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A detailed still-life composition featuring a quill pen as the central element. The quill is positioned diagonally, with its tip resting on a scroll of aged parchment. The scroll is secured with a red wax seal and a red ribbon. In the background, a lit candle in a brass holder casts a warm glow. In the foreground, a glass inkwell with a quill inside sits on a wooden surface, alongside a red wax seal and a small wooden object. The overall scene evokes a sense of traditional scholarship and research.

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Influence of Society on Assamese Poetry**L.X. Polin Hazarika***Research Scholar, Department of Assamese, Dibrugarh University, (Assam) India***Abstract**

Literature has been considered as a mirror to society. It carries the essence of the society. The contemporary social, economic, political and cultural changes had played a crucial role in shaping up the literary scenario of late nineteenth century Assam. The works of notable Assamese poets such as, Anandaram Agarwalla, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Hemchandra Goswami, Nalinibala Devi, Ganesh Gogoi, Devakanta Boruah carry the spirit of this glorious period of history of Assamese literature.

Key Words: social background, romantic poetry, nineteenth century, patriotism, Bengal Renaissance, western education

Key Words: contemporary social, Assamese, literary scenario.

1.1 Introduction:

Literature is a social evidence and testimony. Being a social creature, human depicts his thought about the social situations and systems in his literary creation. The economic, cultural and political conditions of a society serve as causes in the creation of literature. Society serves both the manner and matter to literature. Hence, literature is considered as a mirror of the society. The study of the relation between literature and society brings into light that society provides necessary motifs, themes, subject matters, forms and styles in the creation of literature.

Every society of a period has a spirit of its own. The spirit of the age is determined by the geographic environment, natural calamities, demographic changes, racial structure, economic production, trade and commerce, war, communication and administration of a society. These factors

take a prominent role in the psychological make-up of man of that particular society which is expressed through literature. It is true that literature may not carry the full picture of the society but it can provide a concise view and carry the essence of the society.

1.2 Objective and Methodology:

The chief objective of the paper is to study the social influences on Assamese poetry with a specific focus on romantic period of later nineteenth century. To achieve the objective analytical method has been applied in the paper. Besides, historical, descriptive and introductory methods have also been applied wherever feels necessary.

2.1 The Analysis:

The observation of the social background of Assamese Romantic poetry reveals three major factors working behind its development. They are: spread of British

imperialism and new social structure, the coming of the American Baptist missionaries and rise of the middle class and Bengal Renaissance and access to western education.

During the nineteenth century mainly for political reason a new type of economy and social life was developed in Assam. In the mean time the Āhom rule had gone into the hands of the British, sequel to the Yandaboo Treaty on 24th February, 1826. The introduction of new administration had brought many changes to social, political and economic areas. At the initial phase the newly introduced British administration was cherished by the common people of Assam. Till 1826, the Burmese had invaded Assam for three times in 1816, 1819 and 1824, which caused a tremendous loss of the political, economical and social infrastructure of Assam. They snatched away the wealth of common people, burnt down villages, burnt down human alive and did inhumane brutality which resulted in a psychological break down of the people. The Assamese people, therefore, considered the British rule as a boon that saved them from the cruelty of Burmese expedition. The British administration had introduced a new tax system in lieu of the former pāik system. But, the new tax system turned to be a nuisance for the common people. Under the new administration some of the former Āhom ministers found respectable positions, but many of them lost their earlier ranks. The deprive gentry who had lost their former ranks became disappointed. This resulted in the revolt of the Gomdhar Konwar and Piyoli Phukan in 1828 and 1830 respectively, demanding removal of the

British administration. Later, in 1857 during the sepoy mutiny Maniram Dewan was also moved by the thought of removal of British administration from Assam and restore of a Āhom king. But, he was caught red handed and later hanged on along with Piyoli Boruah, another revolutionist.

