

**LITERATURE
AND
SOCIETY IN
ASSAM**

TILOTTOMA MISRA

THE BOOK

This work attempts to study Assamese literature produced during the first hundred years of British rule in Assam (1826-1926) in the light of the developments and changes within Assamese society during this period. Its focus is on the interaction between literature and society in Assam during the period under review, the way literature reflected social reality as well as profoundly influenced it nudging it towards new directions.

Situating Assamese literature in the context of Indian literature this work argues that the trends and perspectives of the Indian literature of the colonial period—the overwhelmingly secular nature of the creative works of this period, the growth of a relatively national attitude which enabled the intellectuals to review their history and social institutions critically and the incipient nationalistic aspirations which on the other hand occasionally manifested themselves in highly idealised and glorified visions of the past—are all discernible in the literature of Assam during this period.

However, while affirming that the literature under review was an integral part of the Indian literature of the colonial period, the study is primarily concerned with the distinct and in some ways even unique features of this literature reflecting the specificities of the socio-economic reality in Assam. These specificities include

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the impact of and reaction to Western and Bengali culture in Assam, the extent of the spread of modern education in the region, the special features of Assamese society which influenced Assamese reactions towards the nineteenth century social reform movements in the rest of India and the cultural and religious ethos of the Assamese people which above all enabled Assamese writers to assert and advance a distinct identity of their own.

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**Literature and Society
in
Assam**

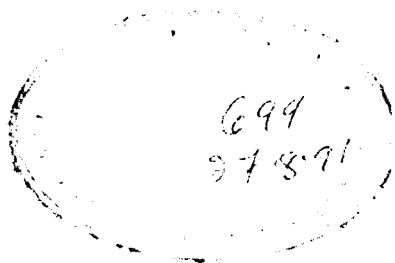
**A Study of the Assamese Renaissance
1826-1926**

TILOTTOMA MISRA

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Introduction

The significance of the nineteenth century in the history of India has been pointed out by most social historians and literary critics. It was an age of contrary pulls in the realm of politics, economics and intellectual ideas. The final defeat of the Mahrattas in the hands of the British in 1818, followed by the annexation of Sind in 1843 and of the Punjab in 1849, led to the consolidation of British power in India. These political developments triggered of certain deep-rooted socio-economic changes in the country. The political and economic policies adopted by the British Government laid the foundation of a colonial economic structure in India which initiated economic changes without encouraging consequent economic development. It is now believed by most modern Indian economic historians that the imperialist interests in India were inimical to the development tendencies in the country and there was a gradual crippling of the process of growth in the indigenous agricultural and industrial spheres because of the stranglehold of a colonial economy.¹

These negative aspects of the establishment of British rule in India, however, cannot nullify certain progressive forces set in motion by the impact of British rule. The establishment of the railways and the improvement of the transport system, the

introduction of a modern Western system of education and the adoption of the British legal system in India, though understandably to facilitate the exploitative colonial machinery, had far-reaching effects on the entire socio-cultural fabric of India. That the introduction of these structural changes in India ushered in new and progressive ideas from the West has not been denied even by the nationalistic school of Indian scholars. In the sphere of social organisation the resultant inevitable clash between the two radically different structures of the East and the West led to a number of social reform movements in India in the nineteenth century which ultimately contributed to the development of a pan-Indian nationalism. According to Charles Heimsath, "the Indian social reform movements produced a multi-faceted intellectual expression of the social and cultural transformations which took place under the impact of British rule."²

These socio-cultural transformations of the upper strata of the Indian society led to the birth of what is now called Modern India.

The nineteenth century was also of special significance to Assam because the Treaty of Yandabu (1826) between the British and the Burmese brought to an end the six hundred years old Ahom monarchy in Assam and paved the way for the eventual establishment of British rule. Despite certain negative effects of the British rule in Assam during its early phases, such as the displacement of the Assamese language in favour of the Bengali as the official language and as the medium of instruction in schools, it must be conceded that the impact of its progressive face was more marked in Assam than in those parts of India where a relatively stable political or economic structure existed prior to British rule. After the nightmarish days of the Burmese invasions and the misrule of the decadent Ahom kings, British rule ushered in a period of comparative stability in Assam. The railways were laid and the water-routes established between Calcutta and Assam primarily to serve British commercial interests in the region. But the consequent improvement in the transport system helped to establish the much-needed links between the region and the rest of the country. The progressive winds from the West entered Assam

