Bengal Renaissance and Assamese Modernism:Epistemic Disquiet of the Native Self

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Abstract

The paper looks at the crucial transformations of cultural and intellectual history of Assam in the wake of the Bengal Renaissance leading to the formation of what can be termed as the 'modernist consciousness of Assam' that had kindled a deep sense of emancipation as well as legacies of ambivalences and destabilities, for it had brought in a fresh wind of progressive social ethos and also warrants of defeat to the vernacular syntax of social and cultural mores. The paper problematises the Renaissance of colonial Bengal not only as instrumental in the formation of a new capital of learning but also as an era of shifting and dislocating of the traditional centres and institutions of power and social pedagogy. The paper underlines that Assam is one such state where the ethos of the Bengal Renaissance has been one of its most significant legacies through which had evolved Assam's transformative rationality of modernism and at the same time, quite significantly, had also been a catalyst to engender cultural disquiet and epistemic anxieties.

I

The flowering of modern intellectual exercise in India, or to be more precise, 'modernism' under colonial tutelage, can be said to have been largely coincided with that of the setting up of the 'Asiatick' Society in Calcutta by William Jones on 15 January, 1784 and the subsequent publication of the journal, *Asiatick Researches* in 1788. This had heralded the new intellectual beginning in colonial India. The first issue of the journal published an article by Jones which was a comparison of the Gods and Goddesses of Greece, Rome and India. In one of his Asiatic Society lectures he had argued, "The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either (of them)." (in Dasgupta 2011:30) Jones, in fact, became a major storehouse of Indian knowledge whose knowledge of Persian and Sanskrit was exemplary for he learnt the languages under Muslim maulvis and Brahmin pundits. Through him

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many Indian texts became familiar in Europe including the Sanskrit plays of Kalidasa. Ironically, the Indian readers became more aware and attracted to these classical writings through the new intellectual interests shown to them in Europe and the West, which can be defined as a sort of 'revised orientalism'. In a significant way, it was Jones who had laid the foundation for the 're-discovery' and 're-understanding' of the Indian texts making a seminal impact on the way the Bengal Renaissance was to bloom. Subrata Dasgupta therefore writes, "If the Bengal Renaissance was a revolution that created a new consciousness, that created a new kind of Indian mind, Jones must be seen as one of the progenitors of this revolution, a begetter of this mind." (2011:25) This 'revolution' found its most remarkable germination in what is called the 19th century *Bengal Renaissance* which had emphatically placed itself as one of the primary referents for India's evolution into a 'modern' transformative intellectual regime.

Anthony Giddens argues that like coloniality modernism too is a Western invention (1990). Decolonial theorist, Walter Mignolo, has also defined modernity as the 'darker side of coloniality' (2007). The emerging discourse of decoloniality, however, has located the formation and operations of modernism as essentially emanating from colonialism. The recent school of critical thoughts that have emerged in the form of 'Decolonial Option', pioneered by the thinkers like Peruvian sociologist, Anibal Quijano, US based Argentinian theorist, Walter D. Mignolo, Russian philosopher, Madina Tlostanova *et al* who have defined modernism in terms of the epistemic matrix of *coloniality/ modernity/ rationality* dynamics, have provided an alternative ontology to reassess the supposed sanctity associated with the modernity praxis. While critiquing the advent of modernity, the decolonial thinkers have underlined modernism as an unfinished agenda of the 'logic of coloniality' (Mignolo).Madina Tlastanova has pointed out that the 'logic of colonilaity' is linked to the Western hegemony. And the decolonial option, she asserts, "radically questions the existing system of knowledge production, disciplinary spheres and epistemic modes and methodologies." (2013) Modernity in India has effectively emerged through its exposure to the Western discourse of rationality of which Marx has been one of the core influences.1 Discourses of Western rationality, nevertheless, has remained as abiding idioms and one of the central motivations for the subsequent initiatives towards achieving a transformative and progressive social order essentially endorsable by the western matrices of enlightenment. In a significant way this has found its remarkable manifestations in the 19th century Bengal Renaissance that has emphatically placed itself as one of India's most influential epistemic referents.

Walter Mignolo in his essay, "Coloniality: The Darker Side of Modernity" (2017) refers to Anthony Giddens when he says that modernity is a Western invention and argues that coloniality too is an invention of the West. "Therefore", he writes, "it seems very difficult to overcome coloniality from a Western modern perspective." (2017:48) He argues that the rhetoric of modernity, which includes the seemingly emancipatory ideals like salvation, newness, progress, development etc., in fact, went hand in hand with the 'logic of coloniality'. He sums up with the emphatic conviction

that "*modernity/ colonilality are two sides of the same coin. Coloniality is constitutive of modernity; (therefore) modernity cannot be without coloniality*" (2017:48, italics mine). He further warns that even postmodernity and 'altermodernity' cannot get rid of this predicament apart from providing a mask at best to hide it.

