

## Chapter- II

### Jyotiprasad Agarwala: His Social Backdrop

To focus on the social backdrop of Jyotiprasad it is essential to analyze his involvement with Assamese culture that remolded the concept of nationalism in Assam. The Agarwala family quite famous for its contributions to the economic, social and cultural regeneration of Assam and had played a vital role to shape the versatility of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Therefore, this present chapter deals into exploring the social background of Jyotiprasad Agarwala and his family.

People generally migrated from one place to another or from one country to another mainly for livelihood, to avoid natural calamities and socio- economic and physical oppression meted out by the economically dominant social classes. To avoid political trouble and instability leading to insecurity of life and property are also counted as causes for migration.<sup>1</sup> Behind all their causes it is sure that the inner motive in every migration is the cause of livelihood. Different factors invited the migrants into Assam. As a result of migration of people from different places Assam has been a melting pot for many races and cultures. “The attractions are so irresistible that an outsider living in Assam for a short time do not desire to go back to his native land which gave rise to the report that the people of Assam can transform a man into a lamb”.<sup>2</sup>As the Assamese society formed with the various sections, there is less rigid caste system resulting in a tolerant society.<sup>3</sup>

The Austrics are believed to be the original inhabitants of this region. Periodic Mongoloid migration from the north and east throughout millennia resulted in the formation of the large number of tribes and ethnic groups which went to make the

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<sup>1</sup> Kalita, Ramesh ch., 2011, *Situating Assamese Middle Class the Colonial Period*, , Bhabani Printers, Guwahati, P.91

<sup>2</sup> Bhuyan, Surya Kumar., 1965, *Studies in the History of Assam*, New delhi. Omsons Publisher, P.1

<sup>3</sup> Bharali, op. cit., P. vi

broader Assamese identity.<sup>4</sup> In the Primitive Age the *Nisads*, latter the *Kiratas* and during the medieval time the Ahoms and also the Mughals, Pathans afterwards the British and other immigrants like laborers, Marwari merchants, Bengali intellectuals etc. came to Assam for different purposes and some of them assimilated with the life of Assamese whole heartedly. With the coming of the British into Assam the process of migration started from different places of the country to Assam. It can be also mentioned here that the migration process even also started around C556-560 A.D. during the reign of Mahabhuti Barma. The educated Bengali immigrants came to Assam and during the reign of Rudra Singha many people migrated to Assam.<sup>5</sup>

Historically and socially, the most influential Mongoloids were the Ahoms who united the diverse tribes dwelling in the Brahmaputra valley into the greater Assamese race. The Ahoms when they first came to Assam from their Shan homeland brought with them their traditional classics which had a rich heritage. Living in Assam for a long time, the Ahoms could not but be influenced by the models available in their adopted country. Their own culture got assimilated with the culture of the people they overcome. The Khamtis and the Phakials, who came to Assam later than the Ahoms, possess a splendid literature of Buddhism. They contributed with their culture and literature in the land.<sup>6</sup> Even during the Ahom rule no foreigner was permitted to settle in Assam unless he contributed to the cultural and material prosperity of the people. Muslim immigrants were allowed to settle in Assam since their services were essential “in deciphering and interpreting of Persian documents, carving of inscriptions...”<sup>7</sup>

However, there is hardly any evidence of communal rise or ill feeling between the Muslims and Hindus of Assam. Nowhere had the immigrant Muslims identified themselves so completely with the indigenous people as in the valley of the Brahmaputra. Shihabuddin Talish found amongst the Assamese Muslims “nothing of Islam except the name, their hearts are inclined far more towards mixing with the Assamese than towards association with the Muslims.”<sup>8</sup> The very fact that a handful of foreigners penetrated and carried on their transactions into the country without any difficulty clearly shows that their relations with the local people were quite friendly

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<sup>4</sup> Dutta, Arup Kumar., 2003, *Jyoti prasad prince of Beauty*, Anwasha, Guwahati, P.21

<sup>5</sup> Benudhar Sarma Rachanawali, P.213

<sup>6</sup> Bhuyan, Surjya Kumar., 1965, *Studies in the History of Assam*, Omsons Publisher, New Delhi, p.12

<sup>7</sup> Bhuyan, 1933, *A History of Assam 1681-1826 A.D. (Tungkhungia Buranji)*, p.xxx

<sup>8</sup> Sarkar, T. N., 1915, *Translation of Fathiyya- I -Ibriyya*, JBORS, P.193

although they remained socially aloof. After the British annexation of Assam the Bengali and Marwaris in particular came to Assam in large extent. Again, the tea-garden labourers, Hindustanee sepoys etc. continued to constitute a floating population following their respective customs, usages and traditions.<sup>9</sup> All were almost assimilated with the indigenous culture maintaining their own individuality. Likewise, the most striking feature of the family of Jyotiprasad Agarwala was their cultural assimilation and it is not just assimilation but contribution of the family in building modern Assamese society.

The family history of Jyotiprasad Agarwala can be traced back as the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The surname, Agarwala is derived from a Rajasthani word 'Agarwal' which means 'pioneer'. Jyotiprasad has reflected this meaning in the real sense and becoming the pioneering ideal for the later generations to follow. Chananmul (1720A.D.) Kedia who migrated from Ked in Jaipur is regarded as the earliest ancestor of the family of Jyotiprasad. He was a Baishya by caste and for various reason the family migrated to a village called Gudda. His two sons Kushal Chand and Ghasiram were brought to Tai by their aunt. The two sons raised their family business much better than before. But during the time of Ghasiram's son Hemraj, the Zamindar of the area troubled him. He was wealthy and prosperous and the rising tendency of Hemraj became the cause of concern for the ruler of their native place in Rajputana. They tried to find fault with Hemraj and eliminate him from the scene and confiscated his wealth and authority.<sup>10</sup> When Hemraj was robbed and looted, the family moved from Tai to Churu. After some time Navarangaram became an orphan at the age of sixteen. The boy moved from pillar to post to settle himself and regain his father's status. But the prevailing situation did not prove friendly. To settle himself in life in a peaceful and secured atmosphere Navarangaram moved towards the east.

Due to poverty Navarangaram Keida (1811-1865 CE), the son of Hemraj or the forefather of Jyotiprasad Agarwala left Surur of Rajasthan in 1828A.D. at the age of seventeenth as an economic migrant and set out in the search of his fortune, arrived Assam in 1830 A.D. From available sources the genealogical history of Jyotiprasad starts with Navarangaram who came to Assam in search of livelihood and better living

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<sup>9</sup>Bhuyan., A. C & S. K. Barpujari (ed)., 1999,*Political History of Assam Vol- I*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, p.62

<sup>10</sup>Jyotiprasad Rachanawali, p.13

and also for security from the hostile situations that he had to face in life in Rajputana. To settle himself in life in a peaceful and secured atmosphere Nabarangaram moved towards the east and stayed for a brief period in Goalpara district in search of a footing. It is said that Navarangaram walked all the way from Rajasthan to Assam. But it seems a bit exaggerated. Actually, he came to Varanasi first but the route he used was not known. So he came to Mirjapur and later he arrived at Murshidabad, and afterwards he arrived at Biswanathghat in 1830 A.D. and started earning his livelihood by engaging himself as a *gomasta* (helper) in a Marwari establishment.<sup>11</sup>

Navarangaram came to Assam at a very crucial time. The Burmese who replaced the Ahom king let loose a reign of terror in Assam. Assam had been suffering for a long period from internal disturbances which were closely followed by the Burmese invasions. The population of the country dwindled down to less than half of what it had been. After the tyranny days of the Burmese invasions and the misrule of the descendant Ahom kings, the British rule ushered in a period of comparative stability in Assam. Assam laid pleading in the dust sloped and creaked in pain when Navaranga arrived. Again, during the early part of the British rule conditions worsened under the burdens of taxation and mismanagement. Subsequently, however, the British in their own interests tried to improve the conditions.<sup>12</sup> When he first moved into Assam, he found everything so different like language, people, culture and climate. The region was dreaded by most outsiders for plague and trouble. Strife- torn Assam rolled in chaos and confusion as the foreign invaders struck terror through brutal devastation. He found Assam not a promising haven for outsiders. But he came, saw, fell in love and stayed on. The whole of Assam, and especially, the north bank, east of Tezpur Biswanath *Ghat* up to North Lakhimpur, turned out to be an area almost deserted by men.<sup>13</sup> The Burmese replaced the Ahom king and let a reign of terror. The social and commercial activities came to a standstill following the Burmese invasions and destructions they caused. Ruthless rule, exploitation, invasions feuds and natural calamities turned Assam into a graveyard. Though for some time, Upper Assam was under the Ahom rule but by 1835A.D. the whole Assam came under the British rule. Navarangaram entered Assam in a contract to supply ingredients to the British army.<sup>14</sup> The social and commercial

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<sup>11</sup> Agarwala, Bibekananda, 1998, *The Agarwala Family of Tezpur*, Devi Prasad Bagrodia, Tezpur, P.8

<sup>12</sup> Goswami, Chandana., 2008, *Nationalism in Assam*, New Delhi, P.60

<sup>13</sup> Agarwala, B., *op. cit.*, P.5

<sup>14</sup> Gohain, Hiren(ed.), 2007, *Jyotiprasad Rachanawali*, Assam Publication Board, Guwahati, P.873

activities came to a standstill following Burmese invasions and devastations they caused. Large scale casualty and abandonment of houses and property resulted in depopulation in the area. Commerce practically did not exist at all. The villages were plundered and burnt, and the people were compelled to seek shelter in the jungle and the misery of the unfortunate Assamese was extreme.<sup>15</sup>

During the period in Assam threats were too many and the prospect of trade was bleak.<sup>16</sup> The most striking feature in the Ahom state, and one which must have been extremely repugnant to the people, was the system of enforced compulsory labour. The lower orders were divided up into groups of three or four called gots, each individual styled a poua paik.<sup>17</sup> The Ahom Kings consolidated administration through the system of *paik*. Under this system, revenue was collected in terms of service rendered to the authority and not in terms of money. Thus, there was little trade and whatever little prospect there was, it was demolished by barter system of economy. Every household was a self-sufficient unit. Under the *paik* system it was bound to be so as the system reduced internal trade into something terminated. Whatever import and export were there, they were a state monopoly. The society was ruled by autocrats who looked down upon trade and commerce as the occupation of the lowest of the low. There was no trade no monetary circulation. Coins were minted for royal rituals.<sup>18</sup> For such reasons, presence and absence of some practices were features common to the Assamese society. But they were unusual for an outsider and in the field of business, trade and commerce. The unique system of Ahom administration that continued for long six hundred years kept Assam in isolation from the mainstream Indian national culture. Such was the situation of Assam when Navarangaram arrive Assam and he boldly faced the stark realities. The north bank in which Navaranga decided to settle, the society was predominantly tribal.

The British did not care for restoration but as much as it did was drain the resources of Assam for its profit. Their eyes were on the resources of Assam and the British to facilitate commercial transactions with Bengal, allowed the merchants of Marwar to set up *golas* or depots at several locations in western Assam. In the absence of an economically viable local business community, the British brought bankers and

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<sup>15</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, P.38

<sup>16</sup> Agarwala, Haribilash., 1967, *Haribilash Agarwala Devar Atmajiwani*, Guwahati, P.15

<sup>17</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, P.39

<sup>18</sup> Agarwala, B., op cit., P.4

traders from other provinces of India to give them the service of banking and trading. In the early days of the Company “these enterprising men are stationed in all principal parts of Assam and their petty agents stroll about the frontiers, wherever there is a chance for making a rupee”.<sup>19</sup> It is stated that Maniram Dewan had raised his voice to protest against the British policy of employment of Bengali and Marwari people in the revenue department of Assam such as *Mauzadars* for which a number of respectable Assamese became unemployed.<sup>20</sup>

Assam is a region as colourful and varied as India itself. In fact some social ills of Indian society like dowry, sati, caste divisions etc. did not prevail in the Assamese society. Kulinism, infanticide was almost unknown and Assamese society was free from many of the other social evils practiced in Bengal. It is said that the Chinese scholar and pilgrim Hiuen Tsang described in his narrative that Assam represented or inhabited with a fairly advanced civilization and rich cultural heritage.<sup>21</sup> In the early years of the eighteenth century, when the Mughal Empire was disintegrated, a new middle class was beginning to rise. Although the village still retained its position as the productive unit, urban trading centers had arisen as a result of the exchange and distribution of commodities carried on by a middle class which was already becoming wealthy.<sup>22</sup> However it appeared that during the British rule as the Hindus mainly took the advantages of new education and the opportunities of employment introduced by the British, the Marwari and Bengali traders and merchants monopolized the trade and commerce with little or a number of Assamese participation.

During the time the business community like in the rest of India, in Assam also did not have a counterpart. This vacuum was filled in by the business community from the rest of India. The Rajasthani Baniyas took control of the trade and commerce in Assam beginning with the British rule. J Sherar, the Deputy Commissioner of Nagaon district mentioned in his account that the peasants themselves exchange or sell their commodities in the nearest *Bazars* or *Golas* of the Marwaris.<sup>23</sup> In the District Gazetteers of Darrang District also mentioned about the immigration. It mentioned that among the immense mass of those immigrants were garden coolies, Bengalis employed

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<sup>19</sup> Cosh, M., *Topography of Assam*, P.63

<sup>20</sup> Guha, Amalendu, 1977, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, P.16

<sup>21</sup> Chakravarti, Mahadev, op. cit., P.5

<sup>22</sup> Desai, A.R., op. cit., P.23

<sup>23</sup> Wade, Dr. John Peter., 1800, *An Account of Assam*, P.2

as clerks and shop- keepers, and the wholesale trade was in the hands of Marwari merchants coming from Rajputana.<sup>24</sup> During the time there was no export and import by private persons and the need of the people were fulfilled by barter form of exchange. The society looked down upon trade and commerce as the occupation of the lowest of the low. The imperialist British also did not care for rehabilitation or any effort but they did as much as for exploiting the resources of Assam for their profit.<sup>25</sup>

In the meantime the commercial tea company's entry had helped in the rise and growth of trade among the Assamese middle class. A section of the Assamese youths got employed in the tea gardens under the British planters and thereby rose to the status of the middle class and due to their interest; they need to follow the policy of cooperation with the colonial government and in such situation they became the inevitable leaders of the educated Assamese middle Class and the junior partners in the system of exploitation under the imperial rule. Their survival was mainly depended upon the support, blessings and encouragement of the alien government. In such a situation Navarangaram decided what was most needed for him. By dint of his efforts he could get himself established as a remarkable person in this unknown state. The first inter- action was between a hard headed and practical *Bania* and a native population which was polite, simple and welcoming. Leaving behind ancestral home far away, Navarangaram made Assam his home, devoted all his time and energy in the state and got absorbed to the culture and tradition of this land.