After the advent of the British power in Assam a large number of people migrated from the nearby areas of the province. The immigrants of this period are divided into two groups: the first one is immigrants from the Bengal presidency who came for cultivation in the wasteland and the other is immigrants from distant areas coming for trade and commerce. People from Bengal viz Dacca (Dhaka), Mymensing, Rangpur chiefly came to work as āmlāhs (officials), traders, boat men and khālāsī. Immigrants from Bihar worked as constables, domestic workers, masons, earth-cutters, carters, cobblers, fishermen and boatmen. As McCosh reported, in 1837 a good number of Mārwārīs settled in Assam for trading. The Mārwārīs acted as money changers, bankers and agents of the tea garden managers. A few immigrants belonged to the Punjabi community worked as contractors, carpenters and skilled mechanics in railways and tea gardens in Upper Assam. Moreover, the scarcity of labourers to work in the gardens of Sadiya, Chabua, Deenjoy and Keyhung made it necessary to bring labourers from densely populated areas of Bihar, Odisha and Madras. In 1891, approximately 4, 23,199 immigrants were found working in the tea-gardens of Assam. According to 1911-21 census report of Assam 12, 90,157 were immigrants. As Myron Weiner observes, the immigration

had changed social structure, economy and influenced educational scenario of Assam. Due to immigration into Assam from different areas, through assimilation of the native and immigrant people a socio-cultural harmony had grown up in Assam.

The extension of tea- gardens had increased the demand of coal as it was essential to run the factories. The Assam Company which was originally formed for trading tea in Assam discovered coal in Assam. In 1892, W.H. Cheetham visited Assam and reported about the good quality and high value of Assam coal. Along with coal, since 1866 digging of oil wells were also started in Assam. Finally The Assam Railway and Trading Company discovered oil at Digboi and the first oil well was completed in 1890. In 1901 the first oil refinery of India was established at Digboi. Thus, the Assam Company pioneered in all the ventures of exploring minerals and expanding the commerce sector in Assam. In the later decades these ventures not only influenced the economy but also the socio- cultural life of the province.

On the other hand, the new revenue system troubled the peasants with land taxes of higher rate. The poor people surrendered themselves to their fate and habit of taking opium made a section of people indolent. The opium affected Assamese society to a large extent. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan in his memorial pointed out that since the annexation of British little perceptible change had been affected the condition of the Assamese people. Increase of land revenue, imposition of the Stamp Duties in 1858, income tax in 1860 and other taxes like license tax for utilisation of forest

products made common people irresistible. Moreover, the ban on poppy cultivation and rumour about tax on areca- nuts and betel leaves worked up common people's sentiment. In 1861, rāj mels were organised among the peasants of Phulaguri in Nagaon district and later on, in the districts of Kamrup and Darrang. In subsequent periods in the place of rāj-mels, the ryot sabhās were came into appearance to protest against enhancement of land revenues. In 1885, Indian National Congress was established by Lord Hume to protest the government in a constitutional manner. A number of Assamese people were also interested in the way of congress. In the same decade, in 1886, the Jorhāt Sārbajanik Sabhā was established with Raja Naranarayan Singha as the president and Jagannath Barua as the secretary. The sabhā strongly criticised the British policy regarding land revenue. Among these growing socially aware socio-political organisations The Assam Association (1903) and Assam Students Association (Asam Chātra Sanmilan, 1916) were generating patriotism and social responsibility among people. During this period, some literary organisations such as, Assam National Welfare Society (Asam Desh Hitoisinī Sabhā, 1855), Assamese Literary Society (Asamīyā Sāhitya Charā, 1872) and Assamese Literary Society (Asamīyā Sāhitya Sabhā or Asamīyā Chātrar Sāhitya Sabhā, 1872) were also formed to generate nationalism among the native people of the province. Besides, establishment of Cotton College in 1901, publication of The Honey (Mau) by Bolinarayan Bora and The Friend of Assam (Āsām Bandhu) by Gunabhiram Barua

helped to promote lingual nationalism in Assam.