Modernism in Assam

Assam's history of modernism too is intrinsically linked with the historical trajectory of colonialism, both as a source of transformative social dynamics and also as a cause of subterranean cultural anxiety. The major proponents of the 19th century modernism in Assam like Gunabhiram Barua, Anandaram Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Chandra Kumar Agarwalla and others were all exposed to the great intellectual movements that had occurred in the wake of the Renaissance of colonial Bengal. They, in fact, obtained the early idioms of cultural modernism literally from the soil of Bengal. After all, the early modern texts in Assamese were produced in Calcutta in the late 19th century like the first Assamese literary magazine, *Jonaki,* which was launched in 1889 by a group of Assamese students at Presidency College of Calcutta. This magazine played a crucial role in the movement for modern Assamese literature. Among the social movements of the 19th century in Assam the initiatives for widow remarriage, abolition of child marriage and opposition to polygamy were significant reformist initiatives under the active leadership of Gunabhiram Barua who, being immensely influenced by Ishwar Chandra Vidysagar, used to frequently write his column under the pseudonym, 'An Assamese from Calcutta' in the first Assamese periodical, *Orunodoi* (1847-1883). This was also the period when a section of emerging elites of Assam, including Gunabhiram Barua, embraced the Brahmo Dharma, a major and somewhat elitist spiritual order of the 19th century Bengal[2]. Gunabhiram Barua was initiated to the Brahmo faith at Dhubri, which was the headquarters of Goalpara district in lower Assam. (Guha, 2006:19)

Gunabhiram Barua's *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukanor Jivan Caritra* (Biography of Anandaram Deheliyal Phukan published in 1880, considered to be the first biography in prose in modern Assamese), the *Bezbaroa Granthavali* (writings of Laxminath Bezbaroa, reprinted in 1968), Padmavati Devi's first Assamese novel, *Sudharmar Upakhyan* (1884) and numerous other literary writings of the time heralded the onset of Assamese cultural and literary modernism which was substantially informed by the ethos prevailing in Bengal Renaissance. Tilottoma Misra in the erudite introduction to her translation of *Ramnabami Natak,* (2007) giving an account of the 19th century transformation of Assamese society, argues that the social activism in Assam that began post 1826, the year of Anglo Burmese Yandaboo treaty through which Assam became part of the British colony, was the 'result of the colonial encounter' and that it drew 'inspiration constantly from Calcutta.' She writes that the "city of Calcutta came to symbolize all that was modern and 'progressive' in 'Western culture."(2007:xvi) And, ironically, the geographical imaginary of the west for Assam was just beyond the western border of the state, across the border line of the old Goalpara district

(later in 1901 when Golakganj railway junction was established, it became the first railway station of Assam immediately after Bengal). Eminent historians and thinkers like H.K. Barpujari, Amalendu Guha, Udayon Misra, Sanjoy Hazarika *et al,* in their well-informed works have underlined the role of Bengal in the consolidation of nationalistic consciousness in Assam in the form of political as well as linguistic nationalism. It should be noted that modernism in Assam is not only a narrative of liberal intellectual discourses; it was also a juncture of ruptures and social disorientations. The cultural historians and critics have analysed how the British colonial rule and the subsequent eminence of Bengali culture, language and ethos had substantially stirred, and motivated the crystallization of the complex narratives of nationalistic articulations in Assam way back in 1828 with various set of agendas including reinstatement of the native Ahom nobility, restoration of the Assamese language as well as the legal recognition to the indigenous social customs among other despite those being apparently incommensurable to the growing dominance of Bengal's intellectual perceptions of Assam. The Bengal Renaissance was evolved through the propagation of a new set of social codes, religious customs, language, intellectual discourses, cultural practices and a whole new epistemic dynamics that had effectively brought progressive energy to the land and also had warranted the destabilization of its native discourses. The process Slavoj Zižek would define as a new 'Symbolic Order'.

Assam and the Renaissance of Colonial Bengal

The Renaissance of colonial Bengal had its own impact in Assam not only as a new discourse of enlightenment but also as a process of discursive subjectivization. Renaissance emerged with a set of values to constitute a new 'Symbolic Order'. In the context of Assam, the state of Bengal, with which Assam had long historical linkages of constant strife since the early 13th century, popularly referred to as the land of the '*Bongals*' (the invading Turks *Deodhai Asom Buranji* 83-84, *Assam Buranji* 51-52) a nd later, since the 19th century, mostly as a *bilaat* (foreign land); ironically became a new reference point to reconstitute its own social and cultural structures by effectively dislocating the existing ethos of spiritual, social, cultural and political discourses of the land. The post Yandaboo exposure to Bengal ushered in an era of 'modern values' to Assam under the colonial patronage which had engendered a fresh enthusiasm and energy and also anxiety among the native inhabitants who found their own world being progressively destabilized and epistemically invalidated. This anxiety found its early manifestations in the ideological conflict between the traditional landed gentry and the nobilities of the Ahom royalty, the *Dangorias*, on the one hand and the neo elites armed with colonial education from Bengal, the Assamese *bhadroloks* on the other.