through Bengal, thereby enabling the region to emerge from the physical and cultural isolationism into which it had lapsed during the long period of uninterrupted Ahom rule. Growing contact with Western ideas coming through Bengal and the aspirations of the emerging Assamese middle classes for a greater share of jobs under the British, led to the growth of a new sense of national awareness among the Assamese people. The efforts of the American Baptist missionaries in the spread of education among the masses and in establishment of a vernacular press cleared the way for the development of a revitalised Assamese literature which, despite its five hundred year old heritage, lay in a state of stupor during the days of the Burmese invasion (1816-24) and in the early years of British rule in Assam.

The present work is an attempt to study Assamese literature produced during the first hundred years of British rule in the light of some of the new trends discernible in the literature of Bengal and other parts of the sub-continent in the nineteenth century. These trends were the direct outcome of an intellectual movement at this period which is today generally referred to as the Indian Renaissance. In discussing Assamese literature of the period as a part of the Indian literature of the colonial period, however, the distinct features of this literature which reflect the peculiar socio-economic background of Assam, have not been overlooked. The impact of and reaction to Western and Bengali culture in Assam, the extent of the spread of modern education in the region, the special features of the Assamese society which produced different reactions in Assam towards the nineteenth century social reform movements in India and the cultural and religious ethos of the Assamese people which enabled the Assamese writers to assert a distinct identity of their own, all these have been touched upon in the present study.

In order to discuss the major characteristics of the nineteenth century Renaissance in Assam, it would first be necessary to arrive at some sort of a definition of the term "Renaissance" and to justify the use of the term in relation to the social, economic and political changes reflected in the Assamese literature of the second half of the nineteenth century.

The term "Renaissance" was first used in a specific European context, to describe the great era from about the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, when the entire socio-cultural atmosphere of Europe underwent a spectacular transformation. The original meaning of the term was associated with the literary movement in Italy in the fourteenth century aimed at the revival of Greek and Latin learning, especially of the original Greek and Latin grammars. This was part of a reaction against the almost total dependence of the intellectual world of Europe on second-hand compilations of the classical texts by the scholars of the Middle Ages which resulted in widescale distortions and misrepresentations of the original writings. This meaning of the term "Renaissance" which is actually taken to denote a "revival" or "rebirth" of learning, has been extended through the ages and the word has wider and more general connotations, to be used figuratively in contexts widely different from the original specific situation of fourteenth century Italy.

Since the word "Renaissance", even in the original context, was used to describe a process that went on over two centuries and covered an area extending over almost all the major West European nations, it is inevitable that the term would be a fluid one, like "Romanticism" or "Modernism". Diverse views have been expressed by scholars on the significance of the term "Renaissance" and different schools of scholars have attempted to put forward widely varied definitions of the term. Voltaire referred to the Renaissance as a specific historical period following the classical age from Pericles to Alexander the Great in Greece and from Julius Caesar to Augustus in Rome and preceding the age of Louis XIV in France and Western Europe.³ But it was in the nineteenth century that historians began to use the term Renaissance in a broader sense to denote not only new intellectual currents that transformed the cultural atmosphere of Europe but also the changes wrought in the socio-political scenario of the age following the Middle Ages. In the year 1860, the famous Swiss historian, Jacob Burckhardt gave a new definition of the term which was in many respects similar to that offered by Jules Michelet in 1855.⁴ He analysed the Italian Renaissance from