In this socio-cultural background the literary creation in Assamese language in the earlier part of the nineteenth century had been frozen. But in the later part of the nineteenth century Assamese literature was illuminated with sense of patriotism. Love and respect for the motherland is expressed in diverge ways in romantic poetry. Chandrakumar Agarwalla's respect for the motherland, greatness and fascination towards beauty come into light in several poems included in the poetry collection *The Idol (Pratimā)*. Agarwalla's contemporary Lakshminath Bezbaroa didn't consider himself as a better poet but, behind his life time achievement the inspiration of nationalism was at the most. In "My Nation" ("Mor Desh"), "Motherland" ("Janambhumi"), "The Song of Assam" ("Asam Sangīt"), "The Song of the Brahmaputra" ("Brahmaputra Sangīt"), "The Bard" ("Bīn Borāgī") etc. his love for the motherland has been expressed. In Ambikagari Raichoudhury's poetry patriotism appears in a revolutionary way. His love for the motherland is scattered in poetry collections *The Feeling (Anubhuti)*, *The Meteor of Ache (Bedanār Ulkā)*, *Nation is the God (Desei Bhagavān)*, songs collection and prose writings. Love and respect for the motherland is expressed also in Nalibala Devi's poem "Motherland" ("Janambhumi"), "Worship of Mother" ("Mātri Bandanā"), "The Freedom" ("Swādhinatā") etc. and in Ganesh Gogoi's "Our Nation" ("Āmār Desh"). Besides, in "My Nation" ("Mor Desh") and "Lāchit Phukan" of Devakanta Borua who is chiefly

a poet of love and youth, the patriotism and critique on the pseudo patriot are expressed.

Following the advent of the British power to preach Christianity, the American Baptist Missionaries came into Assam in the third decade of the nineteenth century. The Missionaries not only dealt with preaching Christianity but also gave emphasis on education by establishing schools and publishing grammar, lexicon and textbooks on natural science and arithmetic etc. to enrich Assamese language. The American Baptist Missionaries had also taken initiative in publication of the first Assamese newspaper *Orunodoi (The Sun Rising, 1846)*. *Orunodoi* has provided a platform to a host of emerging Assamese writers. Through *Orunodoi*, the American Missionaries also tried to propagate the idea of social reform. It is evident in the writings like the death of an opium eating woman (May, 1846), description of wine (June, 1846), education in the childhood (May, 1847), evils of bribery (May, 1853) etc.

In 1837 Bengali language had been declared as the official language of Assam province. After the annexation of Assam by British many Bengali educated people migrated into Assam to hold different official jobs under the British administration. Under the misguidance of Bengali officials the British administration took Assamese language as a byproduct of Bengali language. Some historians observe that the Bengali officials worked under British administration are responsible for provoking British officials to introduce Bengali language as medium of instruction in schools and courts of Assam. But, any particular Bengali official cannot be accused for it. Another point to note that,

when the British occupied Assam, they had not declared it as a separate state; rather they annexed Assam to Bengal presidency. Therefore, Assam became a part of Bengal. In 1837 the government according to the Act 29, made the provincial language of British India as the medium of administration and judiciary in the concerned province. As Assam had been a part of Bengal, therefore, Bengali was chosen as the medium of instruction in schools and courts of Assam.

The process of mobilization of Assamese language was started with the coming of the American Baptist Missionaries into Assam in 1836. They raised their voice with documents and evidence against British government for the wrong language policy by which the British forced Bengali language on Assamese people. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan in his *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education in Assam* (1855) and A. J. Moffat Mills in *Report on the Province of Assam* (1854) supported the American Baptist Missionaries in this context. The American Baptist Missionaries along with Anandaram Dhekial Phukan had fought to establish and rehabilitate Assamese language in its own place and in 1872 Assamese language was replaced as official language of Assam.

