

**REFLECTION OF URBAN AND RURAL LIFE IN MODERN ASSAMESE NOVEL
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *Jibonor Batot*.**

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Abstract: The origin of modern Assamese novel dates back to the first half of the Twentieth century. Though the practice of Assamese novel writing started under the influence of European novels of the late Nineteenth century, over the years it attained its own flavor and established itself as one of the prominent literary genres that reflected on various socio-political events of that period. Massive transformation was underway with rapid urbanization at the behest of the British administration and emergence of a new aristocratic class in Assam left an indelible impact on the social landscape. Conflicts of value system in terms of urban and rural society was starkly visible as market economy of urban settings completely transformed the society posing threat to the traditional value system of rural based agrarian economy. Assamese novelists of that period responded to this transformation through their literary representation by portrayal of their lived reality with an agenda of putting a resistance to the ongoing change that did not go well with the traditional value system of Assamese society. The contemporary novelists of that period also responded to the escalating tension over identity issue and impact of the ongoing nationalist revolution on Assam. Bina Baruah's novel *Jibonor Batot*, published in 1944, is one of the prominent Assamese novels that were instrumental in giving Assamese novel writing a new direction by focusing on such contemporary issues. This paper attempts to examine the representation of the Assamese society of the first half of Twentieth century with special focus on the conflicting value system of rural and urban Assam.

Keywords: Modern Assamese novel, representation of society, social realism, value system.

Introduction:

In this paper an attempt has been made to examine the conflicting nature of urban and rural life as represented in modern Assamese novels. Following the representational nature of English novels, Assamese novels have been instrumental in reflecting various aspects of Assamese society including the socio-political developments and cultural transformations during the formative years of modern Assamese novels. Assamese society has largely been rural based till the first half of the twentieth century and therefore early literary representations in Assamese language were mostly based on rural life. However, literary representation of Assamese society underwent a massive change in the second half of the Twentieth century with focus on the conflicting nature of rural and urban lives as change in the value system of society was very much evident primarily caused by socio-economic developments and political transformation. *Jibonor Batot* published in 1944 by

Bina Baruah is one of the notable examples of such literary representations that capture the transformation in socio-cultural fabric of Assam during the early Twentieth century. This paper examines the representation of rural and urban lives in this novel focusing on the social, economic and psychological conflicts suffered by the characters following rapid urbanization in Assam in the early Twentieth century.

Characteristics of modern Assamese novels:

Novel may be considered as one of the integral part of modern literature. Novel in Assamese literary tradition is comparatively a new addition and it emerged as one of the new genres in Assamese literature under the influence of English novels. Assamese novel is a late Nineteenth century phenomenon that largely focused on capturing the political, socio-economic and cultural transformation in Assam brought about by British colonial administration. Novel as a genre of literary expression was added to Assamese literary tradition as a result of the changes in taste and aesthetic sense augmented by the influence of English education and European novels in the late Nineteenth century. Going by the dynamics of the representational style of Assamese novels, it is quite evident that some of the prominent features of Assamese novels are assertion of identity consciousness, conflict of rural and urban lives, social realism, promotion of scientific temperament, resistance to superstitious beliefs, generational conflict, class difference, rejection of religious dogma and idealism, criticism of petty bourgeoisie culture of the Assamese nouveau rich and so on.

Conflict of Urban and Rural lives in modern Assamese novels:

Assamese society witnessed a massive change in terms of political and economic landscape at the backdrop of the onset of colonial government in Assam in the early Nineteenth century. Needless to mention that British government needed educated Assamese youths for the expansion and perpetuation of its administration as employees hired from the then Bengal was not enough. Recruitment of educated Assamese population as permanent salaried employees by the British government was instrumental in the emergence of a new class of Assamese middle class that impacted the societal value system causing gradual transformation in society. Impact of the two world wars may also be considered as one of the major contributing factors to this transformation. Expansion of technology driven economy into Assamese society played a crucial role in the emergence of new capitalist class giving rise to stark economic and class disparity in the hitherto agro-based society. Early Twentieth century Assamese novels started reflecting these contemporary developments in their literary expressions focusing on the themes of exploitation, class difference and degradation of value system in society. Binaries such as rich/poor, literate/illiterate and urban/rural became the dominant themes of many novels of this period.

It is pertinent to mention that Assamese novelists have mostly assumed critical stance towards the issue of class difference in the society siding with the have-not class. Their focal area in literary representation has been largely the exploitation of the poor by the capitalist class and psychological conflict of the general masses at such socio-economic disparity. They have also been found to expose the shallowness of urban life since it is shown as lacking in compassion and humanity in contrast to the innocence of rural life in their literary representations. In this paper the

conflicting representation of rural and urban lives in the Assamese novel *Jibonor Batot* has been taken as a case study for the convenience of the discussion.