The *Dangorias* took up the leadership to initiate a political revolt against the British between 1828 and 1830 and again in 1857. To the visiting British judge, A.J. Moffatt Mill, Maniram Dewan, who would be later executed by the British, submitted a strong memorandum seeking restoration of the lost power and authority of the Ahom kings and

the Ahom nobilities. He had also protested against the repressive tax regime imposed on the farmers, handing over of several *mouzas* (local administrative territories) to the 'Bengalees from Sylhet' and the Marwari traders by depriving the native 'respectable Assamese'. He had also placed his strong protests against the imposition of new customs and rules through the establishments of 'innumerable courts, unjust system of taxation and the objectionable treatment of the Hill Tribes'. On the other hand, Anandaram Dehkiyal Phukan, an 'enlightened' Assamese elite, had demanded in his memorandum of 1853 the restoration of the Assamese language in Assam (it may be noted that Assamese language was replaced by Bengali language in 1837, however, it was restored on 19 April, 1873), increasing the number of courts and appointment of native judges in those courts including abolition of the monopoly of the excised opium and implementation of compulsory registration of marriages. (Guha 2014:16-17) Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dekiyal Phukan represented two different sets of class interests; when Maniram Dewan wanted the restitution of the native ruling class, Anandaram Dekiyal Phukan was keen to seek the British patronage to constitute a new class of elites primarily through services under the colonial rulers. When Anandaram was apparently in favour of the colonial rule, Maniram Dewan, on the other hand, despite having praised certain aspects of the British rule, was primarily critical of the colonial regime. When Anandaram was the 'product of the modern age of enlightenment (who) got his inspiration from the contemporary Bengal Renaissance' (Guha 17), Maniram Dewan, on the other hand, was a 'revivalist' who, in the eyes of the British, as described by A.J. Moffat Mill, was 'discontented, clever, untrustworthy and intriguing' (Mills 516-517 qtd in Sengupta 295) and who would be executed for his anti-imperialist role in the 1857 uprising.

Renaissance is associated with the revival of art and literature in the 15th-16th century Europe. In the Indian context we largely understand this as a literary and intellectual movement mainly in the context of the 19th century colonial Bengal. However, the most epochal literary and cultural movement in Eastern India occurred way back in the 16th century in Assam under the leadership of the great Vaishanivite reformer Srimanta Sankardeva during the rule of the powerful Koch king, Maharaj Naranarayan. In fact, the great literary movement in Assam can be traced as early as in the 14th century during the rule of the Koch king Durlabh Narayan (1330-1340) who had commissioned translation of several Sanskrit texts into native languages including the composition of the folk mythologies like the *Manasa Mangal* kavya. This was also the time around which the *Ramayana* was translated into Assamese by Madhava Kandali which happened to be the first translation of the epic in any regional language in North India. (B.K. Barua 10-12) However, the modern colonial Renaissance of Bengal of the 19th century turned out to be a guiding framework of modern, 'progressive' transformation. Tilottoma Misra writes, "The colonial efforts of opening up new communication links with the rest of the country in order to facilitate trade and administrative work, provided the much needed impetus to the *educated Assamese* to seize the new opportunities and to assert their identity as a nation." (xv) One might ask as to who were those educated

Assamese that were eager to seize the 'new opportunity'. Significantly, they were not the members of the indigenous ethnic natives of Assam or the Ahom gentry who were in power till the Yandaboo treaty (1826), but the 'new opportunity' seekers, were the new educated Assamese, the *bhadraloks,* who exclusively belonged, as in Bengal, to the high castes such as the Brahmins, Kayasthas and the Daivjnas. About the *bhadroloks* of Bengal Subrata Dasgupta says that in order to carry out their colonial governance the British needed brokers, agents, revenue collectors, managers, lawyers and also Indian middlemen and therefore they had formed a new class of people in the form of the *bhadroloks*. Dasgupta writes, "These middlemen in Bengal became the core of the Bengali *bhadrolok"*. (Dasgupta 58) They had effectively served the colonial masters as the most efficient agents for the successful establishment of the British rule in the colonised territories. But unlike Bengal, there occurred a direct clash of interest in Assam between the native aristocrats, the *Dangorias*, and the neo elites, the caste Hindu *bhadroloks*. The Bengali *bhadroloks* did not have to face such challenges as, being ruled by the Turks and the Mughals for a long six hundred years at a stretch, the indigenous aristocrats of Bengal prior to colonisation were mostly decimated and were effectively displaced in the medieval period itself.

However, ironically, Assam's colonial Renaissance is crucially associated with an outsider, quite literally. It was one Lakshminarayan Brahmachari of south India who got the lucrative post of Duaria Barua of Hadira Choky port near the present Guwahati from the Ahom King, Gaurinath Singha, against the annual contract of Rs. 10,000 in cash and Rs. 70,000 in kinds. Brahmachari, who had come to Assam by abandoning his family in South India, turned to be rather lucky. By the sheer good luck as he would have it, the British took hold of Assam in 1826 and the current king, Chandrakanta Singha, became a fugitive. Therefore, Brahmachari did not have to pay anything to the king. The celibate Brahmachari, however, adopted orphan children, six boys and a girl, who were brought up after his *gotra* and were looked after by him with utmost care. Subsequently, this new Brahmin family assumed authority and importance in the new era of colonial rule through Captain David Scott who came to Assam with his army to fight the Burmese. Brahmachari's adopted sons Holiram Dhekial Phukon became the Sirastadar of Lower Assam and his brother, Jagnanram Barua, a Police Superintendent. (Misra xviii)