Navarangaram got his first job at Goalpara in a firm named Navarangaram Ramdayal Poddar. This firm had a branch at Biswanathghat near Tezpur and 20 miles from Gomiri. That was a British outpost with a military camp. Navarangaram was appointed as a *gomasta* (salesman) in the branch of the firm in 1830A.D. He had his own visions of prosperous life. After two years he began a new life as an independent businessman at Gomiri and opened his shop in the locality at around 1833A.D. Initially, he bought goods at Biswanath and sold them at Gomiri. His capital was small and he made the best out of that capital. Within two years of opening the shop, he could enlarge his capital sufficiently to move into the new *gola*. He opened a *gola* in Brahmanjan also and appointed his brother Ramlal the manager. He opened another *gola*

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<sup>24</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, P79

<sup>25</sup> Mills, A.J. Moffat., 1853, Report on the Province of Assam, Assam Publication Board, Guwahai, Pp.3-4

at Gogagoria of Kalangpur in 1851A.D. From this time onwards his trade and commerce began to flourish. In the course of time, by dint of thrift and industry, Navarangaram succeeded in giving his future a new direction and grew prosperous. Under the last Ahom ruler Purandar Singha, Navarangaram established himself at Gomirighat in Sonitpur. It is said that Maniram Dewan presented Navarangaram to the court of the Ahom king and Purandar Singha made him the Hatkhowa Baisya (toll collector) and granted him a *sanad* to raise tolls in all the markets on the north bank of Brahmaputra.<sup>26</sup> After getting the royal assignment, Navarangaram made Gomiri the headquarters of his office. He also learned as many tribal dialects as he could.

Considering Assam to be his new home, Navarangaram decided to cut off his Rajasthan roots and become Assamese to the core. Within a short period of time Navarangaram assimilated himself with the local life, married Assamese girl in Assamese style and merged with the Assamese life. Navarangaram did not marry from his community but married one local girl to consolidate his social position. He married at the age of 21, one Assamese girl Sadari the sister of Tholok Keot which amalgamated his social position. Amalendu Guha presents Haribilash Agarwala (1842-1916 A.D.), grandfather of Jyotiprasad Agarwala as a *keot* from his mother's side and son of a Marwari trade settler.<sup>27</sup>

Navarangaram married for the second time to the daughter of Saikia family. After Navarangaram's second marriage to Sonpahi the sister of Lakhi Saikia in 1836, he took '*saran*' (refuge) in the Gumadhara *Satra* to be a disciple of the *Vaishnava* religion and he became an Assamese in the literal meaning of the term. Not only did he give up his native language, but also ensured that his children grow up in a typically Assamese environment.

Like in the rest of India the Vaishnava movement in Assam formed in basic principles but on the social side it developed a form which established the equality of all human beings irrespective of their birth and origin which made the cultural bond of Assam and India very close. Though Assam was isolated from the rest of India in trade and commerce till the end of the Ahom rule, the great Vaishnava reformer of the 15<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Agarwala, B., op. cit., Pp.i, 8

<sup>27</sup> Guha, A., op. cit., P.281



Century kept Assam in touch with the religious movement in the rest of India.<sup>28</sup> Sankardeva preached *Ek Sarania namdharma* to unite a fragmented society in the fifteenth century Assam. The religion he preached was based on *Srimad Bhagavat*. He had a large number of followers and the common people accepted his religion. It is said that due to the acceptance of *Vaishnava* religion, the distinctiveness of the Agarwala family could be seen from the other Marwari people and it is argued that their religious conversion mostly help the family in assimilating to the Assamese society.<sup>29</sup> Navaranga's religion brought him closer to the people. However it is stated that they were devout Vaishnavites and were religious people in Rajasthan when their life were prosperous.<sup>30</sup>

Navarangaram established his first shop within the Ahom territory only after taking due permission from the local authority. Thus he became a subject of the Ahom king before being presented to the royal court by Maniram Dewan, who had an immense personality and knew Assam thoroughly. The royal appointment legalized Navarangaram's entry into the Ahom Kingdom and his business activities got endorsed. The small shop was no longer remained small and with due course it grew into a legend after Navarangaram became an officer himself. The shop played a very crucial role in his rise. Sudden fall into adversity at teen age, adventure and travel taught Navaranga to observe men and environment keenly and to make the best of his environment. With the passage of time Navarangaram rose in wealth and social stature. Within a short span of time, the small shopkeeper became a business prince and for that he sweated his blood out to make fortune. His social services also got recognition. His social position became prestigious and the officials and common people alike began to respect him.<sup>31</sup>

As a shrewd businessman Navarangaram kept an eye all along on tea and rubber. He saw the possibility of the growth of the new agro-based industry in the North Bank. Messrs Williamson Magore and other companies started their tea gardens around that time. Within a distance of fourteenth miles tea gardens like Bargang, Dufflagarh, Halem Borai, Brahmajan, Gohpur, Ghagra, Purubbari etc. were opened. He knew that educated Assamese young men like Malbhog Borua, Ghanashyam Borua and others

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<sup>28</sup> Bhuyan, S., op. cit. P.185

<sup>29</sup> Gogoi, Akhil & Geetashree Tamuli, 2003, *Uribo Pora Hole aakau Jujiloheten*, Loknath Entra Prize, Guwahati, P. 23

<sup>30</sup> Agarwala, B., op. cit., P.7

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, P.9

began plantation of tea. It was Maniram who pioneered in the field. Again Navarangaram saw the possibility of the growth and profit of the new agro industry and started his tea garden in Tamolbari. Navarangaram appointed Mr. Stawart an English man as the manager of Tamulbari tea estate and he continued in office till 1875A.D. The stagnant economy of the area was changed to a great extent. The Gomiri steamerghat within a distance of three miles from Halem gained importance. Navaranga was generally benefited from his imaginative mind and innovations. Actually, Navarangaram's life in Assam began with river transport as he was a chanandar in a boat. He had always tried to extend **river transport** service as far as possible from Gomiri. On contract loaded cargo-boats were sailed to their destination and for such activities Gomiri was the centre. However, Navarangaram's fleet of boats did not remain a near monopoly when the Company introduced motor boats and dispatch services from Calcutta to Dibrugarh. In 1861 A.D., Navarangaram started the new business of rubber.

Slowly and steadily by dint of his ability he assumed his social, legal and commercial position in the Ahom kingdom. The royal appointment legitimate Navarangaram's entry into the Ahom kingdom and his business activities got recommended. The power through accumulation of wealth and the royal patronage earned him a social position and his married to a local girl also cement the process of assimilation into the Assamese society. His social services also got recognition. His social position became prestigious and the officials and common people alike began to respect him. When he first moved into Assam he found everything so different such as language, people, culture, customs, manners and climate. But the hearty welcome of the local people brightened up his hope.

We know that 'Society is a system of usages and procedures of anything and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions of controls of human behaviour and of liberties.'<sup>32</sup> Human beings are social animals and that is why they are ever anxious to maintain their existence in the society. Society is a collection of individual human beings. The relationship between the society and the individual is mutual. A man, however, dependent himself can never ignore his society. Through the change of time, social life and social thoughts also change. People have to adjust themselves and go

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<sup>32</sup> Machver, 1981, P. 5

ahead along with the society depending upon its strangeness and the changing steps. Society has a great influence in developing the mind of men or in shaping their personality. In the childhood days a man's personality mainly depends on his own family atmosphere and as soon as he grows older, the family atmosphere expands to a greater social environment. The individual has to accept his social existence and is liable to its manifold influences just as he is also capable of influencing the society by his actions and thoughts. Without society, without the support of social heritage, the individual personality does not and cannot come into existence.

Likewise, the Agarwalas also received spontaneous and hearty welcome from the local Assamese society which struck the first generation of Agarwalas with love and admiration. Nanarangaram when first settled on the soil of Assam was in his teenage. Strange language, customs, manners and usages would have scared away the teenager who came from Rajasthan, but the hearty welcome of the local people brightened up his hope. He got absorbed to the culture and tradition of this land. The first inter- action was between a hard headed and practical *bania* and a native population which was polite, simple and welcoming. The inter-action wore smooth the *bania's* rough manners. His entire attitude to life was in sharp contrast with that of the local people around him. He was hard working, had great ability and power of endurance.<sup>33</sup> They enriched Assamese culture and society through significant contributions. All that remains at present of the original cultural identity of the Agarwala's is the family name or surname. The rest has all become thoroughly Assamese. He picked up local language, customs, manners and usages within a very short period of time. He also learned as many tribal dialects as he could. He knew that language was the medium of establishing rapport and friendship with people. The man's adventures must have been very highly exciting and he must have been a man of strong self-confidence and a sense of service and commitment. Their dreams, hopes and aspirations got intimately bound up with the destiny of Assam. Everything changed completely including speech and food habits. Matrimonial relationships with Assamese families further consolidated their emotional attachment to the socio- cultural life of Assam.

It is said that the Assamese people took the 'Agarwala' title from the time of Navaranga's marriage with the Assamese daughter Sadari. The *satradhikar* of Sri Sri

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<sup>33</sup> Agarwala, B., op. cit., P. viii

Aauniati Satra gave the title 'Gupta' to the family, but the title 'Agarwala' became popular and familiar among the local people that though Haribilash and his sons tried to use the title, it could not last long.<sup>34</sup>

However, the Marwari community in Assam started discriminating against Navarangaram's family because; the community did not welcome the policy of Navarangaram's complete assimilation in the Assamese society.<sup>35</sup>

Though Navarangaram was living in a remote corner of the country, he kept himself informed of what was going on in the world outside through the Bengali newspaper '*Chandrika*'.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand Navarangaram also devoted all his time and energy for the development of the locality in the transition period. Getting absorbed into the Assamese culture and society, Navarangaram had enriched Assamese culture and society through significant contributions. He devoted himself to the task of rehabilitation of the people rendered homeless by loot and plunder of the Burmese.<sup>37</sup>

In the meantime, under the new administration of the British rule made north Lakhimpur the Head quarter of the district and Captain Vetch, the new Assistant Commissioner appointed Navarangaram the *Mouzadar* upto Rangali in 1836A.D. The *mouza* began from Borongabari to Rangali and Gomiri was the centre. Therefore he accessed directly with the commissioner and under the patronage of the government commissioner he became an influential man in the locality. He also got armed guards for the protection of the *ryots* and maintaining law and order. He saw that tracts of fertile land were lying in waste. He taught people how they could sell their field produce in the market to earn cash. He also encouraged the people to produce paddy, cash crops, oil, seeds, and cereals and to sell them in the market. Besides engaging others in clearing forests for cultivation, he engaged some people to clean a huge tract for himself. His own land and cultivation also set an example. Navarangaram built large **granaries** at several places in the area for stacking paddy and mustard seeds in the harvesting seasons.

Opium cultivation was not banned at the time of Navarangaram and he took full advantage of it to gain economically. He made large profits from his herds of cattle and

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<sup>34</sup> Saikia, P. 20

<sup>35</sup> Agarwala, Haribilash., op. cit., P.24

<sup>36</sup> Agarwala, B., op. cit., P.23

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.,P.10

buffaloes. He also got a *mahal* from the government to caught wild elephants in *Khedda Shikar*. He caught an average of 50 elephants annually and sold them either outside Assam or gave them on hire to the tea planters. Apart from other businesses nearly all the export and import trade was in the hands of Marwari merchants, locally known as *Kaiyas*, who were the great shopkeepers and money- lenders of the Assam Valley. Each tea garden is also a small centre of trade and on every estate there were one or two *kaiyas* shops.<sup>38</sup>

Transport and communications have always been a cause of economic backwardness of Assam. At the time of Navaranga, surface communication was in a very poor shape. Lack of communication kept almost every village in isolation. Villages were self-sufficient but still it was necessary to collect items like salt, sugar etc. from outside. People walked from far away villages to Biswanathghat to collect such items.<sup>39</sup> The price of the commodities in those days was so cheap and the cause of the cheaper rate of the field produce was lack of transport and communication and the absence of a market. Trade and commerce also therefore could not grow under such circumstances. The British government took up the task of building **the trunk road** and Navarangaram built a position of the road from Behali up to Gohpur Borpukhuri via Rangsalikathanibari and Gomiri. He built on contract many other roads and lanes which connected the villages with the trunk road.

Navarangaram was a practical and hard headed businessman and naturally he was always with the rulers. During the Ahom rule, he was a loyal subject of the king and following British rule his loyalty shifted to the British. It is said that in 1838 A.D. Jenkins found that a Marwari merchant at Gomiri not only carrying on his own trade but performing the duties of the Government as a *Mouzadar* and a Manager of hats at Chaiduar.<sup>40</sup> Though the name of the Marwari is not mentioned in the gazetteer, it can be assume that he was Navarangaram.

But due to some losses and mismanagement he had compelled to close his flying businesses. In his Kalangpur firm he had appointed Hiranand Chaudhury as manager but due to ill health he left the job. The Lakhimpur branch of his firm was also closed down at an early date. The land was occupied by others. The Dibrugarh branch

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<sup>38</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, P.181

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.,P12

<sup>40</sup> Major, Jenkins., District Gazetteer of Darrang, 1838

also incurred heavy losses because of the '*khuchrabaki*' given to the customers and therefore its managers Gouridut Lohia and Govindaram Goenka were discharged from their jobs. Haribilash, son of Navarangaram took charge of it in 1861A.D. At last he forced to close down the Dibrugarh branch. Therefore he closed his flying business and concentrated on tea and rubber.

