

Socio-Cultural Elements in the Songs of Bishnu Prasad Rabha: A Retrospective

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Abstract:

Bishnu Prasad Rabha has been an accomplished musician, creative writer, acclaimed master of fine arts, social activist and politician. His contribution to Assamese social and cultural life is great. When we talk about modern Assamese music, we need to mention the name of the musician par excellence Bishnu Prasad Rabha. His contribution to modern Assamese lyrical literature is great. Bishnu Prasad Rabha was a profound composer and musician of his times. He has numerous songs to his credit which speak of the aspirations of the Assamese community at large. Whether be it a romantic song or a patriotic song yet unique quality of the composer Bishnu Prasad Rabha was always there. He was born to Sardar Bahadur Gopal Chandra Rabha, an efficient officer under the Governor of Bengal. He was honoured with Order of Merit of the British empire. Bishnu Prasad's mother was Gethi Rabha. He was born as the eighth child on 31st January, 1909 at Dhaka. Gopal Chandra Rabha was a great lover of music. Music sessions were held at his residence where the little Bishnu Prasad got acquainted with all the stalwarts of music in Bengal. Unfortunately, his father Gopal Chandra met an untimely death and the family fell into adversity. His widow Gethi along with her children took shelter at their own house in Tezpur. Bishnu Prasad resumed his studies in Tezpur He continued with his other co-curricular activities as well.

It is no easy task to assess the worth of the multi -talented personality of Bishnu Prasad Rabha. In his lifetime he was a live legend. Music, fine arts, theatre performance, creative writing, politics, creating social awareness- he explored in all these diverse fields and won accolades for his exceptional contribution. His physical contribution towards the greater Assamese society came to a stop on 20th June, 1969 due to throat cancer. But the grand legacy of his craftsmanship lives on. In this Paper an attempt has been made to assess the socio-cultural elements present in his songs.

Keywords: Accomplished, contribution, aspirations, co-curricular activities, assess, music, theatre performance, social awareness, craftsmanship, socio-cultural elements

Introduction:

Social life is incomplete without music. It is music which soothes the heart. Music is a heavenly boon to mankind. It is the songs which are the primary source of identifying a particular society. In this regard the Assamese lyricists and musicians are also not left behind. Since the ancient times, Assam has been able to showcase a variety of musical elements and songs. Hymns and incantations which have been a part of Assamese oral literature, indicate to the presence of musical elements. After this we can cite the example of Charjyapada and Borgeet. The Charjyapadas are those songs with dual meaning composed by the Nath

Yogis, prominent among which are Luipada, Minanath, Darikpada etc. By the turn of the sixteenth century the Assamese society witnessed a religious as well as socio-cultural revival. It was the golden age of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam which was spearheaded by the founder of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement Srimanta Sankardeva. His unique creation the Borgeets are a gem of Assamese literature. These are spiritual songs composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and his favourite disciple Madhabdeva. Assamese lyrical literature continued developing throughout the centuries. At this juncture we need to mention a few lines about modern Assamese songs and the musician par excellence Bishnu Prasad Rabha's contribution to modern Assamese lyrical literature. His contributions can be assessed: "Bishnu Prasad Rabha was a profound composer and musician of his times. He has numerous songs to his credit which speak of the aspirations of the Assamese community at large. Whether be it a romantic song or a patriotic song, the unique quality of the composer Bishnu Prasad Rabha was always there." (Phukan, p. 65)¹

Bishnu Prasad Rabha was born to Sardar Bahadur Gopal Chandra Rabha, an efficient officer under the Governor of Bengal. He was honoured with Order of Merit of the British Empire. Bishnu Prasad's mother was Gethi Rabha. He was born as the eight offspring on 31st January, 1909 at Dhaka. Gopal Chandra Rabha was a great lover of music. Music sessions were held at his residence where the little Bishnu Prasad got acquainted with all the stalwarts of music in Bengal. Unfortunately, his father Gopal Chandra Rabha met an untimely death and the family fell into adversity. His widow Gethi along with her children took shelter at their own house in Tezpur. Bishnu Prasad resumed his studies in Tezpur He continued with his other co-curricular activities as well. He excelled both in his studies and fine arts training. Having passed the matriculation examination with flying colours, he joined the Saint Paul's College in Calcutta for ISC Studies. It was during his stay in Calcutta that he got acquainted with the famous Belle danseuse from Russia Ana Pavlova who taught him nuances of dance. He was rusticated from Saint Paul's College for aiding the freedom fighters. Soon afterwards he joined the Victoria College at Cooch Behar. It was 1930 - the year of the Non-Cooperation Movement initiated by Mahatma Gandhi. Bishnu Prasad Rabha accomplished a daring task. He removed the Union Jack and replaced the flag of the Indian National Congress party at the residence of the British Regent in Cooch Behar. He accomplished the same task at the the residence of the Zamindar of Cooch Behar Dewan Nalini Ranjan Khastagir. The next morning this incident created an uproar in Cooch Behar. The Government could not arrest anybody in this connection as there was no proof to whosoever did it.