History has peculiar dimensions of advantages and disadvantages which have remained rather infamously relative and inconsistent. The post-Plassey Bengal (1757) was the first to have been colonized, which might appear as devastation but in effect it turned out to be the most formidable catalyst to completely alter the power structure in favour of those who were earlier vanquished by the Turks in the 13th century. The colonialism in Bengal shifted power from the traditional seats of authority of the Muslim rulers and the Nawabs to a new class of people mostly belonging to the Hindu high castes. The seats of power like Murshidabad, Dhaka, Patna and others lost their authority to a newly built commercial outpost that would become the first capital of colonial India- Calcutta. With the shifting of political power, the cultural capital too has been

shifted to the new location having empowered a new class of elites, notably the high caste Hindus, who were for a long time largely remained in the sidelines of power in Bengal. One distinctive feature of the altered power dynamics in Bengal can be discerned by looking at the pantheon of the Renaissance protagonists who happened to be primarily from the high caste Hindu folds with hardly an indigenous native or even a Muslim figuring in the venerable list. Colonial Assam too was not quite different from the emerging caste dynamics of Bengal. The character of Renaissance in Assam was the same like that of Bengal but smaller in dimension. If it was William Carey who had reinvented Bengali language in Srerampore as part of the missionary goal of promoting Christianity; in Assam it were the Baptist missionaries promoting Assamese language for the same missionary objectives from Sibasagar in upper Assam, one prominent Baptist Missionary being Miles Bronsosn. As the emergence of a new elite class in Bengal, in Assam too the Duaria–Baruas (the revenue collectors at the ports and frontier markets) emerged as *the new elites of Assam* gaining authority through economic might, favour of the colonial rulers and exposure to 'modern' education in the colonial city of Calcutta. In the context of the formation of the Assamese *jati*, the Duaria Baruas turned out to be the new protagonists instead of the traditional elites of ethnic Assam. As Tilottoma Misra would observe, "The *dangorias* represented a culture which was more orthodox and conservative than what was known as the *bhadralok* culture of Bengal and Assam in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They (the *dangorias*) clung to their old values and were slow to respond to the new ideas coming in through the western door." (Misra xix-xx) But this western door was not so far off, it was practically the Bengal door. The Duaria-Baruas were the first protagonists of the Assamese colonial Renaissance who learnt, like the enlightened Bengalis of the time, English, Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali and other subjects. Holiram Dehkial Phukon, a Duaria-Barua, with his great proximity to the colonial representatives, was the richest Assamese of lower Assam as the Sirastadar (the chief official in court); his brother, Jagnaram Kharghoria Phukan, who learnt English, Persian, Sanskrit, Urdu and Arabic, was appointed as the superintendent of police. They obtained their education in Calcutta when, to cover the distance of about 1000 kilometeres from Guwahati by road it took about three months to reach Calcutta which later got truncated to sixteen days once the steamboat was introduced.

II

The Questions of Chastity and the Colonial Juridical Morality

The Renaissance Bengal has not only constructed a class of powerful elites and disseminated new notions of social rules; it has also brought in a new set of moral codes so far not construed as compatible especially to the lived world of ethnic Assam. Two of the significant judicial cases in this respect were the 'Unchastity Case of Kery Kolitani' and the 'Inheritance Case of Aiti Kochuni'. These two keenly contested judicial cases redefined the dimensions of social morality that would subsequently become the dominant codes of social ethics. These cases also institutionalized the

Dāyabhāga Hindu Law[3] of inheritance with strong patriarchal bias which was primarily operational in Bengal up till now.

The Unchastity Case of Kery Kalitani

To the colonial Bengal Assam was a land of enigma and exotic promiscuity as well as veritable barbarism. There was a landmark legal battle of Kery Kolitani that drew huge attention in Bengal as a case of unthinkable adultery and dreaded immorality which came to be known as the (in)famous "Unchastity Case" of 1873. Kery Kolitani was a childless widow of the late Moniram Kalita who belonged to the blacksmith community. After she lost her husband she had inherited the share of her deceased husband's property as per the existing provisions of Hindu Inheritance Law. However, the situation became little complicated when she had taken a lover and gave birth to a child through him. At this the cousins of her deceased husband went to the Munsif Court (session court) seeking forfeiture of her property rights on the grounds of her alleged 'unchastity'. For the practicing Brahminical values to claim property of her dead husband that too after having maintained a relationship with another man was the ultimate act of irredeemable evil. The high caste Brahmins in Bengal had been throwing even 'chaste' brides in the burning pyres primarily to deprive them of any property rights. This case had the potentiality to jeopardise the patriarchal Brahminical strategy to usurp properties from the widows. Speaking on the case, Dolores Chew in her essay, "The Case of the 'Unchaste' Widow: Constructing Gender in 19th-Century Bengal (Kery Kolitany V Moniram Kolita Case)" writes that through the medium of legal case in the 'colonial situation of domination and subordination' women were put at the 'intersections of contested space'. Dolores writes, "Their female-ness and sexuality were elements that were debated and constructed by men, both colonizers and colonized, to fit their varied needs." (Chew 1)

However, the Munsif court at Sibsagar in Assam in 1870 ruled that the parties were entitled to equal share. Regarding Kery's 'unchastity' the Court observed, "Although the defendant has lately taken a paramour, still, when a second marriage is not solemnized, the first cannot be dissolved." (Dolores Chew 31) But the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, on the appeal of Moniram Kalita's cousins, decided against Kery and ruled that because of her 'unchastity' she had lost her claim on property. She then appealed in the Calcutta High Court. The case eventually went to a full bench which had ruled in her favour[4]. At this the citizens of Bengal were outraged and became so restless that they went to the extent of raising public fund to send the case to the Privy Council in Britain. However, the Privy Council interpreted the *shastras* and ruled in favour of the defendant in 1879. Significantly, the case had caused uproar in the orthodox Bengali society forcing them to reopen all the *shastras* to firmly establish the conventional position of women. But the case did not evoke as much reaction in Assam for it was rather construed as a normal social practice.

