Gender Aspect of Ramnabami-Natak

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Tilottoma Misra needs to be congratulated on introducing to a wider readership, an Assamese play written as far back as 1857, but which still remains germane to our present-day concerns. The playwright Gunabhiram Barua (1837-94) in Ramnabami-Natak deals with problems that continue to bedevil Indian society in the 21st century – man-woman relationship outside the institutionalised caste or religion-based marital framework; consensual marriages as distinct from marriages arranged by parents; and widow remarriage among other things. Today, when caste and clan-based “panchayats” in villages sentence their sons and daughters to death because of inter-caste marriages, and when parents preside over “honour killings” of their daughters for opting for partners from outside their clans or religious communities, Gunabhiram’s play acquires a poignant significance.

Morality Play

The play itself may not strike literary critics as offering anything original from the point of view of dramaturgy. It follows the style of a morality play of sorts that was in vogue in the 19th century – a five-act drama, with the usual cast of a hero, a heroine, their friends and confidantes arranged on the one side, and their enemies on the other, culminating in a tragedy, but ending on a moral message delivered by a commentator (like the Chorus in Greek plays).

To summarise its contents – Nabami, a girl from a middle class Assamese family becomes a widow at an early age and comes back to live with her parents. She feels lonely, and falls in love with Ramchandra, the brother-in-law of her friend Jayanti. With her help, Nabami gets into a secret liaison with Ramchandra, and soon after conceives and the entire village comes to know about it. The mahajan (the local religious head) issues an edict ostracising her family. Nabami commits suicide to spare her family the shame. Her friend Jayanti follows her by stabbing herself, and an inconsolable Ramchandra hangs himself. The play ends with the mahajan’s acknowledging that he had been responsible for the death of all these three, as he had wrongly accused Nabami. Explaining his repentance, the mahajan narrates a dream that he had after pronouncing his edict. In his dream, Parasar, the ancient sage of the puranas, appeared and declared that under the new law laid down by him (his samhita), Nabami was a chaste woman and the man (Ramchandra) with whom she had an intimate relationship was her real husband.

Assamese Intelligentsia

In her_long and erudite introduction, Tilottoma Misra situates Ramnabami-Natak not only in the present backdrop of controversies over women’s emancipation, but also in the context of the debates in 19th century Assamese society. In the course of her presentation, she encapsulates the multifaceted history of the birth and rise of an Assamese intelligentsia – tracing their pre-colonial origins in the upper caste strata; the standardisation of their language with the help of the print culture like running a press in the city and bringing out books about Assam. Tilottoma refers to “his Assam Buronji (A history of Assam in Assamese prose) published in 1884”. A minor query in this connection. I find from a report in the Bengali newspaper Samachar Darpan of 25 August 1832 that a book entitled Assam Buronji had been written by Holiram Dhekiyal Phukan, “describing the history, geography, manners and customs...of the Assamese people, which he printed and distributed at his own cost”. Did Gunabhiram then re-publish this book by Holiram (who, as Tilottoma mentions, was a close relative of Gunabhiram’s and lived in Calcutta), or was it his own original work? On his return to Assam, Gunabhiram wrote in support of women’s education, consensual marriage and widow remarriage. After the death of communities within their own society, which were more permissive in matters like consensual marriage, conjugal norms, widow remarriage, among other things.

Going back to the pre-colonial past, Tilottoma Misra draws a distinction between two groups of the Assamese gentry – the Dangori and the Duaria-Baruas. The former were the landed interests, tending to be conservative and orthodox in their views and habits. The latter belonged to a class of commercial agents, appointed by the old Ahom rulers to collect duties on all the merchandise that passed through the Dangori or the gates on the west of Assam. Their interaction with traders from outside and exposure to new ideas helped them to develop a cosmopolitan and progressive attitude. Their continuation in that role in the early years of British rule in the 19th century allowed them contact with their nearest neighbour on the west – Bengal, where Calcutta at that time was developing into a centre of stirring intellectual activities and social reforms.

Gunabhiram came from a prosperous family of this Duaria-Barua community, and his parents sent him to Calcutta for studies, in the course of which he became inspired by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar’s widow remarriage campaign. As a tribute to his mentor, at the end of his play, he introduces Vidyasagar as a figure in a dream. He also became involved in cultural activities like running a press in the city and bringing out books about Assam. Tilottoma refers to “his Assam Buronji (A history of Assam in Assamese prose) published in 1884”. A minor query in this connection. I find from a report in the Bengali newspaper Samachar Darpan of 25 August 1832 that a book entitled Assam Buronji had been written by Holiram Dhekiyal Phukan, “describing the history, geography, manners and customs...of the Assamese people, which he printed and distributed at his own cost”. Did Gunabhiram then re-publish this book by Holiram (who, as Tilottoma mentions, was a close relative of Gunabhiram’s and lived in Calcutta), or was it his own original work? On his return to Assam, Gunabhiram wrote in support of women’s education, consensual marriage and widow remarriage. After the death of
his first wife, he married a widow according to Brahma rites. But unable to create a social circle of liberal intellectuals in Assam who could have led a campaign in support of the causes that Gunabhiram advocated, he moved back to Calcutta in 1890 where he died a few years later.

Two Complex Issues

While tracing the common thread of reformist ideas that runs through Gunabhiram’s play and his other writings, Tilottama Misra also touches upon two complex issues – the limitations of the reformist zeal of a 19th century intellectual (by modern standards) as well as the reasons for the failure of such an intellectual in his endeavours in contemporary middle class Assamese society. As for the first problem, Gunabhiram viewed women’s education primarily as a tool that would aid “conjugal happiness by providing a rational base to man-woman relationship” – rather than empowering the woman to choose independent options outside the conjugal framework. In his play, even while empathising with the widow Nabami’s romantic relationship with Ram, Gunabhiram has to turn them into a married couple, and summons Parasar to bless them with the sanction: “She (Nabami) is a true and loyal wife. The man with whom she had an intimate relationship is her husband in accordance with dharma” (Act Five, Scene Five).