However he could not fulfilled his dreams as he breathed his last by a sudden attack of Cholera in Calcutta. He died at the age of fifty four but his life was eventful. He was a shrewd and practical businessman. He cultured carefully the masses with relentless efforts towards their social and economic welfare in the backward areas.<sup>41</sup>

Navarangaram also earned the gratitude of the British by acting as an intermediary with some of the hill- tribes and fostering amicable relations with them. Navarangaram also solved the tensions between the British and the Duffalas. The Daflas, a people, like their neighbours on the east and west, of Tibeto- Burman origin carried off one Bihoal Dom and his family <sup>42</sup> The Daflas continued to be good behaviour but when the payment of *Posa* was stopped, they carried off four persons and three guns in order to invite attention to the claims against a firm of *Kaiyas* for price of rubber lapped in their territory. The prisoners and most of the property were recovered, the *Kaiyas* were required to pay what was due and the Daflas were fined for their violation of British territory. While a liberal deduction was made from the sum paid by the *Kaiyas* on account of the value of such property as was missing. <sup>43</sup>

During the early years of transition, a split came between the hill Duffalas and the British. The dispute follows an incident of a Duffla Gum, i.e. the Headman, beheading a plainsman who was a British subject. The dispute led because of non-payment of *pocha* (a kind of tax that the Duffalas levied upon plainsman). Captain Vetch, the Assistant Commissioner sprang into action when a British subject was beheaded. He issued a warrant of arrest of the headman and asked him to surrender. Tension worsened and the situation grew tense as both the Dufflas and the British remained adamant and stubborn. The British were determined to maintain law and order at any cost and the Duffalas were uncompromising on the point of preserving age old

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<sup>41</sup> Agarwala, H., op. cit., P.7

<sup>42</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, Pp.56-57

<sup>43</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, P.59

rights and privileges. Navarangaram was in good terms with the Duffalas. He offered to deed as the go- in the middle of. The risk he ran was really very high because the tribal people easily ruffled and false move might create misunderstanding to worsen the situation. However, he succeeded in diffusing misunderstanding and tension. On behalf of the Duffalas Navarangaram paid the amount of fined rupees three hundred to the British. That act of kindness at once transformed the height of Navarangaram's personality among the Duffalas.

In 1851A.D. Captain Vetch, the Assistant Commissioner met Navaranga on the purpose to settle the problem of '*Pocha*' that the Duffalas periodically collected from the people of that area. During the Ahom rule, the Duffalas were allowed to collect the *pocha*. The Ahoms followed a policy of appeasement. But the British wanted to stop this practice of paying *pochas*. The Assistant Commissioner personally came to Gomiri and asked Navarangaram's help and advice to settle the problem and it was Navarangaram's initiative that a settlement accepted by both the parties. Navarangaram was regarded by the tribal people as their guide, philosopher and friend. The Duffalas agreed to collect the *pocha* annually from the Government instead of raising it directly from the people. It was agreed to collect in cash and not in kinds. Thus Navarangaram succeeded in negotiating the settlement with the Duffalas. Captain Vetch was very much pleased with Navarangaram and rewarded him with the Kalangpur Mauza.

After Navarangaram's premature death the family was shift in the field of work. Navarangaram brought in social changes primarily through trade, commerce and agriculture but his descendants wanted to do the same through cultural and literary activities. In 1842 A.D. from the first wife of Navarangaram gave birth to **Haribilash**. His parents called him Baniram. Like Navarangaram, his son Haribilash also kept up the tradition of love for the culture and literature of the state. He took his father's mantle and kept up the family's commercial tradition as well as Assamese ethos.

Haribilash much as adept in business, looking after a string of sixty odd shops in Assam, banking business in then Calcutta, rubber business with South India, besides the newly started tea plantation in Dibrugarh, had a deep attachment to matters religious and spiritual.

A highly intelligent and enterprising individual, he was keen to uplift the mental and spiritual wealth of the family along with the material. It was primarily due to his

inspiration that the family became well known for their literary and cultural pursuits. His family became one of the remarkable families among the Assamese middle class. There is no denying the fact that the Assamese Middle Class in comparison to other group established their leadership in the social and cultural spheres. However, the tea planters being the richest section amongst the Assamese middle Class, they monopolized the social, cultural and political life and leadership of the entire Assamese society almost throughout the colonial period.<sup>44</sup> They as a matter of fact had to play second role from the beginning almost till the Non- Cooperation Movement.

**Haribilash** had endless thirst for knowledge, a love of secret and romance and a spirit of adventure in new fields of industry like his father. But his health was pale and indifferent in early childhood. He was always gathered around by servants and attendants. From his childhood he took deeper interest in life. He went with his mother to the field of poppy. He rode buffaloes and elephants and saw wild animals like tigers and bear. At the age of nine in 1852 he left the north bank (Gomiri) to Dibrugarh for acquiring education. At that time, Dibrugarh was not even a township. The only importance of the small town was the British garrison and the army camp. There was also a new settlement along the bank of the Brahmaputra. The American Baptist Mission was working there under a padre. Beyond the present Railway workshop there were all jungles. A jail was there near the court building and it was fenced off with bamboos.<sup>45</sup> At Dibrugarh he also did not find a school of his choice. There was one Bengali school in which Keshab Dev Sarma, the father of Ganga Govinda Phukan was the Headmaster. In the same school Ganga Govinda Phukan, Kirtinath Barua, Ruchinath Sarma, Deuram Sarma, Gunaran Sarma, Ramdihal Rai etc. were students in the upper classes.

The Padre of the Baptist Mission gathered some boys and appointed a teacher to teach them English which is in a short distance from the *gola*. Baniram (Haribilash) used to attend the classes and learned the first lesson in English. Haribilash visited his home at Gomiri after three months and returned to Dibrugarh after eight months remaining absent from school. During this time he learned how to keep book of accounts from Tilak Chand Kedia in Nagri. He also learned Devangiri and thus he devoted his times to learning outside the school syllabus. He also learned Sanskrit and

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<sup>44</sup> Kalita, R., op. cit., P.21

<sup>45</sup> Agarwala, H., op. cit., P.23



gathered knowledge necessary to keep accounts and cash books in the *gola*. He also gathered experience of running the *mouza* by maintaining accounts. He also helped the O.C. of the Gohpur Police station in a census. For sometimes he studied astrology under the guidance of a local school pundit. Though he had eager to learn English education but during that time there was only one English school in Sibsagar. In Sibsagar, Haribilash was admitted to class I to learn English. He was well in studies and got double promotions more than once.

In 1859A.D. Haribilash went to Calcutta. He got admission in the Hindu school. He continued his studies for nearly two years but he could not proceed further. In the meantime, Bhaniram, the business partner of their firm at Dibrugarh died of Cholera and Haribilash had to make a retreat to take charge of business. Though unwilling, Haribilash had to come back from Calcutta. Haribilash, like all other educated Assamese young men of that time, had an ambition of becoming a government officer. As trade and commerce did not enjoy social prestige since it did not exist during the long years of Ahom rule. But circumstances did not favour Haribilash to become a government officer.

He did the first thing that a businessman had to do was to take '*diksha*' and change his name from Baniram or Bapiram to Haribilash. His guru was a Marwari pundit. The second important thing that Haribilash did was an interview with lieutenant Governor of the time. Following the interview, Haribilash took charge of the Dibrugarh firm named it Navaranga Ram- Bhani Ram. It was that partner Bhani Ram's death which compelled Haribilash to give up his studies and to leave Calcutta. However his health was not good and therefore taking charge in 1862, he had already been ill. After appointing Ratan Ram to look after the management of the firm, Haribilash left for Kalangpur.

Haribilash returned to Dibrugarh towards the end of that year and found the management of the firm in a very poor shape. It ran at a loss for small loans which had not recovered. Ramlal was dismissed and Haribilash took charge himself. He could not recover a huge amount and had to move out of the rubber industry. In the meantime his father had to leave for Rajasthan and on the advice of his father and Gunavi Ram, the Dibrugarh branch of the firm was closed down. In 1863A.D. Navarangaram had made Haribilash the sole heir to all his property through his will.

A couple of years after his father's death, Haribilash resumed rubber business. Mr. Mitchel, the Assistant D.C. at Dibrugarh, talked to Haribilash Agarwala about the rubber trade. He employed Bholai Duffla to gather **rubber** from the hills. This rubber business later resounded and the briskness of the trade made Haribilash a millionaire.<sup>46</sup> Haribilash owned the rubber *mahal* from Darrang to Gauhati for one year. In 1870A.D. he worked for the rubber *mahal* jointly with Maising Meghraj and earned profit. The rubber trade which Navarangaram initially started with Bholai Duffala, later brought a handsome profit to Haribilash. The partition of the family property was completed before the rubber boom of Haribilash. Haribilash concentrated on rubber business and he personally went to places like Balipara and Borgong to collect rubber from the Duffalas. By 1870A.D. Haribilash made a profit of around one lakh from rubber business alone.

But, the year 1875A.D. was a year of setback for Haribilash. One of his sub-contractor, Mosai Shikasi, while was engaged in collection of rubber, was murdered by Duffalas at Dubia, some ten miles east of Gohpur. Following the incident, the Commissioner Hopkinson issued an order that a *Mouzadar* should not engage himself in contract business. Accordingly, the Deputy Commissioner Graham issued a warrant of arrest of Haribilash which caused loss of his business. Thus, through rubber business though Haribilash brought into huge profit but at the same time it also got him into trouble. He failed to make good rapport with the government. Gurudas Dey, the assistant Commissioner at Tezpur, did not have a good opinion regarding Haribilash. He reported to the Deputy Commissioner about the damage caused to forest resources through collection of rubber and framed a criminal case against Haribilash. The accused were Haribilash and his *gomasta* Lalchand Chunilal. The charge was that the rubber collectors uprooted rubber trees for the rubber and thereby destroyed forest property. However, the case was dismissed as the charges could not be verified and proved but it cost Haribilash about ₹. 50000/-.

In the eighties, rubber business never could run smoothly by the indigenous people. Haribilash again began to buy rubber independently from the Bhutias but he got into trouble again. The agent he employed was Sonaram Bepari and Lanchand. Sonaram was accused of theft because of that through a ban Haribilash's stock of

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<sup>46</sup> Agarwala, B., op. cit., P.19

rubber intended to surrender. The bulk of the forest revenue was derived from the imported rubber or from the price obtained for the rubber tapped in the Government plantation at Charduar. Therefore the government tried to get the monopoly in the rubber business. The Charduar rubber plantation was started in 1873.A.D.<sup>47</sup>

In 1884 A.D. Haribilash engaged agents to buy rubber from the interior places like Dikarai but that was also not smooth sailing. One Englishman Mr. Penny was also doing the same business and he reported against Haribilash to remove a competitor from his business. The matter was reported to the British Officer who came with armed guards to make a survey. The British officer was biased for Penny and Haribilash felt discriminated as a native. Such splits and difficulties with the British Government finally drew Haribilash towards the Indian National Congress. One can get on with trade and commerce if there is no interference by the Government but that was not possible under the British rule.

In 1885A.D. Haribilash bought a rubber *mahal* in the government auction for ₹. 2000/- for one year. For the default of payment of revenue in time, the *mahal* was cancelled and resold by another auction according to government order. Later on Haribilash repurchased the *mahal* for five years at ₹. 32000/-. It was in his name but the entire Marwari association was behind him. He formed the Assam Rubber Association making Mr. G. F. more a partner. By 1883A.D. Haribilash began to work independently after dissolving the partnership with Meghraj. Even since the government framed criminal charges against him for destroying forest resources therefore his rapport with the government also ended from this time. However, Haribilash could not stay without doing rubber business. At a later date he purchased the rubber *mahal* at Dibrugarh for ₹. 4000 /- and appointed Mcleod Co. as his agent. He opened purchasing counters at Sadiya, Balijan and Missa. In spite of all his efforts he suffered loss from *mahal*.

Fortune did not favour him and he started seeking new avenues. During that time he had almost sixty shops all over Assam. He went to B. Borua and discussed the prospects of rice trade. In the meantime he sold his Calcutta house at ₹. 70000/- to settle the claims of his creditors. By that time his banking business also had failed. Having closed all his business in Calcutta, he started to look after his garden. He appointed a

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<sup>47</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, P.149

British manager for his garden in 1893A.D. and around this time, he had to close down the rubber business.

As the demand for rubber increased rapidly during the colonial rule, it became essential not only to preserve the existing trees but also to set up new plantations. Accordingly, government rubber plantations were established at Charduar near Tezpur and Kulshi in Kamrup. In course of time, the production of rubber proved so profitable that the government decided to establish a monopoly over its production<sup>48</sup> and in this point Haribilash's business got destruction due to the colonial interest of the Government. His business was declined gradually due to the British capitalists.

In 1864 A.D. Haribilash married Malma, the daughter of Bhadraram Hazarika. In between 1860 and 1870 A.D. Haribilash could earn a profit of about one lakh and he shifted his family to Tezpur for education of his children. By that time his children Bishnu was five, Chandra Kumar three and Paramananda just one year old. Haribilash shifted his business to Tezpur by purchasing a plot of five *bighas* of land and he sold the land and the family house at Gomiri on the bank of the river Brahmaputra.

The **Tamolbari Tea** Estate was owned by Navarangaram- Bhani Ram and after Gulab Chand, when the rubber business was flourished, the partnership was dissolved in 1865A.D. Since the dissolution of partnership, the entire profit occurred from the Tea Estate was owed only by Haribilash. It earned a good name for the Agarwala family for the quality of tea produced and the profit it earned for the family. The registration of the Tamulbari tea Co. Ltd. was the last deed of his life. He died in 1816A.D. after one year of this registration.

In the early seventies, Haribilash purchased another tea garden, Phukan Bari near Chabua at Dibrugarh. By this Haribilash's annual profit went up to rupees two lakhs. He also started his own banking business in Calcutta in a rented house in 1875A.D. In 1895A.D. Haribilash purchased Bhimpara garden from Lalchand Rampat Das.

