

CHAPTER TWO
ART AND IDENTITY: A SPECIFIC READING OF THE VISUAL ART
PRACTICES OF ASSAM TILL THE 1970S
(With Specific Reading of the Colonial Implications and Modernist Aporias as
the Backdrop of Identity Formation/Deformation)

I

In the previous chapter we had made an attempt to map the contexts of our research by analysing the conceptual formulations of “identity” and “modernity” with specific reference to the art historical formulation of the modern Indian Art to trace the construction of the national modern in the paradigm of visual arts which could be seen as a part of the larger agenda of the constructing the National Identity of India as an emerging nation-state. We also attempted to trace the genealogy of the modern art in Assam so that along with having a holistic truth-functional mapping we can reclaim the identity of the regional developments of peripheral pockets like Assam which have yet to find a room in the broader art historical accounts and the canonical texts on modern Indian art.

Now, as we proceed further in the direction, we would like to map the historical backdrop of colonisation, its impacts and implications in the colonial and postcolonial Assam as British colonisation played the pivotal role in the dynamics of identity in this geo-political space. In order to have a comprehensive reading of the reflections of this dynamics of identity in the realm of arts, we have to, at first, comprehend the historical backdrop so that we can understand the dialectics of the formations/deformations and construction/deconstruction of identity and its simultaneous and subsequent reflections in the various manifestations of art in a better way. Therefore in this chapter, we would give a historical account of this colonisation process along with a critical analysis of the circumstantial implication of its Siamese twin – the modernisation by discussing the internal conflicts and aporias of the modernity which has been experienced here. In keeping to this dual discussion about colonialism and modernism in the multiple arenas of the social, economic,

political and the aesthetic, we shall further examine the evolution of the identitarian politics in the state and critically delve into our main area of study. We would hereby attempt to make a reading of visual art practices right from its modernist inception to the advent of the nineteen seventies. This specific demarcation of the period has been done in keeping to the stylistic/idiomatic/ideological differentiation manifested in the art paradigm. As stated in the previous chapter while tracing the genealogy of modern art in Assam that the nineteen seventies brought forth a new departure in the multiple avenue with the emergence of a group of artists with new perception and experimentation in keeping to the ideational and ideological transformation and transitive evolution from modernist perspectives to the postmodernist position. It is worth mentioning that, though my central concern is focused in the art of the post colonial time, as a definite subtext in this chapter I have also tried to draw a link between the modern and pre-modern phase in a specific study about the sculptural reliefs of Srihati Satra to thereby establish it as the first instance of Identity formation/identity construction in the visual practice of art in Assam in the backdrop of colonisation. Now before delving into the mapping of the historical backdrop let us at the outset probe into internal dynamics of modernisation and the conflicts and aporias of modernity in the conceptual level so that we can have a better understanding of the implications of colonialism in Assam.

II

CONFLICTS WITHIN MODERNITY AND ITS REPURCUSSIONS IN THE IDENTITY FORMATION

The realm of modern is a slippery terrain, loaded with inner discrepancies, incongruities and contraventions. The circumstantial irony being the experimental disparity within the process of modernization, the state of modernity and the realm of modern and the constant persistence of the part of individual or culture to mediate and transcend this circumstantial irony. To be precise, the slippery terrain of modern is about the problematic of modernity both as a notion and as a lived experience. But as

Edouard Glissant has pointed out, one of the unique components of modernity is a critical awareness of the awareness (the double, the second degree), a reflective awareness about its practices, as articulation about the reflective relation to one's time and to its historicity, the ability to problematize the practice to work out way out of the aporias of modernity.¹

My attempt in this section is look into the aporias, the conflicts of modernity, since the explorations of modernist aporias have much relevance and significance in the context of a post-colonial, third world, marginalized geographic space like Assam. It would help us to comprehend the nature of the lived experiences of the people and to know the context of their identity formation in the individual and collective level and to thereby understand the devices of mediations and interventions articulated by the class of intelligentsia through different form of cultural practices in general and visual art in particular which is our main area of focus. First I shall discuss the critical dynamics and then analyze it with specific reference to Assam.

THE INTERNAL CONFLICTS OF MODERNITY:

(i) MODERNITY AND IT'S DOUBLE:

The aporia of political modernity specific to post colonial third world region is a doubling of modernity, a splitting, an insurmountable divide between the subjects of modernism and modernity where modernism is the category of intellectual realm that enables critical reflexivity, the awareness of awareness as a form of historical consciousness, and whereas modernity is the state of existential being undertaking the qualitative social experience. The qualitative experience within the state of modernity is often substrated over the premise of Modernity, whereby this modernist aporia, makes space for two different and opposing sets of modernist experiences. One set is invested with uneven modernity. The discrepant experiences within the terrain of political and economic modernity contribute to the doubling of splitting of power through the accessibility of knowledge and information industries that eventually enable a higher political status in the strata of social hierarchy. The other set is disprivileged of powers invested to the first set. A victim of modernity whose predicament is of being trapped within the limited boundaries or narrowness of one's own existential being (usually the narrowness of rural settings) that reflects a cowering contraction when confronted by the aggression of modernity. To give an illustration,

one would like to mention the story discussed by Vivek Dhareshwar in his article “Is the Post in Postcolonial is Post in Postmodern?” These two sets of modernist experiences exhibiting the double of modernity is explored in the story ‘A Horse for the Sun’ by U. R. Ananthamurthy where the encounter between his discrepant experiences of modernity is staged via the encounter of a modernist writer with considerable involvement in some form of left policies – the autobiographical representative of the writer himself with his boyhood chum Venkata, the village idiot, a figure from a lower strata of society both economically and socially. This modernist aporia can also be focussed in the light of other internal conflicts of modernity as evident in its nihilism and aggressions marked by its utter destructiveness. While talking about the aporias of modernity, one can keep in mind the already existing long time modernist critique of modernity, sometimes called romantic anti capitalism, at times aesthetic nihilism of which the range of French theory of Post-structuralism is one. This kind of modernist aporia can be seen as significant existential component with regard to the identity formation of a creative persona or in the construction of an artistic selfhood and its reflections in his art.

(ii) CONTRAVENTIONS AGAINST MODERNIST TENDENCY OF HOMOGENISATION:

Following this modernist aporia that have been discussed so far, one can extend the paradox of political modernity with regard to the contraventions by several liberating forces that tend to break through the homogenizing project of political modernity. The founding dictum of political modernity within the context of a modern nation-state is the extension of a homogeneity upheld as a progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion – the theory as one, shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community and by the theorists who treat gender, class, or race as social totalities as expressive of unitary collective experiences, like a Hegelian strife for wholeness and an unified spirit. But the paradoxical implication of this tendency of political modernity is the upsurge of self-awareness and political reflexivity regarding one’s own identities and cultural locations paving way for split within the nation articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The Nation/State or the specific geographic space becomes a signifying space in such dissemination that is internally marked with the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending people, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural differences.

Dissemination as the point of departure for the political state of affair of a nation is thus directed to a direction where the nation/state ceases to be the sign of modernity under which cultural differences can be homogenised in the horizontal view of society. But herein one should keep in mind another modernist manifestation of political and economic modernity that investigate the process of dissemination of the notion of a pure pristine ethnic cultural identity.

(iii) MODERNIST ASPIRATION AND TENSION BETWEEN MODERNITY AND TRADITION:

An inherent dilemma that modernist experience of a post-colonial, Third World, peripheral culture mediating through the colonization, cultural imperialism and all pervasive globalisation confronts is a modernist aspiration for modernization in the socio-political economical contexts, an urge for progress, emancipation and an equal status in terms of the criteria of the colonizer which it is invariably denied by the later on the ground of identity on one hand, and on the other hand a struggle for not getting submerged through the diffusion of strata, where all cultures are subsumed under the blanket of universalizing enshrouding the identity of one and of all, by proclaiming one's own cultural rootedness, to maintain undisturbed, its own old cultural provisions of which it constantly stands in danger of being robbed of. Thus an evocation of nostalgia and tradition, as to expression of the urge to reconcile with the enigmatic past is witnessed simultaneously with aspiration for modernization and a passion to be in the mainstream of the universal modern. Generated by the internal dynamics of the paradoxical site of modernity whereby the two inter-swinging tendencies provoke a mixed feeling, delirium and antithetical hermeneutics with a specific culture. Nostalgia for the past often imagined and constructed gets triggered off in order to establish one's authenticity and 'original' identity. As observed by Apinan Poshyananda, in Asia the huge mega cities face the dilemma of preserving their "true" cultural heritage while striving to catch up and compete with rapid economic technological advances of west.