several angles which included the discussion of the State as a work of art, the development of the individual, the revival of antiquity and the discovery of the world and of man.⁵ He pointed out that the "new birth" of antiquity had been "one-sidedly chosen as the name to sum up the whole period." While admitting the overall importance of the revival of interest in the classics, Burckhardt considered the other intellectual tendencies connected with the Italian Renaissance to be equally important and sometimes even more significant than the revival of antiquity.⁶ The English historian J.A. Symonds (1840-93) who exercised considerable influence over Walter Pater (1839-94) in his literary criticism, popularised the broad meaning of the term Renaissance in England, with the publication of his seven volumes on the Renaissance in Italy.⁷ In this work, Symonds said that the term could not be explained by means of some specific characteristics but it was to be accepted "as an effort of humanity for which at length the time had come, and on the onward progress of which we still participate." The history of the Renaissance, according to him, "is the history of the attainment of self-conscious freedom by the human spirit manifested in the European races."⁸ Symonds emphasised the release of tremendous "intellectual energy" which enabled mankind to make use of the arts, inventions and "knowledge of books, which suddenly became vital at the Renaissance."⁹ That is why he claimed that the modern world was still in the midst of the Renaissance because "the force then generated still continues, vital and expansive, in the spirit of the modern world."¹⁰ Thus, to Symonds, Renaissance stood for all progressive movements, whether economic, political, social or intellectual, which enabled Western Europe to pass "from the medieval to the modern modes of thought and life."¹¹

Twentieth century views are sharply divided over the interpretation of the term Renaissance. According to Thorndike, it is necessary "to reject Michelet's redefinition of the Renaissance as the discovery of the world and of man together with all kindred attempts to assess it in vague terms and intangible conceptions such as the medieval mind and the modern mind, or the popular mind and the intelligentsia, individuality and personality, sentiment and spirit. Instead, one should

return to the original conception of the movement as a revival of classical Latin belles lettres and the recovery of Greek classical belles lettres."¹² This limited, narrow description of the term Renaissance, however, has proved generally unacceptable to most of the recent historians and literary critics. Robert Ergang surveys the history of the term Renaissance and arrives at a definition which is similar to the broad definition of the term accepted in the nineteenth century.¹³ According to him, the Renaissance opened the paths to modern civilisation by giving a "new direction to intellectual endeavour."¹⁴ Ergang shares the view of Symonds that the word Renaissance denotes "the process of transition from the medieval to the so-called modern order in Western Europe... It is a bridge between the Middle Ages and modern times."¹⁵ He points out the complex, many-sided character of the Renaissance and comes to the important conclusion that the "unifying factor" which makes the facts about the period intelligible is "the secularization of life, thought and culture during the Renaissance period."¹⁶

It is this broad definition of the term that has been adopted in this present study. Though the word Renaissance has definite European connotations as has already been pointed out, yet it happens to be the only word that comes nearest to expressing the complex socio-economic and intellectual currents that swept through almost the whole of India during the second half of the nineteenth century. The impact of these new ideas was felt in Assam for the first time after this region came under British rule in 1826. A study of the major trends of the nineteenth century Assamese Renaissance as a part of the general stream of new consciousness flourishing in Bengal in particular and in India in general would yield fruitful results. Such a study would not be complete without a comparative study of similar trends in the Bengal Renaissance. That is why the present work would attempt to focus attention on some of the major characteristics of the Bengal Renaissance that helped to shape the Assamese literary consciousness in the nineteenth century.

One of the earliest uses of the term, 'Renaissance', in respect to nineteenth century India was by J.H. Cousins. In his work Cousins emphasised the spiritual content of Indian culture and expressed his doubts as to whether India required any

“awakening” at all, since spiritually she had always been awake.¹⁷ Surprisingly enough, the person who contradicted these views of Cousins was one of the greatest spiritual leaders of modern India, Sri Aurobindo. In his series of essays published in the journal, *Arya*, between August and November, 1918,¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, in his characteristic inspired language examines the basis, history and character of the Indian Renaissance. While discussing the question “whether at all there is really a Renaissance in India,”¹⁹ he goes back to that moment in the history of European civilization when “the Christianised, Teutonised, feudalised Europe” was seized and overturned by “the old Graeco-Latin spirit and form with all the complex and momentous results which came from it.”²⁰ This process of transformation from one kind of culture to another was “not so much a re-awakening as an overturn and reversal.”²¹ Sri Aurobindo finds little possibility of this kind of an European Renaissance ever taking place in India. He discovers greater affinity between the Celtic revival of Ireland and the growth of the nationalistic spirit in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In refuting J.H. Cousins’ contention that India never needed a re-awakening, Sri Aurobindo holds that though it is natural for an outsider to be struck by “the living continuity of past and present in India,”²² to an Indian, things may appear in a different light. For, an Indian who is conscious of the “great decline” that overpowered India in the eighteenth centuries, cannot but feel the snapping of the bonds that bound her, in the early twentieth century. Since a period of Renaissance implies the existence of a preceding age of darkness, Sri Aurobindo too describes that dark age in India as a period marked by political anarchy, torpor of the creative spirit in religion and the deadening of the intellectual sphere. The re-awakening or renaissance which followed was to him the inevitable outcome of that nadir which must lead to the beginning of a new cycle and of “the pressure of a superimposed European culture.”²³