The rise of the middle class in the nineteenth century colonial Assam was a matter of importance in socio-economic context. The education, monetary economy and the new system of employment under the British government paved the way for emergence of the middle class in Assam. The newly emerging middle class elite were aware of the dynamic nature of the western civilisation, eagerly accepted its salient

features and the scientific and critical spirit of English education enable them to reassess and re-examine their literature and culture. This middle class was as Macaulay pointed out 'Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.' As Macaulay supposed the representative figures of emerging Assamese middle class Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Borua of the mid nineteenth century and Padmanath Gohainbarua, Hemchandra Goswami and Lakshminath Bezbaroa of the later part of the nineteenth century also expressed their gratitude in their writings towards British Empire. The positive effect of this westernization was that it let the educated Assamese to know about the orthodoxy and superstitions prevailing in the society. H. K. Borpujari points out two basic consequences of the expanding new economy in Assam, at first, it modified the rigidity of caste system and secondly, it removed although slowly some traditional beliefs and prejudices. Nineteenth century's elite persons like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua had openly criticized the prejudices and superstitions prevailing in the contemporary society. This trio of the mid-nineteenth century Assam represented the character and attitude of the new emerging educated middle class. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan has been compared with Raja Rammohan Roy of Bengal for his contribution towards reformations in Assam. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan became an inspiration for Gunabhiram Barua and others of his age. The writings of Gunabhiram Barua published in Orunodoi under the pseudonym

'Ejan Asamīyā Lok' are infused with indirect expressions of patriotic feelings. His social responsibility is exhibited in the play Rām-Navamī where he tackles the issue of widowhood. Rām-Navamī also inaugurated the secular play tradition in Assamese literature. Hemchandra Barua who is designated by Dimbeswar Neog as the 'unofficial dictator' of the Assamese language of his time, also has got inspiration from his predecessors Anadaram Dhekial Phukan and the American Baptist Missionary Union of Assam.

In the middle part of the nineteenth century some aristocratic Assamese people came into touch with new awakening Bengal. During this period the feudal society gradually had transformed into a semi-urban society. In the same time, Assamese middle class people tried to follow lifestyle of educated Bengalis; as a result of which a cultural-lingual self oblivion had grown up. In Autobiography (Ātmajīvan Charit), Hemchandra Barua writes that in those days 'everyone hates his mother tongue'. However, towards the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, a sense of nationalism was infused among the middle class Assamese people. This spirit of nationalism inspired the writers of the later part of the nineteenth century to be more vocal in regard of the Assamese language and literature. Their consciousness towards language and literature shows their sense of nationalism. The idealistic view of the trio in the time of appearance of The Moonlit (Jonāki) and the objectives of Assamese Language Development Society (Asamīya Bhāsā Unnati Sādhinī Sabhā in short ABUSS) exhibits the nationalistic attitude of

the poets. In "The Necessity of Life" ("Jīvanar Prayojan") the nationalistic and revolutionary urges of the poet Ambikagiri Raichoudhury is expressed. Nalinibala Devi also in "Lakhmīnāth" (Parashmoni) criticises Assamese people for adopting Bengali culture. The non-cooperation movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that swept all over Assam served the background of many poems of Nalinibala Devi. Her anthologies The Touchstone (Parashmoni), The God of the Era (Jugadevatā) and The Awakening (Jāgriti) consist poems packed with nationalistic fervour. Besides them, most of the poets of the later part of the nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth century are moved by a strong nationalistic zeal.

During the nineteenth century two important processes took place in Assam, westernisation and Bengalisation. After taking up the charge of Assam, British annexed Assam with Bengal presidency. The British administration had began in Bengal after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 A.D., when Assam was still an independent state and it was ruled by Āhom king Rajeswar Singha. Long before Assam, Bengal came into contact with English life and culture as a consequence of which a current of modernism was gradually developed in early nineteenth century Bengal. Drinking, dancing and dinning in a European style, westernised Hindustani music, use of luxury articles, art objects, textiles, furniture were the effects of social change. During this period, Calcutta emerged as the nerve centre of the political and cultural India. The western literature, culture and civilization entered through the

corridor of communication with the west. The Bengali society as well as literature was influenced by the western idealism. In the social sector, importance was given on removing superstitions and prejudices prevailing in the society. Thus, the education, literature and industrialisation changed the oriental mind of the Bengali people in early nineteenth century.