The main tactics for cultural rejuvenation become nostalgia for past traditions and attempts to restage authenticity in response to external dominating forces. In these attempts to preserve "authenticity" at all costs, defenders of tradition often resort to standards of cultural purity

as the goal (on excuse). External threats are projected as poisonous, degrading filth from the materialistic west that will corrupt the pure and innocent mind of spiritual East. Egocentrism, materialism, individualism and intellectualism are characterized by as debased western tendencies that endanger so-called Eastern Values such as spiritualism, harmony, togetherness and refined manners”. (Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons In Transition, 1996)

III

ASSAM AS SITE OF MODERNIST APORIA AND ITS REFLECTIONS IN THE CULTURAL PRACTICES

“I wish, O dear I could see the bridge on the river Dihing before I leave this world” I came across this particular Mishing folk song while I was documenting and translating the oral literature of the Mishing tribe of Assam in collaboration with a Mishing tribal poet Jiban Narah. It struck me as an excellent example of a spontaneous and authentic expression of qualitative experience of modernity (non modernity) in the remotest corner of a postcolonial third world peripheral region. Within the spectacular unfolding of myths and magic, hills and rivers, birds and animals dead ancestors and evil spirits and so many other ‘aboriginal’ elements evoked melodiously, an urge to see the bridge on the river Dihing, a concrete bridge constructed by modern technology, gets as easily manifested! The song can be read as a site of expression of the modernist aspiration as well as stark remainder of the consequence of uneven modernity, where a modern day common technofact like a bridge achieves almost a mystified mythical status, a piece of wonder, a thing of utmost desire! No wonder Assam can be a site of the modernist aporia that is staged in the splitting or doubling of modernity. Of course this tribal singer is not within the same plane as what of Venkata, Ananthmurthy’s rural-idiot juxtaposed against the modernist writer who mediates modernity in a self-critical ironic mode, in the story “A Horse for the Sun” already referred in our discussion about splitting of modernity. While Venkata exhibit a cowering sense of contracted tendency at the confrontation of modernity while the Mishing tribal singer is overwhelmed by the desire to confront it, his aspiration reaching a height of death-wish fulfilment! And this wish-fulfilment tendency ultimately becomes a pointer to the uneven form of economic and political modernity in the region. A ferocious site for contesting identifies, ethnic rifts, cultural difference that Assam has recently ended

becoming is the manifested site of another of paradox of modernity. The nation-state of India's homogenizing project had given rise to Assam's liberating tendency, to break up centrifugally whereas Assam's own tendency of homogenization irrespective of any considerations about the other sixty three tribes/ classes/ cultures (ULFA's agenda of a liberated Assam prioritized the ethnic Assamese; Bhasa Andolan or the Language Agitation overlooked other major contending dialects) in the name of "New-modern-progressive-political Assam" gave way for centrifugal forces of several cultures and ethnic groups to break away from the rarefied centre of the conceptual wholeness of Assam. It was not that the disseminating force was never evident in the historical discourse, but it was manifested in forms of differences put to restraint by peaceful mode of co-existence. The aggressive repercussion of the political turmoil is rooted ironically in the new found political consciousness and critical self awareness that modernization brought about and that eventually gave rise to several political forces demanding new political power structures. On the whole it is a justifiable historical discourse of political empowerment or subaltern making a voice but it is also a manifestation of the aggressive nihilism of modernity whereby it takes an auto-destructive terrifying form! The internal dynamic which gave rise to the aggressive nihilism also gives rise to several dynamics of contending binaries. These contending binaries of patriarchy versus feminism, rural versus urban or tribalism against non-tribalism further problematize the politics of structural settings of a society. Though such kind of political awareness reveals a kind of progressivism and ensures formulations of identities, but its aggressive forms threatens internal disruptions and instabilities. The aspiration for modernization is often overshadowed by a tension between modernity and tradition and furthermore, a historic adherence to cultural purism exposed in its extreme form of fundamentalism. The undercurrent of tension is taken to its extreme cyclonic form in Assam again by the so called self affiliated vanguard of Assamese authenticity, originality and purity, the extremist group who in their implementation of unofficial code of conducts call for upholding the values such as traditional ethnic dress code (basically for the females!), compositions of literary and cultural texts of certain genre like that of utmost patriotism pledging for a free Assam, or performance of music or theatre only in vernacular language. But due to insistence on the part of the progressive groups that timely resistance came up against such dangerous cultural purism.

Though such cultural restrictions could not deter the mediational forms of cultural practitioners, one can say the dilemma or disparity of aestheticism and art's liability to life aggravate the Assamese counterparts also. But of course, historically speaking, one thing becomes evident that socio-political reflexivity has been the focal tradition of Assamese modernist practice of art and culture and most of the intellectuals try to transverse the disparity of aesthetic modernism and political modernity, since a sense of answerability or ontological/political quest for seeking meaning into the dialectics of life within the broader historical-social collective discourses intrigues this class of intellectuals. Hence Greenbergian modern would perhaps not mean much to the politically engaged intelligentsia or participating public there as such.

To site a few illustrations of mediation of these modernist aporias one can begin with the music of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, the writer, music director and film maker, when he tries to mediate and intervene in the conflict of the liberating separatist tendencies, the sub-nationalism and Pan-Indianism by creating the feminine metaphor of state-“Asomi”, who is the youngest daughter of Bharati – the mother-motif of the Nation. The mother-motif achieves a number of things – it makes the connection of a people to its homeland primal, and the implemented idea of a common womb gives member of the nation a sense of shared origins that minimizes differences. Interestingly, in a song composed in 1984 during the days of “Assam Agitation for Survival”, he pays tribute to martyrs to the cause of Assamese sub-nationalism in this way – “We salute you, O martyr, in order to save Bharti's youngest daughter, you have embraced death”. This political reflexivity is very prominently gets manifested in several literary texts such as “Samiran Barua is coming” (1994) where Samiran – the central protagonist is returning from political exile in a far eastern country is depicted in all its irony, satire, humour, pathos and a subtle humane empathy that reflects the futility of militant nationalism, the aggressive nihilism of modernism (weapons and war), the failure of nation-state and the decaying, degenerating, corrupt state of bureaucracy. Another story by Harekrishna Deka titled “Bandiyar” (Gaoler, 1995) about the abduction of an officer by the extremist group of insurgency reflects the “Stockholm Syndrome”. Whereas Saurav Chaliha, Debabrata

Das and others have reflected on the polyvalent dimensions of modern urban life in post modernist or magical realist techniques, they have also explored the internal splitting of modernism in economic settings of uneven modernity. While a range of poets with leftist inclination talk of social dialectics in metaphorical manners, a group of feminist writers have come up with a sophisticated range of variations in exploring female subjectivity. Two most significant films in the feminist mode of thinking are “Agnisnan” (1985) directed by Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia and “Adahya” (1998) by Dr. Santana Bordoloi where a certain radical subversion of social system is advocated. Another film “Hkhagoroloi Bohu Dur” (It’s A Long Way To Sea, Jahnu Baruah, 1995) tells the pathetic story about a boatman who is rendered jobless when a bridge is built on the river. A pointer to another modernist conflict, the movie becomes most expressive in the shot where the grandson of the old boatman, a little naked boy starts disarmingly dancing to the music of Michael Jackson that he happens to see on the television at his cousin’s place.

These multifaceted forms of modernity, our own modernity at this point – with its inherent aporias and unresolved dilemma is at the crossroads. This paradoxical form of modernity at crossroad evokes several multi polar pulls and we all who are mediating it are tormented like the rope struggling against opposing forces in a game of tug of war. My own attempt to capture this dilemma in a story “Lambada Nachor Xesot” (After the Lambada, 1997) juxtaposing discrepant experiences of two tribal characters, one rural boy and the other staying in a metropolis, display their confusions, nostalgia, and pranks of tradition. The metaphor that I used to depict this dilemma is the mythical hill of Mukindon featured in a Karbi song of lament. The people of the Karbi tribe believe that the deceased soul has to stand at the crossroad foot of a hill, Mukindon and choose a definite path. The song begins “Dear soul, you are standing at the crossroad, at hill foot Mukindon the mysterious hill” Modernity seems to be that hill Mukindon and we are as if standing at the crossroads, tethered to it.