It is no easy task to assess the worth of the the multi-talented personality of Bishnu Prasad Rabha. In his lifetime he was a live legend. Music, fire arts, theatre performance, creative writing, politics, creating social awareness - he explored in all these diverse fields and won accolades for his exceptional contribution. His physical contribution towards the greater Assamese society came to a stop on 20th June, 1962 due to throat cancer. But the grand legacy of his craftsmanship lives on. In this Paper an attempt has been made to assess the socio-cultural elements present in his songs.

Objectives:

This research Paper aims to depict the cultural milieu of Bishnu Prasad Rabha and to assess his contributions as a lyricist and composer particularly to highlight his focus on the socio-cultural elements of that time.

Methodology:

This research Paper is purely based on the available data i. e, the songs composed by Bishnu Prasad Rabha. Henceforth, the analytical approach is being used while discussing the distinct aspects of this Paper.

Results and Discussion: Socio-Cultural Elements in the Songs of Bishnu Prasad Rabha:

The all-pervading intellect of Bishnu Prasad Rabha can be identified in the numerous songs composed by him. The political cum cultural activist Bishnu Prasad Rabha was a roving being. He was writing incessantly. But not all his writings have been preserved. Some are lost in the wear and tear of time. Some are damaged in parts. Those which parts could be retrieved, those showcase the talented music composer Bishnu Prasad Rabha. His confidence upon powerful vigour may be found in his own words, for example:

*"Shaktimaan! Jaga Jaga Shaktishali Vishwajoyi Na Jowan
Shil Bhangi Pahar Porvot Dh Wongxi Gorha Aloka Nogori
Kondor Khandi Buwai Tolahi Amrit Dhaara Nijori
Akaaxor Meghor Kolija Phali Aana Bijulire Baan
Bidari Madhyakorxon Gorbho Tuli Luwa Chumbak Taan
Shaktimaan! Jaga Jaga Shaktishali Vishwajoyi Na Jowan".*

(Bishnu Prasad Rava Rachana Sambhar-Part1, P. 133)

(Meaning: O powerful youth! Arise! Hit hard at the rocks to turn it into a beautiful city, make way for a beautiful stream. Evoke the thunder and bring plenty to this earth)

Here, Bishnu Prasad Rabha calls out to the youth of the state to come forward and create a new fruitful society. The composer has faith in the upcoming youth of the society. He feels that the future of the society is safe in their hands. The only thing necessary is to realize the power within themselves.

The word "Liberty" cannot be narrowed down to its political aspect only, in fact, the word Liberty has a deeper meaning where liberty encompasses economic right and freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of choice, freedom to live with dignity, etc. Rabha wishes that all in society must be able to taste the sweetness of liberty. This liberty isn't political liberty or independence alone. It is that feeling of liberty which makes an individual feel empowered in the true term. It is only possible when he has food, shelter and work. Bishnu Prasad Rabha calls out to the weaker section in society to come to the forefront and demand what is rightful to them. He wrote:

*"Bol Bol Bol Bol
Krishak Shaktidol
O' Bonua Xomoniya
Aagbarhi Jao Bol
Jaag Jaag Jaag Jaag
Mazdoor Na Jowan
Nirjatita Nipirito
Krishak Shaktimaan
Tor Bahute Ase Lukaai*

Ashim Shakti Bol".

(Bishnu Prasad Rava Rachana Sambhar-Part1, P. 134)

(Meaning: Ye powerful farmers! March ahead. My labourer friends, we need to march ahead. My farmer friends, you are unaware of the tremendous power you harbour within you. So, march ahead)

He was not only a social activist; he was also a harbinger of change. Transformation of his political ideology is also an interesting aspect of his ideology as a harbinger of social changes. He was a communist in thought and deed. One such song which echoes his political ideology is given below:

"Dhwangxa Kar Dhwangxa Kar

Dhonir Ahangkar

Doya Maya Nokoribi

Khyomar Din Je Gol

Haal, Kor, Da, Haturi Loi

Ronoloi Jāo Bol

Toi Khuwao Vishwabaxik

Maati Phali Dhaan

Toi Jugawo Dhoni Shrenik

Ostro Shaktimaan."

