

## CHAPTER ONE

### MAPPING THE CONTEXT

#### I

As we undertake our research regarding the dynamics of identity and art activism in art (Modern/contemporary) with specific reference to Assam in the post-colonial period, at the very outset we will have to map the contexts to get the holistic understanding and insight about the issues at hand. Here, three intermingling triadic contexts have to be taken into consideration in order to have a complete mapping of the substratum. Along with mapping the conceptual formulation about the notion of 'identity' at the primary level, we will also have to understand the theoretical formulations about 'modern' or 'modernity' with specific reference to the context of modern Indian art so that we can understand the dynamics of identity in relation to visual art practices of Assam in the post-colonial time which is the focus of study. Moreover, the mapping of the theoretical construction of the modern Indian art forms a part of the larger concern of identity with regard to the regional developments of modern art in peripheral pockets like Assam who finds no mention in the canonical formulations of the "mainstream" modern or in the art historical textual accounts of the national modern so far. To talk about modernity – our modernity, one needs to consider the embedded contexts and its associated polemics to specify our status. Our major stigmas being 'third world', 'post-colonial', 'multicultural', 'oriental', and 'peripheral' – the stigmas distinctively brewed in our experiences seasoned in nostalgia, tradition and its fizz and flakes. The opposing pulls of modernity and tradition (often imagined and constructed) triggers off a quest for an 'authentic' and 'original' identity, an urge to safeguard our cultural purity. While at the same time, dazzled by the sensuous exuberance out there in art and life of the West – our 'Other' (again, a question arises whether there be an authentic 'Other' in this post-modern juncture, where everything is disseminated by the centripetal force of globalisation and multiculturalism bridging all the gaps? And also that isn't 'Other' also a construct?). And yes, our modernity is also split on the premise of uneven modernity situated within the political and economic setting.

Hence it seemed inevitable to talk about the issue of margins of modernity with regard to its general context. The project of tracing modernity in geographic space like Assam necessarily also accounted for a critical probing into cultural specificity and certain embedded historical/geographical and socio-political contexts – all distinctive and unique in their manifestations (Assam as the vested site of double imperialism or issue of immigration as a de-stabilising element of ethnic composition). Positioning ourselves at this vantage point and in keeping with the fact that art as cultural action mediating collective historical discourses through political reflexivity, I have at times in my formulations referred to the specific modernist manifestation in such a region where the reference has been made at par with other art critical coinage in the scholastic tradition within the paradigm of modern (international modern or national modern). This is a relative categorization for academic convenience and thereby denounces any status as ‘Absolute’ or ‘Independent’ category. In fact it is a term constructed within the paradigm of universal category of modern (a Western coinage) but prototypical in its manifested variations. Hence it is an attempt to delve deeper into the intricacies and heterogeneous multiplicity of a modernist manifestation. The prospect of my study is not to define any ‘essential’ Assamese characteristics in the realm of modern art in the line of essentialist position of identity politics but to position Assam within the larger frame of modern Indian art and thereby reclaim and re-affirm the identity of the geopolitical space in the broader art historical paradigm of the National Modern. For this matter I have attempted to trace the genealogy through thorough documentation and mapping and formulate the art historical account of the entire evolution and development of the discourse which forms the integral part and one of the intermingling triadic contexts of our research.

## II

### THE CONCEPTUAL FORMULATIONS OF IDENTITY

Concern with identity as a notion within human consciousness had been philosophical in nature initially. In philosophy, identity (derived from Latin: *identitas* which means ‘sameness’), is the relation each thing bears just to itself. According to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s law two things sharing every attribute are not only similar, but are the same thing. The concept of sameness has given rise to the general concept of

identity, as in personal identity and social identity. Identity is whatever makes an entity definable and recognizable, in terms of possessing a set of qualities or characteristics that distinguish it from other entities. The concept of self or self identity which is a sum of a being's knowledge, understanding and awareness of one's own individual self within the contexts of the physical/material, psychological and socio-cultural attributes found further theoretical formulations in the realm of psychology after philosophy, with their focus on psychoanalytically structured models of personality, ego, individuality, self, self-image and such other psychological constructs. Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, expanding on Freud's psychosexual stages, defined eight stages that describe how individuals relate to their social world.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, James W. Fowler's stages of faith development is seen as a holistic orientation and is concerned with the individual's relatedness to the universal.<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud's psycho-sexual stages describing the progression of an individual's unconscious desires had unprecedented impact on the conceptual formulations of individual and collective identity formations and gained canonical status. The reigning psychological paradigm structured by such psychologists provided the basis for most anthropological and sociological assumptions and constructions concerning identity. While looking at identity either as problems of human as subject and/or object or as relationship between Reason and Reality, psychologists take a more societal view of identity. Drawing from the societal basis of psychological assumptions, one can say that identity is (in psycho-social terms) not inherent but evolved, a phenomenon which envisage a historical perspective. Identity is not a static concept but a process of increasing differentiations as Erikson opined.

At present, identity has gained major significance for the political scientists and cultural thinkers. With ideological contemplation and praxis around concepts like ethnic identity, gender identity, cultural identity and national identity, the cultural and political activists are deeply engaged in the politics of identity at various levels in the contemporary time. In sociology, gender identity describes the gender with which a person identifies (i.e., whether one perceives oneself to be a man, a woman, or describes oneself in some less conventional way), but can also be used to refer to the gender that other people attribute to the individual on the basis of what they know from gender role indications (social behaviour, clothing, hair style, etc.). Gender identity may be affected by a variety of social structures, including the person's ethnic group, employment status, religion or

irreligion, and family. Cultural identity is the (feeling of) identity of a group or culture, or of an individual as far as she/he is influenced by her/his belonging to a group or culture. There are modern questions of culture that are transferred into questions of identity. An ethnic identity is the identification with a certain ethnicity, usually on the basis of a presumed common genealogy or ancestry. Recognition by others as a distinct ethnic group is often a contributing factor to developing this bond of identification. Ethnic groups are also often united by common cultural, behavioural, linguistic, ritualistic, or religious traits. Processes that result in the emergence of such identification are summarised as ethnogenesis. Various cultural studies and social theory investigate the question of cultural and ethnic identities. Cultural identity remarks upon: place, gender, race, history, nationality, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and ethnicity.

National identity is an ethical and philosophical concept whereby all humans are divided into groups called nations. Members of a "nation" share a common identity, and usually a common origin, in the sense of ancestry, parentage or descent. Nationalism becomes the major ideology through which the national identity is to be maintained, nurtured and sustained. Constructs like national identity, at times, contributed to the ideological discourse of the ruling class to establish the hegemony of the dominant class thereby placing it as an all embracing super community with no internal contradictions. However, it's tendency to ignore plurality of nations, their identities and histories often give rise to disruptions and dissolutions in multiple level thereby challenging its gigantic and monolithic position.

In the contemporary world politik identity politics seems to play defining role in various realms with multiple implications. Identity politics are political arguments that focus upon the self interest and perspectives of self-identified social interest groups and ways in which people's politics may be shaped by aspects of their identity through race, class, religion, sexual orientation or traditional dominance. Not all members of any given group are necessarily involved in identity politics. Groups who participates in identity politics may or may not be a marginalised class of people. However, group advocates will often have a self-belief, a self schema or explanatory narrative, that they are in fact a marginalized group. Typically, these group identities are defined in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, or neurological

wiring. Minority influence is a central component of identity politics. Minority influence is a form of social influence which takes place when a majority is being influenced to accept the beliefs or behaviour of a minority. Unlike other forms of influence this usually involves a personal shift in private opinion. This personal shift in opinion is called conversion. This type of influence is most likely to take place if the minority is consistent, flexible and appealing to the majority.

So far we have been discussing about the conceptual formulations of identity with regard to various realms of knowledge systems such as philosophy, psychology, political science or cultural studies. But it can be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives or standings such as the essentialist approach, the strategic essentialist approach, the post-modern approach, the Post-positivist approach etc. The essentialists believe in positing one aspect of identity (say, gender, class, race etc) as the sole cause or determinant constituting the social meanings of an individual's experiences. There is a problem with such essentialising as the post-modern school would point out. For instance, a woman in the nineteenth century would experience her womanhood differently a rich metropolitan woman of the twenty first century. Even two women living together in the same time could be differently located in respect to their gender, say, for example, a lower class/caste working woman and upper class/caste housewife. Any fixed identity involves a certain amount of falsity since it essentializes certain experiences. The social experience of an individual is cross-cut by various factors like gender, race, caste, language, and religion and it is very difficult to essentialize identities based on one factor. Therefore identities are not real but constructed. As Paula M. L. Moya points out the "first problem with essentialist conceptions of identity, . . . is the tendency to posit one aspect of identity . . . as the sole cause or determinant constituting the social meanings of an individual's experience" (Reclaiming p.3). However, one would not be able to disregard the concept of identity, even if it might be contested, because of "the fact that goods and resources are still distributed according to identity categories" (Reclaiming p.8). In fact Moya points out that an alternative to essentialist conceptions of identity, termed variously as "strategic essentialisms" and "contingent foundation", has been posited by theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics) and Judith Butler (Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity). The former talks of "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously

visible political interest” (“Discussion: Subaltern Studies – Deconstructing Historiography”, p.342). In other words, although one knows that identity is not real but one can still use identity in the public domain as an instrument for resistance as a way to displace hegemonic knowledge and structures of oppression. Contemporary gender theories too argue that identity is flexible and that gender need not only be a product of the biological body.<sup>3</sup>

According to the Postmodernist view, identity is but a construct only. Anything and everything related to identity is related to a deep sense of plurality. Identity is essentially fluid, variable, fluctuating, alterable and elastic. This fluidity of identity amounts to the dissolution of the self in relation to history, society, community etc as opposed to the conventional/traditionalist/modernist formation of identity signifying unity of self in relation to the various other aspects such as the community, society, history where self acts as the mediator between God and Reality. For the post modernists, all observation and knowledge are theory mediated. There is nothing like the original experience. Identity categories are neither stable nor internally homogeneous. All identities are “fictitious” and “mystifying” since they treat “fictions as facts” and erase all “contradictions” and “differences” internal to the social construct (Reclaiming p. 6). The post modernist view of identity assertion reflects a shift from the social to cultural movements. Post modern cultural movements tend to be as stated by Ronald Robertson and Bwckart Holzner, in the book Identity and Authority “to be composed of innumerable and diverse largely (organizationally) unconnected and uncoordinated small groups which forms along the lines of friendship network” (p.25) which are also ideologically heterogeneous.