So far we have focused on the cultural practices other than the visual art. Now we shall proceed further in this direction to discuss about the visual arts in relation to the dynamics of identity at the backdrop of the lived experiences embedded within

modernity (and late/post modernity) in the postcolonial time. However as stated earlier we would elaborately focus on the starting point of the identity formation in art in the colonial period with a glimpse at the colonial phase to further discuss about the post colonial art renderings till the seventies. Hence, it would be relevant to discuss the historical backdrop of Assam in the colonial and post colonial Assam and the formation of Assamese identity in and through this process so that we can have a better understanding of the contexts.

III

MAPPING THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP OF COLONISATION AND MODERNISATION: THE COLONIAL AND POST COLONIAL ASSAM

The Ahom kingdom of pre-colonial times, located in the extreme north-eastern corner of the Indian subcontinent can be described as the cultural heartland of modern Assam. Starting with the Moamoria (a tribe and also a Vaishnavite sect) rebellion against the Ahom king in 1780, the Burmese invasion in 1817 and finally British colonization in 1826, when according to the Yandaboo Treaty that ended the Anglo-Burma war, Assam has a long history of political restlessness and turmoil. When the Ahom kingdom passed to British hands under the terms of the Yandaboo Treaty, it was for the first time in history that the Assamese heartland became politically incorporated into a pan-Indian imperial formation. British colonization brought forth tremendous changes in the socio-political, economic, cultural scenario of Assam. Introduction of taxation policy, new transportation and communication systems such as railways, and the education system introducing western thoughts and political ideals gave birth to the new middle class in Assam. The newly educated class, the children of Macaulay captured the clerical and managerial posts in the administration, adopted western mannerisms and also became the new social elite. Thus modernity in its pseudo-crippled form entered Assam in mid 19th century.

THE IMPLICATION OF BRITISH RULE: PAVING WAY FOR MAJOR POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN POST-COLONIAL ASSAM.

There have been certain major implications of British rule, which account for far reaching socio-political significance. A very brief discussion of these would enable us to understand the context of modernity (and identity as well) that was entrenched in Assam. This is also to point out how British colonial rule was different and far more damaging in context of Assam than rest of India. This outline has been modelled on research of several historians and political thinkers on Assam. For the most part around these observations by Sanjib Baruah in India Against Itself.

(1) THE SEGREGATION OF THE HILLS:

The Colonial Policy of drawing a hard boundary between the hills and the plains was a sharp break from past. This new perception leading to a policy of strict boundary maintenance was based on British policy of colonial expansion and the policy of Divide and Rule, that was superimposed on a complex world of inter relationship. This policy of segregation combined with economic and cultural changes in the hills and plain regions of Assam, profoundly affected the new project of people hood that emerged in the region.

(2) ASSAM AS AN EXTENSION OF BENGAL:

A second aspect of the colonial geography of Assam that had laid the implication for the cultural politics of Assam was the notion of Assam as an expansion of Bengal. Bengali was implemented as the official language of Assam instead of Assamese language of the people of the place. This imposition ultimately erupted in a dreaded form of bloodshed and turmoil. It had far reaching implications on the part of collective psyche since the newly emerged elitist middle class succumbed to the cultural imperialism of this neighbouring state of Bengal, so much so that at one point, to give an instance, the Bihu a vibrant folk dance of Assam where youthful sensuality and desire is expressed melodiously was looked down upon by the then middle class as ‘vulgar’ as compared to classicism of “Dhrupadi Sangeet”.

Thus Assam was a site of double imperialistic dominion – the British Colonialism and the cultural imperialism of Bengal, a unique phenomenon in the history of entire India!

(3) IMMIGRATION POLICY:

Once Assam became a part of British India, it came to be perceived as a part of the pan – Indian economic space. Colonial policy makers saw Assam as a land frontier that needed more settlers and actively pursued policies to encourage immigration. The economic formulations that began with the introduction of tea plantations set off economic frames that lay further impetus to immigration. Migration of labourers from Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, traders from Rajasthan and later farmers from East Bengal became such a major issue related to the ethnic compositions, that it sowed the seeds of a identity crisis and growing angst for survival among the ethnic people of Assam. The roots to all maladies of agitations, conflicts and terrorism can be attributed to it. It may be analytically rewarding to compare Assam briefly with Malaysia and Fiji, two other places where large-scale immigration that took place as a result of the political and economic transformation of colonial rule led to a stubborn pattern of “immigrant indigenous” conflicts. In all three places there is a long history of demands on the part of those claiming to be “indigenous” for primacy in terms of official cultural symbols, economic opportunities, and even political power. Cultural policy and immigration policy are especially sensitive issues in all three situations and they have seriously threatened democratic stability.

(4) THE ECONOMIC DRAINAGE:

The British colonial expansion plan for Assam was directed by the interest to exploit the region, draining out the raw materials and natural resources along with the maximization of revenue collection. Hence no economic policy for modernization and industrialization was implemented in Assam unlike the regions in the heartland of India where economic growth was encouraged. Always marginalized economically Assam’s aspiration for progress and economic modernity always got hindered and lagged behind the rest.

(5) CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY:

Unlike the rest of India where upper strata of the social hierarchy occupied, by the upper caste Hindu constitutes the socio politically dominant group, during the pre colonial era Assam had always been a land of balanced social equilibrium. Tribes like Ahom, Bodo, Kacharis, etc. formed the ruling class while caste Hindus constituted the general class of bureaucrats and businessmen and enjoyed almost equal status under the ruling class. Peasants and artisans forming the lower caste

were also relatively affluent owing to the land ownership –system. Colonial rule dethroned the ruling class and made the upper caste Hindu socio politically more powerful since enjoying the benefits of western education, they emerged as the new middle class’ elitist group occupying the posts in British administration. And these middle class elites became absentee-landlords creating new problems for landless farmers.

(6) EMERGENCE OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM:

A unique phenomenon of neo-orthodox revival of Hindu fundamentalism occurred with the emergence of this upper caste Hindu as powerful elitist group. They attempted to reclaim and revive a reinvented and re-appropriated umbilical chord with the upper caste Hindu of Indian heartland with the “myth of immigration theory” to upgrade their cultural supremacy and authenticity of their origin. The myths of immigrant in Assam have had a function that is quite independent of their historicity. In a region on the periphery of Indian culture, such myths enabled those who assimilated into the high cultures of Hinduism and Islam to distinguish themselves from their “Less sophisticated” neighbours and countrymen. The tribal and the other culture groups who had been the integral part of the system started getting marginalized as a newfound ‘casteism’ entered the system. To give an example, introduction to purification ritual, a ritual of upper caste Hindu to cleanse and purify oneself if contaminated by any touch or presence of lower caste members was a new happening that was never present in the earlier history of Assam!

(7) DE-EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN:

Though primarily patriarchal, owing to the influence of matriarchal system in some tribal culture, Assamese society has been, historically speaking, a system of gender equality. Assamese women enjoyed greater freedom compared to that in the Indian heartland. Women power had been manifested in the lives of Queens like Phuleswari and Chousing, Mula Gabhoru (who led an army against the Muslim invaders after her husband was killed) etc. who were woman of great substance, power and influence. However the advent of British colonization, along with a greater interpolation of cast Hindu fundamentalism, brought forth Victorian ethical norms into the social life of Assam. Several accounts by British colonizers like **Brown (Book)** described Assamese woman as “ethically fallible and characterless” since “they mixed

up freely with the man folk of the land”. A reclaimed force of patriarchy rejuvenated to shatter the older equation of gender equality.

These major paradigmatic shifts in the socio-political cultural and economic setting brought forth by colonization had long standing implications for the years to come that would substrate major political movements, ethnic rifts, culture wars and decentralizing forces in the post-colonial period. Of course, if colonization had prepared the substrating ground for the post colonial turmoil and political instability, it has equally been the disinterested apathetic attitude, lack of proper understanding of the circumstantial complexities, mismanagement negligence and loopholes in the political policies and economic planning on the part of central government that made the ground fertile for growth of detrimental elements of progress and peace in the region.

