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Women in the Works of Jyotiprasad Agarwala: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Jyotiprasad Agarwala was a great Assamese personality of Assam in the twentieth century. He was a great writer, film maker and cultural icon of Assam. Jyotiprasad Agarwala had spreaded messages of nationalism among the people of Assam through cultural activities and by his scripts. The idea of building a 'modern' Assam was a recurrent theme in his writings. Jyotiprasad's creative composition was that female characters had a central presence in them. Out of the six plays that he composed, five were titled after female characters. Jyotiprasad was a great feminist. He followed in the foot-steps of his role model Srimanta Sankaradeva. The women characters of the dramas of Jyotiprasad Agarwala have attempted to safeguard their family's dignity and ideals. He tried to explain the plights of women and to provided them equal treatment in the society through his writings. To recognise his contributions to the Assamese Society, his birth day is celebrated as Silpi Diwas all over the state. His noble work and activities are remembered in Assam with great honour and respect.

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Introduction

(Early Life of Jyotiprasad Agarwala)

Jyotiprasad Agarwala (17 June 1903 to 17 January 1951) was a noted Indian playwright, songwriter, poet, writer and film maker of Assam. He was considered as Assamese cultural icon and premier think tank of Assamese literature, deeply remembered for his creative vision and output and is popularly called the *Rupkonwar* of Assam. In fact, he is regarded as the founder of Assamese cinema namely Joymoti (1935). His death anniversary (17th January) is observed as "Silpi Diwas" (Artists' Day) all over Assam on his honour. The Agarwalas, especially Paramananda (Jyotiprasad's father) and Chandra Kumar (Jyotiprasad's uncle), were sympathetic to the nationalist cause and were actively involved in spreading the message and spirit of nationalism among the people of Assam. Chandra Kumar was one of the leading figures of the Jonaki era- the period of Romanticism in Assamese literature. During the Guwahati session of the Indian National Congress (INC) in December 1926, Chandra Kumar converted the weekly Asomiya, of which he was publisher and editor, into a daily paper to cover the proceedings of the session. After 1930, it was published as a biweekly magazine with the express purpose of spreading nationalist and Gandhian ideas among the people. It also

functioned as a mouthpiece for the aspirations of the Assamese people, including the tea plantation workers. It was from Chandra Kumar that Jyotiprasad received his training in publishing, later taking over the mantle of editorship from him.

His father, Paramananda Agarwala, was an accomplished musician and singer. He played the violin and the organ and sang Assamese folk songs such as biyanaam (songs sung at marriages), bangeet, ainaam, etc., (types of folk songs) apart from devotional songs such as bargeet (devotional songs) and recitations from the Kirtan Ghosa (compositions of the bhakti saint Sankaradeva). He also sang Brahmo Sangeet. As a young boy, Jyotiprasad would often stand by and listen to his father's renditions of these songs. Paramananda had attended the Ahmedabad Session of the INC held in 1921. Jyotiprasad also accompanied him, and the speeches of the nationalist leaders, particularly M.K. Gandhi, had left a profound impact on his young mind.

Jyotiprasad's mother, Kironmoyee, belonged to the Tiru Kakati family of Baliaghat in the Sibsagar district of Assam. It was also from his mother that he acquired familiarity with Assamese folk songs and tunes including nisukanigeet (lullabies), ainaam, biyanaam, bihugeet (songs sung on the occasion of the Bihu festival), and so on. Kironmoyee was a

woman of strong will and substance. She was the first president of the Tezpur Mahila Samiti, established in 1919. Responding to the call of Gandhi to do constructive work, she set up the Sipini Sangha, a weaving centre for women, at the ancestral Agarwala home in Tezpur called 'Poki'. She was a major influence on Jyotiprasad's life, supporting him steadfastly in the face of family opposition when he expressed his desire to study abroad. It was due to her unflinching support that he was able to go to Scotland for his higher education at the University of Edinburgh.