Stuart Hall in his path breaking essay “The Questions of Cultural Identity” by “de-centerings” the five significant positions/postulates of thoughts, Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, Saussurean structuralism, Foucault and Feminism “tried to map the conceptual shifts by which, according to some theorists, the Enlightenment 'subject', with a fixed and stable identity, was de-centred into the open, contradictory, unfinished, fragmented identities of the postmodern subject”. In this regard we can note Stuart Hall’s words about identity:

. . . [I]dentity is actually something formed through unconscious processes over time, rather than being innate in consciousness at birth. There is always something 'imaginary' or fantasized about its unity. It always remains incomplete, is always 'in process', always 'being formed'. The 'feminine' parts of the male self, for example, which are disavowed, remain with him and find unconscious expressions in many unacknowledged ways in adult life. Thus, rather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of *identification*, and see it as an ongoing process. Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a *lack* of wholeness which is 'filled' from *outside us*, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *others*. Psychoanalytically, the reason why we continually search for 'identity', constructing biographies which knit together the different parts of our divided selves into a unity, is to recapture this fantasized pleasure of fullness (plenitude). . .” (“The Questions of Cultural Identity”)

As we all know Michel Foucault rejected the view of a person having an inner and fixed 'essence' that is the person's identity. He identified the self as being defined by a continuing discourse in a shifting communication of oneself to others. The common notions that individual possess certain form of implicit power had been rejected by Foucault by replacing this with the idea of power as a technique or action in which people engage. According to him, Power is exercised but not possessed. He described *technologies of the self* as ways individuals act upon themselves to produce particular modes of identity and sexuality, in his thought provoking contemplation called “About The Beginning Of The Hermeneutics Of Self: Two Lectures At Dartmouth” (Political Theory, 1990). These 'technologies' include methods of self-contemplation, self-disclosure and self-discipline which can be seen expressed in multiple manifestations of autobiographies, diaries, blogs, etc. Foucault also describes technologies of the self as the way in which individuals work their way into a definite discourse. For Mikhail Bakhtin too, the self is ambiguous. Building up the concept of the ‘unfinalizable’ self he opined that individual people cannot be finalized, completely understood, known, or labelled. Another significant formulation of Bakhtin is the idea of the relationship between the self and others, or other groups. According to Bakhtin, in an inescapably intertwined way each and every individual subjective persona in the world order comes under influence of one another, and consequently no voice can be said to be absolutely independent or entirely isolated. As pointed out by the thinker, One cannot really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, “because they are located outside us in

space, and because they are others” (New York Review of Books, June 10, 1993). In his seminal research about Dostoevsky, his idea of unfinalizability and self-and-others, found an equivalent relation in the concept of "polyphony", which could be termed as multiple voices within one frame of mind. It is the unfinalizability of individuals that creates true polyphony. (He found Dostoevsky’s work a true representation of "polyphony", where each character in Dostoevsky's work represents a voice that speaks for an individual self, distinct from others.) He also challenged philosophers for whom plurality of minds is accidental and superfluous. Thus these thinkers like Hall, Bakhtin and Foucault in their individual expositions about self/identity developed a counter discourse against the essentialist deliberation about identity.

To cope with the post-modern debunking a new strategy has been adopted towards identity which is the Post Positivist approach. Formulated by Satya P. Mohanty in his 1993 essay “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On Beloved and the Postcolonial Question” and in his subsequent book Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics (1997), it is a more complicated and nuanced alternative to current formulations that see identity either in a deterministic way or as solely arbitrary (or, at most, ‘strategic’). According to Mohanty identities can be simultaneously “real” and “constructed”. For him:

All experiences . . . is socially constructed, but the constructedness does not make it arbitrary or unstable in advance. Experiences are crucial indexes of our relationships with our world (including our relationships with ourselves), and to stress their cognitive nature is to argue that they can be susceptible to varying degrees of socially constructed truth or error and can serve as sources of objective knowledge or socially produced mystification. (Literary Theory, p. 211)

Mohanty draws on the perceptive work done by Naomi Scheman in her essay “Anger and the Politics of Naming”, where she explains how we carry out the mistake of estimation that our emotions as our own “inner” possessions.<sup>4</sup> Naomi Scheman in her observant essay dismissed the notion of emotions as our inner possessions. According to her, personal emotions say anger is not as a fully formed emotion that was waiting to be released or expressed. The emotion becomes what it is through the mediation of the social and emotional environment that the consciousness-raising group provides. A part



of what constitutes this environment is an alternative account of the individual's relationship with the world, and these are unavoidably theoretical. These include notions of what the individual or the group is supposed to be angry, what s/he or they should not tolerate, what is worth valuing, notions that are not merely but also socio-theoretical in nature. Scheman points out that such alternative accounts help organize amorphous or confused feelings to produce an emotion that is experienced more directly and fully. However dependent emphatic understanding is on personal experience the simple fact of experiencing oppression is not sufficient for understanding one's own or some else's oppressive situation. "Experience is epistemically indispensable but never epistemically sufficient for arriving at a more objective understanding of a situation". Experience is subjective. The meanings given to experiences are unavoidably prepared by the ideas and beliefs through which the world is viewed. Experience in its mediated form contains a "cognitive component" through which we can gain access to knowledge of the world. Scheman's work proves that the postmodernists' distinction between knowledge based on personal experience and that on theory is wrong since highly personal experience such as anger, pleasure, etc are not immediate and self-mediated but mediated and ambiguous.

Terry Eagleton opines that it is wrong to suppose "that the mere occupancy of some place within society will automatically supply . . . [one] with an appropriate set of political beliefs and desires" (*Ideology* p. 206). Eagleton remarks that if that had been the case then all women would have been practitioners of Feminism. Women may be better placed to understand their exploitation than their counterparts. But they are liable to misinterpret their situation and form a false identity. The link between their position and their identity may vary since it depends partly upon the interpretation of experience. The simple fact of experiencing oppression is not enough for understanding one's own or some else's oppressive situation. "Experience" refers to the fact of personally observing, encountering or undergoing a particular event or situation. But the meanings we give our experiences are unavoidably prepared by the ideas and beliefs through which we view the world. Mohanty points out that "the experience of social subjects has a cognitive component." He adds that "'experience' refers very simply to the variety of ways human process information" (*Literary Theory* p. 205). But the "truth- value" of such understanding of experience will depend on how adequate is the "theory" that explains the intersecting social, economic and political relations that constitute the subject and

object of knowledge. Any understanding of the “experiences of any given individual” has to take into consideration “the mutual interaction of *all* the relevant social categories that constitute [his or] her social location and situate them within the particular social, cultural and historical matrix in which [he or] she exists [*italics author’s*]” (*Reclaiming*, p.82-83). This is important in our study for we would find that the artists may very often left out relevant categories while constructing one’s selfhood or even the class based characters’ identities. Thus, “some identities, can more adequately account for the social categories constituting an individual’s social location . . . than some others that the same individual might claim.” If the artist (or the author) is “forced to ignore certain salient aspects of . . . [his] social location in order to maintain . . . [his] self-conception, we can fairly conclude that . . . [his] identity is distorted.” Thus, “identities are not self-evident, unchanging and uncontestable, nor are they absolutely fragmented, contradictory and unstable. Rather, identities are subject to multiple determinations and to a continual process of verification that takes place over the course of an individual’s life through her interaction with the society she lives in” (*Reclaiming*, p.83-84)

The difference between post-positivists and the post modernists is that the Post-Positivist realists agree, like postmodernists, that all observation and knowledge are theory mediated. There is nothing like the original experience. Post-positivists, however, point out that there is nothing wrong with such a theory-mediated objective knowledge. Such knowledge is always open to reconsideration on the basis of new or pertinent information. However, they can form the basis of truth claims. An individual may be incorrect about his “experience” or “identity” and it is possible to disembark at a more truthful explanation of it. Post-positivists point out that postmodernists’ division between knowledge based on individual experience and that on theory is wrong for even highly personal experiences (such as anger, pleasure, etc) are not instantaneous and self-mediated but mediated and indefinite. contrasting the post-modern view, post-positivist emphasises on truth claims on theory mediated knowledge. The “truth-value” of such understanding of experience will depend on how adequate is the “theory” that explains the intersecting political, economic and social relations that constitute the subject and object of knowledge. Identity is neither preset nor fixity of identity is desirable. Identity is a incessant process of reassessment or re-examination. Some identities are comparably more true. The “truth-value” of such will depend on how sufficient is the “theory” that

explains the intersecting social, economic and political relations that compose the subject and object of knowledge. Identities are not obvious, static and irrefutable, nor are they absolutely split, conflicting and unbalanced. Identities are variables under multiple determinations subject to a recurrent process of validation that takes place over the course of an individual's life through multiple interactions with various coordinates of the society.