IV

EMERGENCE OF IDENTITY AND ETHNO-NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL AND POST COLONIAL TIMES

As we have pointed out in the foregoing, British colonization brought forth major changes in the Assamese society and gave rise to a new elite western educated class – the Assamese middle class with subsequent implication in the formation of Assamese identity and its intensification in the later parts of nineteenth century. We have also pointed out already that Assamese was replaced by Bengali by the colonial rule as a result of which an overwhelming resistance to this act could be witnessed. Triggered by the issue of restoration of Assamese language (manifested first in 1873) and reclaiming its independent status from Bengali, the Assamese middle class took an active role in this interventional resistance thereby intensifying the issue of Assamese identity. The establishment of literary societies “Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Sabha” in 1888 along with some other important organizations like “Assam Association”, “Asom Sahitya Sabha”, “Jorhat Sarbajanic Sabha”, etc. and publication of journals like Jonaki further propelled this movement of identity assertion. To quote Manorama Sharma from her article “Identity: Inherent or Evolved”:

All these organizations were primarily led by members of the educated elite and the nascent Assamese middle class. This was also the most articulate section of the Assamese society at that time . . . the question of Assamiya identity found a prominent place amongst them . . . though the Assamiya as a community had been historically present long before the exposure to colonial influences, yet the question of identity begins to emerge only by the end of nineteenth century and becomes more intensified in the twentieth century, gaining momentum as the middle class ascended to hegemony in the Assamese society.” (p. 21)

Hence, to speak about a few of the major political movements triggered by the existential predicaments of colonial implications, modernist aporias and identity politics that shook the entire region and rest of India at times were the “Bhasha Andolan” the language movement to have Assamese as the official languages in the immediate post-colonial period in sixties and seventies. Scores of people had died and were called language martyr and were of highly emotive concern. Another was “Astitva Raksha Andolan” or the famous ‘Assam Agitation for Survival’ in the seventies (where the issue of Assamese Identity and associated crises of identity) that protested against endless immigration from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal as this was a threatening factor to upset the ethnic character and composition of the population of Assam. Therefore we can perceive that the issue of identity and identity crisis, has been of utmost significant for Assam. Death of more than ten thousand, communal riots, rape-violence, innumerable human rights violation cases, ethnic rift, emergence of sub nationalism, conflict with pan- Indian identity based on the issues of marginalization and cultural difference erupted which even drew attention in the international arena. And finally there was the violent emergence of the separatist force United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) who demanded a, sovereign Assam free from the “Colonial Rule of India”. The political furore, turmoil and instability that this major political liberation movement has brought forth need no further mentioning as almost all the politically conscious people of India had become aware about this crisis. Nirmal Kumar Swain in his article “The Post-Colonial Indian State: A Paradigm for Emergence of New Identities” discusses how the newly emerged post colonial Indian nation-state is structurally constructed by an apparatus of power and hegemony of the dominant class

and culture based upon the notion of a imagined unified community and an all encompassing unified identity of the Nation. To quote him:

We can infer that a post colonial identity of a nation as an 'imagined community' poses a common identity so long as it is self-reflexive to the 'other', e. g. so long it poses against its 'other'. But within itself, it undergoes a vigorous transformation in which it reproduces a disjointed variety of identities, because this is effect of deconstructing the hegemonic discourse. Nation as a common identity is a deconstructive identity with a surface of discrete identities engaged in a process of locating itself by displacing itself and its 'other'. Therefore, within an Indian Identity, an 'other' is always created . . . the process of internal 'otherisation' is manifesting in the form of marginalized discourses. Such discourses can be located in the context of N. E .India, such marginalized discourses are constructed to resist the dominant discourse . . . the identity movements in N E India spearheaded against the state in earning a fair deal from the state is the marginalized discourse that transgresses the dominant disciplinary discourse of the state . . . the discourse of the ULFA movement in Assam can serve as a sample of such marginalized discourses."(p. 80-81)

He further observes that:

. . . simultaneously, an effort to revive one's own past cultural traits among many marginalized and small cultural communities is a strong tendency to articulate their own identities. But the impact of dominant and hegemonising global and Indian cultural space have already changed the distinct marks of the marginal cultures in the N E India to such an extent that the 'emergent' cultural identity is articulated in terms of ethnicity or language , which can unite the community in a minimal sense. Therefore cultural identity gets subordinated under the fabrics of political discourse, through which a marginal identity can enter into a dialogue with the dominant discourse of the Indian State." (p. 83)

Hence the issue of ethno-nationalism has become the undeniable reality of the post colonial world which is the substratum of identity formation in the collective sphere of the culturally distinctive geo-political spaces based on language, history, memory and many such other factors. Northeast or Assam has long been in the periphery of national mainstream imagination as an 'exotic' other for mainstream theorists and their interpretations. While interpreting the dynamics of identity about this region the mainstream theorists have formulated a classical framework centred

mainly around the problematic of economic distribution/re distribution often sidetracking the cultural factor and the issue of ethnicity as a result of which new social movements in form of ethno-nationalism and identity assertion have sprang up as interventional strategies against the hegemonic socio-cultural domination. As Rajesh Dev, in his article “Ethno-nationalism: Politics of Difference” points out:

The articulation of differences in identities in north-east Indian ‘other’ reflects a process of conflict between a liberal accommodation within an Indian ‘We’ and an upsurge of asserting autonomy of identity operates to shape the local narratives of ethnic groups. These local narratives undercut the dominant discourse of Pan-Indian or ‘Hindi-Hindu-Brahmanical’ nationalism. The mobilization of local narratives by these identity groups is a strategy to (dis)locate themselves from the colonized site of power. (p.119)

The interesting point to be noted here is that this very politics of difference that is being articulated by the north east/Assam as ‘other’ to assert their own marginal identities by ethno-nationalist fervour against the mainstream Indian hegemony is again reflected within the geo-political space itself to dislocate the dominant culture among themselves. This is a post colonial phenomenon manifested among the ethnic groups who hitherto celebrated the politics of multiculturalism. The assertion of Bodo identity is one such example which earlier preferred to be a part of the greater Assamese community/identity. The rise of the elite educated middle class and the upsurge of ethnic awareness to preserve promote and sustain their own identity is the triggering force behind this historical tendency. Hence we can see the evolution and transformation of a definite historical process of identity formation, construction, assertion in and through the colonial and postcolonial time whose inception began by its deconstructive movement of the hegemonic discourse of the British colonialism and has been undergoing a process of internal othering and dislocation of Indian national identity by its own marginal ethnic/cultural identities.

DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY IN ART: READING THE VISUAL NARRATIVES

We would now turn to our main concern of our research e.g. the mapping of the dynamics of identity in the visual art practices in the post colonial Assam as we have so far in this and in the previous chapter have elaborately delved into the contexts and backdrop of the undertaken research. As we have mentioned already though the central focus of the research is the post colonial period we will definitely have to undergo a brief glance about the formative period in the colonial time to have a comprehensive holistic understanding of the subject. Keeping to this context, I shall now deliver a subtext to put forward my findings about the first instance of identity formation in art in Assam at the early part of last century in an elaborate manner. It serves as a pointer to the attempt made by some unknown artists from the traditional art community of Assam to disengage and liberate itself from the colonial ‘other’ thereby constructing a ‘self’ of colonized subjects for the first time though in a nascent form.

A SUBTEXT – THE SCULPTURAL RELIEFS IN SRIHATI SATRA: A STUDY INTO THE FIRST INSTANCE OF REFLECTION OF IDENTITY IN ART

I have attempted to write this subtext as an important part of my broader concern about the dynamics of Identity in art in Assam because it would establish a link phase between the pre-modern and modern in the art by interlinking a connection between the traditional form of art in Assam that is the sculptural relief in a Vaishnavite monastery and the modern art in the line of British academic realism which was the first phase of modern art in India and Assam and thereby unfold the initial spark of the politics of identity and political reflexivity about identity in art in the beginning of the ninetieth century. We know art mediates, maps, reflects, and records its time-space, sometimes with bold letters, at times with indecipherable scribbles that calls for decoding. Art has been playing this role, even within tethered restrictions and bindings. For instance, religious art which acts as one of the medium for propagating the canonical truths and mythical narratives of certain religion through symbolic depictions or realistic illustrations, also at times sparks off a glimmer of political reflexivity in the guise of spiritual. The Srihati Satra of Assam, which is an

important site of Vaishnavite art form, can come across as an amazing example of this foregoing. During a visit to this monastery in 2000, I was gripped by some of the wooden sculptural reliefs on the wall of this satra that seemed to whisper in the tune of the mythological something political. In a humble attempt to listen and capture that whisper that I have tried herein, we shall proceed by delving into the background and origin of the art form and mapping its evolution at first.