Jyotiprasad's great-grandfather, Navrangram Agarwala, had migrated to Assam from Churu, in present-day Rajasthan, in the 1820's. His first wife, Sadari, belonged to the Rajkhowa family of Bebejia. His second wife, Sonpahi, belonged to Kolongpur, where he also settled down as a mauzadar (revenue collector). The process of assimilation of the Agarwalas into the Assamese society thus began right from the time of Navrangram. His son Haribilash Agarwala (Jyotiprasad's grandfather) inherited his father's business concerns, as well as the mauzadari. He married Kumari Maloma, daughter of Bhadrang Hazarika of Gohpur.

Undoubtedly, it was the influence of these Assamese women and their families which set the Agarwalas in a new direction and made them receptive to divergent social and religious views. Navrangram was perhaps the first Marwari to be initiated into the nama-dharma (a variant of bhakti in Assam) of Sankaradeva, the Vaishnava bhakti saint of Assam. The Agarwalas were devout Vaishnavas, and Haribilash 'pioneered the family's attachment to literature and the arts by publishing the literary works of Sankardev and Madhavdev', which 'till then had been preserved either orally or in manuscripts'. Copies of these publications were also often distributed free of cost. Haribilash had, thus, made a major contribution to the field of publishing and printing, as well as in propagating the message of the two saints. The Agarwalas, despite being primarily businessmen, were thus unusual in some ways.

• Creative Works of Jyotiprasad Agarwala

Jyotiprasad Agarwala's familial background and the cultural environment of Tezpur during his formative years, combined with the impact of nationalist ideas and Western education, were important influences on his works. The idea of building a 'modern' Assam was a recurrent theme in his writings. He became one of the foremost advocates of a distinct Asomiya (Assamese) identity and worked towards the revitalisation of the culture of the Asomiya people. He did this through experiments in the fields of folk music, dance, arts and crafts. These concerns are also reflected in his literary works and cinematic endeavours. The influence of swadeshi ideas inherited from his family and his meeting with Gandhi in 1934, strengthened his resolve to carry through with his projects despite hardships. He set up his own film studio at the Bholaguri Tea Estate, created sets out of indigenous materials, used local forms of music and dance, and chose themes located in local history.

Jyotiprasad had trained in the techniques of film-making at the Universal Film Aktiengesellschaft (UFA) studios in Germany. He was familiar with the methods employed in European, Russian and American films, and this was evident in the techniques that he adopted. However, Jyotiprasad innovated and adapted these to suit his own concerns and context. His pathbreaking film *Joymoti* (1935) - the first Assamese film - diverges from the established style of film-making in India at that time, and turns to the realm of social

realism. It was also perhaps the first film that was shot in an outdoor studio, which, at that time and place, was a herculean task in itself because of the lack of technological and communicational wherewithal.

Jyotiprasad was also an accomplished musician, lyricist and composer. His repertoire of songs had a distinct tone, tenor and feel as he experimented with local folk music and elements of Western music, which he learnt during his stay in England. In fact, 'he successfully integrated melody of Indian music with the harmony of the Western music into unified musical tunes.' His songs covered a wide range: from patriotic songs to romantic ones to songs for the common masses, such as the toiling cultivator, the tea garden worker, people struggling against all odds, etc. Due to the distinctiveness of the tunes and songs composed by Jyotiprasad, these have come to be known as 'Jyoti Sangeet'.

• Women in the Works of Jyotiprasad Agarwala

A striking feature of many of Jyotiprasad's creative compositions was that female characters had a central presence in them. Out of the six plays that he composed, five were titled after female characters. However, it was in his sixth (unfinished) play that he addressed the 'women's question' directly, bringing forth the issue of patriarchy and women's subjugation in society.

Jyotiprasad was a great feminist. He followed in the foot-steps of his role model Srimanta Sankaradeva, who had spoken of women's rights way back in fifteenth-sixteenth century in compositions like *Harishchandra Upakhyan* and *Uttarakanda Ramayana*. Like any other Assamese litterateur-artist, Jyotiprasad also was influenced by the father of Assamese nation, Srimanta Sankaradeva. Jyotiprasad took up the cause of women in his stories and plays, which were almost always dominated by female characters. Even his film '*Joymati*' was the saga of a great woman *Joymati*, whose sacrifice helped bring about a much needed political change during the Ahom reign. It is true, Jyotiprasad's stories, plays and films had tragedy embedded in them. But he highlighted the aspirations and rights of women in his writings very forcefully. The tragedy added an extra dimension to that.