Haribilash bought a **saw mill** from Mr. Martin, the proprietor of Bamgaon Tea Estate. He appointed Mr. Davidson as Engineer, Lakhinath Borkataky as Manager and Mohikanta Barkotoki as clerk. Again due to British interest he did not able to earn any

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<sup>48</sup> Goswami, Priyam., P. 181

profit from it. Haribilash also personally could not pay any attention to the mill. He had to accompany Mr. Davidson to release some forest officers kidnapped by the Duffalas and therefore damage was done to his saw mill. There was one saw mill at Tezpur which converts *simul* into tea boxes.<sup>49</sup> In 1886 A.D. the saw mill which was running at a loss was shifted to Tezpur Steamer *ghat*. Around 1893A.D. he sold his saw mill to one mouzadar at ₹. 25000/.

By 1888A.D. Haribilash started looking for new avenues in business. He went to Baleswar, though he stayed there for three four days but his trip was not of much use. He also went to Garo Hills to see the prospects of the cotton business but that was of no advantage. He also wanted to start tobacco business and went to Muzafarpur regarding that but he had abandoned the idea when his eldest son Bishnu refused to take charge of the management.

Thus Haribilash suffered losses in business and his reputation in the business community subsequently suffered. The patriarch Navarangaram, by dint of hard work, had raised himself from a state of utter poverty to magnificence. But, during the lifetime of his son Haribilash, the family fortune took another turn for the worse, though he had no fault.

Much of the family's wealth centered on the saw- mill in Tezpur which made chests for packing tea. All the tea- gardens in the Darrang district used to purchase tea- chests from this saw- mill. Since the European plantation owners took full advantage of the credit facilities offered by Haribilash, they owed a huge amount of money to the saw- mill. The manager of Haribilash's saw mill once wrote a letter to the European requesting that the outstanding dues be paid. But the European planters were enraged by the 'effrontery' of a native in writing such letter. They got together and unanimously resolved that they would no longer purchase tea- boxes from Haribilash's saw- mill. To make up the shortfall, they helped one of their own countrymen to set up a saw- mill at Tezpur.

For Haribilash, that was a severe commercial blow. Thousands of tea- chests rotted in the saw- mill and it had to be shut down. His business associates in Calcutta

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<sup>49</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, P.149

and elsewhere got wind of the Europeans' displeasure and stopped financing his other ventures.

He had to sell his important properties including the Calcutta house. The sale of Calcutta property led to immediate claims of big and small creditors alike and he had to settle them all. At that time his son Chandrakumar had been living in that house. Cutting short his studies, the young man returned to Assam to help his struggling father out.

As Haribilash had opened out a small tea-plantation near Dibrugarh named Tamulbari but during the decade from 1900 to 1910A.D. Haribilash had to look up for creditors to run his tea garden. The losses he suffered in the preceding years left no choice. His reputation suffered along with the losses suffered and creditors were unwilling to give him accommodation. In 1903A.D. Khemani stopped financing Tamulbari and refused to pay ₹ for garden expenses. Government land revenue and labour payment became long overdue. He had proposed to sell off this fledglings garden too but Chandrakumar opposed the idea. This time Chandra Kumar took up the task of managing Tamulbari and within a few years converted it into a thriving enterprise. He stayed for 23 years at Tamulbari embarking on a titanic struggle and within a few years, redeemed the Agarwala family's status to what it had been before.<sup>50</sup> Paramananda and Kironmoyee stayed for a while in the garden to assist their elder brother. It was in Tamulbari tea- garden that Jyotiprasad was born.

Haribilash for a brief period of time became *Mouzadar* again but he was not liked by ryots for his arrogance and quick temper. The *mouza*, in the meantime came under Tezpur jurisdiction.<sup>51</sup> However he kept a close contact with the government through the Deputy Commissioner Mr. Cumber and by this time he took back the *mouza* from Thanuram.

Due to the economic interest there was constant and unfair competition between the British, European tea planters and the tea planters from amongst the Assamese

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<sup>50</sup> Gohain, H.(ed)., op. cit.,378

<sup>51</sup> Agarwala, B., op. cit., P.31

Middle Class. In this competition, the colonial government always sided with the European planters.<sup>52</sup>

But Haribilash did not take rest from looking for avenues. He went to Chakradharpur to study the prospects of *mica* business as well as the business of **iron** wires. But his trip was not fruitful. He also made field study on cane business by going to places like Rowmari. He was a widely travelled man. He worked in cane *mahal* all over Assam. The cane *mahal* was run by Gopal Chandra at Dimapur. He also went Bhakrak twice- once for jute business and subsequently for rice business. For cane business he went to Bokajan, Borpathar and Doclongia tea estate. He had a cane *godown* at Dhekiajuli near Tezpur. Haribilash Agarwala was a man of eminent personality. He became the president of the special meeting of *Asomia Bhasar Unnati Sadhini* in which meeting people paid special attention to the presidential lecture of Haribilash Agarwala. He delivered a short lecture in the presence of Colonel Garden regarding the history of Tezpur which shows the remarkable position and personality of him.<sup>53</sup> The Tezpur Ryot Sabha was initially formed to ventilate the grievances of the people mainly the agricultural ryots against the enhancement of revenues. Haribilash Agarwala was one of the leading members of the association. Other members of the association were Lambodar Borah, Lakshmi kanta Barkakoti etc.

He also played an important role in dealing with the British and the Aka tribe as he had a good relation with the tribes through the rubber business.<sup>54</sup> He went to the interior of the hills to settle a dispute between the Akas and the government. For Calcutta exhibition, when the government sent Lakhidhar Mazumdar to collect items from the Akas, the feud started. The Akas to feed an ancient grudge against the government they not only arrested Mazumdar but also sent troops to attack Balipara range office and kidnapped the Range officer and his clerk. The chief Commissioner himself came to Balipara to offer proposal of peace through Haribilash to make sure the return of the kidnapped persons. Haribilash, accordingly went to the Aka Hills, camped at Thakurbari and had discussions with twelve Kakotis of the Akas. They demanded one lakh rupees. The government did not accept the demand and the Commissioner sent an expedition to Aka Hills. The troops rescued the prisoners by destroying the Aka

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<sup>52</sup> Borkataki, Sailen., *Asomiya Madhyashreni*, P.22

<sup>53</sup> Saikia, Aparna., *Sanghatar majedi Tezpur Asomiya Club*, Tezpur, P.7

<sup>54</sup> Agarwala, Kamalaprasad., *Tezpurar Pakee*, P. 10

villages and the Akas fled. Haribilash could ill afford such social work because his business got neglected in the process.

Haribilash again had a travel at times for his social concern. One such concern was opium. He made a trip to Calcutta to express serious concern at production and use of opium. More than three-fourths of the excise revenue of Darrang was usually obtained from opium. Prior to 1860 A. D., restrictions was placed upon the cultivation of the poppy. The evil effects of unrestrained indulgence in opium were undeniable. Between 1877 A.D. and 1883 A.D., the right to sell opium in a particular *mahal* was put up to auction.<sup>55</sup>

The autobiography of Haribilash Agarwala, namely *Haribilash Agarwala Dangariar Atmajeevani* was written in Assamese language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The text has narrated the Revolt of 1857 and the social and economic condition of Assam which reflected the author's stance on Assamese society and Indian nationalism. Haribilash was gradually drawn towards Indian National Congress when he saw in many occasions the Indians discriminated by the British. He attended the session of the Indian National Congress held on 29<sup>th</sup> of December, 1896A.D.

However, any discussion on Haribilash Agarwala will be incomplete without making mention of his contribution to Assamese culture and literature. Navarangaram completely assimilated with the rural Assamese life and Haribilash also kept up that tradition of love for the culture and literature of the state. He always encourage the Assamese youths for business. He was interested in books, learnt and studied Sanskrit. He knew Sanskrit language very well and had esteem towards the language. He himself had a big library of Sanskrit books.

Jyotiprasad viewed about his grandfather Haribilash: "Haribilash inherited the good qualities of his father Navarangaram, and cultivating those qualities, he elevated the Agarwala family to an important position in Assam. He extended his father's trade and commerce and built a business network across Assam, Bengal and Orissa. With material success, Haribilash made efforts for mental and spiritual development. Quick and intelligent Haribilash made a search for spiritual knowledge and created such a need in the family. Haribilash was a worshipper of beauty. The last phase of his life was

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<sup>55</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol-v, Darrang, 1905, Pp.201-202



spent in the contemplation of this beauty. He thoroughly studied ancient Assamese literature of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva and was so overwhelmed that he printed them out to make them easily accessible to common Assamese people.”<sup>56</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, western romanticism stimulated patriotic enthusiasm and the spirit of revivalism in Assamese literature both in poetry and prose. Stress was laid initially on unfolding of the rich heritage of the past by the collection and publication of materials, literary or otherwise, lying scattered and uncared for in different parts of the province. The process started with Nathan Brown was followed up by Haribilash Agarwala. He published the *Kirton*, *Namghosha* and *Dasham* of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva in published form and thus placed near the works of the great vaisnavite saints to the common people. He also had great regards for Assamese language. He wrote an article on Lambodar Bora. Till then precious works of the two saints had been preserved only in *Sachipat* and *Tulapat* manuscripts scattered in different *Satras* and also in oral form. Haribilash undertook the difficult and time-consuming task of scouring the entire valley for such manuscripts and collecting them, documenting the oral tradition and then inviting scholars and authorities to authenticate the collection before bringing it out in book form.<sup>57</sup>

Haribilash Agarwala’s deep interest in collection of books and study of Sanskrit, his unusual enterprise in printing of Assamese vaisnavite scriptures must have created an atmosphere at home which made the family member sensitive and curious towards the mysteries of books and writings. Haribilash himself had ability for writing as his small but invaluable precisely detailed autobiography shows.

It is said that he was inspired into this effort by Sadori, his mother, a devout woman who regularly chanted prayers at the *Namghar* (community prayer hall). She pointed out that since the congregation did not have any written material to read from and had to depend upon memory, numerous mistakes occurred while chanting the *Kirton*. Haribilash collect the manuscript and compiled it systematically. As Jyotiprasad writes: “It was the thirst for spiritual knowledge as also his enterprising nature which made Haribilash enter the literaru world of Sankar- Madhav and enthralled by its

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<sup>56</sup> Gohain(ed), op. cit., P.874

<sup>57</sup> Dutta, Arup Kumar., op. cit., P.24

glory...”<sup>58</sup> He also published the *Kirtan Ghosha*, *Nam Ghosha*, *Srimad Bhagavat*, *Borgeet* etc.

‘Due to the right literary environment created in the family, the Agarwalas like Bishnuprasad, Ananda Chandra and Jagweswari could establish themselves on their own right in the field of Assamese literature. Paramananda and Gopal Chandra the third and youngest son of Haribilash achieved greatly in the field of music, opened the door for the family to cultivate music and as a result Jyotiprasad and Kamalaprasad could make a mark in the field of music in Assam.’<sup>59</sup>

It was, however the third generation Agarwalas, sons and a daughter of Haribilash that showed the first signs of real creative tendencies in the fields of art and literature. Haribilash’s eldest son Bishnuprasad regularly wrote articles in ‘*Jonaki*. The biography of John Stuart Mill, translated by Bishnu Prasad, was serialised in *Jonaki*. The magazine also serialised a biography of Sankardeva written by Bishnu Prasad. Lakshminath Bezbarua in his book ‘Sankardeva’ quoted from Bishnu Prasad’s book at several places. Bishnu Prasad was the first person to discuss Sankardeva in detail.’<sup>60</sup>

**Chandra** Kumar Agarwala (1867-1938) uncle of Jyotiprasad Agarwala was the notable among journalists, apart from being a tea-planter. He was the founder editor of *Jonaki* in which age Assamese literature reached its zenith. Assamese literary ferment was on at the time under the inspired leadership of the literary giants Lakshmi Nath Bezbarua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala and Hemchandra Goswami the triad spearheading the ‘romantic movement’ in Assamese literature. ‘*Jonaki*’ became the forum of a group of eminent writers who were instrumental in bringing about a renaissance in Assamese literature in the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The romantic period in Assamese literature covering roughly half a century from 1890 to 1940 synchronized with the rise of Indian nationalism.

It is needless to say how Chandra Kumar Agarwala one of the pioneers in getting the Romantic Movement in Assamese literature started, contributed a lot for the growth and development of modern Assamese literature. The trinity behind ‘*Jonaki*’, a very crucial Assamese literacy journal was Hem Chandra Goswami, Chandra Kumar

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<sup>58</sup> Gohain(ed), op. cit., P.875

<sup>59</sup> Sarma, Satyendranath(ed), *Jyotiprasad Rachanawali*, Assam Publication Board, Guwahati, P.12

<sup>60</sup> Agarwala, B., op. cit., p.41

Agarwala and Lakshminath Bezbaruah. The florescence of the Assamese romanticism actually began with Chandra Kumar Agarwala. He contributed a lot for the growth and development of modern Assamese literature. In his two collections of poetical works *Pratima* and *Bin Baragi* the salient features of romanticism are clearly noticeable. Bezbaruah's critical comment on Chandra Kumar's *Pratima* is a stature, a collection of poems is a quotable quote: "the statue is small but of gold". Again, love of nature (*Niyar, Ban- Kunwari, Jal Kunwari*), adoration of beauty (*Sundar, Saundarya*), humanism (*Manav- Bandana, Biswa Bhawariya*), revolutionary sprit (*Bin- baragi*) and love for the poor and downtrodden (*Tezimala*) was also visible in his other poetical works.<sup>61</sup>

Maheswar Neog observed: "Chandra Kumar Agarwala (1867- 1938A.D.) made the first offering to Assamese romanticism. Son of Haribilash Agarwala, the first publisher of ancient Assamese literature, Chandra Kumar read up to the third year B.A. class at Calcutta, and took a front seat in printing and tea business in Assam. He was the founder editor and policy maker of *Jonaki* (1889A.D.), the journal that initiated romanticism. He founded and managed '*Asomiya*' (1918A.D.), *Sadiniya Asomiya* and *Tinidiniya Asomiya* all three newspapers. Bezbaruah's *Banhi* got his co- operation from the beginning and his clear thinking helped the stabilization of the spelling towards the end."<sup>62</sup> Dimbeswar Neog also praised him thus 'that sonorous poems can be written in Assamese is first proved by Chandra Kumar's poems published in *Jonaki*.' His contribution to Assamese journalism and literature was enormous.