The novel *Jibonor Batot*:

Perspectives and literary representations of the novelists underwent a massive transformation due to the evident changes in socio-political conditions of the post WW-II era. Assamese novelists were no exception in this regard since they started growing more sensitive towards the emergent social issues of that particular period. Deeper probe into the social issues like the difference between rural and urban lives as well as various problems that started emerging due to economic inequality found lucid manifestation in their literary explorations under the obvious influences of Marxist and Freudian theory.

Birinchi Kumar Baruah's *Jibonor Batot*, published under the pseudonym of Bina Baruah, is one such example of Assamese novels that undertakes modernist exploration of the contemporary society with a new perspective. The novel documents the social dynamics of a period ranging a century at the backdrop of the ongoing nationalist revolution for the independence of India. Dr. Prahlad Kumar Baruah rightly argues that *Jibonor Batot* is a testimony of Assamese society that was undergoing a definitive transformation over a period of a century. Divided into three parts, the novel represents Assamese society in its every completeness focusing on the bits and pieces of the society. It lays equal importance to the representations of the apparent affluence of the few aristocratic classes and the acute poverty of the common masses. Hudson in his *An Introduction to the Story of Literature* (2015) opines that, "The great novelists have been thinkers, about life as well as observers of it, and their knowledge of characters, their insight into motive and passion, their illuminative treatment of the enduring facts and problems of experience, to say nothing of ripe wisdom which they often bring to bear upon their task. Combine to give to their view of the world a moral significance which no thoughtful reader is likely to overlook." P.12 Birinchi Kumar Baruah perfectly fits into the category of novelists as defined by Hudson since Baruah's representation of the society and development of the characters reflect the very reality that he was witnessing as a close observer of the society.

The plot of *Jibonor Batot*:

The story of the novel starts with the marriage ceremony of the eldest daughter of Mouzadar Bhogodutta. During the observance of the marriage ceremony a new romantic relationship develops as the Mauzadar's college going son Kamalakanta begins courting a village girl named Togor. Along the portrayal of the relationship of Kamalakanta and Togor, the novel navigates the socio-economic dynamics of the contemporary society and shows that the older social system of feudalism was about to be replaced by a new system of Imperialism with the surfacing of a new aristocratic class. The novel further navigates the emergence of nationalist consciousness among the new generation through the character of Dharani and thus documents the ongoing changes in the society with contrasting pictures of rural and urban lives. Baruah as a true modernist novelist gives equal importance to the contemporary socio-economic transformation as well as the psychological conflicts undergone by the central characters as the narrative of the novel progresses.

Pertinent to mention that the protagonists of the novel belong to a very specific period in Assamese history as this period witnessed a gradual transformation in terms of value system in society. The roots of both the characters lies in the rural background of the typical Assamese village but owing to his education, Kamalakanta has got the taste of urban life and he is more drawn to the comfortable executive life of a salaried government employee. Through the character of Kamalakant, the novelist tries to navigate the phenomenon of rural to urban migration that started with the establishment of market economy during the British Raj. On the other hand, through the character of Dharani, the novelist tries to navigate the political undercurrent of the contemporary society. Dharani's character is a testimony of the emergence of a new identity consciousness among the youths of India during that period which was inspired by Gandhian ideology of self rule. Thus the novel explores the conflict between the old and new values in the society through the contrasting portrayal of rural and urban lives.

Reflection of Rural and Urban in *Jibonor Batot*:

The novel captures two different images of the society. One is of the rural society in all its innocence as well as superstitions and conservativeness, on the other hand, the other one is the urban society established at the behest of the British administration with all its pettiness and consumerist culture.

The character of Togor is a testament of the innocence, righteousness and ardor of the rural society. Togor stands at the crossroad of rural and urban society and much of the plot development depends on the transition in her character induced by the conflict caused by the two opposite value systems.

“Red beak of Kam bird
with vermilion smeared on it
Father, father
Do not send me far”

The beginning of the novel with these lines forecasts the conflict that awaits Togor in the later part of the novel. Togor is not highly educated like her male counterpart Kamalakanta but she possesses every decorum and modesty of the village. Adept in all the required expertise to run a modest rural life, she excels in the study of Naam Ghosha and Kirtan Pada. On the other hand, Kamalakanta is the son of a clerk serving for British government in Dibrugarh, one of the earliest urban areas established by the British. Kamalakanta receives modern education in the town and excels in academics but at the same time he is dislocated from the societal value system of the village and thereby distanced from his ancestral roots. Instead, he possesses all the negativity of urban society such as treachery, opportunism, consumerism and corruption that came along with the urban settings during British administration. The novel depicts the inevitable conflict between the innocence and dignity of village society and the petty bourgeoisie consumerist culture of the urban life. At this juncture, a village bred girl Togor falls for the urban boy Kamalakanta and accepts him as her would be husband completely failing to gauge the shallowness of Kamalakanta's commitment.