The Neo Vaishnavite Bhakti movement of medieval India was a religio-cultural upheaval of an unprecedented manner, paving space for a repertoire of multiple art forms like manuscript painting, fresco, sculpture/sculptural relief, wood carving, dance-drama, music-recitals and other minor art forms which acted as an illustrative media for the religious/philosophical/literary expressions of this movement. In Assam Srimanta Sankardev (1449-1568 AD) the Bhakti saint-artist-poet-social reformer who propounded the Vaishnavite movement established the first Satra – the medieval monastery, a forerunner of about two hundred and fifty six as on date. Satras are wonder houses that nurture and unfold a vast spectacle of cloistered art forms such as Borgeet (Raga based Bhakti music), Sattriya Nritya (Classical Dance Form), Bhaona (Theatre Performance), Manuscript Painting, Sculpture, Wood carving/Sculptural reliefs (on the walls of Satra structures) and other associated art forms such as mask making, costume designing, and production of artifacts like the votive wooden structures (Asana, Sim-hasana), Thogi (book rests), decorated pleasure boats (Khel-Nao), Dola (Litter) etc. Some Satra-associated ritual enactments such as the erection of Akash Banti (massive sky lanterns made of bamboo) in Kamalabari Satra of Majuli would remind one to the contemporary art of installations.

In this context, it must be pointed out that among all these cultural expressions, the wall paintings and sculptural reliefs were more integral part of common life as they were accessible to the common masses unlike the illustrated manuscripts which were exclusive in nature, kept in the secluded sacred interior of Satra premises to be accessed only by a selected few like the Satra dignitaries and privileged elite literati. Woodcarvings and sculptural reliefs painted on the walls had a definite functional objective to serve. Apart from being used as decorative embellishments of the Satra architecture, they played role similar to the fresco paintings of medieval European

church of being the vehicle to spread the gospel amongst the masses. Thus this art form came up as a visual medium within the distinct indigenous traditions to become an integral part of folk-life. In general, the manuscripts seem to be more refined and sophisticated with free flowing delineations, and exhibit finer handling of other pictorial elements as compared to the woodcarvings and sculptural reliefs. However this can be attributed to the fact that the smaller medium of manuscript painting has inherent advantages in these aspects. This is also the reason why the carved and painted panels are mostly simple, direct, and comprehensible which enacts a crucial moment of a narration rather than the entire sequence of events. (The task becomes more challenging as one has to execute the narration within the limited space available conforming to the pre-determined architectural set up. The most imaginative and appealing capability of these artists is evident in the technique of utilizing the negative spaces of the pictorial design to carve out decorative windows which serve the dual purpose of admitting light and air besides enhancing the aesthetics of the structure/design)

The changing socio-political and cultural arena brought about by the colonialism also began to get reflected even in the Satra related art “praxis” especially the living art form of decorative sculptural relief, registering a deviation from the standardized canons of visual narrative. New assimilations/departures further heightened its hybrid folk-classical-popular character along with glimmer of newer assimilation of the lingual features of British academic realism. The foremost change was in the material – wood and mud plasters at places replaced by cement as concrete buildings began to replace thatched construction and synthetic dyes taking the place of *hengul* and *haital*, the traditional colours made of natural ingredients and extracts. The sculptural relief on the walls of the Srihati Satra of Suwalkuchi is a witness to these changes which we propose to discuss herein.

The themes of the narratives of the sculptural reliefs about which we shall discuss now are mostly centred on “Krishna Leela” and one or two from the epic Ramayana. The panel is divided into various rectangular compartments/niches adorned by connecting “Toranas” and each depicts an abbreviated narration of an incident in its crucial moment. Like the Kalighat paintings, here also the sequential narration is

abandoned to give place for the abbreviated expression. Now let us review some of the salient picture frames of various panels in detail. To start with, in a frame Kamsa is shown sitting on a “Simhasan” to the left wearing waistcoat, trousers and shoes (visual 26). The guard standing nearby is also similarly attired whose headgear looks like the “Pugree” of a police constable. In the back ground Vasudeva stealthily spirits away infant Krishna. The next frame shows Kamsa about to smash Yoga Maya while two guards witness the scene. One of the guards, shown standing on top of the prison, points to the deficient sense of proportion on the part of the artist. Kamsa is now in traditional attire – bare foot and Dhoti, while the guard on top is attired in western clothes. The way the guards are carrying clubs is also more akin to the posture of a European trained soldier shouldering arms rather than the strong men of Hindu mythology carrying war maces. The apparel in both the frames is clear deviation from tradition and show the influence of colonial times. Of course conformity to the traditional style of composition is maintained. In Assamese tradition of manuscript painting, within the same picture plane several simultaneous events are depicted. A certain pictorial strategy is applied to create a connecting link among the different spaces within one picture frame. At times the figures are placed either in convergence or divergence to distinguish between two different events. The narrative placed within a niche under an arch or “Torana” is a distinct feature of manuscript painting where the connecting link composition is manifested. In the connecting link composition, a common object connects the different spaces, and the space division is done either by “Torana” or pillars, trees, etc. These features have been conformed to in most of the narrative frames. In the middle frame of (visual 27), Krishna and Balram are shown walking along the streets of Mathura followed by two of the townsfolk. One is wearing a Gandhi Cap and both wears Jawahar coats over dhotis. The man wearing the Gandhi cap resembles the image of a Satyagrahi seen in the popular art and theatre of those times. Though such kind of topi or cap were pretty common in the western part of India, it was not much seen in the North Eastern Part until the advent of twentieth century, when the Freedom Movement spread like fire to all parts of India. A rare spectacle is seen on the background where two of the three women are shown baring their breasts something not visible elsewhere in this genre – perhaps a faint echo of the images of fallen women in bazaar paintings and calendar art. The right frame of the third plate also shows a guard clad in trousers and boots in a soldierly posture. In the

right frame of (visual 28), the guards are again attired in European style, this time wearing knee boots and red police caps. Even Chanuka (Chanoor?) and Muristhaka (Mustika?) the wrestlers assigned by Kamsa to slay Krishna and Balaram bear striking resemblance to Europeans in facial features as well as dress in (visual 28). In the narratives of these panels, Kamsa is often depicted as a monumental iconic figure dwarfing other figures in the frame in order to show his power and position. As we have already seen that there is conformity to certain standardized norms as the connecting link composition, placement of icons within the niche, there are also stark deviations as illustrated above. There are further deviations in the mode of figuration and the gesture/posture of the characters. The conventional figuration in profile with the “Oda Bhangi” posture is now mutated to frontal postures with forward-looking gaze. The typology of figures also has undergone much change into a rounder and plumper shape like that of the popular calendar art figures and the figures of “modern day” idols such as seen in Durga Puja. It is worth mentioning here that the popular “modern” iconography of the Kumartuli tradition of idol making was popularized in Assam on a mass scale during the mid part of nineteenth century with the influx of Bengali babus who migrated to serve in the state. In the fairs and *haats* associated with various festivals like Raas, scenes of *Krishna Leela* were presented as puppet plays and idols. The similarity of the figuration of *Sattriya* sculptural relief to these popular art forms may be traceable to such cultural developments. Nilomoni Phukan in *Loka Kalpa Dhristi* mentions about a babu smoking hookah in the style of Kalighat painting in another *Satra* of Suwalkuchi. (p.25) The pith-*pat*, *Maju* paintings of Goalpara/Dhubri region, *Bishohari* pats of Gauripur – Golokganj – Bilasipara area shows a clear connectivity to the bazaar painting of Kalighat. Hence their reflection in sculptural relief of Srihati *Satra* cannot be a far-fetched concept. To carry the study further, European optical perspective and the elements of foreshortening which were not to be seen in traditional renderings are also visible here. A fine example of this is a picture of Sita sitting in the Ashok Vatika with Sarama and Trijatayu (Trijata?). All the four figures are placed in different positions and spaces with a balanced use of space and optical perspective. It is a clear evidence of British Academic realism being appropriated within a local tradition and of stark deviation from the overall earlier look of this art form. Such developments are also evident in the picture frame of Krishna Balaram and Sudama and the one where Garga Rishi is sitting in the background

while Nanda Jasoda and a Dasi are seen discussing (the juxtaposition of some local artifacts and household appliances are noteworthy). Of course the artist still seems to grapple with the perspectives and proportion of the figures which at times appear crude and comical. A few reflections of change can be seen in minor detail such as the shape of the asana, which resembles a chair. It is not that there are no references to the European costumes, apparel and persona etc. in the manuscript painting. In a plate of Brahmabaibarta Purana written in the nineteenth century (British Library Collection) shows four British officers seated on chairs in the court of King Purandar Singha (**Kakoli Borkakoty, Cihna, p.70, Silver Jubilee issue, 2001**). But whereas the British of Brahmabaibarta Purana were an authentic naturalistic representation, depiction of Kamsa and his gang of villains in European apparel seem like an interesting subversion. The devotees of Mathura in Satygrahi's dress and the oppressors as Europeans are a subtle pointer to the ideological fervour and the socio-political climate of the times. Thus it seems that even costumes and apparel becomes a signifier to the social and economic realities as well as the reflection of current ideological perception.