In his long essay, Sri Aurobindo discusses the three stages of the contact of Indian culture with Western culture which began with a stage of blind imitation of everything Western

and ended with "the process of new creation in which the spiritual power of the Indian mind remains supreme."²⁴ While agreeing with Cousins that spirituality is the master-key of the Indian mind, Sri Aurobindo emphasis the importance of the body too, with respect to the soul. Therefore, since the body of Indian culture was temporarily gangrened during the early period of British rule, the Renaissance in India was essentially great change effected in the body. Thus, Aurobindo tries to give a philosophical answer to the complicated question arising out of the continuity of as well as the major transformation of Indian culture under Western influence.

The fact that the word "Renaissance" was eagerly seized upon by the majority of the Indian social historians and literary critics to describe the age of transition between the early period of British rule and the post-independence period, is amply proved by the fact that a large number of important books on the subject bear the word "Renaissance" in their titles. Most of these works were published between the period 1940-1970, and a few even later. Sushobhan Sarkar, one of the earliest of this group of writers, deals with the crucial period in the history of Bengal from the years 1814 to 1919.²⁵ He begins with a discussion of the life and works of Ram-mohun Roy and concludes with the Swadeshi Movement and its impact on Bengal. The reason why Sarkar considers this period as a crucial one in the history of Bengal in particular and of India in general is that "the impact of British rule, bourgeois economy and modern western culture was felt in Bengal and produced an awakening known usually as the Bengal Renaissance."²⁶ Sarkar's work was followed by a number of studies on the phenomenon known as the Bengal or Indian Renaissance.²⁷

Not all Indian scholars however accept the validity of the term 'Renaissance' with reference to the socio-cultural movements in nineteenth century British India. These critics, amongst whom the Marxist scholars figure most prominently, are not averse to the concept Renaissance but they doubt whether such a historical situation to which the term can be applied, ever existed in India at all. For, though cities like Calcutta

witnessed unprecedented progress in economic, social and cultural spheres, the vast expanses of the Indian countryside remained totally untouched by industrialization, economic progress or western education which British rule brought to the commercial centres like Calcutta.²⁸ The "Calcutta Renaissance", according to these critics, was at the expense of the surrounding areas which were progressively drained of their wealth and population in order to sustain the colonial market at Calcutta.²⁹ The majority of the Marxist critics are concerned with the class-character of the leading figures of the Bengal Renaissance with the relationship between British imperialism and Indian nationalism, with the attitude of the leaders of the "Renaissance" towards various anti-British movements of the time and with the stranglehold of Western education on the Indian elite. But, not all Marxist critics subscribe to a negative view towards the Bengal Renaissance. The progressive aspects of this movement, though on a limited scale, have been acknowledged by several Marxist critics³⁰ who have adopted a middle stand between the earlier nationalist school and the post-Naxalbari radical school of leftist critics. The debate between the different groups of Marxists on the question of Bengal or Indian Renaissance which began in the 'forties of this century, continues to generate lively intellectual interest even today as is evidenced by the articles published in a recent number of Bengali leftist journal.³¹

Though the critics of the "Indian Renaissance" may be justified in their rejection of any attempts to draw exact parallels between the situation in Europe during the Renaissance and that of India in the nineteenth century, yet it would not be wholly fruitless to discern certain broad similarities between the two situations without distorting facts of history. Analysing the Renaissance situation in Europe from a sociological standpoint, the German social historian Alfred Von Martin said: "The centre of gravity of mediaeval society was the land, was the soil. With the Renaissance the economic and thus the social emphasis moves into the town : from the conservative to the liberal, for the town is a changeable and changing element."³² This urban bias is also a notable feature of the