Thus any identity would have to recognize and comprehend the socio- political, economico- epistemic consequences of a person's social location. Mohanty opines that our social world is one "constitutionally defined by relations of domination" (Literary Theory, p.232) We find that to maintain his/her identity the author/ artist may have to suppress or misconstrue his/her own or other's experiences. However to give a Post positivist critique is that it is the issue of identity is the centre stage around which most conflicts occurs in a multi-cultural geopolitics.

### III

#### THE FORMULATIONS OF 'MODERN' IN THE PARADIGM OF MODERN INDIAN ART

A Western coinage, the term 'Modern', though highly equivocal, commonly refers to a cluster of international movements and trends in the arts and literature pertaining to a specific periodization within the given historical context. Beyond this rudimentary labelling, however, there is little agreement about the meaning and scope of the term, and hence, it jeopardizes any claim for a homogenous wholeness or status as a monolithic entity. Rather the semantic structure of modern can be described as a "fuzzy set" of meaning horizons determinable functionally and contextually and clustered in dynamic hierarchies by degrees of salience. The salience of one modernist position or set of positions over another is to be determined pragmatically by the particular aesthetic, social and political contents in which it is used. Since its value is often transient, within a given historical context, it can be reviewed and re-interpreted. The expressions of modern differ from culture to culture, and region to region within the changing frames of reference. The engagement with the notion of modern as a homogenous whole surpasses

the questions of uneven modernity and hence gives rise to the formulations of a “mainstream” modern on the basis of certain commonalities in terms of high cultural practices, which is often problematic. In the vast international paradox, the version of mainstream cultural modern is often traceable to a pattern of geopolitical and scholastic domination based on certain access to information, a reductive influence achieved through cultural information industries. Take, for instance, the international scenario. The world system re-inscribes the old binary division of tribalism versus universalism, nationalism against imperialism, first world versus third world, or occident versus orient. More subtle is the way in which the constant re-contextualising between local and global perspective lures subsidiary players as intricate parts in the balancing of power, in the larger strategy to regulate regional cultures and politics. The inherent hierarchization often results in a proliferation of relatively powerless subcultures, which are received less as equal partners than as splinters groups of ‘thems’.

The irony of the situation is that these dynamics of cultural power politics operating within the vast international paradigm of world-system can be very often seen activating within the cultural paradigm of the national versus regional discourses also, reinstating certain politics of canon- formulations. This politics of canonization adhering to the formulation of the institutionalised version of mainstream cultural modern is of course very much related to the problematics of ‘modern’ that I have referred to at the outset. The tendency of upholding a logically ‘intentional definition’ of modern with an official checklist of necessary and sufficient conditions for all modernist trends to articulate an “Organic Model” proves to be too positivistic on one hand, and the logically, “extensional definition” concerned with the periodization oriented approach that attempts to define modern simply by enumeration or descriptions of various conventionally associated issues tends to be too relativistic on the other hand. Both these models make no room to embrace certain categories, since these categories cannot be appropriated within the organic wholeness of the monolithic structure of the modernist model. These sidelined categories or systems tether onto the edge of the margins. Looking into the context of mainstream national modern as regards Indian art, the logically intentional definition of a monolithic modern based on this organic model seems to be working so far. The national modern of Indian art is about the ways in which the choice of historicizing the art of twentieth century has been operating. It is about framing of history,

categories, inclusions and exclusions. It is obviously a troubled terrain. Any discussion of the ways in which objects, representation and practices are historicised would necessarily entail a consideration of the ideational and institutional frames within which these objects, representation and practices are produced, understood and disseminated.

The American art critic Lucy R. Lippard in her book Mixed Blessing outlines a pattern of cultural domination in the United States by a homogenized Euro-American society, and the consequent marginalizing of 'mixed race' group comprising African, Native American, Latin American and Asian natives. Lippard states:

The Contemporary art world, a somewhat rebellious satellite of the dominant culture, is better equipped to swallow cross-cultural influence than to savor them... Ethnocentrism in arts is balanced on a notion of Quality that "transcends boundaries"- and is identifiable by those in power. According to this lofty view, racism has nothing to do with art, qualities will prevail, so called minorities just haven't got it yet. (p.57)

Hence, the institutionalized version of cultural modern that emerged in Europe and American around the middle of the century is based on the critical standard of a nation of Quality that transcends boundaries and is identifiable only by those in power. I take this clue from Lippard's observation about the international mainstream modern juxtaposed against other modernisms at the margins, to apply it to the modernist canonization of Indian national modern, where if any marginalised category or system does not map into the mainstream, it is as if because (not clear) it has not came up to the critical standard or "just haven't got it yet". Now the significant question arises as to who formulates or power plays the construction of the modernist canon within the paradigm of modern Indian art? Within the historical conditions, it is the metropolitan, academy trained modern art circles operating within a few dominant art centres who control the larger part of the business of art production, exhibition and publication within the secure confines of institutions devoted to art or high culture. Within this ordered white cube of closed community it is the urban academy trained art practitioners, curators and writers who are engaged in producing modern or contemporary art and in the very process giving form to modern secular subjectivity, while the folk, tribal and popular cultures get sidelined in this history of modernity, thereby inventing a modern that is exclusive and one which privileges the speaking

subjects of the metropolis as the norm. Here in this exclusive list that includes folk, tribal popular, other minorities, little tradition and subaltern groups, I would like to add another category of the lesser zones situated in the sidelined terrain of remote geographic space, a terrain of dis-privileged positions with regard to geo-political domination or economic emancipation and wielding no power in cultural dynamics.

With regard to this problematics of the construction of a mainstream modern at the cost of accountability for the margins of modernism, we can refer to the argument laid by Vivek Dhareshwar in his thought provoking article, “Post Colonial in Post-modern or the political after Modernity” published in the July issue of the Economic and Political Weekly in 1995, whereby he critically comments on Geeta Kapur’s project of constructing a leftist avant-garde. According to him to understand the exigencies of a modernising capitalism and the modernising imperatives of a left politics, and how both these get inter-articulated by the nation as subject, one has to look at the programmatic attempt of Geeta Kapur’s construction of Indian avant-garde. “How to name the contemporary” that is the form that Geeta Kapur attempts to specify the modern takes. The task is to say how to experience our own time and it involves defining the founding equation between history and subject and thus constitutes the revolutionary or avant-garde subject in the historical context of decolonising post-colonial India. To name the contemporary, one needs an account of the multiple and conflicting registers in which the people, i.e. the Indians have been named. She articulates that this question of contemporary is important for the urban middle class intelligentsia including the artist. The new citizen subject assumes the burden of identity, of naming the contemporary. The site occupied by this subject is where the chasms between tradition and modernity take place. Thus, Geeta Kapur’s reworking of tradition, via the mediation of a “theory of tradition”, and “tradition-in-use”, prepares the political and aesthetic ground for the arrival of avant-garde. Turning tradition into tradition-in-use has been the task of an artist through the appropriation of the folk. It regards such an appropriation as justified, in so far as it gives content to the self-definition of the national subject and its goal of uniting disjointed histories and trajectories into a coherent and complex whole. As for the task of transforming modernism into an avant-garde project, it is forced to hold together the nation in the face of globalization. The left avant-garde then supplements nationalism. And here the social antagonisms that modernisation brings about and which

nationalism tries to suppress cannot be addressed or they have to be deferred. An interesting point noted by Vivek Dhareshwar is that in such modernist/ avant-garde agenda, anything that moves away from the formalism of the high modernism in order to foreground local or indigenous practices, would be an ‘anomalous’ modern for critics like Geeta Kapur. He makes this point transparent with the example of a short story named “A horse for the Sun” written by a Kannada writer from South India, U. R. Ananthamurthy that stages the encounter between discrepant experiences of modernity and the dilemma of modern fore-grounded in a local, regional arena, as projected through two protagonists – a leftist modernist urbane writer and a rural idiot Venkata. Dhareshwar observes:

Geeta Kapur’s resolution seems at first to be the most unambiguous, she is not troubled as Ananthamurthy clearly is, by the identity programme of modernity project including its left version. In fact, she would deny that the aporia as it emerged in the first scenario (i.e. Ananthamurthy’s’ strong juxtaposition of the doubled or split form of modernity) is intrinsic to modernity, while her programme is outlined in the most orthodox terms – the creation of a historical avant-garde of left modernism – its idiom is said to be the “Swadeshi”. The need, therefore, is to invent or reinvent a tradition and it’s “tradition-in-use”. Yet the resolution she proposes avoids the splitting of the subject that occurs in the case of (Ananthamurthy’s) the first scenario only at the cost of redoubling the nation into modern and vice versa. The politics of left modernism ends up reiterating or supplementing the popular sovereignty i.e. nationalism of the nation-state. And the notion of the tradition that she constructs as the historical condition of possibility of an avant-garde may have already lost its legitimacy which is why it appears monolithic and, imposed . . . A large part of the problem in the way Geeta Kapur carries of her project lies in the way she abstracts from a specific historical experience of Europe and tries to give it Swadeshi content, rather than beginning with an interrogation of that context to determine what could be a radical politics of aesthetics that could define our present. Her project is the symmetrical obverse of Ananthamurthy or Ashish Nandy’s. If they hold on to ‘culture’ as our content and reject the form as alien, she accepts the form, which is also a norm, as necessary and desirable, and tries to shape the context (culture) into that form. (p. 109)

A similar observation regarding the attempt to construct an avant-garde starting from “Bombay Progressive” Group 1890, to the “Place of People” by Geeta Kapur within the paradigm of national modern is made by Shivaji Panikkar in his seminar paper on

“Regional Modernism and Madras School” in the seminar about “Politics of Representation” held in Baroda 2000, Faculty of Fine Arts, Dept. of Art History and Aesthetics (which I have taken note of from the recorded version of the paper). He also comments that the mode of history writing is the question of privileging and disprivileging and suggests the writing of the regional histories, before attempting a frame for national modern.