Any study of changing style of a visual tradition involves primarily three factors – the organization of artistic production confined to a specific historical period and its relation to socio-economic situation, the ideologies which determine them and the formal changes that accrued there from. In our present study of changing style of sculptural relief panels of Srihati Satra, we can infer the socio-economic and cultural changes related to a specific historical time inversely, through the stylistic and formal changes. There is no available means of precisely dating the production but through the stylistic changes, we can assume the time frame and the socio - political environ that gets mediated and reflected therein. In a genre of art form, which is essentially a means of religious representation, it is the circuitous and subtle suggestions through which such things are reflected and one has to unearth the nuances hidden below the surface. Though the “Khanikars” could not afford to be as sharp and direct as the Kalighat and Bazaar painters, they too in their own way have been the recorders of their time. Their roles were different; whereas the bazaar or calendar artists had thematic liberations with a huge market and the advantage of mass production, for the “Khanikars” it was a limited arena, a job of once or twice in a lifetime. Even then despite all adversities, the “khanikar's” art survived and continues to pulsate.

Deconstruction of the hegemonic discourse by a colonized subject in any form of expression whether political or cultural/artistic, is an act of resistance and intervention. When a subject is colonized and its identity is jeopardized in the colonizing process it redefines and asserts its identity in and through definitions around its own culture, past/history/ traditions/ memories (often imagined and constructed), political and ideological institutions, which entails an independent discursive formation often appropriating its 'other'. The sculptural reliefs of Srihati Satra about which we made an elaborate study in this subtext is a fine example of such interventional strategy by a colonized subject. In the visual narratives we could see the formulation of the self and other dichotomy by the artists when the mythical characters like Krishna who is the Hero of the narrative appears in the iconographic forms and costumes of the local culture signifying the 'self' (read Indian Subject-hood/selfhood) and the villain Kamsa in the British garment, get up and prototype signifying the evil 'other' the Europe. For the first time one could see a depiction in such subversive and unconventional manner in the history of the tradition which can be said as the first ever nascent attempt to deconstruct the Eurocentric hegemonic discourse in a visual narrative of sculptural relief. The appropriation of the British academic realism as the lingual expression is the pointer to the very process of jeopardizing the identity of a colonized subject but it also signified that very act of appropriation and reaffirmation and re-definition of its identity by recourse to various contexts from culture, tradition, history, heritage, memory, socio-political institutions and mythology and Vaishnavite cultural tradition as specific to this definite case study of Srihati Satra.

VI

READING OF VISUAL NARRATIVES IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD TILL SEVENTIES

The Srihati Satra sculptural reliefs were basically traditional art. But as we have pointed out in our previous chapter while tracing the genealogy of modern art in Assam, the modernist phase in the true sense of the term began in the mid twenties of the nineteenth century. Among the first four trained artists who initiated this

modernist phase, perhaps Muktanath Bordoloi was the one who tried to speak about the socio political problems of Assam through his works like “Kanikhula” (Opium Den), where few economically lower class people are seen taking opium in a very poignant rendering set in a playful chiaroscuro of colour schemata. Tarun Duwara’s “Tatsal/Sipini” (Loom) is also another rendering of an afternoon in the life of Assamese women set around a loom, which tried to create a definite prototype of Assamese women in a subtle way and nascent form with the portrayal of a serene noon, gossiping yet hardworking women in a fine evocation of that prevalent notion of Nature/woman equation. Few other artists were also seen in depicting the rural life, mostly the rural folk in different snapshots of daily life going about their mundane business thereby creating a notion of native identity in a non complex simple serene existential state of living. Few others tried to depict the ethnic tribes of Assam in the manner of mere realistic representation and documentation. A tendency of creating certain stereotypes could be seen in such depiction in keeping to the colonial mode of representation of the anthropological texts or narratives of ‘exotic’ species of the native oriental prototypes. Since our area of research is focused on the post-colonial period we would not go into detailed discussion of such politics of representation which can be an interesting and independent area of research in itself. However, the decade of nineteen forties saw the emergence of few artists and out of whom played a definite historical role in the discourse. They are Asu Dev and Hemanta Mishra who were contemporaries with a distinct idiom of their own. Asu Dev’s Pointillistic representation and Byzantine Mosaic like endeavour, and Hemanta Mishra’s Surrealist and Symbolist explorations brought a new dimension to the art scene. Hemanta Mishra, the senior most Assamese artist, residing at Kolkata was perhaps the first Assamese artist to carve a name for himself at the national art scenario. In fact, he was a pioneer in more ways than one – the first Assamese artist to exhibit in the First International Triennale held by Lalit Kala Academy in 1968; first Assamese to display at National Exhibition of Lalit Kala Academi or in the galleries abroad. He was also the first Assamese artist to be included in the archives of National Gallery of Modern Art, National Academy of Art in India as well as the Museum of Oriental Art and Culture in Russia. Moreover his name has been included in the international anthologies of artists published by prestigious institutions of USA and UK. In the history of Indian art, Hemanta Mishra is better known as a member of the famous

Calcutta Group, founded in 1942 by likes of Nirode Majumdar, Gopal Ghosh, Paritosh Sen, Pradosh Dasgupta etc. Artists like Ram Kinkar Baij, Govardan Ash, Abani Sen, Sunil Madhav Sen and Hemanta Mishra joined them later on. As stated in the manifesto of the group “the guiding motto of our group is best expressed in the slogan Art Should Aim to be International and Independent. In other words, our art cannot progress if we always look back to our past glories and cling to our traditions at all costs. The vast new world of art, reach an infinitely varied created by the masters of the world over beckons us, we have to study them deeply, develop our appreciation of them and take from them all that we could profitably synthesise with our own requirements and traditions” That Hemanta Mishra chose to join this Calcutta Group is itself a pointer to his relentless quest for an art which is synthetic, vast and unbounded. For a person who started his artistic journey five decades ago, in a peripheral place like Assam, in an environment not conducive to art practice, it was indeed a great achievement for the artist and a matter of pride for his native place. In fact, it was artists like Hemanta Mishra who introduced the element of modernity in the true sense of the term by experimenting in the idioms of surrealism hitherto unexplored in the art world of Assam. His historical significance lies in the fact that though his lingual idiom was surrealist, temperamentally his works were very much Indian. Of course surrealism was the final phase, which he reached after traversing through two different phases. In the beginning, like any other artist, Hemanta Mishra too was interested in academic studies of figures, objects or nature. Such naturalistic representation comprised of landscapes, natural settings of forests, hills, rivers, valleys and human figures. His technical skill and capacity of enhancing the theme with a fine blend of colour and form received rave applause and critical acclaim. But his artistic quest seemed unquenched as he tried to break through the forms and colours and took to the cubist mode of expression. Cubism, as we all know, was an art movement espoused by Picasso and Braque (1907-14) which brought forth a radical break from the idea of art as imitation of nature. This idea of art as an imitation of nature had been dominant in European Art since renaissance. But Cubism aimed to depict objects as they are known rather than as they appear at a particular time or place. To this end they broke down the subject into a multiplicity of facets, rather than showing them from a single fixed view point. Hence the Cubist subjects depict many different aspects simultaneously. The ideology behind such representations was that of a belief in the