This brings us to the second issue – the mood of the Assamese middle class society at the end of the 19th century, which resented even this moderate effort to rehabilitate a widow within the marital structure. Tilottoma traces it to the psychology of the Assamese educated middle class at that time which had its roots in a love-hate cultural relationship with their contemporary Bengali peer group. During the last decades of the 19th century, even nationalist Assamese intellectuals viewed with growing apprehension the progress made by women’s education in Bengal. They feared that if this tendency to give ‘masculine’ education to women is encouraged in Assam, the result may be disastrous for the traditional hierarchical social structure (pp xxxix). The mood was also aggravated by the rise of nationalist self-consciousness amongst the Assamese middle class…accompanied by an acute awareness of the need to protect the Assamese linguistic and cultural identity from what had been perceived as the threat posed by the hegemonic tendency of Bengali cultural nationalism…(promoted by) large-scale induction of Bengali clerks into Assam to man the colonial offices… (pp xliii-xliv).

It is this sub-nationalism of the Assamese intellectuals which set them apart from their Bengali counterparts. The Assamese middle class did not anticipate any direct threat to their private domestic space from the European west but rather from the westernised ‘modern’ culture of the Bengalibabus of Calcutta (pp xiv).

Bengali Babus and Women

But historically, this fear of sociocultural threat from the Bengali babus was a bit misplaced. The Assamese middle class overestimated the power of their Bengali brethren, who by the end of the 19th century had themselves retreated from their earlier radical position in favour of women’s empowerment and emancipation. Like the Assamese intellectuals, during the same period (the last three decades of the century), the Bengali male-dominated educated society was also withdrawing support from causes like widow remarriage, women’s education, prohibition of child marriage. It was this anti-reformist attitude among his peer group during this time that drove a frustrated Vidyasagar, the proponent of widow-remarriage, to quit Calcutta and retreat to a village, where he spent his last years in the company of the rural poor. Bengali intellectual society at this time was increasingly moving away from the social reforms movement of the past (based on liberal ideas) to a political movement of rising sub-nationalism that fell back on Hindu revivalist values and patriarchal norms (imposed on women in particular). In a bid to assert their political rights, the Bengali bhadralok leadership quite often picked upon the Bengali woman as an object of heroic protection from the intrusion of the British colonial rulers into their private space. On the plea of nationalist opposition to all colonial laws, the bhadralok was even prepared to deny her the little relief that was occasionally available to her through such laws.

Three particular cases can be cited in this connection. First, the hue and cry raised by Calcutta’s Bengali elite in December 1876, in protest against one of their own members – Jagadananda Mukherjee, a high court advocate – when he invited the visiting Prince Edward (Queen Victoria’s son) to his andarmahal (the women’s quarters). The leading lights of Bengali society immediately turned it into an issue of national rights versus colonial intrusion, denouncing Mukherjee for his “unpatriotic” subservience by exposing the Bengali women to the prurient curiosity of the foreign ruler! In the course of their public campaign (through newspapers, dramatic performances, etc), the image of the Indian woman was upheld as a sacrosanct figure, to be protected from outside gaze – thus relegating her to the “sacred” space behind the purdah.

The second instance was the storm in Bengali society over the Age of Consent Act of 1891. The British administration had proposed, through the act, to raise the age of a girl’s marriage from 10 to 12. The militant Bengali nationalist sections immediately protested through their newspapers and public meetings, claiming that foreign rulers had no right to interfere with their religious and social customs.

The third instance was the infamous “unchastity case” involving the rights of Kerry Kolitany, an Assamese widow (who had remarried) to her former husband’s property, and the judicial verdict in her favour by the British court in 1873, which provoked the Calcutta Bengali gentry to protest against what they perceived as encouragement of “unchastity” among Indian women by the colonial judiciary – a far cry from Vidyasagar’s call for widow remarriage. Even a liberal like Dwijendranath Tagore (Rabindranath’s elder brother) joined the city’s conservative elders at a meeting in deploring that the British were destroying the “Hindu rules and customs that protected our women’s chastity” (The Bengalee, 26 April 1873).1

Kerry Kolitany’s Case

Tilottoma Misra uses Kerry Kolitany’s case as a starting point for a special section in her introduction which configurations several issues – pre-colonial customary laws ruling
conjugal relations among non-brahmin communities in Assam; the comparative freedom enjoyed by women under such laws; the intervention of the colonial judicial system in reconciling such laws with the newly introduced laws; and the brahmin-dominated Assamese literati’s suspicion of the customary laws as well as fear about modern reforms (like widow remarriage or campaign against pre-puberty marriage) that could break the barrier between the brahmins and the vast majority of the non-brahmin population. It was these caste-based patriarchal apprehensions about the expansion of the woman’s sphere that alienated the Assamese educated middle classes from the message of Gunabhirm’s play, which as Tilottoma discovers, “did not leave a deep impression on the Assamese literati...” As for the rest of the non-literate Assamese masses, they had no access to it, since it was never staged – unlike the traditional bhaona performances of anki-nat around religious themes which were popular with them. Thus, Gunabhiram, despite the major social and historical implications of Ramnabami-Natak, remained estranged both from his own peer group and the rural masses in Assam. But, like many such radical loners of those days, Gunabhiram deserves revaluation by today’s scholars as well as general readers, who will welcome the present book as a major contribution to both the historical research into the colonial encounter of the past, and today’s gender studies.

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