What one has proposed to put forward with the critique of such modernist context here is that a certain mode of historizing with a set of agenda for an “organic model” of modernism tends to sideline several categories, as they cannot be appreciated or fitted into this pre-fabricated mould. Taking into account these undercurrents within the modernist paradigm and internal dynamics in the politics of representation, I think, it is high time that we start tracing the unexplored vista of regional modern to arrive at the “Truth” functionality of the cultural dynamics in its entirety. There are modernisms which would not fall into any definitive order of black and white fixity but into the indeterminate grey region that can neither be categorized into minor modernism or little traditions in the pure scholastic sense of the term, nor subaltern in the purest form of sensibility and perceptions. In their particular distinctive mode of predicament and their unique qualitative experiences they would fall into a different genre of modernism. Hence an alternative model of modernism for the fullest possible explanation of these categories is called for. An aesthetic creative order to summon up the inauthentic mode of experiences – the dead area of culture, the ability to critically diagnose and distance, to confront the occasion of fantasy and distraction with requirements of imagination and critical self awareness and critical engagement to evoke history, sociology, poetics and politics and to establish its comparability to some current mode or style of the inauthentic – the idealised, the sentimental, the euphemistic in its culture. There ought to be the qualified modernist criteria that would take into account the specific historical contexts to formulate one’s own prototype of modernity. Hence keeping these factors in mind one can talk about the formulation of regional modernism with one’s own distinctive qualitative experiences, and as I have already proposed, to accommodate all these distinctive qualitative expressions/experiences, there is a need for an alternative model for modernism. In this search for an alternative model that would recover the marginalized or submerged currents and accommodate the decentred peripheral zonal



systems, I would like to take the aid of the model articulated by Chana Kronfeld in her book titled On the Margins of Modernism, Decentered Literary Dynamics (1996) where she has taken up the case of two decentred languages – Hebrew and Yiddish. The model infers and extends Ludwig Wittgenstein, the German philosopher's concept of "Family Resemblance" and Charles Fillmore's and George Lakoff's work on "Prototypes and Frame Semantics and the Theory of Categorization."

To the classical conception of a category as having clear boundaries and being defined by a common checklist of properties, Wittgenstein offers a more pliable alternative. Although family resemblance is the illustration that has become synonymous with his approach as a whole, Wittgenstein uses other illustrations, each of which sheds a slightly different light on the ways in which a category such as Modern may be constructed. I shall not go in detail but only give three major examples that he took up. (i) First is the family resemblance proper – members of one family share a variety of similar features – eyes, complexion, gait, temperament, but there need be no one set of features shared by all family members. (ii) The second example concerned the concept of game. There is no set of features which all games share. Some are a form of group play, without any winning or losing, others involve luck, still others, skills some have rigid rules, others are free form and so on. While some share same properties, no one feature is common to all. (iii) The final illustration, which Wittgenstein develops, nevertheless, could be the most applicable to a diachronic literary and artistic category such as modernism. It has come to be known, as the rope analogy, even though he actually talks about thread – "In spinning a thread, we twist fiber on fiber. And the strength of the fiber does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through in the whole length, but in the overlapping, of many fibres." (Philosophical Investigations, Part-1, Sec. 67).

Within this framework, modern can remain one clear category even though no two sub-trends within it may share the same features. If modern is a 'fuzzy' category in Zadehean Sense (1965), it is therefore, necessarily structured on the principle of family resemblance. According to the prototype theory of categorization and cognitive semantics, a prototype is a member of a category, which is considered the "best example" of that category. For example, the prototype of the category of bird may be the Robin. This prototype model is neutral with respect to the ontological status of its constituents.

It is, therefore, possible to argue against any essentialist view of modernism by advocating the prototype model as a functional construct, which allows people to zero in on relevant segments of a heterogeneous category. The question whether a member of a category is more or less prototypical of that category marks a centrality gradient for the various members. (The example – Robin has a higher centrality gradient within the category of bird than penguin does, although both are members of the same class) When as Wittgenstein has already pointed out, the category itself has unclear boundaries, we can distinguish not just a centrality gradient within the category, but also a membership gradient marking degree of membership in that category. Modernism presents difficulties because of the differing constructions it involves in both centrality and membership gradients. Modernism is furthermore a category with diachronically and culturally fuzzy boundaries where “best examples” of prototypes of each sub-trends are often quite atypical. And yet they tend to misleadingly and at times subversively stand for the whole. Diverse and complex factors, such as experimental grounding, cultural convention, the specific historical and social context and the discourse conditions of a given text may combine to affect the judgement of literary or in our case, artistic prototypicality. For the purpose of art theory, a dynamic, content sensitive conception of the hierarchy of prototypical members within a category becomes particularly crucial. While this flexibility is important for all artistic categories, it becomes absolutely vital for those artistic systems that are diachronically or synchronically on the margin. The need for some such alternative model is even poignant for the recovery of marginalised and submerged currents. Hence I would like to propose that the project of recovering a regional modern tethered to the margin of Indian national modern on the basis of its membership gradient and prototypicality of category within modern can be taken up. And the regional modern that concerns us as one of the contexts of our research work is the regional modern of Assam, an unexplored, yet a potential and significant prototype of the Indian national modern. Now let us map the genealogy of the modern art in Assam.

#### IV

### THE GENEALOGY OF THE MODERN ART IN ASSAM

The basic proposal of this section is to provide a synoptic historical account of the modern art scenario in Assam within the mentioned time frame to have a general overview and a substrating ground for the main concern of my study. But it would not bring into scrutiny the intricate details, undercurrents or discussions about all the art practitioners within the geographic space and time frame. The methodology followed would be a broad chronological discussion regarding the significant artists who represent signpost trends vis-à-vis thematic, stylistic currents flowing through the Assam art scenario and a brief comprehensive observation with regard to general recurrent tendencies within the art scenario.

Modernity in India emanated from the interplaying tangents ripe at the time – the vast cultural heritage that was insidiously denigrated by a Macaulayan cultural policy and (as in the process) the heritage that was being rejected by its own people, a growing wave of orientalism influencing not only European thought and art but also the political climate and its urgent concerns of national identity reflected via the Swadeshi Movement. The fervour of nationalism had enveloped the entire region of Assam also, with charismatic visit of Mahatma Gandhi during the Session of National congress in Pandu in 1927 and Azad Hind Fauj's first conquest of Manipur (1944), where the Indian tricolour was first hoisted on Indian soil, reaching its delightful zenith at the moment of independence of India. Assam shared the joy, new aspirations, and the new inspiration for the reconstruction of a newly born nation with rest of India. The cultural scenario seemed conducive and pregnant with innovative and experimental dynamics.

Like the rest of India, Assam also has a distinctive tradition of folk arts and manuscript painting. At the advent of colonialism, the rich and vibrant tradition of Assamese traditional manuscript painting started dwindling and subsequently died down due to a lack of patronage from the ruling class and the "Satras" – the religious institutions within which the traditional painting had flourished, as the ruling class and the institutions were rendered powerless both politically and economically by the colonial rule. Of course, the wave of westernization had tilled the ground for the growth of a new

art form, a new tradition, new in the context of changes in the stylistic, idiomatic, mediumistic and thematic representations, which was a pan-Indian phenomenon.

The seed from which this movement towards “modern” painting grew were the influences resulting from western academic art education, which seemed to stand against the grain of Indian psyche. This influence is manifested in the popularity of an artist such as Raja Ravi Varma, the first and foremost among the Indian painters to imbibe British academic realism in the new medium of oil, and various other new elements like perspective, European drawing, composition etc. In Assam this seed of modernism took root during the pinnacle of Bengal School, (the first major evolution of a “national” style and school of painting that evolved during the first two decades of the twentieth century). The cultural scenario seemed conducive and pregnant with innovative and experimental dynamics. Assamese literature had already struck the modernist chord before the beginning of the century with the publication of a literary magazine *Arunodoi* (1846) by the American Baptist Mission. It was in this magazine that art-illustrations in wood block relief printing were introduced for the first time. Portraits of great people, pictures of different animals, illustrations of Bible and other literatures and many others were printed. As aptly observed by Rajkumar Majinder<sup>5</sup> all the elements of British Academic Realism such as chiaroscuro, perspectives, tonal variation, proper anatomical proportion, depth and volume, etc were visible in these illustrations. Some of the artists were Rev. Nathan Brown, Tularam, Kanuram, Mohiram, Tuleswar, Young, etc.