The Case of Aiti Kochuni

Another significant legal battle is that of Musammat Aiti Kochuni vs Aidew Kochuni in 1919. This was also about the legal right of an 'unchaste' daughter over the properties of her deceased father and the question of succession under the *Dãyabhaga* Law. Aiti Kachuni was a daughter of Sasadhar Koch. She had eloped with Kheda Koch and stayed together but she had solemnised her marriage only after the death of her father and claimed her right over her father's property which was contested by the daughters of Sasadhar Koch's second wife. To the argument of the lower court that the strict application of the Hindu Law to the people of that part of the country (Assam) might lead to injustice, the High court maintained that it must decide according to the *Dãyabhaga* Law and therefore the plaintiff, on account of her 'unchastitiy', forfeited her claim on her father's property. Subsequently, in the backdrop of the legal case of Nearam Kachari v/s Ardaram Kachari, the Calcutta High Court in 1921 gave a landmark ruling stating:

> *The question whether the Hindu law should be applied to the aborigines of Assam came up to this Court in several cases, and it was held that the Bengal School of Hindu Law applied to the people of Assam. (AIR, 1921 Calcutta, 558 (2) in Misra xlviii)*

This judgment caused the subordination of customary laws prevalent among various communities in Assam. They came under new and heavily orthodox legal codes that would turn the intimate social reality and the traditional rights to propriety of the aboriginal women of Assam change forever as legally untenable and even profane.

Quite significantly, during that period in Assam chastity of women came under strict scrutiny turning women into veritable objects to carry the orthodox Brahminical codes of male moral parameters which was the most powerful normative codes prevalent in colonial Bengal more so among the caste Hindus during the long Muslim rule. Though no bride burning was recorded in Assam but the social status, especially of the high caste widows, dramatically changed as the strict modalities of Bengali Brahmin widowhood was systematically imposed on women in Assam including wearing of white sari by a widow instead of colourful *mekhela chadar*, removal of ornaments, imposition of vegetarian food, also cutting of hair etc. This turned out to be acute social tortures on an individual who was used to ethnopolitan cultural life and food. The plight of the high caste widows (Brhamin, Kayastha and Daivajna) became quite acute and became a major social issue. (Guha 19) There has been complete overhauling of her personal life which eventually became the norm by the mid-20th century even for the non- high caste widows in order to avoid the growing disgrace of social apathy that took its roots in Assamese society. The high caste women were totally subjectivised with the new codes of Brahminical values arrived from Bengal.

However, the practice of hypergamy or supergamy prevalent among the Bengal Brahmins did not take place in case of Assam though polygamy was not uncommon among the natives. It may be noted that when Vidyasagar made a survey of the *kulin* (high caste) polygamy in Hooghly district, the revelations were staggering. Even in 1850 the one hundred thirty kulin Brahmins surveyed had about ten wives each on an average, the highest being 80 number of wives of a fifty five year old Brahmin followed by 75 and 62 number of wives each of two other Brahmins. Dasgupta described this Kulin profligacy in terms of possessing wives not as just polygamy but 'hypergamy'. (Dasgupta 222) Because of the powerful movements initiated against *satti* and for widow remarriage, Dipesh Chakrabarty defined Ram Mohan and Vidyasagar as the ones who could achieve 'modern self' as they could internalize the suffering of the 'female community'. (Chakrabarty 121)

The Caste Dynamics of Modernism

Ambedkar's views on the seemingly progressive and reformist initiatives of the Renaissance protagonists like Vidyasagar and Ram Mohun Roy are significant. Ambedkar would disagree to confer 'modern selfhood' for such reformist agendas. In his famous undelivered lecture, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) Ambedkar points out that there are distinctions between 'Hindu family reform' and 'social reform'. According to him not the first but the later kind of reform was important for the reorganization and reconstruction of Hindu society. The former involved widow remarriage, abolition of child marriage but the latter was related to the abolition of caste system. He alleged that the high caste intellectuals neither had the courage nor the feel to agitate against caste. Ambedkar also quoted Woomesh Chandra Banerjee, an enlightened 19th century figure from Bengal, who had publicly denounced the social reform aiming at women education as a vital condition of India's true emancipation. Even Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a chit pavan Brahmin (a Brahmin superior hierarchy) and the champion of Swaraj, was vehemently opposed to women education, when his compatriots, Mahatma Phule and Jyotiba Phule (Dalit social reformers) relentlessly fought for education for women and the untouchables during the same time. (Ambedkar 212-213) He mentions about the governing ethos of Hindu society and its pedagogy which propagated the ideology, *barnanam brãhmane guru*, i.e., among all the castes only the Brahmins have the warrant to be the teachers/ preceptor. (Ambedkar, 207) The subtle operations of such caste hierarchy and the dominance of caste categories in the discourse of Assamese nationalism too obliquely continued as the fundamental premise in the social and political realms, a legacy that deepened with the germination of modernism in Assam through the colonial Renaissance of Bengal.