Indian Renaissance of the nineteenth century. The Establishment of British trade centres at important towns like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras led to the concentration of wealth in these towns and the nineteenth century saw the development of a new city-based culture centred round the important cities of Calcutta Bombay and Madras. The shift of emphasis from the villages to the towns appears to be one of the most significant aspects of the Indian Renaissance. In fact, the Bengal Renaissance has been also called the 'Calcutta Renaissance'³³ because of the lopsided growth of Calcutta at the expense of the surrounding regions in and around Bengal. Arabinda Poddar has analysed how the progress of the intellectual movement in nineteenth century Bengal synchronized with the urban transformation of Calcutta³⁴ It would be part of our endeavour in this study to discuss the impact of this new "Calcutta Culture" on the Assamese elite of the nineteenth century and how far this group of Assamese intellectuals was successful in disseminating the ideas of the Indian Renaissance amongst the general masses of the Assamese people.

The brief analysis given above of the significant works published on the theme of the Indian Renaissance has been considered necessary in order to prove that though the term, Renaissance, has been taken from an European context, yet it has been generally accepted by Indian scholars as a convenient term to describe a particular historical situation in India. The concept, Renaissance, is therefore, no more foreign to the Indian situation than other concepts like Liberty, Socialism or Nationalism. Robert Ergang, while justifying the figurative use of the word, Renaissance, has put it succinctly thus :

Many words of the English language are used figuratively, and there appears to be no valid reason why 'Renaissance' should be an exception... 'Renaissance' is not only a colourful word, it is a useful term when not invested with meanings which distort the facts of history.³⁵

II

The modernisation and secularisation of Indian literature during the period of Renaissance in the nineteenth century has, as has already been pointed out, been the subject of several important scholarly works in recent years. But in the sphere

of Assamese literature, though the importance of the nineteenth century has been generally acknowledged by most scholars as the beginning of modern Assamese literature, yet its significance as a bridge between the Middle Ages and the modern times and the significance of its overwhelming bias towards secularism have not received adequate emphasis. Furthermore, the possibility of studying this period of Assamese literature as a part of the general stream of new ideas associated with the Indian Renaissance, has not been duly explored. The older group of Assamese literary critics had been pre-occupied primarily with the stupendous task of writing voluminous histories of Assamese literature which, by their very nature, could not provide a detailed critical analysis of any one period or author. Little attempt had been made to explore the socio-political tendencies common to Assam and the rest of British India in the nineteenth century which influenced vernacular literature of the period and helped to establish new trends in literary form and content. The present work endeavours to focus attention on these issues. The word, "Renaissance" has been used in relation to these new thought currents of the age in order to place them within the broader orbit of the Indian Renaissance. No attempt has been made to draw exact parallels between Assamese literature of the nineteenth century and English literature of the Elizabethan period. Earlier critics like Dimbeswar Neog, following on the footsteps of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, have attempted to define the flowering of Vaishnavite literature in Assam during the age of Sri Sankardeva, as a period of "Renaissance". Neog labours to discover exact similarities between the Elizabethan Age in England and the age of Sankardeva in Assam. Even the apparent discrepancy between the predominantly secular bent of the Elizabethan Age and the spiritual emphasis of the age of Sankardeva is lightly dismissed by Dimbeswar Neog with the statement that "the tides of all true religions leave the soil always decidedly more fertile for the luxuriant growth of even secular seeds."³⁶

Lakshminath Bezbaroa, who first used the term "Renaissance" with respect to the Vaishnavite literature of Assam in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, makes no secular claims for the age. According to him, since religion forms an

intrinsic part of all Hindu manners, customs and habits, so, there should be nothing surprising in the fact that the Hindu Renaissance should be basically religious and reformatory rather than secular in character. Thus, Bezbaroa considers the Vaishnava age to be an age of religious Renaissance not only in Assam but also in the rest of India wherever there was a revival of Hinduism after the period of Buddhist supremacy.³⁷