Under the leadership of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala,<sup>6</sup> Bishnu Rabha,<sup>7</sup> and several other cultural activists, literary personae and intellectuals, Assam’s cultural scenario was vigorously dynamic in the twentieth century. A number of guilds and associations like the Progressive Writer’s Association (1936) Indian People’s Theatre association (1944) formed branches in Assam along with indigenous literary and cultural organizations such as “Assam Sahitya Sabha”, “Assam Sanskritics Sangha”, all established during the 1930s with politically progressive socialist inclination. But as compared to other cultural forms, the modern art scenario in Assam gained momentum comparatively later. The highlights of the emerging modern art scenario in Assam can be traced as – emergence of four Calcutta trained artists in the second/third decade; establishment of the first art school by Jibeshwar Baruah in 1947, convention of the 4th National Arts and Crafts

Exhibition by Lalit Kala Academy in 1958 and the National Art and Craft Exhibition organized by Art and Craft School of Assam in 1960. The later exhibitions not only highlighted the important aspects of contemporary art trends in the national scenario but at the same time brought forth a new interest and understanding among the public and the aspirant artists. The literature oriented Assam Academy for Cultural Relations had initiated several group exhibitions of Assamese artists in the premise of Cotton College. It was in the seventies that some most significant art organizations like Fine Art & Craft Society of Assam (1971) founded by Neelpaban Baruah & Sonaram Nath and Guwahati Artist's Guild (1976) under the Presidentship of Benu Mishra came up. Meanwhile, the art school was provincialised into the Government Art college of Assam. The formation of Jorhat Fine Arts and Crafts Society in 1976 was another significant happening as the art awareness spread to the other culturally thriving parts of Assam rather than being a capital centric phenomenon centred around Guwahati. Late Pranab Baruah's art institution "Kallol" in Nagaon (1973), Biren Sinha's "Serdihun Kalaniketan" (1979) in the hill district of Karbi Anglong and establishment of Kokrajhar Art College in Kokrajhar at Bodoland (1991) also contributed a lot in spreading the art awareness and endeavours to different parts of Assam. Later on when the Department of Fine Arts was started in Assam University, Silchar in 1996 the art scene gained a new momentum and vibrancy in the Barak valley of the southern part of Assam. To trace back the beginning of this entire modernist/ modern art discourse in the state we have to go back to the early parts of the twentieth century. It was perhaps the publication of the magazine Avahan in the second decade (1929) and the circulation of works of some artists both local and western; appearance of the first article on art by Sarbeshwar Kotoky and Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla's artistic engagement in espousing aesthetic concept like the Krishna Tatva<sup>8</sup> in this periodical, that created a wide spread public awareness about modern art for the first time. It is herein worth mentioning that though the cultural scenario in Assam was always literature centric, and fine arts occupied a comparatively marginal place, it was through literature that many theoretical and conceptual formulations such as Marxism, Existentialism, Freudian Psychoanalysis and many such ideas and notions entered the realm of art and manifested in the artistic renderings of the artists. As we have already stated, it was during this decade that the first set of four Assamese artists namely Muktanath Bordoloi (visual 5), Suren Bordoloi, Jagatsing Kachari and Pratap Barua set forth to Calcutta and took admission in Calcutta art school. The exact date of their

duration of stay in Calcutta could not be traced out. But in an article written by poet and art critic Nilamoni Phukan<sup>9</sup> it is mentioned that Suren Bordoloi was the classmate of sculptor Devi Prashad Roy Chaudhury. Though these artists were trained in Calcutta during the heyday of the Bengal school, interestingly except in the works of Pratap Baruah, the artistic oeuvre of none of the other three artists shows the influence of the Bengal school. In few works of Pratap Barua such as “In the Hat” (open bazaar) or “Joymotir Xasti” (Punishment of Sati Joimoti) the typical Ajantasque figure types of “Bengal School” – the slender-elongated-elegant bodies with dreamy eyes and the typical hazy landscape or the mysterious setting can be witnessed. Barua’s still life “Apples” (1930) the first ever recorded still life in Assam till date, is a unique rendering of composition, mature handling of colours and tonal variation with subtle playfulness of light and shade in the impressionistic manner. However the first Assamese artist to imbibe and assimilate the oil medium, western perspective, chiaroscuro and illusionistic rendering was Muktanath Bordoloi. It was in his art that the element of social reflexivity and critical self-consciousness as modernist manifestation was evident for the first time. In his painting “Opium Den” (1926), the modernist socialist concern is manifested through the depiction of the horrific reality of a social evil. A concern over the catastrophic environment, the gift of colonial exploitation, is revealed in the melancholic atmosphere weaving within the dark shades of grey hues and forming a gloomy tonal gradation into which the three skeletal figures hungrily engrossed in consuming opium are projected. The other set of artists who followed in the third and fourth decade were Ratneswar Barua, Chitrosen Barua, Gajen Baruah (visual 6), Abhay Duwara (visual 7), Tarini (visual 8), Sashidhar Saikia, Romesh Ghosh, Prajna Das, Piyari Mohan Chaudhuri, Jibeswar Barua, Hem Mahanta (visual 9), Hemchandra Barua, Chittaranjan Barua, Prakash Barua, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Jugal Das, Sashidhar Saikia, Tarun Duwara, and Robin Bhattacharya. Out of these artists Tarun Duwara was the most well known and was a committed artist who spent his entire life in pursuit of art unlike most of the artists who after a point of time succumbed to adverse circumstances of the state where pursuing an artistic career was almost an impossibility. Even now where in a place like Assam to survive as a art professional for a non affluent middle class Assamese is an uneven path of hurdles one can easily imagine what the situation would be in the third and fourth decade of the last century which offered hardly any opportunities and openings, few secure avenues of livelihood and even fewer promotional platforms that could sustain a

professional artistic life. Tarun Duwara's commitment to art was supplemented by his immense imagination and a poetic sensibility. Tarun's "Weaver" is a lyrical rendering where the mundane yet creative moments in the everyday life of Assamese women has been captured.

The first phase of modern art in Assam manifests British Academic Realism, Rennaisansque representations with some overtones of Romanticism. The artist of the first three decades were obsessed with certain definite range of thematic explorations, like that of scenes from rural life of Assam – its collective social occasions, the scenic landscape of the lush green Brahmaputra valley, and certain mythological ("Buddha and Sujata" by Citrasen Barua) and historical ("Sati Joymoti" by Muktanath Bordoloi) as also themes taken from literature. The language or artistic idioms could not go further than the limitations of academic realism with an underlying general mood for a lyrical romanticism. The two most significant artists emerging in the end of third and beginning of the fourth decade were Asu Dev and Hemonta Mishra. In Asu Dev's stylistic rendering a distant echo of Seurat and his Pointillism delving deep into the optics of colour perception may draw an apparent resonance, due to the granular or cellular texture created by his singular way of applying pigments. But, as such, the total effect of his painting was not divisionistic or pointilistic. Asu Dev's dots were a substitute for strokes of brush; he created effects of movement, and aerial perspective with this technique. There is a striking similarity to the total effect of the Greek mosaics of the Byzantine period with Asu Dev's proverbial dots, in the dedication and execution. His use of colours bears a translucent effect. The realistic figurative approach generally deals with protagonists from the common rural, labouring folk. His figures were very fine life studies of the Assamese locals. It seems his artistic oeuvre was a cathartic manifestation of transforming; "laukika" into "alaukika" – the mundane simple act of life like fishing, harvesting into something ethereal. Hemanta Mishra's painting is an expression of certain surrealistic evocations. Dream, memory, fantasy – the hidden elements of subconscious and unconscious – are woven in a complex fabric of symbolic imagery. His world is mysterious, surrealistic, sad and lyrical, where even the titles of the works like "In search of a vanishing God", "The Echo of a Song", "Rose-dew in the bosom of time" etc. suggest this lyricism.

Both the artists continued working relentlessly the following decades defying various constraints. Meanwhile no other significant artist had emerged so far. Of course Prosenjit Duwara (visual 10) who was an aristocrat elite and a woman artist Hemangini Bordoloi (visual 11) who returned from Santiniketan need to be reckoned with. In her rendering of landscapes, portraits, and mythological representation the influence of Santiniketan was evident. Prosenjit Duwara had stayed in Bombay and became close to the artist K. H. Ara of Bombay Progressive. Prosenjit kept oscillating between figuration and abstraction and could not evolve a distinctive style of his own. Though he could not go beyond a limit unit he has produced few significant works like “Silent boats” and “Mother and Child”.

The period of nineteen fifties and sixties had been considerably uneventful as no significant experimentation or conceptual contemplation got manifested with the single exception of Benu Mishra. It was at the advent of seventies, that a new movement encompassed the art world of Assam with a varied range of experimentation, in creative imaginative order marked with aesthetic sensibilities. Art production and art activism both were charged with an acute enthusiasm to define new parameters for emerging modernist manifestation of regional and cultural specificities. As we have already pointed out many art organizations were formed during this decade of seventies among which Gauhati Artist Guild played a pivotal role in giving a momentum to the art scenario. Herein, we would like to elaborate upon the role played by the guild in order to record the collective effort played by the artist community in keeping the historical significance of the organisation in the entire paradigm of visual arts in Assam.

Every space and time has its own spatio-temporal realities. The ‘thinking people’ of that definite time and space try to critically map and mediate these realities by various intellectual/creative means and strategies. Assam, a state situated in the eastern corner of the country facing a plethora of challenges particularly in the realm of visual arts, saw this attempt for mapping and mediation in the activities initiated by GAG – “Gauhati Artists’ Guild” founded in the mid seventies of the last century. The challenges were many - first and foremost being the “Survival angst” in a society where newer idioms and modern vocabularies of art found limited acceptance. Besides creating an atmosphere for art awareness and resolving the infrastructural inadequacies of all sorts, transcending the



polarities of the rational/intuitive, aestheticism/ materialism both in terms of the ideational/ideological and economical or financial contexts were of immediate concern. (Though these may seem like things of past and almost irrelevant today!). The fate of the artists of that time was like, as aptly been compared by writer artist Bhupendra Narayan Bhattacharya in his editorial in the Silver Jubilee edition of the Chinha, the journal of GAG, that of the protagonists of Marquez in “Love at the time of Cholera” who keeps shunting between the banks of “Realism” and “Romanticism” with their eternal dilemma about where to land and why. It was amidst such challenges and dilemma that, in 11th July of 1976, a meeting was held in the drawing room of Scholar-folklorist Prof. Birendranath Datta, to form an organization which came to be known as GAG. The time was conducive. Under the leadership of Benu Mishra and Neelpawan Baruah (visual 12), artists like Late Asu Dev, Late Rajen Hazarika, Tapan Bordoloi, Dhruba Deka, Jogendra Nath Seal, Sashi Bordoloi, Noni Borpujari, Jnanen Barkakoti, Biren Sinha, Aminul Haque, Ramesh Ghosh, Sarat Baruah, Prabhat Dutta, Dibakar Choudhury, Sonaram Nath, Girish Bora, Champak Barbara, Pranabendu Bikash Dhar, Bidyapati Sinha, Naren Das, Nava Choudhury, Tridiv Bhattacharya, Bhupendra Narayan Bhattacharya and others came forward to form this organization. Literary figures like Navakanta Baruah, Hiren Bhattacharya, Nilmani Phookan, Tirtha Phukan also joined hands. The aims and objectives were to find a platform, to look for sponsorship and other financial aid along with creating conducive environment to address various issues and problems. In the next year, GAG opened a school with the two yearly art course & curriculum for children and other aspirants. It was also decided to publish an art journal called Cihna. In 1978, GAG organized its first group exhibition in the premise of North Eastern Hill University of Shillong. Art discussions, seminars, exhibitions along with many other activities became a regular feature. In 1983, they published two albums of art works by eminent artists Asu Dev and Late Rajen Hazarika. In a rented space of GAG, artists would gather, work, discuss their works, argue on issues about art, literature, cinema and other things in life... during the day time they would join in the collective venture of raising funds for GAG by working in various commissioned works, painting Signboard, hoardings, designing book covers and other commercial works and when evening descended, they would go out to the open spaces outside the studio to work. New people came up, once students in the art school of GAG, now they became the responsible members – Deben Dewan, Punam Kalita, Jabeen Rehman, Simanta Jyoti Baruah, Rajkumar Mazinder, Nikhileswar Baruah,