The social reform in Assam during the Renaissance was similar in character like that of Bengal. It was essentially a programme for internal correction of Brahmin households without an apology of attempt to address the issues concerning the so called low castes or the other ethnic categories, the *janjatis*. Gunabhiram Barua (1837-1894) was one of the major intellectuals of that time to have been immensely

influenced and fascinated by Ram Mohun and Vidyasagar when he went to Calcutta in 1851 to study in Kolutola School and later to join the Presidency College. He even married a Brahmin widow as per the Brahmo rites after the demise of his first wife in 1870. Their daughter Swarnalata was the first Assamese girl to have been educated in Bethune School in Calcutta. Ironically, despite such progressive developments this was also the time when the Brahminical values were taking roots in Assamese society, resulting in the strong disapproval of Gunabhiram's attempts to give too much education to the girl children.

The upper castes and the Brahmins, who called themselves as the 'important persons of Assam', campaigned along with the missionaries against the 'evil custom' of informal marriages practiced in several communities which was seen as the social customs without having the approval of the *shastras*. The missionary periodical, *Orunodoi* became the major mouthpiece for such 'reformist' discourses. Ironically, the same periodical was also the major platform for the progressive thought of Gunabhiram Barua who has been the most eminent champion of women education and widow remarriage which he used to propagate through his incessant writings and rejoinders in the *Orunodoi*.

In this context Tilottoma Misra makes a significant observation when she argues that the 19th century Renaissance group in Bengal inspired the upper caste Assamese literati to take up similar programmes in Assam, but the peculiar nature of the Assamese Hindu society necessitated the adoption of a dualistic position in most cases. There was uncertainty about the actual nature of reform that would suit the Assamese society, and there was also a latent fear of taking up a stand that would break the growing barrier between the Brahmins and the vast majority of the non-Brahmin laity.

Gunabhiram is the representative figure of the Assamese Renaissance, a proverbial Ram Mohun Roy of Assam, a radical in terms of his social commitments to promote widow remarriage and women education, but when it came to several liberating practices prevalent for women among the various ethnic communities of Assam, he had taken rather conservative stances to overlook or ignore them.

Representation of Assamese women as seductresses and promiscuous was the general image that dominated the colonial writings on Assam of that time both in English and Bengali which had an effect of Althusserian 'interpellation' when it came to evolving the self-perception of the Assamese women. Through such writings Assam was effectively orientalised. A.J. Moffatt Mill in his *Report on the Province of Assam* (1854) orientalised Assam as a land of degenerate lot and interpreted local customs as acts of utter depravity. The custom of 'bride price' among the ethnic weddings was described as 'fathers bartering their daughter for financial gain' (Mill 525). The colonial voyeurism on the native cultural manifestations turned into acts of moral evaluation. Such interpretations were so influential that even Holiram Dhekial Phukon in his *Assam Buranji,* written in Bengali, reflecting the Brahminical moral values that got so

deeply ingrained in the intellectuals psyche of that time, gives quite an unceremonious description of Bihu (the spring festival of ethnic Assamese natives). In his otherwise erudite book he had described the female participants in Bihu dance as 'ordinary women' and the male participants as 'lumpens' (*sadharan mohila* and *lampat*) and the tradition of Bihu dance as *kuriti* (decadent). (Dhekial Phukon 103-104), Sengupta has translated the original Bengali statement of Holiram Dhekial Phukon as 'licentious orgy'. (Sengupta 293) In the book Dhekiyal Phukan, however, had greatly praised the Brahminical practices and customs that were taking roots in Assamese society. The growing caste consciousness among the emerging new elites was evident when Dhekial Phukon observed that 'more fortunate an Ahom was, more ignorant was he'. But in the same breath he had praised the Brahmans as learned and the colonial rule as the onset of good governance. (Dhekial Phukon 101)

It may be mentioned that till the end of the 19th century the illegitimate children of Brahmin widows were given a social recognition as *Borias*. But with the advent of the 'modern values' or the 'Bengal values', such practices were seen as immoral. One may note that despite being a Brahmo, Ramkumar Vidyaratna, while describing Assamese society, emphasized more on the higher and the lower castes in Assam and obviously the lower castes were seen as typical representatives of decadent social practices. However, he made some favourable observations about Assamese women which were quite uncommon for a writer from Bengal of that time. There used to be a general perception among the common people from Bengal that the animals like rams and sheep seen grazing in the slopes of the Nilachal Hills of the Kamakhya temple were actually the males from Bengal turned into animals by the power of black magic possessed by the sinister Assamese women. About this Tilottoma Misra writes, "(This) was the figment of the same imagination which represents the women from the colonies as the voluptuous 'other' who corrupt the white male." (Misra lvii).

