

Contribution Of Christian Missionaries In The Initial Phase Of Assamese Novels: A Discussion

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Abstract

The Indian word “Upanyash” is only a terminological word English word “Novel”. Novel means new, fancy, fresh lively etc. Moreover, novel is identified as an imaginative long story, where representation of real life is presented through characters and their activities more or less in a complex narrative. In the second half of 19th century, novel originated in Assamese literature. But the background and environment for the structure and development of a real novel was developed in 20th century. Therefore, in Assamese literature, it is considered as premature awakening of novel. Assamese novel is a fruit of English education and literature. The forceful implementation of Bengali language in Assam during British rule began to break the speed of Assamese language. And at that mean time, the arrival of Christian missionaries to Assam, though their primary aim was to promote Christianity, flourished literary passion among Assamese people. The missionaries made it easy to compose novel by giving literary importance to the colloquial language by establishing printing press, publishing newspaper and magazine (Arunodoi), compiling grammar and dictionary and by publishing various prose works.

Key-word: Assamese novel, Novels of Missionaries, initial phase of novel.

Introduction:

0.1. Introduction to the Topic:

Though novel is an old term in Western literature but it is quite a new term in Assamese literature. In fact, some prose narratives were written in some regional languages in India only after the arrival of Christian missionaries. The main subject-matters of these prose narratives were mainly religious, humorous and historical. In reference to Assam, it can be said that though the missionaries started this genre to promote Christianity but it cleared the path to Assamese novel.

0.2. Objectives:-

The objectives of this paper “The Contribution of Christian Missionaries in Initial Phase of Assamese Novel: a discussion” are as follows:-

(i) To discuss about the initial period of Assamese novels.

(ii) To give an explanation about the initial phase of Assamese novel along with the structural method, representation of story and subject-matter.

(iii) To discuss about the unforgettable contribution of Christian missionaries in social lives of Assam.

0.3. Methodology of the Study:

Analytical and descriptive methods are used along with helps from various reference books and discussion papers are taken to discuss the topic “The Contribution of Christian Missionaries in the Initial Phase of Assamese Novel: a discussion.”

1.0. Main Discussion:

The novel is a kind of an independent narrative fictional writing based on realism. The subject-matter of novels can be varied from big to small events of the life where exploratory visions of eye-witnessing or physical reality are apparent. This form of literature originated in Assamese literature as a result of the influence and imitation of Western literature. Specially, with the publication of Arunodoi in 1846 by the initiative of American Baptist Missionary, this genre of literature began to flourish through modern Assamese literature. This period is known as “Missionary period” or “Arunodoi period” in the history of Assamese language and literature.

The skeleton of Assamese novel was built in the pages of Arunodoi and got its complete form towards the end of the 19th century and now it is stepped into its 120 years of age. Before 1826, the condition of Assamese was distressful. At that time of uncertainty, a group of Christian missionary reached Assam with the aim to spread Christianity. Coming of the missionary group which included Dr. Nathan Brown, Dr. Miles Bronson, O.T. Cutter, A.H. Den Forth, Nidhi Libai Farwel etc. at that time of scarcity was like a blessing to the people of Assam. Though their primary aim was to promote Christianity but when they saw the condition of Assamese people, they started to put their handful effort to improve the condition of Assamese people. By the initiatives of missionaries, printing press was established on 15th November in 1846 in Assam and a monthly periodical called Arunodoi was published in it. The first wave of renaissance came about Assam through this paper. The newly created form of Assamese literature, the seed of novel was sowed and germinated in the heart of Arunodoi. Dr. Nathan Brown had translated the famous novel of John Bunyan “The Pilgrims Progress” into Assamese with the name “Jatrikor Jatra”. It is the first novel-like book in Assamese language. This novel was published in many parts from November, 1848 in the paper Arunodoi. It was published as a book in the year 1857. In this novel, it is shown how to get salvation through visiting God by the people plagued by sin. The narrative of this novel was not related to the social life of Assam, story was not strong, prose style was refined, poetry style is near to English

sentences and the appearance was also weak. Though there was lack of novelistic content and characteristics, still it marked the first step in the preparation phase of Assamese novels.

After Jatrikor Jatra, by the initiative of Missionaries, three promotional fictional books were published together. They are—“Alokeshi Beshyar Kotha”, “Fulmoni aru Karuna” and “Kaminikanto”(1877). First two of these were written by Mr. Garni and the third one was written by Mrs. Garni. ‘Alokeshi Beshyar Kotha’ and ‘Fulmoni aru Karuna’ were translated from Bengali language.