All modern uses of the term Renaissance, however, emphasize the growth of the secular spirit as the basic characteristic of the movement. It is this that distinguishes the European literature of the Renaissance, with its preference for the non-Christian tradition from that of the literature of the Middle Ages which emphasised the subservience of the individual to the religious order.³⁸ Most of the well-known critics of the Renaissance like Jacob Burckhardt or Robert Ergang have emphasised the fact that the spirit of scepticism towards the established doctrines of the Church and a boldness to delve into the pagan antiquity without fear of being condemned to an eternal Hell for committing the Faustian sin, are the most striking characteristics of the European Renaissance. Humanism, the dominant philosophy of the Renaissance, released the forces of individual self-consciousness which culminated in the infinite appetite for personal fame, glory and power at any cost and by any means. Burckhardt discusses in details how the thirst to win and secure fame in Italy during the Renaissance led to the "boundless ambition and the thirst after greatness, regardless of all means and consequences."³⁹ The fame and popularity of Machiavelli's *Prince* in Elizabethan England is easily explainable from this. The infinite ambition and thirst for power of Christopher Marlowe's heroes is considered to be the most effective summing up of the whole story of Renaissance Humanism and its inevitable impoverishment when viewed from the Christian moral angle.⁴⁰ Closely related to the Renaissance tendency to exalt the individual even to the stature of God Himself, is the desire to acquire infinite knowledge about the world of nature from whatever source and by whatever means possible. The dictates of the Middle Ages that condemned all secular or non-Christian sources of knowledge as belonging to the realm of the legendary Doctor

Faustus, was either openly defied or skilfully counteracted by men like Sir Francis Bacon. Considering it to be his foremost task to separate the provinces of religion from that of science in order to lay the foundation for the progress of modern science, Bacon made the historical statement, "It is, therefore, most wise soberly to render unto faith the things that are faith's."⁴¹ Without hurting the sentiments of the religious divines Bacon quietly put forward the case for the separation of secular knowledge from religion and thereby ensured the advancement of both the branches of knowledge.

It appears from the above discussion that since both the Italian and the English Renaissance were overwhelmingly secular in character, with a marked shift towards a modern age of doubt and scepticism, the later use of the term Renaissance with reference to other widely different historical periods is generally linked with an age with a secular bias rather than a religious one. Since not any or every kind of flowering of literature or art can be termed as a Renaissance—a concept which has certain historical connotations even when used in a broad sense,—so a predominantly religious age like that of Sri Sankardeva in Assam cannot be termed as an age of Renaissance without confusing certain major issues. Dimbeswar Neog himself points out in his book on Sankardeva that the victory of individualism over the dominance of the medieval religious order together with the release of the rational faculties of man, are the principal aspects of the new thoughts associated with the Italian Renaissance.⁴² But the principal tenets of the "Bhakti-marg" (the path of Bhakti) as preached by Sankardeva relegate the individual and all his personal ambitions and aspirations for worldly or sensuous gratification to the lowest level and proclaims the supreme power of the one Godhead, the Brahma.⁴³ In Vaishnavism, God is the supreme manifestation of all the power in the universe and the devotee possesses only an atom of that mighty power. So, the devotee must seek the support and strength of the Supreme Being at every step of his life. The devotee is the eternal beggar who does not desire earthly glory, wealth or the gratification of the senses, nor does he desire heavenly joy or even salvation. His only desire is to

serve God most humbly.⁴⁴ The "qualified monism" of Sankardeva views the relationship between God and man as "dasya-bhava", or the relationship between Master and servant.⁴⁵ Such supreme self-subjugation is nearer in spirit to the medieval Christian poetry which like Vaishnava poetry, is often anonymous because the poet considers it his duty to obliterate his individual identity in relation to God.⁴⁶

This view of man is certainly diametrically opposed to the Renaissance concept of man defying Heaven and Hell, like Tamburlaine, Faust or Mebeth, to achieve the object of his temporal desires. Marlowe's heroes prefer the earthly crown to the heavenly one⁴⁷ and Shakespeare's heroes are compared to all that is excellent in heaven and earth.⁴⁸ In religious literature, however, only God can be the subject of such adoration, man's existence being totally dependent upon the mercy of God. The basic difference between religious literature, especially drama, and the literature of the Renaissance is that in the former, the divine order becomes the real focus whereas in the latter, it is man who receives the central attention.⁴⁹ An anthropocentric vision was certainly not possible in a predominantly religious age like that of Sri Sankardeva. That is why, the term, Renaissance, when used in the context of the historical situation that bears some resemblance to the period of secularisation of life and thought during the European Renaissance, is hardly applicable to the Age of Sankardeva in Assam. The present work proposes to discuss in greater details the chief characteristics of the Assamese Renaissance of the nineteenth century which may justify the use of the term 'Renaissance' with relation to that age.