III

Assam's Colonial Experience and Epistemic Dislocations

Assam's experience of colonisation has been paradoxical and ambivalent for it had caused formidable epistemic dislocation of the native consciousness of the land. Interestingly the ordinary natives of Assam were more wary of the Bengali *babus* than the western colonisers. An ordinary Assamese native would encounter a Bengali official as the colonial master directly than a British administrator, therefore, the common perception against the Bengalis led to general antagonism. The natives of Assam felt that all progressive thoughts like 'women education', 'widow remarriage' etc. came from Bengal but at the same time they also feared that it were the Bengali officials and the *babus* who were instrumental not only in imposing political and economic colonisation but also cultural and linguistic domination. Quite significantly, the British rule in Assam was popularly referred to as the "Bengal Days' by the commoners as well as the intellectuals of that time. (*Assam Bandhu* Vol 1 (3) in Misra xlv)

In this respect it is important to note that the development of modern Assamese language evolved in the 19th century in Bengal with the active support of the Bengali intelligentsia. S.C. Sengupta in his essay "The Bengalees in Assam in the 19th Century" has spoken about how the Ahoms had fortified the western border from any possible invasion from Bengal and also pointed out that not only the Bengalis but also the other communities including the Europeans were also resisted. It may be noted that throughout the discourses of the Assam *buranjis*[5] the term '*Bongal*' was used to primarily refer to the invading Turks since the 13th century. The Ahoms had a great tradition of chronicling events known as the *buranjis*. Several versions of the *buranjis* like the *Deodahi Buranji*, *Tungkhungia Buranji, Asom Buranji* and so many other *buranjis* had referred to the Muslim invaders from Bengal as *Bongals.* Significantly, in those ancient chronicles the term was not seen to have been used to refer to the people from Bengal in general. Quite notably, several Brahmin priests were brought to Assam from Nadia in Bengal and were made the chief priests, one being Krishnaram Bhattacharya of Nadia who was made the chief priest of the Kamakhya Temple as the Parbatiya Gohain or the Priest of the Hills, by King Shiva Singha in the mid-18th century[6]. The Ahoms had welcomed the professionals from the west, which included the craftsman, salt traders, artisans, accountants and others. In fact, the western part of Assam, Kamrup-Kamata, had its border up to Dinajpur in West Bengal where a major military post was set up to foil any attempts of the Turkish invaders who had thoroughly vanquished Bengal as early as the 13th century. (see Edward Gait, K.L. Barua *et al*) Later, when Rangamati came under the Mughal rule and subsequently to the British rule in the mid-18th century, Goalpara became the effective border between Assam and its western neighbour. (Guha 2000)

Nevertheless, the Bengal Renaissance had been influential in shaping the modernist ethos of Assam. Guha in his seminal work, *Planter Raj to Swaraj,* has referred to Jagnaram Barooah who was greatly influenced by Ram Mohun Roy and also a group of Assamese youths educated in Calcutta, like Holiram Dhekial Phukon, Jagnaram Barooah, Jaduram Deka Barooah who used to publish progressive letters in Bengali in the newspapers published from Calcutta such as *Samachar Darpan, Samachar Chandrika* etc.Holiram Dhekial Phukon wrote the history of Assam,*Assam Buranji*,in Bengali in 1829, also *Kamakhya Yatra Paddhati* (Guide to Kamakhya) in Bengali. Sengupta makes a significant observation that till 1880 there was cordial relationship between the Assamese middle class and the Bengalis, but, referring to W.H. Hunter's *Statistical Account of Assam* (1879), he writes that the relationship embittered when the Assamese middle class became "conscious of their own language and had to compete with the Bengalis for employment, and (when) the teachers from Bengal made derogatory remarks betraying racial arrogance." (Sengupta 372) However, there were also a host of eminent Bengali teachers like Chandra Mohan Goswami, Janmejaya Das, Rameswar Sen who had taught Assamese language to some of the iconic figures of Assamese literary history- Laxminath Bezbaroa Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Padmanath Barua and others (Sengupta 372) In fact, some of the most

significant cultural and literary bodies such as the *Assam Desh Hitoishini Sabha*, the *Jnan Pradayini Sabha*, the *Ryot Sabha* and the like, that had played crucial role in the evolution of the Assamese consciousness and the ethos of modernism, were formed under the influence of Bengal Renaissance. (Sengupta 373)

When Assamese modernism was intrinsically associated with Bengal that had definitely brought fresh energy and ethos to the growth of Assam's intellectual trajectory, the same had also engendered considerable anxiety. This was the time when, especially, the Brahmin widows were subjected to greater social repressions through the propagation of what Tilottoma Misra would call as 'de-Asssamization' which included the adoption of the Bengal customs in order to make the widows more pure and sanctified than the women from other communities, in effect, to claim a superior social status for the high castes by way of imposing greater restrictions on their females. Thankfully, this tendency did not take its extreme form to import even the customs of *satti* from Bengal. It may be noted that as per the official statistics of 1815-18, within this three years, there were reported cases of 1528 *satti* (bride burning ritual) in the Calcutta region alone. (Dasgupta 120)

During this period of Bengalisation of social values an interesting division significantly grew among the Brahmins belonging to lower Assam, i.e., Kamrup and also Goalpara and the Brahmins from upper Assam. Quite curiously, the Brahmins in upper Assam were more influenced by Bengal than their counterparts in lower Assam. However, the influence of the orthodox Bengal order among the Brahmins in Assam in general is significant as they had seminal impact in the construction of the social and cultural ethos in the formation of the Assamese as a *jati,* a nation. The division between the two groups of Brahmins, that is the Brahmins from upper Assam and the lower Assam, got intensified following the Raghunandian[8] opinions on the *Smritis* and the Hindu Law Books that were followed by the Hindus in Bengal.