multiplicity of truth. All modernist distortions of forms started with cubism and almost every modern artist can be seen undergoing a cubist phase in their career. Hemanta Mishra was no exception. But his cubist phase was more ornamental in nature. It is as if the artist sought something deeper and different as his medium of expression and Cubism acted as only an intermediate phase in the search. After a decade long quest, he finally arrived at that language which enabled him to express himself with utmost vigour, both at the conceptual and aesthetic levels. That Hemanta Mishra is also a poet perhaps accounts for his lingual choice of surrealism. Surrealism which took root in the 1920s and 1930s as an offshoot of the Dada movement, had always countered rationalism for the belief in the irrational aspect of life and human psyche. Surrealists attempted to find truth in the subconscious impulses, dreams and fantasies of human mind. The central idea of this art movement was to release the creative powers of the subconscious mind, or as Andre Breton pointed out in the manifesto, “to resolve the contradictory conditions of dream and reality into absolute reality – a super-reality”. The quintessential character of Hemanta Mishra’s art is his poetic lyricism. Hence it is no wonder that he attained salvage in Surrealism where his poetic persona could completely complement his artistic persona. We should remember that the motive force of Surrealism was the French poet Andre Breton. At the very first glance one can feel a Salvador Dalisque mode of rendering in Hemanta Mishra. To cite an example, the painting “Xomoyor Bukut Golap Niyor” or “A Rose Dew in the Bosom of Time” (visual 29) evokes a Dali like cosmic vision. But whereas Dali was preoccupied with the cerebral and cosmological queries, Hemanta Mishra seemed to deal more with the psychical aspects. In this work, he seems to explore the multi-layered strata of memory, dream and fantasy. It is also an intimate account of some existential conflict or inner turmoil. The motif of rose dew evokes an element of impermanence in contrast to the continuous flight of time. But what is it that is temporary like a dew drop? Is it love? Is it the relationship between man and woman? Or is love and relationship with the ideal other a conflicting experience like a rose that exude fragrance and beauty co existent with a thorn of pain? Is it like the dew drop that sparkles only for a moment, yet leaves a mark forever in the memory forever? Like any Surrealist work this painting also presents it’s subject subtly, keeping the element of mystery or the irrational intact. Also motifs and images are pitted against an indefinite indescribable surreal background, thereby creating a web of multiple

suggestions. Of course, Hemanta Mishra's Surrealism has an inherent Indianness in it. His treatment of colour, tonal variations, style of delineation and the spectres of imageries manifests that inherent Indianness in his art. His colours are never stark; but always subdued, smooth and translucent. This quality of colour and tonality evokes a deep sense of vastness and infinitude. The compositional pattern adds to the depth and volume to his psychoscapes giving it a dream like dimension. Amazingly at times Hemanta Mishra seems to be more a symbolist where the motifs, images and the symbols act as coded signs of certain hidden thoughts and impulses. For Symbolism, art is the visual expression of the emotional experiences where the idea is clothed in a sensuous form. Another interesting feature which sets Hemanta Mishra apart from the western surrealists is his choice of motifs and symbols. Whereas the western surrealist symbols were derived from the natural and the modern mechanical settings, Hemanta Mishra seemed to be inspired by nature alone. Stretches of land, streaks of sand, rocks, frozen rivers, trees, ruins and eggs are some of the recurrent motifs in his oeuvre. In most of his paintings one can discern the recurrent presence of a headless female torso. Herein one can draw a parallel with the Romantic painters for whom motifs like ruins, forests, barren land, rock formations or female figures were favoured images. For both these natural images are sites of hidden truth of the universe and inexplicable mysteries of life. Hence with a closer look, we realize that Hemanta Mishra is an artist of eclectic vision. If linguistically he is a surrealist, temperamentally he is at times a blended persona of romantic and symbolist disposition with a profound sense of being rooted to the Indian tradition, culture and ethos (visuals 30 & 31).

When we consider reading Hemanta Mishra's visual narrative with regard to reflection of identity he comes up within the frame of Freudian psychoanalytical notion of identity and selfhood. His renderings of the unconscious and the libidinal forces of the subconscious are the driving force of his identity construction or the formation of selfhood or self-concept and self image. His existentialist quest and angst are embedded within this psychological position of identity assertion and like many artists are operative within a personal and individual construction of identity rather than some socio-political collective formation of community/racial/ethnic identity (visual 32). It is interesting to note that Mishra did a series of works about the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya (visual 33) which were different snapshots of their daily life. Though

they were more of realistic representation he tried to formulate certain characteristic feature of the tribes in their mannerism, way of life and attitudes in a subtle way. Of course it was the scenic beauty of the state which captured his imagination more poetically in the aesthetic sense of the term.

Asu Dev makes an interesting reading in the context of identity reflections in art. When we talk about his subject matter he seems to be engaged in depiction of the rural life. Capturing rural folk in their daily chores was his favourite passion with a major sum of works dedicated to this theme. Among the protagonists women were the dominant figures engaged in different forms of livelihood like agricultural works, fishing, stone breaking etc. in a series of significant works like “Crucial month” (visual 34), ‘Stone Breaker’ ‘Santhal Virgin’, ‘Symphony’, ‘Harvesting’, “Looking for Fish” (visual 35), “Sowing” (visual 36), “Contender I” (visual 37), “Contender II” (visual 38), “Log Carrier” (visual 39) etc. His representation of such subaltern women speaks in volume about his pro-Marxist standing. As he tried to build up a distinct prototype of Indian woman he tried to break through the romanticised glorified stereotype of rural Indian women by depicting them in their hardship of life. Of course they were never shown in melancholic or tragic portraiture rather in happy jovial self absorption of taking the challenges of life into their stride!

Asu Dev’s rendering of the women were build up on the Indian prototype of the oriental body in dark complexion and voluptuous figuration with further emphasis on the ethnic nativity of the Santhal woman or the local tribes of Assam like the Deuris. Adorning Gamosas or the handloom made cloth in their heads and bodies and wrapping up the bodies around the bosom in “methoni” or the definite style of wearing a garment typical of the rural women in the state. These figurations of women weave up a definite cultural identity or ethnicity and perhaps for the first time provided a visual metaphor for the representation of native identity.

Asu Dev’s imagery of these Indian/native/Assamese/ethnic/tribal women can be ideologically and aesthetically interconnected to the imagery of the Indian women by Amrita Sher-Gil. At the outset the first striking difference in the rendering of both the artists that becomes visible is the vibrant dynamism and jovial mannerism of Asu

Dev's representation of the native women in comparison to the static stillness and languid torpor of Sher-Gil's Indian women. As Geeta Kapur comments:

Sher-Gil's peasant and aristocratic women in a feudal setting seemed to hold in their stillness a latency of desire that would appear to exceed the artist's own potential as a middle class woman. . . Her othering process, at work through and beyond the frozen mise-en-scene, filled the paintings with orientalist imagining. More critically one might say that the women subjects of Sher-Gil's paintings, contained within their feudal seclusion, were not perceived to have a personal vocabulary for sexual signification. They could only appear like emblazoned motifs in the erotics of a dream. Sher-Gil, who clearly saw herself to be further evolved, melded her sexuality with theirs and relayed the imaginary process of a double emancipation with a tantalising, at times almost regressive effects. ("Body as Gesture: Women Artists at Work", p. 12)

Compared to her typical hybrid female subjectivity, Asu Dev's male subjectivity played up with the female imageries from his own gendered perspective where male gaze definitely acted out its voyeuristic pleasure grazing at those bodies engrossed in works yet tantalizingly inviting in their throbbing sexual energy and vibrancy. To make the point more transparent one can see that the physicality of Sher-Gil's women are fine admixture of western classicism and Indian Ajantasque prototype which gave rise to the slender tall dreamy figuration of women in the Bengal-School style of representation. On the other hand Asu Dev's women are more supple, voluptuous and Dravidian in nature. However one cannot deny the possibility that Asu Dev too must have felt if not overtly like Sher-Gil but subtly the same challenge of self-representation through the imagery of his women with regard to the newly formulated definition of the Indian National Identity and its representation in the realm of art which was a major issue for the artist of his generation often grappling with the dilemma of emblemizing an identity of authentic Indian-ness in modern Indian art while being universal in one's lingual expression. These artists faced the challenges of averting the pitfalls of the orientalist inclination of essentializing the 'other' (their own identity as seen by the western counterpart) and romanticising indigenism on one hand and to find a realist footing for their genuine post colonial construction of an authentic identity at the other hand. Hence artists like Sher-Gil to quote Geeta Kapur: "... had also as if to act out the paradox of the oriental subjects in the body of a woman designated as Eurasian – a hybrid body of unusual beauty. This

vexed solution to the problem of identity must be inscribed into her stylistic . . . Within this stressed sublimation of her Europeanism Sher-Gil took on the problem of representation as something of a project conducted through her art . . . ” (p. 11). Whether the problematization and negotiation of this problem of representation of a definite class/culture/ethnicity of the people of a specific region was a conscious effort on the part of Asu Dev is a debatable proposition but there is no doubt about the fact that he was the artist with a set imagery of cultural and gender identity who opened up immense possibilities in conceptual and lingual level. If Hemanta Mishra was the epitome of the existentialist/psychological identity of the Freudian constructs, Asu Dev was the true signification of the societal identity construction in the broader collective sphere. Both of them marked two distinct strands of identity concern catering to the two distinct spheres of the individual and the collective level and gave a momentum to the otherwise stagnant art scene of the nineteen fifties and sixties in Assam.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Cited in Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consequences, London: Verso, 1993.