Almost all the modern Assamese literary critics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seem unduly confident with a term like 'Romantic' which they have applied unhesitatingly to the writers of the 'Jonaki' group. Yet, Romantic is a concept that is as broad as complicated and as controversial in European literary criticism as the term 'Renaissance'. But most Assamese critics, with the exception of a few,⁵⁰ seem to have avoided the use of the term 'Renaissance' in relation to late nineteenth and early twentieth century Assamese literature, because such an attempt would necessarily involve the task of

studying Assamese literature and culture of this period not as an isolated phenomenon but as a part of a greater movement sweeping across the intellectual horizons of several other parts of the Indian sub-continent, especially of neighbouring Bengal and Orissa. A survey of the histories of Assamese literature and of all the major works of literary criticism reveals the interesting phenomenon that the general tendency to prove the distinctness of the Assamese literature from the Bengali literature has often led to the denial of the fact that Western influence reached Assamese literature mainly through the writings of Bengali intellectuals and creative writers. The direct influence of the English Romantic Revival of the nineteenth century on Assamese literature of the period has been over-emphasised at the expense of the probable impact of the new intellectual thought currents that are today generally referred to as the Indian Renaissance.⁵¹ Satyendranath Sarma, however, breaks new ground in the recent edition of his history of Assamese literature where he evaluates the Romantic Movement in Assamese literature as a movement that had not sprung from the native soil of Assam but had been "grafted" artificially on the tree of Assamese literature. Analysing the reasons why this movement attained acceptance amongst the nineteenth-century Assamese intellectuals, Sarma says that the new wave created by the combination of the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance and the Romantic movement in Europe had swept across the mental horizons of the Assamese writers as well.⁵² The English Romantic movement had no doubt exercised immense influence on the Assamese writers. But, according to S.N. Sarma, these influences were usually filtered through the writings of the prominent architects of the Bengal Renaissance like Rammohun Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and Bankimchandra Chatterjee.⁵³

It may be surmised that a sense of insecurity and a fear of loss of identity which had hunted the Assamese middle class consciousness throughout the nineteenth century prompted the Assamese critics to set up defensive fences to protect the identity of Assamese literature. In one of his recent books Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya has referred to the lack of self-confidence amongst the Assamese middle class and its self-preservative

tendency.⁵⁴ This sense of insecurity and fear no doubt had strong historical roots. The British policy of systematically eliminating the Assamese language from the courts and schools of Assam, the introduction of Bengali as the medium of instruction in schools from the year 1836, the resistance mounted by the Assamese intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, and the ultimate rehabilitation of Assamese as the court language and the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam in the year 1873,—all these historical facts are only too recent to be forgotten by the Assamese writers and critics of pre-independence and post-independence days. But now after almost a hundred years since the Assamese language regained its rightful place, time is perhaps ripe to study Assamese literature of the nineteenth century in its proper perspective as a part of the movement that wrought far-reaching changes in almost all the major literatures of India of that period. Contact with Western civilisation primarily through the medium of the English language lay at the root of this major transformation of Indian life and, consequently, of Indian literature.

The impact of the West on different Indian literatures of the nineteenth century has been discussed in most of the recent histories of the modern Indian literatures. Some of these studies have discussed the revival of interest in secular vernacular literature in the nineteenth century and the consequent scientific development of the languages.⁵⁵ The infusion of new life into Oriya literature in the nineteenth century under the able leadership of such writers as Phakirmohan Senapati, Radhanath Ray and Madhududhan Rao⁵⁶ was the outcome of the same thought-currents which produced such men as Rammohun Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and Bankimchandra Chatterjee in Bengal or Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua in Assam. Most of the recent books on the Bengal Renaissance, already referred to, throw some light also on the impact which the Bengal Renaissance had on Bengali literature. In Oriya literature too, the significance of the nineteenth century in the formation of a new Oriya consciousness which led to a revival movement in Oriya literature and language, has become the subject of several recent studies.⁵⁷ Keeping in view the dearth of critical studies

aimed at placing nineteenth century Assamese literature within the ambit of a distinct Indian literary movement, the present work would endeavour to re-assess Assamese literature of that period from a new perspective.