Many Assamese critics have so far evaluated the poems of Chandra Kumar but still it is stated that his works has not yet been properly evaluated.<sup>63</sup> "In the first phase of *Jonaki* (1889-1899A.D.) and *Banhi* (1903-1933A.D.) Chandra Kumar established himself as the greatest poet through a handful of poems. Bezbaruah writes in his autobiography about '*Bon konwari*' published in the first volume of *Jonaki*. One day, Rai Bahadur Jaganath Baruah and Manik Chandra Baruah asked me to read out *Bon konwari* to them and they overwhelmed listening to it. I understand their feeling. They

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<sup>61</sup> Barpujari, S.K. & Arun Chandra Bhuyan (ed), 1999, Political History of Assam Vol-I, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, P.144

<sup>62</sup> Neog, Maheswar., *Asomiya Sahityar Ruprekha*, Guwahati, P.56

<sup>63</sup> Saikia, Nagen, P.76

could not imagine that a beautiful poem like that of Wordsworth could be written in Assamese by a college student.”<sup>64</sup>

More than even his parents, Jyotiprasad Agarwala came under the influence of Chandrakumar who tutored him as if his own son. Jyotiprasad’s biography on Chandra Kumar testifies to the pivotal impact of the scholarly and cultured Chandrakumar upon the child’s. Chandrakumar able to aware Jyotiprasad’s sensitivity and had tried to realize his own untranslated dreams through Jyotiprasad. According to Jyotiprasad love for man is followed by Chandrakumar’s passion for motherland. Such noble passions coupled with his imaginative impulse and made him a great poet. He was the worshiper of man. He wrote:

*“Manuhei deb, manuhei seb*

*Manuh bine nai keb...*” (Man is the Godhead. Do service to man. Nobody is superior to man. Worship him)

He inspired and supported Jyotiprasad all through his artistic career. Jyotiprasad had his journalistic stint when he was a college going boy. During the time Chandrakumar Agarwala was busy with the publication of the journal named *Asamiya*. Chandrakumar’s life was full of struggles all through. He was torn between business and literature. Jyotiprasad mentioned this opposite situation and career of Chandrakumar Agarwala in his biography of Chandrakumar.<sup>65</sup> Jyotiprasad described Chandrakumar as the first revolutionary poet in Assamese. Chandrakumar rebelled against all that is inhuman, unethical and immoral.

Jyotiprasad himself wrote that Chandra Kumar endeavored to inculcate high ambitions and ideals into the children of the household from a teen age. He taught them how democracy worked, and how the opinion of the majority must count if individual units of the family were to function smoothly. At Tezpur he often used to take the young children out on picnics. When there was a difference of opinion amongst the youngsters as to where they should go, he would take a vote and then chose the spot elected by the majority. In this way he taught the youngsters the rule of democracy from

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<sup>64</sup> Bezbaruah, Lakshminath., *Mor Jiwan Sowaran*, P.26

<sup>65</sup> Gohain(ed), op. cit. P.

a tender age'.<sup>66</sup> From Chandra Kumar Jyotiprasad learnt concepts such as dignity of labour, equality of every individual in society as well as the principles of socialism. Above all, Chandra Kumar inspired in him a love for the Assamese language, literature and culture. "He tried his best to get the children interested in the literary culture that had been a tradition in the Agarwala family."<sup>67</sup>

Progressive Chandrakumr had introduced into the Tamolbari Tea Estate some revolutionary concepts. He had opened up a grocery in the garden run on a co-operative basis by the tea- workers themselves. He too had started a school for the children of the workers.

**Ananda** Chandra Agarwala established himself as an unparalleled translator of English poetry into Assamese. Ananda Chandra Agarwala also established himself as an unequalled translator of English poetry into Assamese.

Passion for music was a family tradition for Jyotiprasad. **Paramananda** Agarwala, father of Jyotiprasad Agarwala was also an eminent singer. An accomplished singer and instrumentalist, Paramananda was a member of the Tezpur 'Concert' associated with the historic Ban stage. Paramananda won particular praise for his skills, and was a musician associated with Lakhiram Barua, one of the initiators of a musical revival in Assam. In his organ he used to play the folk music of Assam. Even the *padas* (verses) of *Kirton Ghosa* and *Nam Gosha* were being played in his organ. Paramananda's devotion to music influenced his children and family too and 'it was due to him that Assam has been able to have them as exponents of music.'<sup>68</sup> He not only did inspired the children of the family to cultivate music, he himself experimented enormously both with musical compositions and blending the music of outside with that of Assam. He familiarized Jyotiprasad with the idiom of both classical and folk- music. Jyotiprasad wrote: "one day I returned home from rehearsals of *Sonit Kunwari* at the Ban Theatre and heard my father singing a verse from the *Kirton* with musical accompaniment on the organ. I had never heard Assamese music being played on the organ before. Then father played an Assamese song on the organ, and then yet another.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, P.378

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, P.379

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, P.377

That night I could not sleep. The entire night I spent contemplating as to how I could use Assamese tunes and music in my play *Sonit Konwari...*”<sup>69</sup>

The youngest son of Gopalchandra, as also Khageshwar, a nephew of Haribilash also displaced his great aptitude for music.

Like Bishnu Prasad, **Krishna** Prasad also regularly wrote poems, songs and articles in *Jonaki* and *Bijuli*. He published a small book ‘Brahma Sangeet’ a collection of songs. Had he not died young, he could have made solid contributions to the Assamese literature.

**Kamalprasad** Agarwala, the third generation contributed the Assamese through giving the tune of the Assam Sangit *O’ Mor Aponar Desh*. His work *Tezpurar Pakee* is an important contribution for the History of the Agarwalas and the Assamese political and social condition.<sup>70</sup>

The sole daughter in the family, **Jageswari**, was a skilful writer, particularly for children. Chandrakumar paid a tribute to her literary talent by composing a poem, *Ashirwad* in her honour.

The youngest and brightest of all the Agarwalas is **Jyotiprasad** Agarwala, the son of Paramananda Agarwala and the grandson of Haribilash Agarwalawho gave a leadership to the cultural and political life of this land. He born on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1903A.D., to Paramananda Agarwala and Kironmoyee. He gave new dynamic and great dimensions to Assamese dance, drama and song and established the aesthetic view of the Assamese people through his works and writings. His poetry in many plays, songs constitutes a peak of poetic achievement. His writings and expressions are virtual fountain heads from which spring ever new meanings at each successive reading. Above all, he had a genius for technique that transformed even what cannot be given a dramatic form into a drama. Only a genius will be capable of instilling as much power, force, emphasis, depth and beauty as he has done in his writings

He was inspired to enter the field of literature by the study and achievements in the field by his uncles Bishnu Prasad and Chandra Kumar. His family shone brightly in an environment of poetry, drama and music. Bishnuprasad, Chandrakumar and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, Pp. 4-5

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Mina Agarwala, wife of Kamalprasad Agarwala by author on 21.2.2012 at parowa

Krishnaprasad instilled in him the creative urge not only in literature and music but also in other facets of fine arts such as painting and sculpture.

He had his early education at two institutions there, the George School and the Dibrugarh Government High School. In these periods he got Chandrakumar as his mentor. The first impulse to make a film crossed Jyotiprasad's mind when he was a college student in Calcutta in the mid- twenties of the nineteenth century. Leaving his collegiate education incomplete in Calcutta, he left for England in 1926 A.D. apparently for higher education and got himself admitted to Edinburg University. But his interest and possibly, ambition lay elsewhere, so he left his education incomplete. For, during his Edinburg days he undertook a course, on the sideline, in western music which later proved very useful in his wonderful musical innovations and experiments he did with modern Assamese song. After about three years in England he again left his studies and went off to Germany. Towards the end of 1929A.D. leaving his academic studies at Edinburgh incomplete, he went to Berlin to join Himangshu Ray and tutor himself in cinematic art.

The timing was significant because it was the time when cinema had already passed its first faltering steps of being a mere medium of fun and entertainment and had already developed into a distinct form of visual art with a new language and an independent entity. It was in reality, the golden age of silent films in the West. Jyotiprasad met Himanshu Roy in Germany and it was obviously with Roy's recommendation that he got an entry into the UFA studio in Berlin. He decided to try his luck at film- making. He was with the UFA for just seven months, but in that apparently brief period of practical training so keen was his interest and such deep involvement, that he learnt much about the details of the multi -faceted art of cinema and acquired a deep insight into the distinctions of cinematic language. The six months he stayed at Berlin undertaking training in film- direction and technique made a profound impact upon him. There he absorbed the prevalent trends of German, French, Russia, British and American cinema which enabled him to discover not only the artistic merits of Western cinema, but also the drawbacks of the emerging Indian cinema.

It was a heady, intellectual atmosphere and Jyotiprasad reveled in it when he was abroad for completing his formal education. European art was trying to find a new

idiom for itself. New philosophical concepts were being aired; young minds were in the thrall of Marxian concepts and dreaming of a classless Ideal. European sensibility was grappling with the changed circumstances, especially the social paradoxes that had been the outcome of the First World War, the Industrial Revolution and above all the socialistic vision. Jyotiprasad was young and his mind was like a sponge, soaking in the cosmopolitan ambience and its many nuances. Though he never embraced Marxism as an ideology, the bent of mind which always places workers as well as the needy at the forefront, was reinforced in England. There he became familiar with the European artistic, dramatic, literary, musical and cinematic genres. The intellectual stamp of his stay abroad is visible in his writings- the easy familiarity he displays with European cultural trends even while writing about Indian culture, whether it be the dramatic philosophy or modernist art.

He has great impact upon modern Assamese culture and literature. He was a prolific writer and an active social organiser. He is a dramatist, a poet, a musician and an author of some literary theoretical writings. He is the maker of the first Assamese film *Jaimati* (1935A.D.). He knew the importance of mass- media and mass-communication and their all- pervasive impact on the psyche of the common people. His impact upon present Assamese society can be surmised from the warm enthusiasm with which Jyoti Divas is observed in Assam.

The spirit of revivalism was echoed and re- echoed in the poems of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. He found the stage ready through the representation of the Assamese elite class who insisted in establishing the language based Assamese nationalist identity. But Jyotiprasad Agarwala had departed from the mainstream linguistic nationalism and accepted a broader perspective by accepting different cultural traits like folk songs (*loka geet, biya geet*), traditional dance and ballads and poured nationalist flavor in it by composing songs and poems himself. Whether it be through the lullabies sang by his mother or the folk- tales told by his grandmother, his imagination developed like a flower bud in his early life. The women folk of the household too played their part in honing his artistic talents. Like most Assamese women of her times his mother, Kiranmoyee was a fine singer of devotional verses *Ai nam, Biya nam* etc. The fairy tales told by his grandmother inspired the child Jyotiprasad into painting on the wall of his room the picture of a fairy and perhaps it was this image conjured up by his young imagination which later helped him visualize the *Swapnadevi* or dream goddess of his



play *Sonit Kunwari*. He had acquired an artistic sprit from his musical minded father. Performances by local dance troupes acquainted him with both folk music and dances.<sup>71</sup> This all influences made him familiar with the entire gamut of the Assamese way of life, both urban and rural. He also remained for a long period away from Assam and developed a cosmopolitan mentality and finally came back to his own land to enrich its culture.

As Navarangaram and Haribilash had good relations with the various hill tribes so the bonds remained strong even after Navarangaram's death. Thus tribal chieftains were come and stay at *Pokee* as Haribilash's guests. From them child Jyotiprasad learnt about tribal culture and incredible ethnic mosaic that undivided Assam was. Later, the theme of unity in diversity became central to his concern along with other nationalists like Bishnu Prasad Rabha Jyotiprasad made it his lifelong mission to forge bonds between the ethnic groups inhabiting the hills and valleys of Assam.