Kishor Kumar Das, Subhash Mahanta, Srikanta Sinha, Abhijit Das, Laishram Surjit Khuman, Mrinal Nayak, Niva Devi, Nilima Thakuria Haque, Lutfa Akhtar, Debananda Ulup, Bikramaditya Choudhury and so many others. After two decades of “rented” existence, GAG at present has a premise of its own, class room for the art school, studio, an art gallery, seminar space and an office and has made the record of bringing out the only art magazine Cihna for last thirty five years. It has indeed been a long journey, celebrating the Silver Jubilee and the years after. That GAG has played a significant role in the public life of Assam is beyond any doubt. Though GAG does not make very tall claims with regard to intellectual/ideational innovations, one cannot undermine the restless creative/ideological endeavours of GAG.

As we have gathered in the foregoing some artists who emerged in the seventies brought forth new direction and departure in the discourse along with initiating organisational set ups like GAG and they tried to create distinct idioms of their own. This group of artists, some self-trained and some trained in reputed institutions like Santiniketan came back to Assam with a new consciousness of Indian and Western art, a wide range of exposure and technical sophistication and capabilities. The significant artists were Shobha Brahma, Benu Mishra, Neelpaban Barua, Pranab Barua (visual 13), Madhav Baishya, Saleha Ahmed (visual 14), Kandarpa Sarma (visual 15), Gauri Burman (visual 16), Pulkot Gogoi (visual 17), Atul Barua (visual 18), Sonaram Nath, Hela Das, Bikash Chakravarti, Pranabendu Bikas Dhar (visual 19), Padum Gohain, Aminul Haque etc.

Shobha Brahma, a trained artist from Santiniketan is a painter sculptor who has been vigorously engaged in artistic endeavours. He has been able to create a stylistic idiom of his own, even though a subtle George Keytean undertone is felt, and his figuration renders a vigorous display of strength and force. A vibrant and rich palette, with bold-passionate hues like red and black, his works are built on lavishly applied circular brush strokes. Though cubist at some distant point, the subject matter, of colour and forms evokes primitivistic and the folk elements, he surprises spectators by his sound understanding of the post impressionist pictorial grammar. Sometimes myth and at times social realities, projected through complex figuration conveys maturity and authenticity. Benu Mishra, another painter from Santiniketan, who is aptly known for rare blending of sound technicality, fine craftsmanship and artistic sensibility is expressionistic in the

artistic rendering that appeals to spectators with its inherent pictorial quality. He has also been successfully experimenting in collage method. Mishra's social concern and reflections of the nihilism of restless environs apparent in allegorical content like the "Last supper", "Death", works are of utmost significance. There seems to be an undercurrent of irony, satire and parody that evoke a serious sadness rather than a sentimental melancholy. He had single handedly revolutionized the art genre of cover designing in Assam.

Neelpaban Barua is perhaps the first painter who has consciously been engaged in conceptualizing experimenting and executing ways for blending the idiom of traditional folk and indigenous elements with that of modern western. Simplification and distortion derived both from locale folk culture and cubist elements; he has experimented on various indigenous media like clay, straw bamboo, cane, papier-mâché to create an extensive range of masks and calligraphic figuration on newspapers. These innovative attempts on the part of the artist draw attention to his endless search for a significant artistic form, the creative urge and inquisitiveness for novelty. Pranab Barua, a painter trained in J.J. School of Art, Mumbai, is known for his capacity of expressionistic portraiture, either be it the face of Jesus or a tribal boy. His lyrical expression is often rendered in metaphorical language. But after a certain point, his style seems stagnant. Among all these emerging artists of the seventies, the only one who restricted himself entirely to abstraction was Kandarpa Sarma – owing a lot to abstract expressionism. His artistic oeuvre consisted of a range of surface abstraction with geometrical patterns and experimentation with forms. But he could not go beyond a limit to translate a strong cognitive component into an effective pictorial component though the process of allusiveness and his style became stagnant with same mood and similar brush strokes. The artists oeuvre of Gauri Barman, a self-taught artist, centre around certain specific resulting in some series of art works such as the "Sail", "Birds", "Mother and Child". "Mukha", "Sattriya", "Tribes of Assam", "Ruins" and some other works based on the experience of the Assam Agitation of the eighties. As the titles suggest, the artists through these series of art works has attempted to conceptually delve into the subject matter in different level. The 'Mukha' series explores the possibilities of masks both at the lingual and conceptual level. In fact, the 'Mukha' series can be seen closely connected to the 'Sattriya' series which is based on different aspects of Sattriya Culture,

the wonder house of multiple art forms. The ‘Tribes of Assam’ series capture the vibrant shades of different ethnic culture of this region. But the most significant series of his entire artistic endeavour are the “Sail” and the “Bird”, which have become his signature. Another artist who like Gauri Barman shuffles between the two world of cinema and painting is Pulok Gogoi. Inspired by Picasso and Hussain his initial renderings were cubist in nature but over the decades he has evolved a distinct expressionist and symbolic style of expression. Some of his important series are the Bhakti series, Acrobats, the tribes of Assam, the indigenous people of the Brahmaputra riverbank, and some rendering based on the melodious compositions of the musician-singer-lyricist Dr Bhupen Hazarika. Few recurrent motifs and themes keep reinforcing in Aminul Haque’s art – be it a woman in pensive mood cuddling a goat (a reminiscence of the classical character of Shakuntala?) or a couple engulfed in a musical whirlpool. Music seems to play a very significant role in his artistic vision or we can say he has a keen “eye” for music. Streaks of humour and satire can be seen in the works like a couple riding a bike, where the youth with a crown on his head gallops on almost in an emperor like majestic gesture! (A comment on love and life of the Generation X?). Some of his water colours are visual delight.

It has been observed that in the visual art paradigm the genre of painting dominated the scene until the advent of the seventies. The seventies saw the emergence of few sculptors ushering in expansion and newer genres in the paradigm. The sculptors who emerged on the scene were Ramesh Banikya, a graduate of Santineketan, Saleha Ahmed, Padum Gohain, Hela Das, Sonaram Nath, Atul Baruah and Pranabendu Bikash Dhar. Among these, a significant woman artist of the seventies is the sculptor Saleha Ahmed who imbibed elements from folk and tribal art of the region to evolve an idiom of her own. Her sensitive handling of mass and volume in different mediums like terracotta, wood, plaster of Paris, bronze, iron and Henry Moorean execution in works like “Intellectual”, “Walking in Winter”, “King and Queen” etc. have been able to evoke a poetic allusion. Sculptor Atul Barua’s works are basically formalistic and to an extent abstract, exploring negative space and textural qualities. All his sculptures allude to conceptual inner meanings, transcending the mere world of physicality, as in the works like “Aphelion” where the blasting movement of stars have been captured in rhythmic juxtaposition of verticality and horizontality, and another work – “An Eddy and

Bubbles”, where the cyclical movement of the whirlpool and the irregular lyrical rhythm of bubbles evolve something hidden, unknown and musical. Pranabendu Bikash Dhar searches for the quintessential qualities in a form, the skeletal frame of a body and scrap metal as the medium serve this intentionally very well in his sculptures. The search for the original, eternal and elemental, be it the inner instinct or materiality of facts, enable Pranabendu to evolve certain symbolic motifs. Both Atul Barua and Pranabendu Dhar are sculptors who can be said to be stylistically contemporary to the trend of the seventies evident in the international modern. Since both have done their post graduation in England, sincere efforts to assimilate elements from the contemporary art world and to experiment in the idiomatic/stylistic aspects are evident in their works.