Eventually, Kamalakanta forgets about Togor when he returns to the town. He is more tempted towards the comforts and consumerist culture of urban life. Raybahadur's enticement for a high paying job and upper class life style adds more fuel to Kamalakanta's transition into a man of zero commitment towards his love interest Togor as he grows more drawn towards Raybahadur's daughter Suprabha. Togor, on the other hand, suffers from mental conflict due to this unexpected turn of events and at last decides to get married to Dharani and starts life anew. However, after Dharani's sudden demise she embraces the quiet and lonely life of a widow. Kamalakanta's life too gets hectic and he finds himself trapped in the materialistic value system of urban life as he finds it hard to cater to the expectations of his new love interest Suprabha. Through the conflicts in the life of Togor, the novel shows how urbanization affects the innocence of rural society through exploitation and betrayal. Dharani's sudden death owing to cancer is a reminder of how dangerous unregulated industrialization and its byproduct of environmental pollution may become causing harm to innocent lives. Metaphorically it may also be understood as how industrial economy destroyed the rural economy of Assam during the British raj in between the 1920s and 1930s.

Towards the conclusion of the novel Togor finds herself trapped in the maze of conflicts and struggles to overcome the challenges put on her by the rapid transformations in her life. The novelist uses Togor's dream as a trope in order to reflect on the ongoing psychological conflict as her pathetic reality affects her unconscious realm. Togor finds herself being chased by a snake and running for her life in her dreams which may be understood as the reflection of the insecurity and ethical guilt that she undergoes as a result of the failed relationship with both Kamalakanta and Dharani. She suffers from mental guilt for receiving the gold ring from Kamalakanta as a token of their relationship.

The novel focuses on the objective representation of the new urban life that emerged with the establishment of industrial settings during the British era. The novelist points out that the new world of urban society is not indigenous to Assam but an imitation of the petty bourgeoisie values of the neighboring Bengali aristocracy as exemplified by the character of Ray Bahadur Manik Hazarika, to whom financial gain is more important than ethics. The novel tells us that Manik Hazarika started his career as the overseer of Hindustani Excise department and with his perseverance he eventually grows into an influential person in the locality. With sudden and fast improvement in his financial status, his taste and status undergoes massive transformation due to which he along with his family members maintains an aristocratic life style. The novel provides a detailed description of the house of Manik Hazarika as having posh furniture and well decorated drawing room. It is further mentioned that the house is very well maintained with wafting aroma of some expensive imported fragrance. The walls are decorated with paintings and framed embroidery works signifying high aesthetic sense. Hazarika's daughter, Suprabha, is introduced to the reader as a beautiful lady with urban gait bearing all latest trends of fashion in contrast to the innocence of Togor. However, it is quite evident from the description of Suprabha that she is being staged here as a trope to criticize the tendency of the Assamese aristocratic class to mimic the European and Bengali aristocracy. Suprabha's relationship with Kamalakanta was a

momentary infatuation but not true love. Later she realizes that she did not want Kamalakanta as her husband since she gradually starts discovering the inherent differences in terms of value system between hers and Kamalakanta's family. With the discovery of the differences both of them suffers from internal conflicts that make their life unendurable. Suprabha is a town bred woman with modern outlook and she bears a materialistic viewpoint about life unlike the compassion and loyalty borne by Togor. Kamalakanta is also educated in the town but he is not completely cut off from the ethics and humanity of the rural society. He disagrees to engage in the exploitation of the poor in order to improve his financial status. As a result he fails to stand up to the expectations of Suprabha and it gradually weakens the tie of their relationship. Suprabha is a testament of the decadent value system in the contemporary society with the imitation of consumerist culture as she tells Kamalakanta that true happiness comes from spending and the poor can't have happiness in life as they have nothing to spend. Kamalakanta suffers due to his inability in realizing the dynamics of the society and understanding the true emotional connection with Togor.

Conclusion:

The novel *Jibonor Batot* may be precisely seen as a literary representation of the early Twentieth century Assamese society as it documents the socio-cultural, economic and political developments of the contemporary times. Through the characters of Togor and Kamalakanta, the novelist delineates the conflict of the rural and urban values in the fast changing landscape of Assam. Kamalakanta bears both the values of rural and urban lives and hence he often finds himself caught in dilemma causing his psychological instability and indecisiveness. On the other hand Togor is steadfast in her decision making as she chooses to sacrifice her comfort and love interest for the maintenance of her modesty despite her early widowhood. Suprabha represents the disillusioned generation of that period who found themselves lost in the urban consumerist culture having been totally disconnected from their roots. Dharani's character brings forth the issue of identity consciousness among the larger masses of that period by depiction of the impact of ongoing nationalist freedom struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. In a nutshell, the novel *Jibonor Batot* is a literary testimony of the paradigmatic shift in terms of social, cultural, economic and political ecosystem witnessed in Assam during the first half of the Twentieth century.

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