He gave new, dynamic and great dimensions to Assamese dance, drama and songs and established the Aesthetic view of the Assamese people through his works and writings. In the realm of cultural production, though not blind, he had respect for the old traditional Assamese cultural forms and expressions. He wrote the play '*Sonit Konwari*' when he was a class ten student and changed the trend of modern Assamese drama, completely revolutionized the trend of musical composition of the modern Assamese songs with a new diction and rich contents and setting them to a completely novel mix of Assamese folk tunes and western music. He showed a new enthusiasm to recreate these traditional forms by conducting them with western forms and idioms. He accompanied the local cultures and identities with the world culture and the outcome was a wonderful form of Assamese songs which was deeply rooted in Assamese cultural tradition and was refreshingly new. The opening song of *Sonit konwari* '*Gase gase pati dile*' has thoughtful mixture of modern-western music and the Assamese folk lore which is called as *biyar geet* and performed it in *Ban Stage*.<sup>72</sup> He also took *japi* one of the important elements of the peasant to the limelight and placed it as one of the symbol of Assamese identity. Amarjyoti Choudhury viewed that Jyotiprasad Agarwala's plays, poems and songs inspired the neglected and miserable Assamese

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<sup>71</sup> Dutta, A.K., op. cit., P31

<sup>72</sup> Personal letter of Jyotiprasad Agarwala to the Ban Stage organizer dt. 9/3/1927

culture to sing again in joy.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, his plays also revealed a clear departure from the prevailing themes and modes which was mainly inclined by the Bengali plays. The themes of his plays were mainly on local contexts and with all its uniqueness it developed into a new Assamese variety.<sup>74</sup> In 1950 A.D., Dibrugarh Gyandayini Samiti through their pamphlet named Jyotiprasad Agarwala's songs as *Jyoti Sangeet*.<sup>75</sup>

Bharat Barpujari wrote that there were six phases of *Jyoti Sangit's*<sup>76</sup> history. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Assamese songs were influence by Hindusthani and Bengali songs. Lakhiram Baruah, Padmadhar Chaliha and others though wrote Assamese songs but their tunes were in Bengali and Hindusthani songs. Lakshminatha Bezbaruah's songs were also though written in Assamese provers but they also sang in Bengali and Hindusthani tunes. Rabindranath Tagors tune and Dwijenlal's tunes were the inspiring tunes of Assamese songs. During this time Ambikagiri Raychoudhury tried to acquire the lost pride of *Bargeet*<sup>77</sup> and he also become successful in that but still then Assamese folk songs which known as *Loka geet* were regarded as lower class's songs. In this critical condition Jyotiprasad invented the Assamese songs which were pure with Assamese tunes. He first tried it in his first play *Sonit Konwari*. He mixed the old songs with the new tunes and discovered a new Assamese song which later on named as *Jyoti Sangeet*. In its first phase he mixed it with Assamese folk songs like *biyanam*, *ainam*, *bangeet*, *huchari*, *bihugeet*, *tokari* and thus born a new highly developed songs and able to take its place in the Assamese world of songs.<sup>78</sup>

In its second phase he admixture the tune of *Bargeet* with the Hindusthani songs and created Assamese own songs and thus started the new age of highly developed Assamese and folk songs.<sup>79</sup> Its third phase started during the time when Jyotiprasad Agarwala was in Foreign. He started mixing foreign tunes with Assamese songs. In his play *Karengar Ligiri* such songs were sang. In the fourth phase he started apply harmony in Assamese songs after his return from Europe. In his first film *Jaymati* he tuned such songs. The fifth phase started when he started to apply the highest poetical

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<sup>73</sup> Dutta, Akhil ranjan(ed)., 2012, *Culture identity politics Jyotiprasad Agarwala as a social transformer*, DVS Publication, Guwahati, P.13

<sup>74</sup> Gohain(ed), op. cit., P.

<sup>75</sup> *Jyotisangeet Ghosana Patra*, Dibrugarh Gyandayini Samiti, 1950, *Jagriti*.

<sup>76</sup> Songs which were innovated by Jyotiprasad Agarwala are known as '*Jyoti Sangit*'.

<sup>77</sup> The songs which were written by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva caled *Bargeet*.

<sup>78</sup> Barpujari, Bharat., *Jyoti Sangeetar Itibritta*, Gagana, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1882, Pp.1-2

<sup>79</sup> Barpujari., op. cit., P.2

expressions and phrases. It came to visible in his second film *Indramalati*<sup>80</sup> and in the next phase he started applying the grammatical and classical tune of Indian songs in Assamese songs and thus inherited a highly developed Assamese songs.<sup>81</sup>

His close acquaintance with Western lyricist and composers and assimilation of their music, was another highlight of Jyotiprasad's stay abroad. Now we have the base of Assamese music. Along with this we have two segments of Hindustani music. Added to this, the 'harmony' of Western music has crossed our threshold. Again, in his dramas he also concedes the influence of European drama, particularly that of Maeterlinck's *Monnavana*. There is also the possibility of Shakespearean influence in that the play is set in a village inhabited by an imaginary tribe called Rukmi, much in the manner of many plays by the former.

Thus he retained all the folk traditions which were indifferent parts of the Assamese common people in his creative works and took it as a major tool for his nationalist activities. The elements of Assamese folk culture in Jyotiprasad Agarwala's writings are also the example of his love for the culture. It differentiate Jyotiprasad Agarwala's notion of nationalism from the general Assamese nationalism of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During the period the rebellious spirit of Non- Cooperation Movement inspired the people and the whole country was rising as one with a nationalistic fervour demanding freedom from the foreign rule under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Jyotiprasad the born challenger that he was, jumped into the fight and joining the non-cooperation movement began enlisting volunteers and organising volunteer camps in the rural areas of his district Tezpur. He was arrested twice in 1932A.D. and sentenced to fifteenth months R.I and fined ₹. 500.00.<sup>82</sup>

Jyotiprasad's involvement in the Non- Cooperation Movement had also kept him away from theatrical and other activities. Since he was determined not to pass out from a Government run educational institution, he was sent to Calcutta to sit for his examinations from the National School set up by Chittaranjan Das. He also studied for a while for his Intermediate degree in arts at the National University set up by the same

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<sup>80</sup>Personal letter of Jyotiprasad to Editor of Saptahik Nilachal dted. 9/8/1940

<sup>81</sup>Barpujari., op. cit., Pp3-4

<sup>82</sup>Sarma, Arup., 2005, *Jyotiprasad as a film maker and the forsaken frontiers*, Gauhati Cine Club, Guwahati, Pp. 20-22

freedom fighter. However with the blow of the freedom movement blowing throughout India, and adoring as he was about theatre and writing, Jyotiprasad left the university when it was shut down midway through his studies and returned to Assam to pursue political and cultural activities.<sup>83</sup>

In 1924 A.D. his play *Sonit Kunwari* had been staged for the first time in Ban Theatre. Jyotiprasad himself played the role of *Swapnadevi*. It was said that his delivery of dialogue, the theatrical props designed to give a dream-like floating aura to that section of the play and above all, the wonderful dance that he performed, enthralled the audience. Till that time Assamese theatre had an essentially theological base, with occasional historical or social themes. As a romantic dance drama, *SonitKunwari* was a different genre altogether. Although the legend itself was taken from the '*Kumar Haran*' of Ananta Kandali, Jyotiprasad avoided the religious aspect and focused only on the romance between Usha and Aniruddha. The lyrics and dance forms combined so well with the theme itself, that the play has been addressed as a pioneering work in the gradual secularization of the Assamese dramatic tradition. A section of people opine that *Sonit Konwari* is basically a poetic play. One can see very little action, only extravagant music all around. Such a play reminds one of the similar plays like *Peter Pan* and *Dear Brutus* of James Barrie or those of T.S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats.<sup>84</sup>

The fact that Jyotiprasad was a non-compromising rebel was reflected in the pioneering efforts in making *Jaymati* in the midst of challenging problems. Assam in the thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was just beginning to get the feel of modernism. But in all other aspects of life it was extremely backward and undeveloped.<sup>85</sup> After the annexation of Assam by the British, Assam had been reduced to the stature of a remote outpost, cut off by its geographical and political location and lack of facilities for communication from other parts of India. The scientific and technological infrastructure for a modern society was non-existent, the outlook and attitudes of the Assamese society towards modernism filtering the western colonial education were still to take shape. Thus cultural trends which then had prevailed in mainstream India such as cinema-making had not yet reached the region. That time, not many people in Assam had seen movies, nor were film technicians and equipment available then.

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<sup>83</sup> Dutta, A. Kumar., *op. cit.*, P42

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p43

<sup>85</sup> Sarma, A., *op. cit.*, P.22

By the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century cinema had taken root in India. Cities such as Bombay, Calcutta and Madras became important centers for the cinematic medium. It was, primarily the era of silent films. Providing a sound track for dialogue and background music was still at an experimental stage. Between 1931A.D. and 1934A.D. more than 30 regional films were screened all over India. During the time the Indian cinema in the silent era were least memorable from the artistic point of view, but were also, because of their mythological- historical content, farthest from the existing socio- realistic milieu. The most can be say is Dada Saheb Phalke played a reformist role and did tremendous work as a proponent of Indian cinema.<sup>86</sup>

But Assam was an exception. The state has an age old tradition of drama. Ever since the days of Sankardeva, folk drama varieties such as *Bhaona* had fascinated audiences, as well as imparted moral lessons. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a powerful secular theatre movement also was begin in Assam. The neo- Vaishnavite movement launched by Sankardeva in Assam in the fifteenth century greatly contributed to the development of art and literature. Sankardeva realized the effectiveness of the dramatic medium in propagating his truth. He knew that nothing could serve his purpose better than the visual representation of scenes and incidents drawn from the life of Krishna and Rama. Therefore, he wrote plays which besides giving entertainment acted as a powerful instrument for carrying the Vaishnava ideas to the masses.

They helped not only the growth of popular stage but also the development of music and dancing in Assam. Credit also goes to these plays for their creation of a special kind of poetry known as *bhatimas* (hymns) and their contribution to the emergence of Assamese prose. Before the advent of Sankardeva there were some folk dramatic entertainments in Assam, rich in songs and music. The performances of these institutions like *Ojapali* (choral dance), *putalanach* (puppet dance), *dhulias* (drammers) and others are still in existence in the villages. Sankardeva might have got the basic ideas in writing the *AnkiyaNatas* from these folk dramatic institutions. *Putalanach* (puppet dance) has been one of the most popular performing art forms in Assam and is believed by some people to be even older than *Ojapali* tradition. However, during the Ahom rule, the dramatic literature received a great impetus. *Ankiyanatas* were now

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<sup>86</sup> Dutta, A. K., op. cit., P.11

performed not only in *Namghar* but also in the royal courts on social occasions. Jyotiprasad himself had written *Sunit Konwari* when he was in school.

The first expression of the nationalist ethos in Assamese drama is seen in mythological and historical plays which began to be written towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and came out in good numbers during the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It may be noted in passing that of all branches of literature, drama is the most effective medium for expressing ideas and conveying messages to the people, for even the illiterate knows, by watching the performance of a play what it is the dramatist wants to say.

This is the reason why the Assamese *Ankiya Nats* written by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva could be so effectively used not only as a means of amusement but also a vehicle for educating the masses who took an active part in the theatre.

It was true that, Jyotiprasad had certain advantages. He born into a prosperous family and could raise the finance needed for the end eavor. He had seen Calcutta and Edinburg on the pretext of pursuing higher education which he never completed and come into contact with leading film personalities of those days such as Himangsu Roy and Devika Rani. But to think of making a film in the small, sleepy town of Tezpur in those days undoubtedly possessed strength of character and some courage and determination. Not Mumbai, even Calcutta the nearest film- making centre was more than a thousand miles away from his home still making a film in Assamese language within an unfavourable environment was really one of the many challenges in his eventful life.<sup>87</sup>

He took a far more daring decision to move still farther away from his home at Tezpur, the district headquarter town, to the remote Bholaguri, his family tea- estate. There he built up an improvised film- studio named '*Chitraban*' using the estates huge 'leaf house'. It was the symbol of a young artist's courage, confidence and idiomitable national spirit. But in that time it was apparently sheer madness. It is also noteworthy that apart from freedom struggle, his entire thought process centered round the creation of *Jaymati*. He made his Tezpur home into a regular film workshop imparting a new style of film acting to the artists which he learned in the West and was still unknown in

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<sup>87</sup> Sarma,A, op. cit., P.45

Indian cinema. Aware of the limitations of his resources, he had wanted to make a silent film. But an individual named Faizi Bhai from Lahore had approached him with the suggestion of use a sound- recording system developed by the former. Therefore, Jyotiprasad had changed his plans and decided to make a 'talkie'. He engaged Faizi to design and developed a battery operated sound recording mechanism for his film. In an utterly backward far off place devoid of modern electric power- supply, he possibly had no other option. Film processing facilities not being available in Assam, he had no means of immediately knowing about the quality of his shots or that of the sound- track. And it almost totally crushed him. In the final stage of production, alone and bankrupt he discovered to his utter shock and dismay, in a Lahore studio that the system was a disastrous failure. At last, he performed the unbelievable expertise of dubbing the voices of over thirty odd characters including those of the females without so much of a break till the film was restored to its presentable form.<sup>88</sup>

*Jaymati* being a film of the seventeenth century Ahom rule in Assam, Jyotiprasad had to undertook considerable research work into the Ahom histories, travelers, notes and writings of eminent scholars to reconstruct the period with sets, costumes, wears and ornaments, manners and customs and the speech- patterns of the characters belonging to varied social groups. He himself was very critic of the artificial stagey acting followed in the Indian cinema of the time and therefore he trained his artists in the natural acting pattern of the western cinema. He himself wrote the songs for the film himself and composed the music in which again he was no less a genius. He even designed the choreography and it was a spectacle of sorts. Producer, director, script and dialogue writer, lyricist, music- director, set designer, choreographer all in himself Jyotiprasad was to be precise a modern day auteur, symbolizing the ultimate film maker.<sup>89</sup>

Due to the lack of cinema- halls in Assam exhibiting films was a major problem. He himself had to set up a touring cinema unit to take his film to towns and villages in Assam. Travelling in bullock- carts and using godowns as makeshift cinema- halls. Behind *Pakee* he erected an Assam type hall and named it Jonaki, the first historic cinema- hall of Assam. Later he also set up the Jayashree Cinema Hall at Nowgaon. Not only he was the pioneering film maker but also responsible for the setting up a film

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<sup>88</sup>Dutta. A. K., op. cit., P11

<sup>89</sup> Sarma, A., op. cit., Pp. 12-13

making company and a film studio, but he also paved the way for cinematic exhibition in Assam.

The story of *Jaymati* was taken from a drama of the name ‘*Jaymati Konwari*’ written by the notable Assamese literate Lakshminath Bezbaruah.<sup>90</sup> Padmanath Gohain Baruah’s *Jaymati* (1900) is the first historical play in Assamese. There are two more plays written on the same theme. They are Lakshminath Bezbaruah’s *Jaymati Kuwari* (1915) and Dandinath Kalita’s (1890-1955) *Satir Tez* (1933). A special feature of these plays is the introduction of Naga characters to enhance the dramatic effect. The girl Dalimi introduced by Bezbaruah in *Jaymati Kunwari* is the best of the Naga characters. It was a perfect chemistry of myth and reality and depicts a disturbing period in the seventeenth century Ahom kingdom. Two characters lay at the core of this drama- princess Jaymati and her husband, prince Gadapani. This historical play told of the martyrdom of Jaymati. How her husband deprived of the Ahom throne through the machinations of his rival *Lora Raja*, had to flee to the Naga Hills in order to escape death or injury. Lora Raja’s henchmen, in order to discover his escape place took into custody his spouse, Jaymati and tortured her mercilessly. But inspite of her agony, the heroic princess did not reveal it to them, choosing to die rather than betray her husband.