As the genre of sculpture emerged and flourished in the decade of the seventies so also by the end of this decade and advent of the eighties the art of Graphics and print making made new opening in the realm of modern art in Assam. The two artists who have made an immense contribution to the development of the art of graphics in Assam are Ajit Seal (visual 20) and Dilip Tamuli. It is for their relentless effort, enthusiasm and dedication that the Department of Graphic of Government Art College of Guwahati has slowly been able to secure a foremost position among the institutions of the country with a set of technically sound and artistically upcoming artists. Ajit Seal, working within the tradition of fusing segmented elements of folk and traditional idioms with changing perspectives of modern artistic vision, as initiated by Neelpaban Baruah, Shobha Brahma, and Benu Mishra has recently experimented in this direction, to give a new dimension to his artistic oeuvre. Drawing from the woodcarvings of “Namghars” – the religious institution of Assam and other ‘Satra’ drawings, he establishes a bond between traditional style and modernist ethos by imbibing the stylizations of Vaishnavite paintings into modernist contents and visions. The realms the artist employs are that of the existential and mythical. The formal setting created to depict the human situations is also that of the mythical pantheon. The operating principle is the vision of a cosmic unity and the spaces become the metaphorical expressions of creational paradoxes. Dilip Tamuli’s artistic expressions on the other hand render a primitivistic evocation, passionate and powerful. Sparked with an inherent energy within the distorted anthropomorphic form that Dilip creates, the works are recurrently expressed in intense black figuring pastiche/forms/masses and are the symbolic vibrant wholes which suck all the colours,

psychic waves and energies of universe, as if the cosmic black holes are transferred into artistic “black whole” in the artist’s pictorial depictions. At one point German Expressionism and at another instance surrealism corresponds to Dilip’s artistic vision that delves deep into something magical, psychical and primitivistic. One can draw a parallel to Jeram Patel’s enigmatic drawings in black to some extent. Dilip Tamuli’s extensive research and documentation of the various folk and tribal art forms of entire north-eastern regions has definitely enriched his artistic vision and sensitivity.

By the end of the decade of the seventies, three significant artists emerged in the art scenario. They were Noni Borpujari, and Samiran Barua (visual 21), both self-trained and Lutfa Akhtar, an artist trained in Baroda. Noni Borpujari, a print maker and painter is concerned with objectification of personal response to the environs in a variety of media by adopting methods and techniques suitable for each medium. The background and images of his prints are highly textured while the backgrounds of paintings are tonally graded with treatment of flat colours. His backgrounds are spaces – unadorned, non-descriptive, the physical spatial voids where sparse, disjointed motifs and images are projected. Tethering to the edge of a naïve surreal world, Noni’s figures are alienated and within this imposing intervening void. Though the symbolic and metaphorical tones of the paintings fabricate an existentialistic impression they are highly political in its allegorical contents. Samiran Barua’s world is surrealistic, filled with fantasy – dream-memory rendered in a lyrical manner. The treatment of colour, delineation’s and composition – soft and subdued, contribute to this lyricism. Several recurrent motifs like the plantain leaves, a hazy mysterious night and a pale waning moon weave up an eternal atmosphere, where the ancient/primitive space-time is evolved to delve deep into the man-woman’s mysterious relationship as manifested in the series called “Rowing in an Ancient Night in Kundil Nagari”. If not an escapism, Samiran’s artistic journey is likely to be a search for an alternate space – far from the madding crowds and harsh realities, a space that is romantic, lyrical, idyllic, ideal and surreal. Lutfa Akhtar is inspired by children art, the genre of simplification, distortions and bizarre realism. A world of fanciful imagination with forms and colours in warm vibrant manifestations. But underneath lies a serious introspection of female subjectivity, her psyche, dreams and desires, powers and limitations. Lutfa’s work has an enduring appeal with their colourful rupture in the fairy tale like representations.

The Eighties and Nineties are the two decades, which have sparked off new innovations and experimentations both in medium and the idiomatic thematic contents. New modes of post modernist language like installation and performance art have also been adopted as globalization and various inflows of cultural practices have initiated a fresh environ pregnant with attempts to place the local into the national/international contemporarity. Also an overall art consciousness in the public sphere has ignited the experimental and creative mood and several artists have come up to participate. Utpal Barua is one of them. Utpal employs the transparency of acrylic and pits his forms against an elemental sky. His abstractions emerge from an immersion in his own figurative Indian tradition. Easy differentiation in texture and inscrutable light source bathe the pictorial spaces in a subdued but surprising radiance. The narrative motifs make the spaces traverse a whole range of human concerns as certain recurrent motifs – the butterflies, bodies slit and stitched and the crescent moon that looks like a naked bone weave up a latent allegory. Recently Utpal transferred to conceptual and functional abstraction that extracts the essence of contours which recede or seeks to arrogate the foreground. A series of landscape exploring the local also emerges as inscapes exhausting the tactile undulation in nature.

Discerning the unconscious, Munin Bhattacharya with his oeuvre of symbolic gestures unfolds a libidinal sphere of human sexuality. Marked by several narratives motifs like the papaya tree, the peacock, a lust fully gazing cat, or a bucket full of water placed under a hand pump for drawing water, all suggestive of phallocentricity, Munin exposes a realm of sadomasochistic desires (squirrels eating papaya) and obsessive sexual phantasmagoria. The sensuality of realistic figuration caters to spectators' voyeuristic gaze. The figures performing an artistic orgy become notionally parallel to Laxma Gauds. But the approach to pictorial depictions and technicalities reflect certain resemblance to K.G. Subramanyan. Of course, there is another side to Munin's artistic reflexivity, his political satire about which I shall discuss in the subsequent chapter. Simantajyoti Barua's figurative narrative mode of expression built up certain architectural division of space, to expose a complex narrative of humane political concerns. Debananda Ulup, a self – taught tribal artist also exploits allegorical narration of such political concern with his distinctive approach of appropriation of myth, to put across his intended propositions in a simple but effective manner. Rajkumar Majindar's

concerns with modern urbane subjectivity enable him to react to the human situation within the whirlpool of modernist/postmodernist existential predicament. He has appropriated the folk motif both as an aid to his search for forms and as a technique of allusions and revelations. Kishore Das is also seen engrossed with concerns of modern urbane subjectivity displayed through his juxtaposed images and over layered forms and images. Self – absorbed in a similar contemplation is Parabanti Devi. Though her style of rendering is different from Kishore and Rajkumar, she is also concerned about female/feminist issues through an auto critical decoding of one's own subjectivity. A powerful sculptor and another women artist who is concerned with the inner complexities of female subjectivity along with the existential predicament within the patriarchy is Sansita Gogoi, a trained artist from Baroda. Some other artists who deserve mention, here are artists like Krishna Goswami (visual 22), Madhusudan Das, Champak Borbora, Khil Bahadur Chetri (visual 23) and others. Krishna Goswami is a sculptor working usually in woods where he incorporates the elements of Assamese traditional "Satra" sculpture to give it a modernist perspective. Madhusudan Das has been trying to evolve an idiom of his own in the expressionistic mood in the medium of woodcut and lithograph. Champak Borbora's works which are figurative and symbolic express political/social concerns and humane pathos. Khil Bahadur Chetri is a promising upcoming artist who has already been able to arrive at a distinctive idiom of his own. An element of primitivism derived from folk – tribal culture expresses a sense of iconicity and monumentality in his rendered figures. Layers of compartmentalized spaces juxtaposed, unfold a mythical past, an antique space of forgotten memories, all ethnic reminiscent of some unexcavated truths. Few other noteworthy artists are Tridip Dutta (visual 24), Shobhakar Laskar, Dadul Chaliha, Kamal Mahanta, Aditi Chakraborty, Niva Devi, Monica Devi, Parikshit Barua, Bhupen Burman, Rashmi Devi, and others.

The artists we have so far discussed are practicing artists settled in Assam. But there are several artists who have settled outside Assam and have been able to carve a niche. Jhanak Jhankar Narjari, the sculptor and principal of Viswa Bharti, Shyam Kanu, Deben Dewan, Ganesh Gohain, Santana Gohain (visual 25), Nikhileshwar Barua, Debojit Sharma, Prashanta Kalita, Promud Barua, Bipul Chandra Das, Late Bhupen Barman, Naba Kumar Das, Partha Pratim Sarma and others are the artists who have been able to



pave way for establishing a definite identity of their own. Since my concern is limited to the geographic space, I would not go for a detailed discussion about these artists here.

As we have seen by now for almost nine decades, the art scene of Assam has been thriving and has quintessentially developed into a discourse of politically reflexive cultural actions, working within the constraint of a peripheral pocket, dearth of adequate essentials and has basically evolved through three main phases – the first phase being the academic realism triggered by romantic overbearing (1920-40) the second phase ranging from the forties to sixties with characteristic features of surrealism, symbolism and pointillism and third phase being the seventies onward where new idiomatic, stylistic, mediumistic and materialistic experimentations and innovations complemented by ideological and ideational contemplations could be observed. Lingually speaking, the quintessential character of modern art in Assam is eclectic and figurative. The most visible ideational concern of the modern artists in Assam has been the element of indigenism. In the Pan Indian scenario, post 1980s and 1990s are very significant. As Geeta Kapur has pointed out, artists started using new material, new structures, conceptually coded signs, brought questions of art and its objecthood to a head investigating its status at the level of assembly and installation. This resulted in dismantling images as well as bringing in new purpose to formalist interventions. Extended reproduction strategies like video, photocopy were seen featuring in along with artist's individual performance. Such attempts are also visible in Assam but in limited numbers. Dilip Tamuly, a notable graphic artist with international and national exposures was the one to introduce Installation Art (the corner of consciousness, 1980) in Assam for the first time. It is indeed noteworthy and interesting to note that his attempt was contemporary to the first Indian endeavour in the genre of installation by Vivan Sundaram. Of course other art forms such as Performance art is yet to take root in Assam, except one instant which was a collaborative work of Dilip Tamuli and theatre artist Robijita Gogoi. In this Installation-performance the issue of identity was deliberated upon in the present context of consumerism and globalization. A series of video art and sound installation have been taken up by the Desire-Machine Collective, a collective of two artists Mriganka Madhukailya and Sonal Jain, who have exhibited their work in various national and international fora, followed by young artist like Manoj Chakravorty and others, presently there are almost hundreds of artists who have taken up art as their