(Bishnu Prasad Rava Rachana Sambhar-Part1, P. 134)

(Meaning: Make the rich lick dust. Show no mercy! Come O brothers! Take your tools and get ready for the battle of life -of struggle. You are the ones who feed the thousands of this earth. You supply weapons to the rich. It is you who have established the factories, mines, etc. You have immense power in your shoulders.)

This is what Bishnu Prasad Rabha has to say about the economically weak people in society. A revolution is necessary to make them aware of their rights and privileges as members of society. During his tours all over Assam, Rabha saw the utter plight of the cultivators, the labourers working in mills, local artisans, unskilled workers who could not make ends meet. They were so wretched that they couldn't provide their families with two square meals a day. A drastic change was felt urgent. He who takes the leadership, he must be empathetic towards their cause.

Once, when he was touring various parts of Assam to know about the condition of the agrarian peasants, he had to speak to the workers of the village Panchayat of Nakhaat village. There he said like this:

"My dear friends, before going to start a revolution one has to become a revolutionary himself. Before giving leadership to the causes of the poor, one has to be a pauper himself. One can understand Revolution more through realization rather than theoretical knowledge. Revolution is to establish the new replacing the old. He who believes in the drastic change of society, it is he who is the real revolutionary. One has to broaden his sight, look beyond the Assamese society and extend his sight to India and then to the world. In that way he can think about the changes to be made in the society of the Have Nots. Even then one

cannot ignore the Assamese society. It is through the preservation of the Assamese language and culture of Assam. That a classless society based on fraternity can be possible." (Bishnu Prasad Rava Rachana Sambhar-Part1, p.xxx, Translated from Assamese)

The cultural activist Bishnu Prasad Rabha has also contributed immensely to Assamese cultural life. The sings composed by him give an idea of this novel thought of Rabha. His forever quest for beauty inspired him to compose some memorable sings which will keep on inspiring generation after generation. One such Song composed by Bishnu Prasad Rabha is-

*"Xurore Dealore
Rupore Shikoli
Bhangi Dili Khuli
Duwar Xonowali
Pujari O'
Xundoro Pujari*

*Jaoti Jugiya
Borgeet Omiya
Bongeet Xuriya
Guwa Axamiya
Pran Mon Bhor
Pujari O'.*

(Bishnu Prasad Rava Rachana Sambhar-Part1, P. 135-6)

(Meaning: The exponent of beauty goes exploring for beauty, finds it confined and chained with a silver chain. The exponent of beauty releases it from confinement by opening the golden door to its liberty. Beauty, in the form of folk elements with musical flavour such as the Borgeets, Bongeets, etc. get liberated and brings eternal bliss to the care worn heart.

Music thrills the mind. It brings a kind of heavenly bliss to the mind and soul of the individual who wishes to explore music and culture as a whole. These songs may have dual meaning too, where the love-lorn hearts pine for one another. The earthly union gives them heavenly bliss. When it is abstract beauty then the feeling differs. The individual mind gets inspiration to explore new heights of beauty, creativity and excellence of creative thoughts and ideas. The cultural elements are the base of such novel ideas. The inborn artist Bishnu Prasad Rabha absorbed all these cultural elements and represented those in his musical compositions.

Conclusion:

The artist par excellence Bishnu Prasad Rabha's overall contribution to Assamese cultural life is immense. No part of Assamese culture has been left unexplored by him. He may have been born with the golden spoon. But he was also that man who experienced abstract poverty due to some real -life calamities which befell him and his family. He faced that gallantly. Bishnu Prasad Rabha lived by his words. His empathetic attitude towards the plight of the working class inspired him in his creative endeavour as a composer. This artist cum social activist made extensive tours all over Assam to get an idea of the actual condition of the

agrarian labourers. The outcome of this expedition was manifold. He took on to the task of motivating the people who were not getting their rightful due. He was a well-read person who had knowledge of workers' movement in other parts of the globe. His multi-lingual ability supported him a lot in such studies. He was dead against all sort of subjugation whether be it economic or cultural or physical. He believed that only a free body can think freely and without fear. He ignited this spirit within the voiceless wretched people. His perseverance bore fruit. The masses were thoroughly motivated. They came out in large numbers. In this way his association with the masses inspired him to add diverse elements to his writings. Specially his songs composed not only have literary value but social value as well. These songs are a document of his times. More over the theme of the songs give vent to his ideology too. The universal appeal of his songs is relevant to this day.

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