However, while making a film out of a book Jyotiprasad did not accept Bezbaruah’s play in its entirety but adapted it to suit the cinematic medium. The dialogue too was altered and choreographic items of local interest, such as the *Jhapi* dance and *Khata-sur badh Bhaona* (folk drama) were introduced.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala used a creative of the film medium presenting a very familiar and authentic social milieu. He, with a deep understanding of Assamese life and culture and a real insight into the art of cinema used his creative imagination and artistic sense to reiterate the tradition of Assamese people and culture through the legendary princess. He clearly and consciously departed from the stagey acting and the artificial mode of dialogue delivery found in the Bengali and the Hindi films of those days and used the natural form of cinematic acting which he saw in the west. He also used the special Assamese speech- patterns and local idioms for greater authenticity. He consulted eminent authorities, historians, and traveller’s notes, sketches in religious Scripts and even myths and legends and visited *Satras*, the Vaishnavite religious

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<sup>90</sup>Personal letter of Jyotiprasad Agarwala from lakshminath Bezbaruah dted. 23/7/ 1935



sanctuaries to create his sets. He studiedly and most effectively used the behavioural attitudes of the Assamese aristocratic women as also of the common man on the street. All these point to the unmistakable fact that the making of *Jaymoti* was not just a mechanical uninspired attempt at flashing something novel, but was the result of deep thought, clear intent and extremely painstaking effort of an honest and serious artist to create something. It also has a social significance relevant to the time the film was made.

Again, the time (1920-1930A.D.) were a period of great political upheaval in the country as the whole nation was rising as one under Mahatma Gandhi against the imperialist rule and Jyotiprasad himself was deeply involved in the freedom struggle. In such a charged socio- political ambience, it was only natural that an artist and revolutionary like Jyotiprasad's choice would fall on a story of protest against injustice and tyranny. Considering the prevalent run of the Hindi and Bengali films, it was a bold decision. The decision on the one hand is proof of his realistic thinking and film sense while on the other hand reflects a calculated risk. It is clear that he returned from the West with a distinct concept of film as an art and for him its creative aspects had greater significance than its entertainment value.

Such insight and seriousness in selecting a story and visualizing its artistic and cinematic possibilities is what made the beginning of Assamese cinema peculiarly meaningful. It is strikingly in contrast with the trend of Indian cinema of the time both in style and content. It is this depth of cinematic conception as a serious art that makes Jyotiprasad Agarwala one of the most eminent film personalities in the beginning of the Indian talkie.

The *mahurat* of the film venture in Assamese was performed at Chitraban studio on January 15, 1934A.D. Many were the obstacles that Jyotiprasad had to overcome in order to complete the shooting. His parents, who wholeheartedly supported the venture, died that very year, leaving him strapped for finances. It is, therefore, a rare saga of remarkable courage that against such dim, uninspiring background, utter lack of technical knowhow, artistic ambience and commercial prospect, Jyotiprasad Agarwala ventured to make the first Assamese film. In spite of all the obstacles, the film was released on March 10, 1935A.D. In his essay '*Asamat Film Shilpa Garhat Asamiya*

*Darshakar Dayitta*', gives us an account of the pains he took to impart historical realism to his film.<sup>91</sup>

When the film was released, to Jyotiprasad's great panic and astonished disbelief, it received only an unexcited response from the audience.<sup>92</sup> They were delighted and possibly even proud to see an Assamese film on the screen, but it fell far short of their expectations used as they were to the song and dance- filled dramatics of the Hindi films or the sentimental Bengali tear- jerkers of the time. *Jaymati* had an expenditure of fifty thousand rupees, inclusive of the interest and less than half of that amount has come back. Chitrlekha Movie tone had incurred a loss of twenty eight thousand for *Jaymoti* and that loss is a loss for all times. However, leading personalities like Lakshminath Bezbarua, the author of *Jaymati*,<sup>93</sup> Gopinath Bardaloi the undisputed leader of the freedom movement in Assam, Hirawatee Gohain Baruani<sup>94</sup> and even Pramathesh Barua, who was just beginning to make waves in Calcutta with his new kind of films praised the film and credited Jyotiprasad with creating a real life Assam of the Ahom days. He argued that the film obviously had well researched and artistically designed settings, make- up and costumes that befit a period film.<sup>95</sup>

It is true that the film was defective on its technical aspect, especially for its poor sound recording, inadequate lighting in indoor sequences, lack of re-recording and such other faulty technicalities which were only to be expected in a predominantly backward state like Assam in the early thirties.<sup>96</sup> Though, the film received appreciation from the Assamese audience, since there was a dearth of cinema- going public. He was financially ruined and emotionally shattered. *Jaymati* could not be a box- office success because it did not pander to popular taste. It was in fact, an art- film rather than a populist entertainer.

But every work of art must always be related to the milieu in which it was created and therefore, it stood out as the most significant attempt during the thirties of the nineteenth century. In the thirties, the young man crossed over courageously from the stage to the films and joined force in making films with wider social perspectives

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<sup>91</sup> Personal letter from Jyotiprasad Agarwala, dted.26/6/48

<sup>92</sup>Personal letter to Jyotiprasad Agarwala from Nilomoni, Eleye Cinema, dted. 5/6/1949

<sup>93</sup> Personal letter of Jyotiprasad Agarwala by Lakshminath Bezbaruah dted 23/7/1935

<sup>94</sup>Personal letter of Jyotiprasad Agarwala from Hirawati Gohain Baruahni dted. 14/12/1935

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., P. 26

<sup>96</sup>Personal letter of Jyotiprasad Agarwala from Pabin, Eleye Cinema, dted. 6/6/1949

and greater insights into human conditions and values. He succeeded in creating a serious, socially meaningful movie by competent and dedication and had the basic understanding of the language and knows the grammar of film making. In giving priority to visual communication rather than through oral, Jyotiprasad evolved a cinematic technique that was far ahead of its times. Compared to the high flown rhetoric or mythological cinema of those times, *Jaymati* is indeed unique. Equally innovative was Jyotiprasad's replacement of exaggerated histrionics with realistic acting. The art-film movement in India picks up a trend which was visible in *Jaymati* much later.

The unmistakable visual quality, the realistic setting, the cinematic acting and imaginative use of music that enriched *Jaymati* despite its poor technical quality bore testimony to Jyotiprasad's deep understanding of film as a complex new art form having potentialities with great artistic and social possibilities.<sup>97</sup> No one so far has been able to give a true account of how royal abodes of bamboo and wood were made in those days or how they were furnished. Most critics are astonished at his success in creating a credible Ahom environment. At that time producing an Assamese film appeared impossible. The main problem was getting finances. Next was the social obstacle towards getting actresses. Thirdly, returns on the money required to make a film that can attract the audience. With the circumstances in which it was made, one can assuredly claim that the film is a classic of its genre and deserves a pride of place in the annals of Indian cinema.<sup>98</sup>

Hiren Gohain has rightly pointed out the most imaginative and moving use of the background score in this sequence based on an Assamese marriage song that coordinates the bribes farewell.<sup>99</sup> Padum Barua, the eminent Assamese film-maker, who forty years after Jyotiprasad, tried to match his path breaking endeavour by making another remarkable Assamese film, "*Ganga Chilanir Pakhi*", holds the view that the unique sequence in *Jaymati* has a universally emotive appeal.<sup>100</sup> In one scene, an old woman, from the motley crowd that daily gathered around *Jaymati* shackled to a tree, bent with age, rushes out in explosive anger and rushes at the king's men, trying to beat them up with her stick for their inhuman treatment of a woman. This spontaneous angry

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<sup>97</sup> Letter from Eleye Cinema, Jorhat to Jyotiprasad Agarwala, dtd. 8/6/1948

<sup>98</sup> Dutta, A. K., op. cit., P58

<sup>99</sup> Gohain (ed.), op. cit., P.7

<sup>100</sup> Sarma, A., op. cit., P. 40

outburst in reaction to a clear injustice and cruel act symbolized the collective subconscious of the suppressed and tormented people. It also represents excellent combination of Jyotiprasad's deep insight into human psyche and his cinematic imagination. It is said that Jyotiprasad Agarwala has always been marginalized in the national cinematic history.<sup>101</sup> No doubt there were numerous defects, both cinematic and technical. But that the film was actually completed and shown was itself a miracle. *Jaymoti*, in a historical perspective, we can admit the artistic merits of the film and also its importance as a pioneering piece of cinematic work in the tradition of Assamese cinema.

As a creative writer and dominant literary personality Jyotiprasad's writings had a positive influence to his pursuit of cinematic excellence. His deep literary sense and insight helped him to choose the right story, visualize its depth and sensitive nuances and follow its real drift to the proper cinematic climax. Because of his deep involvement with literature it had not been possible for him to keep his films away from the 'beauty of literature'. He was of the view that stage acting is artificial, film acting is natural. In the same way, the situations created in the film must also be natural. But even the Bengali and the Hindustani films have not yet attained the level of actual film acting. The directors of even famous Bengali and Hindi films have failed to distinguish between acting for the stage and for the cinema. These Bengali and Hindustani films have shaped the taste of the Assamese people. In *Jaymoti*, Jyotiprasad followed the model of English and Russian films in both direction and acting. Besides realistic acting, he gave special attention to specific Assamese speech patterns. These observations about cinema and contemporary Indian films clearly showed that Jyotiprasad was far ahead of his time in both understanding and concept of cinema as a new form of art. His creative imagination and realistic application of the film medium enabled him to present the story of *Jaymati* as a touchable tragedy devoid of immature sentimentality and at the same time as a silent heroism bereft of strange heroics.

He viewed that the foreign films would deeply influence the Assamese youths and students, change their thinking pattern and make them trusting to fall for western values and ideas unsuitable to our traditions. Since film-making entails heavy financial involvement, the Assamese film makers possibly could never dare to take the task. The

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., P.52

task of film making is an absolute struggle against a variety of odds that rear in the neglected backwardness of the regions themselves. He went so far as to suggest that the Assamese for its own survival against the powerful influence of foreign films must continue to make films of its own even at financial losses. According to him, in order to entertain the public, at least twenty thousand rupees would be required for a film which is a least amount. But it is really difficult to earn that amount by distributing the film twice or thrice in Assam. In order to produce a film in Assam, the reduction of cost has to be resorted to otherwise the producer of the film who seeks to develop the film industry by making Assamese films won't be able to survive. All the films to be produced in Assam in the future, the producer must have to calculate all the expenses. According to him it would not be easy to produce films in Assam professionally.

Apart from the formidable problem of 'money not coming back' the other obstacle deterring the growth of film industry in Assam is dearth of actresses. This became a difficult task to bring women out for films. It is all the more difficult to find good acting talents. Most of the girls were half literate from villages. Though the Assamese girls have started appearing before the public through singing, dancing and theatres, they were still reluctant to cast their shadows, as it were, on the screen of the films. Unless talented girls come out of the elite educated class, the Assamese producer shall not be able to make good films like Bengali and Hindustani films.

He cleared that film is a complex and compound art. It needs serious study, deep understanding and creative effort to attain mastery over it. In his article regarding the film industry in Assam he argued that The Assamese needed the film industry, but there is acute scarcity of all the implements and materials. He cleared the reasons why Assamese cinema does not compare favorably with the Indian and European films. First off all, our country lacks the scientific know how of making films. Secondly, there is a scarcity of individuals trained in quality film- craft. Added to that, there has to be a well-equipped proper studio with all the technicians, if a film is to be made according to one's desire. Then it becomes easier for one to make a film after giving it a good thought and consideration. Again, a studio cannot be established merely for production of Assamese films alone. An ordinary well equipped studio would cost between one lakh and two lakhs and to run it with technicians and staff of general establishment it will cost more. To maintain that it won't be sufficient to produce three or four Assamese films a year. So it is just inconceivable to set up a sound studio on a

professional level in Assam. In a state where a newspaper daily does not run well, to set up a studio based on regional films is almost impossibility.

Thus looking from various perspectives, it is observed that there seems to be no future prospect for Assamese film industry. But, the Assamese cannot escape the task of making Assamese films. The way in which, once people were sincerely engaged in various activities to restore and retain Assamese culture, language and literature from alien aggression and published dailies and weeklies even by incurring virtual losses, should be endorsed as through those means the Assamese people had thought for their own development as well as of the newspapers. Even today they should produce films with that spirit for at least the next ten years and thus benefit their own self and also their country. It would be a matter of great happiness if he could help ten Assamese young men engaged in the films, be on their own. The Assamese public also had to offer help then only the producer will find the path easier and the burden of loss would lessen. Again people should encourage those girls opting for acting.

Above all, another matter of concern with the film making is the necessity of owning talkie houses. If the Assamese people do not own talkie houses in each and every town of Assam, half of the money the people pays towards Assamese films shall pass over to non- Assamese owners of talkie houses. Therefore, he advised that the enterprising persons interested in the business should dare to construct talkie houses.

Jyotiprasad said that despite all hurdles Indian film industry will have to counteract the cinematic onslaught coming from Europe. To neutralize the heat coming from the west Indian film industry will have to grow and establish itself to international standard. Otherwise our society will be exposed to western culture and lifestyle. To keep our cultural life intact we will have to develop this film media at all costs and compared to Indian cinema Assamese cinema is a babe. It will have to stand on its own legs, though it does not have the necessary support system. Despite such hurdles Assamese film producers cannot lag behind. He argued that the film maker should have to cross all the hurdles to make the artistic presence felt by the others. He visioned that a time is sure to come when Assamese will be oblivious of their cultural heritage.

An audience familiar with the best of European films will laugh at the quality of cinematography, lighting, make up etc. in Indian films. Due to such lacking Jyotiprasad's vision of making Assamese film vis-à-vis Assamese culture and society

was lost on them as they failed to build up a sound tradition of Assamese cinema rich in the aesthetics and the ethos of a culturally endowed nation.<sup>102</sup>

Such insight into the problems facing Assamese cinema in the perspective of traditional, social and cultural values and his deep and sincere concern for its growth and wellbeing established beyond any doubt that his film making inauguration was not just a frivolous attempt at fulfilling some flushing youthful dreams but a serious purposeful cultural efforts deeply motivated by creative inspiration and it reflected a national consciousness committed to Assamese culture and society and here lies Jyotiprasad's significance as an Assamese film maker.