passion and profession, making the art scene really vibrant in Assam. In spite of various constraints and dearth of infrastructure it has become a regular feature to witness different art exhibitions (almost two-three every fourth night) at different galleries like the state art gallery, the artist's guild gallery, the gallery at the Sri Sankardeva Kalakhetra and others. However, political reflexivity seems to be the overwhelming trait in this context. Mediation of the immediate historical realities by a critically reflexive art-praxis within a specific spatio-temporal paradigm accounts for certain ideological/conceptual, idiomatic/stylistic, mediumistic/materialistic devices that the art practitioners articulate and invest. Allegorical, like the political cinemas or the magical narratives of Latin American literature, artists in Assam seem to subscribe to dynamics of symbolism. Re-appropriations of certain traditional narratives as modern allegories instil a mythical function into the creative repertoire. The allegory is sustained not only in the contents but also in the modes and changes of such mode of presentation against specific historical contents that becomes a unique mode of signification, a historical statement. Triggered by a sense of answerability or a quest for seeking 'meaning' in the existential dialectics within the broader historical collective discourses, the attempts for critical transcendence of the disparity between aesthetic modernism and political modernity seems to be the focal engagement. Right from the "Opium Den" by Muktanath Bordoloi in the 30's rendered in realistic mode to the contemporary allegorical representations in various lingual modes adhere to such character. Closely intermingled with the element of political reflexivity is a pulsating surge of dialectics with the consciousness of identity. Here, the issue of identity is an intellectual concern among the artists either as a manifestation of the ethnic/cultural/racial in collective level or an ontological exploration of the subjective identity of an artistic personae or creative self. The issue of identity in this context is indeed very complex, multi layered and multi dimensional. At one point it becomes a quest of an identity afflicted by existential conflicts of modern and post-modern conditions, at other levels, it is an acute awareness of one's ethnicity. Artists Shobha Brahma and Neelpawan Baruah have explored the awareness of ethnicity with a folkloristic inclination, motifs and myths from their distinctive cultural background. As some artists are engaged with the issues of ethnicity, some others like Munindra Narayan Bhattacharjee have attempted to question the very notion of one's authentic ethnic identity. In the process they have attempted to comment upon the process of hybridization, of appropriations, of formations and deformations in a culture. In the

context of modern art, the Modern pre-supposes a unique individual, an original autonomous authentic artistic self, whereas the Post Modern questions the very notion of identity and talks of pastiche, and schizophrenia of post-modern temporality. Herein the identity is fragmented, multiple, de-centred, conflicting. Artists such as Rajkumar Majinder, Kishore Kumar Das, Dadul Chaliha and others have attempted to explore the ontological issue of subjective identity / creative self through these varied approaches. It is herein worth mentioning that these approaches of dialectics on identity mostly seem to be pro-active in the individual rather than the collective level. It is also observed that the most predominant trend of the identitarian discourse is evident in the context of community seen as a distinct culture group. Artists like Shobha Brahma, Maneshwar Brahma, Debananda Ulup, Khil Bahadur Chetri, Shiv Prasad Marar, Sabita Pegu and others are representative of their individual cultural/ethnic group to which they belong. It is worth mentioning herein that demography of Assam comprises of 360 plus different culture groups and hence it can be seen as a throbbing site of multiple voices of subaltern groups and so called little traditions that are yet to be explored. Moreover, the identitarian dialectics encompasses another significant genre of gender identity. Though woman writing concerned with the issues of feminism evolved as a significant subtext within the greater fold of identity literature decades ago in Assam, art with feminist concern thrived in the last decade of the twentieth century and within a short span has become a dominant genre in contemporary art. A group of women artists like Lutfa Akhtar, Sanchita Gogoi, Parantanti Devi, Nibha Devi, Aditi Chakraborty, Monica Devi and others have been engaged either in the psycho-philosophical quest of a mystic feminine self or questioning the existential predicament of a female subject within a patriarchy. It is interesting to note that apart from the women artists, few of their male co-professionals also seem to be involved in such feminist discourse. To cite an example, late M.H. Barbhuyan has taken up the case of the Muslim women of the Barak Valley in Assam. Hence as we have observed the element of political reflexivity is apparent in most of the artists of 1980s and 1990s. This, as we have already stated, is probably a reflection of the politically turbulent times within which the artist's existential predicament is embedded and by which they tried to mediate and explore the dilemmas and conflicts, the pull of tradition and modernity and other aporias. Likewise the praxis of identity at one point becomes a quest of an identity afflicted by existential conflicts of modern and post modern conditions, at other levels, it is an acute awareness of one's ethnicity.

In keeping with the foregoing, one can observe that such kind of artistic deliberation driven by political reflexivity has imparted a definite transgressive character and dimension that distinguishes the Art of Assam from rest of the country. As pointed out in my article “Modernity at Cross Roads – Two decades of artistic mediation in Assam”, (Lalit Kala Contemporary, Vol: 45, Jan, 2002) In the complex terrain of Assam, the making / unmaking of art will have to operate within its own parameters stretched between historical / art historical context and retrieved autonomy of art (including the paradoxes and ironies this unfolds). This reconciled state of in-betweenness tallies well with in-betweenness of modernist experience - a modernity at crossroads. Here art is not a garb, but an integral manifestation of the existential core embedded in historical / cultural groundings within the enlarged theatre of political contradictions. The realm of art is but only a means and not an end in itself. With regard to experimentation and innovations in the lingual / material levels or exploratory dialectics on “meaning” in the epistemological/metaphysical level, there may not be any tall claims to make. But the significance lie in the constant engagement of the art-praxis as politically reflexive cultural actions, working within the constraints of a peripheral pocket, dearth of adequate infrastructure and lack of genuine art consciousness. In the cultural dynamics of uni-linear trajectory (Bombay Progressive to Radical), the peripheral regional developments as well as other categories like Dalit Tribal, are often sidelined by the national modern. In order to reclaim an entire truth-functional mapping of the modern Indian art, it is high time that we explore the unexplored sites of regional modern. Here regional modern is a relative categorisation that denounces any status as “absolute” or “independent” category. Rather it would be an attempt to delve deeper into the intricacies and heterogeneous multiplicity of various experiences of modernism. But the pitfalls of essentialism / absolutism and the orthodoxy of geographic/ethnographic determinism have to be skirted in an objective art historical approach rather than the subjective art critical one which is often a matter of individual taste and choice.

M Ramachandran had commented:

. . . the practitioner of art in various parts of India have more aspirations and challenges than those who practice mainstream art in the metropolitan cities with higher limitations of resources the art practitioners in various states of India, particularly that of the North East, had to take up more responsibility for they had to project their art from the regional plane to the national and from there to the global. What normally happens in this

cultural situation is that a majority of the artists lose their energy... for me this is an unnecessary futile exercise for a person who practice art. .... What we lose in such a competition is our cultural responsibility to the society in which we live. ("Modernism: Documents of Failure" Unpublished paper, read in the seminar Modern Art: North East vis-à-vis India, organized by Fine Art & Crafts Society, Jorhat, Assam. 21.05.2005)

An in-depth study of the foregoing would enable one to see that the artists from the North East have never shied away from their socio-cultural responsibility. It has only escaped the notice of the mainstream intellectual discourse.

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4. Scheman, Naomi. "Anger and the Politics of Naming." Women and Language in Literature and Society. Ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker and Nelly Furman. New York: Praeger, 1980. 174-87.
5. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Art in Assam and the traditional influence. Ajir Asom, 21<sup>st</sup> may 2006.
6. A versatile writer, musician, theatre person, freedom fighter, political activist of pro-Marxist leanings and the first film maker of Assam, (Jyoti, 1934 ) who had trained in France and Germany.
7. A poet activist, dancer, actor and writer and an active Left Wing activist.
8. The notion of artist and the concept of culture taken together further transforms into a specific concept of "Krishnatatva". It is a concept propounded by Jyotiprashad in his significant essay "Shilpir Prithivee" where the mythical character of Indian tradition and culture, Krishna, becomes a metaphorical signifier of an idealistic artistic and cultural expression. Here the characteristic traits and iconographic manifestations of Krishna serve as the ideal substratum for the conceptual elaboration of the artistic persona and the authentic nature of culture. Even the physical complexion of Krishna, as described in Indian literary and visual texts, bear symbolic connotations and suggestions regarding the meaning and truths of life and this material world. In a poetic rendering, Jyotiprashad expresses:

Maeterlinck's blue bird – the metaphor of the mystery of human life was coloured blue because the sky is blue. We understand the earth, but the sky is always mysterious. Because the eternally mysterious sky is blue, the bird representing mysteries of life is blue. The mystery of Aryan life is also blue like Krishna's complexion. Tytyl and Mytyl in the west have not been able to catch the blue bird till date. But thousands of years ago, the mysteries of life in the form of Krishna played the *Mohan Benu* (enchanted flute) in our hearts through the philosophers of the Upanishads.

This Mohan Benu of Krishna is nothing but the symbolic manifestation of all the aesthetic expressions. It is also the melodious representations of highest cultural refinement. Krishna as the rebellious artistic persona fights the battle of truth against the evil forces (read the battle of Kurukshetra) while as a true artist of people stands perfect, mingling and protecting the interest of the common folk of the society (read the common men of Gokul) as the simple cow herder playing flute. Krishna emerges as the artist working within a real realm of world, he manually labours as a cowherd, evolves as politically conscious persona to stand for his right and decides on his course according to the circumstantial demands, raising his weapon at times and acting as the messenger of peace at other. Krishna is also the symbol of transformation and transcendence in art and culture. Jyotiprakash opines that there are great personalities who have followed the path of "Krishnatatva", where aesthetics, politics, cultural and physical realms amalgamate into a unified form of way of living to serve greater purposes for the collective welfare of the society. For him, the greatest example is Srimanta Sankardev, the great saint-scholar-artist and the propounded the Vaishnavite Bhakti movement in medieval Assam. To give a brief glimpse, these are the trio-concepts which formulate the core essence of Jyotiprakash Agarwala's aesthetic thought.

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