The root of ‘Alokeshi Beshyar Kotha’ is the Bengali book written in the same name by M.E. Leslie. Bizarre experiences of a young widow, her loss of character due to temptation, becoming mistress followed by living as a prostitute and at the end her acceptance of the liberal Christianity to return to a sacred life are displayed in this novel. In the same way, an educated Brahmin named Kaminikanto has to live apart from his paternal home as well as newly-wed wife Sarala as he converts to Christianity. Therefore, he tries to convince his wife Sarala to accept Christianity and explains the greatness of Christian religion by writing letters to her. At the end, he convinces Sarala and she converts to Christianity and lives happily by following the same path as her husband. Kaminikanto’s friends Narendra and Hemangi also accept Christianity. The subject-matter of Alokeshi Beshya is simple in the novel. The problems of premature widows of nineteenth century are represented through the problems of Alokeshi. Although there is realism exists in the story, but character analysis didn’t take place in the novel. The author doesn’t give importance to the creation of environment. In “Fulmoti aru Karuna”, the author describes the stories of two Christian women. There are descriptions of how their lives were blessed after they had converted to Christianity. The author of the original Bengali book Hana Catherine Mullens shows the greatness of Christianity, its effect on marital life, treatment of wife towards her husband and argues for the need to be sympathetic towards the sick.

The above mentioned three books have promoted Christianity through a narrative. Though these books couldn’t stand to the class of a real novel because of its promotional and communal views, yet these can be called as the early examples of Assamese novel.

Though American Baptist Missionaries had composed a few books about friends of widow, description of Joseph etc. in a novel-like form, but the characteristic of real novel is not reflected in those.

In the above discussion, a sufficient discussion has made about the narratives composed by the Missionaries during the initial phase of Assamese novels. The history of Assamese literature doesn’t give acknowledgement to these narratives. Because to be a novel, there need of some characteristics. Such as:-

- (a) There needs to be a detailed description of a well-organized story.
- (b) The presentation style also needs to be well-organized.
- (c) Emphasis should be given on the analysis of the characters.

(d) The stories will have to combine the background environment, enjoyment, ideal of excitement and the style of composition.

These characteristics are rarely observed in the novels of Missionaries. For example, the story of both of the novels Alokeshi Beshya by M.E.Leslie and Kani Beherua by A.K. Garni, there are descriptions of peaceful end of life by conversing to Christianity and God also loves the people who are free from worldly attachments. Therefore, in order to get rid of worldly misery, one should accept the Christian religion. These two things are manifested in both of these novels. There is no assemble of humor, application of strong dialogue is also did not take place. The emotions, feelings, love of the human mind are not expressed or applied in these stories. The subject-matter or background of these stories was created with the only intention of spreading Jesus and his religion. It can be clearly seen if we look into the story of Kaminikanto by A.K. Garni. In the story, there is no feeling of love can be visible in exchanging of letters by the husband and wife. Since the purpose of these stories was to spread religion, that is why, the emphasis on creating character and environment is not given which is the most essential element to be a novel. Therefore, this book cannot be considered as a real novel, but can be called as a story written like a novel.

Conclusion:

Novel is a style of speech of modern times. The novel is the best and most relaxed of all literary materials. The nineteenth century is a very significant time for the language and literature of Assam. On the intellectual sides of Assam, the novel literature was developed in the heart of Arunodoi which was published by the missionaries in the middle of the nineteenth century. Like the other literary genres of Jonaki era, Assamese novels are essentially the result of the influence of Western literature. This new form of literature, which was sprung up in Aunodoi era, flourished beautifully in the Jonaki era. In fact, the modern Assamese novel was published in the heart of Jonaki magazine. It is well mentionable in this context that, human beings have natural tendency to tell or listen to stories and hence, novel is born while satisfying this tendency on the basis of reality. The real genre of the novel in Assamese language begins with the novel 'Bhanumoti'(1890) by Padmanath Gohainbaruah. But before that, the seed of novel was germinated in 'Arunodoi' paper by the American Baptist Missionaries. Although, because of the fierce efforts of spreading Christianity, the intense mentality of social reform and weakness of art and technique etc., these stories could not make it into the class of a novel, yet through the efforts of missionaries, Assamese people could acquainted with the fiction called novel. Although translated, these stories written in the style of novel cleared the path to compose novels in future for Assamese people. The Assamese people are forever indebted to these Christian missionaries for what they did in the initial phase of Assamese novel.

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6. External Connection

Footnote:

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2. Sharma, Satyendranath- Asomiya Sahityar Samikkhatmak Etibritta, 1981, page 251-254

3.Das, Amal Chandra- Asomiya Uponyash Porikroma, page 1-2