When Jyotiprasad was busy in making his film *Jaymati*, Pramathes Barua was desperately after the making of *Devdas*, that epoch making film in the national context. Both of them were greatly innovative. Both of them wanted to elevate the cinema to creative heights. Jyotiprasad is stated to have introduced dubbing, while Pramathes Barua did the same as regards artificial lighting. Jyotiprasad had no alternative but to go for dubbing when he found his film totally voiceless due to a technical fault committed by his sound engineer hailing from Lahore. This was a deadly blow to Jyotiprasad. However, inspite all this lacking *Jaymati* of Jyotiprasad Agarwala heralded a new beginning in the cinematic history of Assam. Today's Assamese cinematic superstructures rest on the foundation built up by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. But Jyotiprasad Agarwala did not get his place in the Film industry as like Pramathes Barua.<sup>103</sup>

In 1936A.D., Jyotiprasad married Devajani Bhuyan of Dibrugarh. Two sons and three daughter and his family members testify that he was a loving husband and a caring father, though he was busy with his political and cultural activities. He sent his children to study in the tea- garden school established by Chandrakumar. He stood for and won an election to the Local Board at Tezpur in 1938A.D. In 1940A.D. he established a music school at Tezpur to train up young musicians.

His second film *Indramalati* released in 1939A.D., four years after *Jaymati* made with the self- confessed intention of restoring his financial stability by paying off his debt incurred during the making of his first film.<sup>104</sup> Considering the cost of *Jaymati*,

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<sup>102</sup> Asomar Film Shilpa, P.341

<sup>103</sup> Gohain(ed), op. cit. P.62

<sup>104</sup> Personal letter to jyotiprasad Agarwala from his brother Kamalaprasad Agarwala, dted. 20<sup>th</sup> May 1939

the cost of the second film was reduced substantially. The stringent measures have been adopted even at the cost of loss of aesthetic and organic quality of the film. Above all the length of the film had been shortened comparatively in order to lessen the cost by four to five thousand.

His plays- *Sonit Konwari* (1925), *Karengar Ligiri* (1930), *Rupalim* (1960), *Labhita* (1948), *Nimati Kaina* (1964), *Khanikar* (1977), and *Kanaklata* (incomplete) innumerable songs and poems, a short- story collection, essays on art, culture, literature, cinema, architecture and his five famous speeches made on different occasions bear witness to his creative potentialities. He was the first and foremost dramatist in the history of Assamese drama who has initiated the banned of creating characters in consistence with the situation and who has made the characters life- like and realistic by means of psycho- analysis. The successful portrayal of the self- conflict in a character can for the first time be see in Assamese drama in Jyotiprasad's *KarengarLigiri*. He knew that historical drama is not the repetition of history. The dramatists can fill the gaps of history by their own imagination. Accordingly they should throw light into the domestic or social life of persons involved.

In his play *Karengar Ligiri*, he has presented before us a completely imaginary story in a historical background. In *Rupalim* also he had invented an imaginary love- story and has made the drama more interesting and attractive. The story of *Labhita* is very much prone to the reality. In this play he has made a sincere effort to present before readers an outline of 42's independence Mass Movement as well as the hasty of the Second World War that blew over Assam.

In *Sonit Kunwari* amongst all the characters which he had depicted, the most outstanding one is Chitralkha. Though not human being, she has been made the symbol of love and beauty.

At the time of writing *Rupalim* the reminiscence of a great play of world literature was predominant in the realm of Jyotiprasad's creative dream. He himself has written that in the play he in place of presenting an ideal character, made attempt to show off the variety in characters. Jyotiprasad has made the character of *Rupalim* more



complex than Maeterlinck's *Monna- Vanna* and this is the most significant distinction between these two plays.<sup>105</sup>

*Labhita* is based on the background of the Indian Independence Movement of 1942. *Labhita* contains the story of an Assamese village girl who has shown great courage and patience and who at last has laid down her life for the liberation of her motherland.

*Nimati Kaina* an immortal play in which the subject matter of the play as well as the characters are so difficult that their significance is beyond the grasp of the children and it is through this play that he has revealed his philosophy as an artist.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala is also known for his poetic plays. His poetic plays occupy a unique place in the history of Assamese drama. They constitute a class by themselves, which form a part of the poetic plays of the world literature.

He also wrote for the children. He had the capacity to come down from the height of his creative pursuits to the level of the children psychology. He wrote a *Ramayana* specially meant for the children to suit their needs. It is named as *Jyoti Ramayana*.

A conservative estimate places the number of lyrics, theatrical and non-theatrical written by Jyotiprasad at around 600-700. Not all of them were published and many have been lost. In setting them to music with a distinctive Assamese bias he evolved a new trend of music, aptly termed *Jyoti Sangit*. He was a fine singer and could play many musical instruments, including the piano. His prose writings revealed the depth of his scholarship and philosophic bent of mind, while his journalistic writings dwelt on issues of immense importance to Assamese society.

Coming out from jail after 1942's August Revolt, he also undertook the task of taking responsibility of the language daily '*Dainik Asomiya*', a paper started by his uncle Chandrakumar, his mentor and guide as its editor. Every distinguished man of literature is seen to have some stint in journalism. Author like George Bernard Shaw put journalism a slot ahead of literature. He preferred himself to be identified as a journalist rather than as a man of literature. Jyotiprasad Agarwala had almost a similar

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<sup>105</sup> Goswami, Pranati Sharma., 2004, *Female Characters in Modern Assamese Drama*, B. R. Publishing Corporation, P.110

kind of belief about literary exercise in relation to his journalistic undertone. Jyotiprasad Agarwala inherited a rich tradition of literature and journalism intertwined meaningfully. Chandrakumar Agarwala was the vital force behind Jonaki. Chandrakumar had also begun the paper as the Sadiniya Asimiya, a weekly published from Dibrugarh from 1918A.D. Under the tutelage of Chandrakumar Agarwala Jyotiprasad was initiated to journalism. Asamiya was on the verge of being closed. Jyotiprasad infused it with new life and vitality. He edited the journal for about seven months. Assamese journalists like Nilmoni Phukan, Lakhminath Phukan, Mahim Chandra Singha etc. helped him in the effort. But due to the lack of readers, the paper showed constant loss throughout 1918-24. The same was the case with the New Press which he had set up at Kharghuli in Guwahati. In spite of that, he spent seven months as an editor and transformed the paper into the mouthpiece of Assamese sub-nationalism. Two issues in those days preoccupied the Assamese people the establishment of Assamese as the official language of the state, and the setting up of a university in Assam. The contribution of the *Dainik Asamiya* to these two causes, particularly through the powerful editorials that Jyotiprasad wrote is legion. He exclusively devoted his journalism to Assamese literature and culture. It was largely due to his effort that Assam finally had the Gauhati University. The paper also aided in rejuvenating Assamese literature and culture. But owing to failing health he left the job and went to Dibrugarh to look after the family tea-estate at Tamolbari. His family decided in January 1945a.D. that he should shift to Tamolbari Tea Estate for rest, while simultaneously managing the tea-garden.

From the time of India's independence to 1951A.D. were the tragic times for Jyotiprasad Agarwala. It was a period of disillusionment for him. In this period a section of the Assamese intelligentsia misunderstood or misinterpreted his philosophy or motivations. In this time also his wife died and his conflict with some members of his family and pain of the cancer disease that had him in its thrall. Yet, perhaps these were the finest years of Jyotiprasad.<sup>106</sup> These were the years that marked him out as a genuine revolutionary who would not be tempted by power or glory to abjure his ideals. There in Poken, on January 17, 1951A.D. Jyotiprasad Agarwala breathed his last.

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<sup>106</sup> Sarma, op. cit., P.83

He did not shirk from his commitment to society no matter what the vested interests dubbed him as. These were the years when he overcame the physical agony of a disease-ridden body to inspire by his personal and example the youth of the region to work towards his vision of a golden Assam. His life and achievements illustrate how an environment created by a family can lay ground in which the seed of genius can blossom. At the same time, his family which came to Assam, assimilated with the local people is the example of the composite nature of Assamese society. With the sources of inspiration in his family mostly by his parents Paramananda and Kiranmayee, his uncle Chandrakumar and others Jyotiprasad had flourished his love for the nation and culture.

The all-pervasive influence of Chandrakumar Agarwala and Anandachandra Agarwala on Jyotiprasad was almost neckdeep. Both the elders created a situation which proved to be invigorating for their nephew. Haribilash's connoisseur of art, culture and literature, Paramananda's devotion to music all thus the familial background of the Agarwala's and their literary tradition was behind the back of Jyotiprasad.

Two aspects of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's life stand out when we calculate his artistic achievements. Naturally, first is the liberal support of his family that lent him which gave him the freedom to carve out his own way through life without being shackled by the worries of having to work towards a conventional career. He, therefore also can effort to make a career of cultural pursuits. That his family was well off was an added advantage to him. Second was the fact that Jyotiprasad was not academic minded, in the sense that the formal education he received was not that important in molding his sensibility, but he learnt more from his environment as well as from his associates than from school and college. He had travelled abroad and developed a broad spectrum of cultured associates. This had helped to create an all-India, cosmopolitan mentality in him.

*Pakee*, the ancestral house of the family is one of the most famous residential buildings in Assam. It was not only the heart of the freedom movement, but also the cultural renaissance in Assam during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *'Pakee'* the home of the Agarwalas' first became the place of vaishnavite teachings during the days of Haribilash Agarwala, then the *sangeetar Deul* (singing temple) during the time of Paramananda Agarwala. Again the historic *pakee* became an integral part of the national movement and turn in to a *ranbheree* (battlefield) which became an instrument

in inspiring Jyotiprasad Agarwala's nationalist spirit.<sup>107</sup> In 1921 A.D. Mahatma Gandhi addressed a public meeting at Pakee and burnt British manufactured clothes in symbolic protest. National leaders of the freedom movement like Motilal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Raja Gopalacharya, Jawaharlal Nehru and a host of others stayed sometime or the other at *Pakee*.

The Agarwalas though have contribution in trade and commerce but their chief contribution is to music, literature, culture and other aspects of social life. The most notable change about the Agarwalas was that following the premature death of Navarangaram the family shift in the field of work. Trade and commerce did not remain the chief occupation of the family. Navarangaram brought in social changes primarily through trade, commerce and agriculture but his descendants wanted to do the same through cultural and literary activities. The shift was to the worship of the Goddess of learning i. e. Saraswati from the worship of the Goddess of wealth, i. e. Lakshmi. Most of the Agarwalas like Haribilash Agarwala, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Anandaram Agarwala and Jyotiprasad Agarwala made continuous efforts to fulfil the needs of Assam in different cultural fields and worked towards national integration.

In the biography of Chandra Kumar, Jyotiprasad recalls the family environment: "Haribilash's love of Assamese literature and especially old Assamese literature, created in his family a love and commitment to Assamese literature and as a result, the Agarwalas like Bishnu Prasad and Haribilash's Nephew Ananda Chandra and daughter Jagweswari turned out to be cultivators of Assamese literature. Bishnu Prasad, Chandra Kumar and Krishna Prasad these three sons of Haribilash devoted themselves to the cause of Assamese literature and with equal zeal, the sons Paramananda and Gopal Chandra and nephew Khageswar devoted themselves to the cause of music. They had great love for music and cultivated it. Among those who cultivated music, Paramananda's achievements were the greatest and he was a fellow musician of Lakshmiram Borua, the noted musician of Assam. Paramananda's love for music helped the Agarwala family to hold up an ideal of the culture of music and fine arts. Paramananda's family also turned out to be workers in the field of the predecessors."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Agarwala, K., op. cit., P.20

<sup>108</sup> Gohain (ed), op. cit., 384

Navaranga made Assam his home and was amply rewarded for it. The second generation continued exploration of new avenues in business as well as in Assamese culture. The later generations contributed primarily to literature, culture and the socio-political aspects of Assam. Arguing in the same line Jyotiprasad Agarwala viewed that culture develops with the assimilation of the masses and therefore the highest culture should have to comprise much masses in its breaths. Because he believed that ‘universalism’ is the indispensable necessity of effective nationalism. Therefore he utters: *Rupantarehe matho jagat dhunia kore seye mor gayatri mantra* (that only change makes this world beautiful is my life’s core principle)<sup>109</sup>.

Thus, the Agarwala family is an integral part of the Assamese society and it has enriched the Assamese nationality with its manifold contributions. All of the Agarwalas made continuous efforts to fulfil the needs of Assam in different fields and worked towards national integration. The family is an example of the composite nature of Assamese society. The example that the family have set, is a pointer to the unity of thought. It is this unity of thought that can bring all the Indians closer together.

Almost two centuries have passed by since Navarangaram came to Assam from far away Churu of Rajasthan in search of an El Dorado he lost in his native land. One can only guess what barriers, both physical and mental, the teenager crossed while travelling a staggering distance when transport and communication were most underdeveloped. He made Assam his home... the family has enriched the Assamese nationality with its manifold contributions. Without the contributions made by Jyotiprasad, Chandra Kumar, Ananda Chandra and other of the offspring of Haribilash, the history of modern Assamese literature and culture remains quite incomplete.

Jyotiprasad’s creative instinct and literary inspiration must have been rooted in the genetic fervour and the sensitive cultured upbringing that ran in the family. For the adolescent Jyotiprasad, who wrote his first play when still in school, the poet uncle Chandra Kumar was an influential literary icon. The other uncle Krishnaprasad who used to compose songs also possibly inspired Jyotiprasad to venture into a new type of lyrical composition at quite an early age. His musical talent found early stimulation in his mother’s casual rendition of folk tunes through her everyday chores, his father

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 234

Paramananda's evening music sessions where, strangely, he played the organ to the spiritual compositions. It is this family background of aristocracy and comparative magnificence, cultured sensitivity and creative potential that shaped Jyotiprasad's artistic personality as something out of the ordinary.