The present work is less concerned with the "flowering" or "re-awakening" aspect of the word, Renaissance, than with the historical trends associated with what is generally known as the Indian Renaissance. The overwhelmingly secular nature of the creative works produced during this period, the growth of a rationalistic attitude which enabled the intellectuals to review their social institutions critically, the incipient nationalistic aspirations discernible in the Indian literature of the time which manifested themselves through glorified sagas of the country's past and romantic visions of a future utopia, are some of the prominent characteristics of this movement. The Assamese Renaissance of the nineteenth century is seen as a part of the same movement, with certain distinctive features of its own.

In discussing the major literary works of the period, the word "literature" has been used in the broader sense to include all the writings of the period which reflect the beliefs, aspirations and struggles of the Assamese people of that period. For, as Hemchandra Goswami says, "Literature is the reflection of the national life. Just as a life-sketch portrays all the physical and behavioural traits of a personality, so a national literature portrays the character, the manners, the progress and the decadence of a nation."⁵⁸ This work, therefore, has attempted to take under purview not only the significant Assamese works of some of the major Assamese writers of the period, but also some of their Bengali and English writings which reflect the important thought-trends of the century. For, most of the important writers of the Assamese Renaissance displayed not only wide variety in their choice of subject matter, but also considerable ability in expressing themselves fluently in Bengali and English,—mediums which they utilised in order to reach out to a wider readership.

Though it might be improper to equate literary periods with historical ones, yet, for the sake of convenience, the present work has been confined within the limits of the period

covering the years 1826 to 1926. In the choice of these particular demarcating years, the main objective has been to isolate this period of study from the pre-British period and the period of Freedom Struggle in Assam. The year 1826 has been considered a convenient date for the beginning of this work since on that year Assam passed into the hands of the British following the Treaty of Yandaboo. Exactly one hundred years later, in the year 1926, the Pandu session of the Indian National Congress was held. This was another important milestone in the history of the province for it heralded Assam's final entry into the mainstream of national politics.

The present work is based primarily on the published creative writings of the Assamese authors of the period under study. Assamese journals and histories published during the period and the autobiographies diaries and memoirs of the important writers whose works have been taken up for study, have also been widely used as primary source material.

The work has been divided into seven chapters and the primary intention in this organisational plan has been to focus attention on some of the major distinguishing trends of the Assamese Renaissance. These trends which have been indicated in the titles of the different chapters, are also shown to be similar in many ways to the principal features of the Indian Renaissance of the nineteenth century. Each chapter, therefore contains brief surveys of the development and application of the different concepts in the context of Bengal and other parts of India in the nineteenth century. The work begins with a survey of the prevalent disorder and chaos in the socio-political atmosphere of Assam which adversely affected the literary scene in the Pre-Renaissance period. This dark background has been considered as a prelude to the Renaissance in the nineteenth century. The first significant trend in the Assamese Renaissance of the nineteenth century that has been taken up for discussion is the development of the secular trend in nineteenth century Assamese literature that was initiated by the journal, *Orunodoi*, published by the American Baptist missionaries of Assam. This discussion is preceded by a study of the causes behind the adoption of a secular attitude towards knowledge by the Christian missionaries in India during the

nineteenth century. The second trend in the Assamese Renaissance that has been discussed is the new-found enthusiasm for social reform and social criticism inspired by Western rationalism. In this context, an attempt has been made to show that the movement for social reform and the direction of social criticism were different in Assam from that of other parts of British India because of the peculiar socio-economic structure of the Assamese society of that period. The emerging regional aspirations of the Assamese people in the nineteenth century which ultimately developed to become a part of the Pan-Indian nationalism, have been portrayed in this work as the manifestations of the tendency for self-assertion born of a renewed self-confidence and awareness during the Renaissance period. Another trend related to this national self-awareness is the tendency to glorify the past, to lament at the present degenerate state of the land and to uphold mighty visions for the future of the Assamese nation. The present work is a modest endeavour to study these major trends in the Assamese Renaissance in the light of their manifestation in Assamese literature of the period under study.

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