The women characters of the dramas of Jyotiprasad Agarwala have attempted to safeguard their family's dignity and ideals. In the drama '*Shonit Kunwar*', Usha could have run away with Aniruddha by ignoring the bondage of Agnigarh and of her father. But Jyotiprasad has not shown Usha doing such a thing. He tries to spread the message of love and friendship through the character of Usha by safeguarding the dignity of her home, devotion and her father. He gives inspiration through the character of Chitrallekha to move towards enlightenment. He provides inspiration for doing one's duty. He presents the ideals of importance, greatness and responsibility of a friend in the family. In the drama '*Karengar Ligiri*', Kanchanmati for the sake of her father as well as to protect the respect, dignity of her husband's home was ready to face hardships and she also attempts to build up a family with Sundar. In this attempt, she did not even hesitate to sacrifice her life. Likewise, Sewali despite being a commoner has kept the higher position of her class and family intact by not exemplifying greed, desire and lust. To protect her ideals she gave her life. Similarly in the drama '*Rupalim*', Rupalim too safeguards the responsibility and dignity of a trial girl. With her rightness of chastity she transforms Manimugdha's lustful heart. She gave her life to protect the dignity of her family. In the drama '*Lavita*', despite being a simple rural girl, the ideals of courage and service that Lavita displayed are

invaluable. She has established the dignity of an Assamese rural girl in the global stage.

Thus, the awareness of Assamese woman that the woman characters of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's dramas have presented leading in the familial field is definitely praise worthy. Jyotiprasad has immortalized them by shaping them as death defying women. He proved that for a woman her dignity is worth more than her own life.

In his plays produced in the 1930s, the scenarios depicted show the influence of Gandhi's ideas on the condition of women. We find in these, a reflection of the idea of 'self-sacrifice' as strength. The silence of Nimati (Nimati Kanya, 1936) and the 'self-sacrifice' of Sewali (Karengar Ligiri, 1937) and Rupalim (Rupalim, 1938) is portrayed not to represent their subservience, but to portray their passive and willful resistance to the forces of oppression. These are shown as acts of self-independence and choice. Nimati breaks her silence only when she decides to do so. Again, in both Karengar Ligiri and Rupalim, the self-sacrifice of Sewali and Rupalim, respectively, are their own decisions in difficult social situations. His film Joymoti also had a strong female protagonist. Based on Lakshminath Bezbaroa's play Joymoti Kunwari, it is the story of a woman's self-willed sacrifice against the evil forces of oppression. It reflected a certain kind of feminine courage and heroism that was upheld by Gandhi when he stressed the superiority of women's suffering.

Jyotiprasad's works in the 1940's offer an insightful perspective on the times. His play Lobhita (1948) provides a vivid picture of the society set in the backdrop of the Quit India Movement of 1942, as well as a realistic portrayal of women's position within it. The symbol of the self-sacrificing woman was now replaced by an assertive individual capable of contesting the social prejudices of her time. Jyotiprasad gives voice to the woman, and through her, perhaps, also articulates his views on women and the existing social practices. Lobhita (the play) represents the anti-imperialist voice of the simple people/woman, fighting for Swaraj and aspiring to run the government. They are no longer prepared to accept oppression by the agents of the state. The woman, here, is a fearless, assertive and conscious being, who speaks out against the patriarchal values pervading society. Lobhita, the protagonist, boldly confronts 'Gulap' (a male character/protagonist), who shirks from marrying her because she had been contaminated- having resided for a few days in the house of a Muslim- and had been 'touched by men'. She tells Gulap that he cannot be considered a young man of today as he lacks the courage to stand up to injustice, and question the age-old traditional prejudices of the society.

Jyotiprasad's lesser known and unfinished play Khanikar is particularly interesting from the point of view of the representation of women. It takes on the confrontation between the liberal and the conservative forces of the time. Nabanalini, the 'female voice', offers a scathing critique of patriarchal norms and represents a liberal, urban and educated view on women. She derides Kalpona (the male character) for failing to grasp the meaning of women's emancipation, and accuses him of being an example of the 'selfish male' who 'shuts up the woman within the four walls of the house' to carry out 'domestic chores during the day' and to satisfy the 'sexual desires of the male at night'. She also states that men created the purdah and transformed it into a social norm to serve their needs. Discussions of these nature point to Jyotiprasad's familiarity with the issues and concerns of women's emancipation- a debate that he may have been exposed to during the time he spent in England.

