sankardeva's literary contributions while "Nam-Ghosa", "Bhakti-Ratnavali", some short plays called Jhumuras, a number of borgeets etc are a few examples of Madhabdeva's contributions.

Alongside this Neo-Vaisnavite literature a Shakta counterpart called Panchali Literature also flourished which cannot be bracketed into the humanist tradition but which are still enjoyed by the common folk through Ojapali Songs. Sukabi Narayandev (writer of "Padma Purana"), Peetambar, Mankar, Durgabar (writer of "Geeti-Ramayana") etc are the major exponents of this trend.

Post-Shankari Era: The Other World Vs This World

The glaring and inspiring examples of these two Gurus kept influencing a host of Vaisnavite writers till the end of the eighteenth century. A few of them were Ram Saraswati, Sridhar Kandali, Ananta Kandali, Daityari Thakur. Govinda Misra etc. In the early seventeenth century Bhattadeva wrote "Katha Geeta" and "Katha Bhagavata" _ the first examples of prose literature in India. In the same century Raghunath Mahanta wrote the Ramayana in prose and Chakrapani Bairagi the prose Biographies of the Gurus.

The same century witnessed the emergence of the tradition of writing “Buranjis” (histories) by the Ahoms. This this-worldly literature written in spoken dialects has contributed a lot to the historical researches made in later times. “Tungkhungiya Buranji”, “Deodhai Buranji”, “Tripura Buranji” etc are some famous examples of this type.

The “Arunodoi”: The First Contact with the West

The emergence of a new educated middle class coincided with the birth of modern Assamese Literature. The cornerstone of modern Assamese Literature was “Arunodoi” which the Baptist Missionaries began to publish from 1846 and with which the Western modern thoughts and sentiments streamed into Assamese literature. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gunabhi Ram Baruah, Hem Chandra Baruah etc were literary icons of that time.

“Jonaki” Era: Romanticism and Liberal Humanism along with Limitations

But the real torrent of modern Assamese literature began with the publication of “Jonaki” in 1889, originally a venture of three students of Assam studying at Presidency College, Calcutta, and they were Laxminath Bezbaruah, Chandrakumar Agarwala and Hemchandra Goswami. They had been under the spell of the Bengal Renaissance which, in turn, was greatly influenced by the great Romantic Age of the English Literature. Thus the seed of Romanticism and Liberal Humanism was carried to our literature in this age. The patriotic sentiments by the freedom movement and the middle-class individualism prepared the ground for that seed to grow. “Bahi” (first published in 1909) enhanced what Jonaki began.

Glorification of the individual, Romantic Love, equality of all human beings, the Independent status of individuals, a living response to Nature, reveling in past glory, patriotism etc were some of the traits of this new Romantic, humanist literature.

But, the nascent middle-class whose literature it was, was a class almost entirely dependent on the British ruling class. Economically it was not much empowered and its compromising and reformist tendencies resulted in a weak and shallow politics which could not bear much significance. Therefore, it was rather impossible for it to usher in a scientifically and rationally oriented, full-fledged, bourgeois humanism; rather its humanism drew much of its force from a kind of spirituality replete with the sense of resignation for which the medieval Neo-Vaisnavite movement was the model. The poetry of Mafizuddin Ahmed Hazarika and the fiction of Rajanikanta Bardoloi are glaring examples of it. Chandra Kumar began to introduce the this-worldly brand of humanism but found no one as his fellow-travelers. The role-model of the movement, also a prolific writer in almost every field of literature, Laxminath Bezbaruah, in spite of his great talent and success, failed to overcome this weakness of his age.

We must mention that apart from the great trio, the generation of the Jonaki Age included Mafizuddin Ahmed Hazarika, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Ananda Chandra Agarwala, Banudhar Rajkhowa, etc. The post-Jonaki group of literateurs including Chandradhar Baruah, Hiteswar Borbaruah, Raghunath Choudhari, Anbikagiri Raychoudhuri, Durgeshwar Shama, Jatindranath Duwara, Ratnakanta Borkakoti etc. more often than not continued the spirit of the Jonaki Age.

Conclusion: And Quiet Flows the Current

The growing crisis of the middle-Class, its gradual disillusionment, the socialist and communist knocking at the door, the horrible experience of the world war, dwindling of the inspiration and optimism released by the Freedom Movement etc left little room for the romantic sentiments. So, the romantic humanism suffered a jolt and gradually gave way to the realist, modernist and leftist literatures in post-war and post-Independence period. But, the current of the humanist agenda did not fail to flow even through these new channels of Assamese literature.

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