There used to be a custom of *gaa dhan* (bride price) practiced by the Kamrupa Brahmins in lower Assam as the amount to be paid by the groom to his prospective in-laws before getting married to the bride. This was a custom that was disadvantageous for the grooms and was considered a decadent custom by the upper Assam Brahmins as well as by the other educated Brahmins. This was a native custom among the indigenous ethnic communities. The custom obviously put the bride's family fairly at an advantageous position. The custom was practiced in recognition of the value a woman carried in terms of social status and the invaluable role she plays in agrarian economy. Many communities, though the practice would no longer be there, still refer to marrying off a daughter as 'selling off' the bride. In a popular Rajbanshi folk song from lower Assam sung by legendary folk singer Pratima Barau Pandey and Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, where a girl laments for being 'sold to a groom' by her heartless father when she was still young:

Bapo bhai mor hiyaré chhara,
becheya khaise mok chototé,
Jauban dholey mor pubal batashey[9]

Conclusion

Despite having propagated emancipatory and progressive values, the impact of the Renaissance of colonial Bengal has been double edged in the context of Assam. Like any Enlightenment Project the Renaissance of colonial Bengal too has been a major metanarrative that has effectively destabilised native order and ethos leading to disruptions and anxieties among the indigenous communities in Assam. Through the rich legacy of ancient and medieval literature, notably the copious and enormous output of the Vaishnavite literature as well as the rich and highly systematic tradition of Ahom Buranjis since the 13th century, Assam can definitely claim more vibrant literary tradition since antiquity than that of Bengal, but when it comes to the literary and cultural sensibilities of what can be termed as 'modern', the Bengal Renaissance has a very distinctive impact. The impact of colonial Bengal has been significantly empowering and at the same time this had also engendered deep cultural disquiet. However, the metanarrative of the Bengal Renaissance prevailed in a formidable way and quite powerfully redefined a set of modern ethos but, at the same time, this has also been a cause of effective cultural dislocation of the Assamese self which had resulted in the epistemic anxiety and progressive obfuscation of the historical centrality of the Assamese indigenous self within Assam itself thereby dislodging the vernacular syntaxes of pedagogic and cultural mores. It may be noted that Modernism in Assam has remained a continued legacy leading to the periodic anxieties that Assam as a nation has been subjected to. Modernism, as Madina Tlastanova would point out, has been by default linked to the 'logic of coloniality', since modernity is inalienably linked to the hegemony of the 'west'. These parameters remain valid even in the context of the discursive history of modernism in Assam.

Notes

1. At the same time, Marx's description of traditional Indian society as 'semi-barbarian' and semi-civilised', to a large extent, had been a foundational derivative to shape India's formulation of self-perception. (see Marx's 1853 essay, "The British Rule in India")
2. The activities of the Brahmos from Bengal were seen in Sylhet (1862), Cachar (1865) and Sivasagar (1866). Among the eminent converts were Padmahans Goswawmi and Gunabhiram Barua (Kanailal Chattopaddhyay, 1998, 621)
3. The *Dāyabhāga* is a legal treatise written by Jīmūtavāhana which codifies the inheritance law governing the Hindus. The strictly defined legal codes of the Dayabhaga had immense influence in the formulation of Hindu inheritance law in colonial Bengal under the British regime. However, it was gradually replaced by subsequent adoption of the Hindu Succession Act 1956 and its later revisions.
4. Gooroodass Banerjee, an expert counsel who later became a judge in Calcutta High Court,

had pleaded for Kery Kalitani. https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in...chapter%207.pdf

5. Many sporadic *Buranjis* were collected between 1840-1850 by Rev. Nathan Brown of Sibsagar Mission which were later published in serial form in the first Assamese newspaper- the *Orunodoi,* in 1853. The early manuscripts of the Ahom *Buranjis* were compiled and edited by Rev. Nidhi Levi Farewell, the first Assamese convert to Christianity. These Buranjis were later edited and compiled in book form from 1930 onwards by the Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti under the guidance of Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan. There were several versions of the *buranjis* called *Tungkhungia Buranji*, *Deodhai Buranji*, *Bahghoria Burha Gonhair Buranji*, *Datiyolia Buranji* (the history of minor chief doms), *Padshah Buranji* (the chronicle on the Delhi Sultanate), *Asom Buranji* by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan (1835), *Tripura Buranji* by Ratna Kandali and Arjun Das Kataky including the Buranjis about the kingdoms of Manipur, the Jayantias, Kacharis, Koches, Chutiyas, Mikirs and the like. (see Prodhani, 2019, 36)

6. Krishnaram Bhattacharyya or the Parbatiya Gohain of Kamakhya Temple played a major role in causing a major religious conflicts by instigating the queen Phuleswari Devi to brutally persecute the Vaishnavas resulting in the subsequent fall of the Ahom rule. Senguta writes, "No other Bengali has rendered so much disservice to Assam as was done by Krishnaram" ("Social Transition in Assam", Sengupta, 2013, 293)

7. As per the official statistics of 1815-18, the incident of Sati was recorded as many as 1,528 in Calcutta region alone when in the other divisions of Dacca, Murshidabad, Patna, Benares and Bareily divisions the total incidents of Sati were recorded as 837. (see Dasgupta, 2011, 120)

8. Raghunanda was the 16th century scholar from Bengal who had composed the *Dāyabhāgatika* considered the best to interpret the best interpretation of *Dāyabhāga* which was followed by Calcutta High Court during the colonial period as the primary base of Hindu law.

9. See *Bhawaiya Gaan* Eds. D.N. Bhakat and Pratima Neogi, p 526.

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