On the whole, the dual tasks of chalking out a distinct Asomiya identity and articulating resistance to colonial oppression were responsibilities he took upon himself. His views often found expression in his poetic compositions as well. To cite just one example, in his poem 'Joymotir Atmar Ukti', he speaks through her voice when she says, 'I shall keep awake through the night to raise the Dalit world/to contest the brute strength and aspirations of beastly forces to show the way to the distressed to shape a new world.'

The women characters of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's dramas are also shown to be politically conscious. Some of the characters have shown the consciousness primarily while others have shown it in a secondary manner. In the drama "Shonit Kunwar" the intensity of Usha's love unites two opposing empires. Chitraklekha created this connection. In the drama, "Karengar Ligir 'Sewali's simplistic love shows Rajmao the path to become a benevolent ruler by shattering her pride. Similarly in the drama "Rupalim", Rupalim breaks down the attitude of selfish Manimugdha and awakens his self-respect. Though Itiven appears as a benevolent figure but later on becomes a selfish ruler due to jealousy and she forces Rupalim to kill herself. Jyotiprasad wants to show that the revenge and retaliation in women can be seen even in the present times. In the drama, "Lavita" the example of Lavita's political awareness is evident as being the victim of foreign rule she provides service to the soldiers who were fighting for their dignity, freedom and motherland.

The women characters of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's dramas are religiously conscious too. Since ancient times the influence of a mixture of various religious traditions and culture can be seen in Assam. Here the equivalent religious beliefs, customs and rituals of both the Aryan and non-Aryan communities can be seen. Therefore Jyotiprasad has presented the women of his dramas as being rich in spiritual philosophy and aiding the Indian ideals. In "Shonit Kunwar" the faith and belief of Usha and to get true love with devotion is represented. Usha's devotion was the most powerful one which could achieve and complete the right path. In 'Karengar Ligiri' Kanchanmati and Sewali show respect to the pure marital system and they do not mock it. They tried to keep intact the dignity and status of marital relations. In the drama "Rupalim" even after being a simple tribal girl, Rupalim did not want to run away and wanted to marry Maya. Similarly in the drama "Lavita" she paid more importance to service.

Conclusion

The background of Assam is rich in cultural diversities. Jyotiprasad Agarwala had shown respect to these diverse cultural traditions. He created the devotion towards beauty here. That is why Jyotiprasad has presented the women characters of all his dramas as being culturally conscious. In, Shonit Kunwar "Usha" was the daughter of a powerful king "Bana" and the princess of rich Assamese empire. Usha is beautiful but not egoistic. She is self-confident but not ill mannered. She takes her father's pride and Assamese culture with elegance to Dwarkapuri. Similarly Jyotiprasad presents the example of Assam's magical paintings, arts, architecture, education and devotion of beauty in Chitraklekha. In 'Karengar Ligiri' Kanchanmati showcases the rich Assamese traditions of the Assamese royal palace. She herself accepts the work and culture. She is shown to have made her own costume. Sewali too has given importance to the specialties of Assamese culture like the preference towards working culture. In the drama "Rupalim" the woman character of Assam's traditional culture is highlighted. Rupalim has accepted the

tribal customs, rituals, behaviour, etc. and through this her life also has been influenced. In 'Lavita' the transformed culture of British ruled Assam that Lavita witnessed as a result of this she herself became conscious and active for its revival. Human emotions, feelings and rules everything were hurdles for her in becoming the follower of the right path. But she presented herself as a powerful example.

From the above discussion it is seen that Jyotiprasad Agarwala has presented the women characters through his own dramatic skills. His life-long devotion, patriotism and respect towards literature is hidden behind these creations. The dramatists has created powerful characters with the aim of conquering the weaknesses and negativity from the society and culture. He has tried to awaken and revive the present through the glories of the ancient golden era. The powerful roles and consciousness of the women characters of the dramas of Jyotiprasad Agarwala have made them immortal in the field of literature.

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