During this period some social institutions grew up with a mission to reform the society. One such organisation was, Young Bengal group formed by Henry Vivian Derozio, a professor of Hindu College, Calcutta. Derozio inspired his students to protest against the prevailing traditional values, religious prejudices and superstitions. He founded the Academic Association in 1928, where discussions were held on the prominent stalwarts of the western literature, culture and philosophy. On the other hand, Brahma Samaj was established by Raja Rammohan Roy in a mission to reform orthodoxy in Hindu religion. Some other eminent persons of Bengal including Akshay Dutta, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Pyarimohan Sarkar, Rajnarayan Basu, Ramtanu Lahiri etc. contributed in their ways in reformation of Bengal. These social activities helped to promote and generate ideas among Bengali people.

The works of Bengali reformers had been a source of inspiration for Assamese people then living in Calcutta. Introduction with English education and western thought had changed their age long believes, values and concepts. The stirring public speeches of the Bengali leaders like Surendra Nath Banerjee, Rabindranth Tagore and

Dwijendralal Roy had a powerful impact on the sensitive young minds of Assamese in Calcutta. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, one of the prominent educated middle class figures of the mid-nineteenth century was deeply inspired by the Young Bengal group in Calcutta and wished to have such a group of youngsters in Assam also. He knew, like many other contemporary Assamese elite people that British administration was necessary for the improvement of the state at par excellence to Bengal. Anadaram Dhekial Phukan inspired other Assamese middle class people such as, Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua who took prominent roles in inculcating European thought, education, natural science, history, geography in Assam. Gunabhiram Barua was a ardent follower of Brahma Samaj. He ardently supported the Widow Remarriage Act which was passed on 1856 in India. In the same year Umesh Chandra Mitra wrote a play Bidhabā Bibāh centred on the theme of widow remarriage. Gunabhiram Barua was deeply inspired by the play and he wrote the play Rām- Navamī on the same theme which was appeared in Orunodoi in 1857. The play was a strong protest against the contemporary social injustices towards women. His deeper sincerity towards idealism was later on expressed when he married a Brahmin widow after the death of his first wife. Moreover, Gunabhiram Barua was inspired by Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. He carried on the liberal ideas and modern outlook of Vidyasagar into Assam.

In this social background the Assamese students who went to Calcutta for higher education were inspired by the works of Bengali social reformers and intelligentsia

for their society, language and literature. Two other factors- women education and political movement also attracted the young students. At the same time, they were pained to see the degraded position of Assamese language in their mother land. As a result of which, Asamīyā Bhāsā Unnati Sādhinī Sabhā (ABUSS) was formed in 1888 with a view to develop Assamese language and literature to the highest level of excellence. Finally, the mouthpiece of ABUSS Jonākī, published in 1889 ushered in the romantic period in Assamese literature.

Analysis of the social background of Assamese romantic poetry reveals that some factors are working behind its growth and development. Among them the changes in the economic and political sectors are

prominent society. During the British period the agricultural economy slowly diminished and had paved the way for a monetary economy. The economic changes brought change to the educational scenario of Assam. The newly educated middle class played a prominent role in reforming the social evils and prejudices. In other words, they initiated the process of modernisation of Assamese society. Introduction to the western literature and contact with the prominent figures of Bengal Renaissance infused patriotism, nationalism along with the sense of equality and liberty among the elites of Assam. Thus, the contemporary social background of Assam helped to germinate the seeds of romanticism in Assamese literature.

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