2. There is no definite date as to when Srihati an *udasin Satra* of Suwalkuchi, was established. According to the *Burha Satradhikar* Sri Madhav Chandra Mahanta, Kanu Burha Thakur who is believed to be a relative of Sri Sri Madhav Dev established the *Satra* where Sri Ram Nidhi Prabhu was the first *Satradhikar*. There have been eleven *Satradhikars* till date, some of whom are s/Sri Nakul Atoi, Gokul Atoi, Manmath Atoi, Harijay Mahanta, Baakasiddha Purush Bood Ram Mahanta etc. The *Satradhikar*, *bhakats* and nearby residents claim that the *Satra* is about 400-450 years old whereas the *Deka Satradhikar* Sri Dipak Ch. Mahanta opines that the *Satra* is 250-300 hundred years old. The later claim however appears more plausible. *Satra* structure of the Srihati *Satra* is adorned by woodcarvings and paintings on all sides except the rear side of the *Manikut*. The right wall (as we enter the premises) is adorned by a panel of

wall paintings on the uppermost portions, below which are several curved windows bearing rectangular frames of wood carvings. The lintel below the window is decorated in *latakata* style with *jalikata* panels below. Most of the carved panels are of high relief pattern. The subjects are drawn from Vaishnavite religious texts – Vishnu in his various incarnations, various mythological characters from *Bhagavat Purana* and other religious texts. Artistic playfulness in the form of incorporations of some neutral subjects such as two cavorting monkeys (Is it Bali & Sugriva or just an ordinary pair of Rhesus variety) is an interesting sidelight. The uppermost panel depicts the scenes of *Yama-Yatana*, the sinners being punished in the city of Yama, which is reminiscent of the Barpetta *Kirtan Ghar*. Though scholars have doubt whether the Yama Patika tradition prevalent in ancient and medieval India really existed in Assam, it is interesting to see some of the *Satras*, mostly from the lower Assam part depicting the scenes of *Yama Puri*. Perhaps the most refined and highly aesthetical rendering of the iconographies depicted with high craftsmanship, artistic sensibility and skill are to be found in the two doors – one being the main door and the other being on the left wall. Metallic plates are stuck over the wooden plank of the doors with compartmentalized multiple niches within each an icon is placed. Nilmoni Phukan in his book Loka Kalpa Drishti has commended the artistic excellence of some of them. According to the *Burha Satradhikar*, the doors are made in the style of those in Old Kamalabari *Satra* and Titabor *Satra* and were part of the old *Satra* architecture, which was demolished in the earthquake of 1897. The right side panel of the sculptural relief conforms to the style of *Sattriya* manuscript painting – from the standardized figurations to the placement of icons in the niches, which is a distinctive style of manuscript painting having resemblance to the Buddhist Pala manuscripts. (It is worth mentioning that this feature is evident in numerous decorative relief panels in the various temple architecture of Ahom period.) Few figures in the panels of the right side wall clearly follow a typical *Oda Bhangi* or the stance of standing with feet apart and bent a little at the knees during a *Sattriya* dance recital, which is a distinct feature of *Sattriya* manuscript painting. The costumes and apparel, the floral patterns and the rich palette fairly conform to the manuscript painting. But as we move to the left side panels, we come across a shift in the narrative style. This is where our main concern lies and the focus will primarily rest on the visuals of this left side wall.

According to the *Burha Satradhikar*, who is in the mid fifties, these panels were in existence since his birth. The paints used in the panels appear bright and gaudy and appear to be of commercial origin and definitely not *hengul - haital* of yore. The primary colours are mostly used in contesting juxtaposition. The empty and uncluttered backgrounds of most frames are painted monochromatic like the manuscript paintings but are azure coloured.

THE BACKGROUND AND ORIGIN:

Among the spectre of cultural expressions which flourished in the premise of Sattra, manuscript painting is the most significant development. It is closely interconnected to the development of the wall paintings and the sculptural reliefs of the Sattra architecture and hence needs a detailed discussion. Manuscript painting is the major narrative form of visual art of Vaishnavite traditions that grew under the *Satra* patronage (Named as *Sattriya* School by Sri Rajatananda Das Gupta). This school comprising of the refined and sophisticated works such as the Chitra Bhagavata (tentatively dated 1539 AD), Geeta Govinda (Assamese translation datable to late 17th to early 18th century) and others bears a distinct stylistic idiom. It is characterized by an admixture of classical / elitist and folk-tribal elements - a fusion of specific indigenous locale and broader pan-Indian features. Scholars have discerned elements of indigenous folk-tribal traditions such as Tai-Buddhist manuscripts of the *Monpas*, *Sherdukpens* (Tribes of Arunachal), Bhutiyas and others. Though manuscript paintings sprang up as the major narrative tradition in Vaishnavite culture, the woodcarvings / sculptural relief (occasionally done on mud plastered surfaces) used in Satra architecture forms an equally significant visual tradition. The significance of this genre of art lies in the fact that unlike manuscript painting which gradually dwindled at the advent of colonialism, wood carving / sculptural relief continued as a living tradition till date. This is a visual tradition which has mediated its immediate spatio-temporal changes and has been adaptive / reflexive of the socio-political-economic-cultural environments. It has been enduring itself by an ongoing process of appropriation/re-appropriations, both in the stylistic and technical levels. This is evident in uses of new medium/material/executional methods & techniques/composition/treatment of space-time/typology of figurations/architectural settings/costumes and apparel and other such pictorial or formal elements. The observed deviation from conformity with the standardized canons of visual narratives is probably due to exposure and encounter

with other parallel art forms, along with the spatio-temporal changes. There is a possibility that this genre of art can be seen as a link phase between the traditional mode of visual narrative to the modern westernized mode of narration which emerged in Assam during the third decade of twentieth century. Of course this is not to claim that modernism (in Assam) is a natural descendant of this phase; but is rather a re-fabrication/re-construction of western idioms and ideologies in the Indian context. Whenever the phasing out of the rich and vibrant tradition of manuscript paintings by the modern art of western orientation is examined, one often tends to disregard the living tradition of wood carving/sculptural relief which has continued to exist, side by side, right from the origin of Vaishnavite visual art to contemporary times (and art). Sustaining on an endeavour of assimilations of traditional manuscript painting and indigenous folk traditions with the new forms of European academic realism and popular art forms like the calendar art, bazaar paintings, modern iconography of idol making etc. has given it a distinct narrative form which at times unfolds a mosaic of multiple intersection and juxtaposition of the sacred/secular; classical/folk and the traditional/contemporary.

Although manuscript painting has drawn the attention of scores of scholars, the art of woodcarving and sculptural relief has not been examined in depth except by a few scholars such as Jugal Das, Nilomoni Phukan and Dr. Birendranath Dutta etc. A seminal observation is made by Dr. Birendranath Dutta in chapter III of his book Folk Painting In Assam (Tezpur University Publications, 1998). In his formulation, this genre is clubbed with other related art forms in what he has named the *Khanikar Style*; after the versatile traditional artists/artisans who displayed expertise in all forms of art – painting, wood carving, idol making, mask making, costume designing, stage setting and drop scene painting, props making, theatrical make up and artefacts of religious and everyday use. A class (not a caste) *Khanikars* received enduring patronage both from the Satras and the Royal Court of Ahoms before colonial rule and perhaps formed a kind of guild. However, in this context the term '*khanikar style*' appears to carry an element of ambiguity as the illustrators of manuscripts were also known as *khanikars*. In fact, whoever would sculpt, paint, model and fashion artefacts are known as *khanikar* in Assam. It may be that the author wanted to emphasise the point that whereas in several cases, the illustrator – painter cum calligrapher of the manuscript

paintings have been traced to their individual identities (Like the Ghanashyam Kharghoria Phukan, Sri Sashadhar Aata of Parijat Haran fame or Sri Durga Panchanan or Durgadas Dwij of Karna Parba and others), the artists or *Khanikars* of woodcarving / paintings of the *Satra* architecture are all anonymous without decipherable names. Hence all the art forms done by the anonymous *Khanikars* are clubbed together to give a common name after the artists may be seen as a tribute to them. Or perhaps the author wants to emphasise the fact that one of the art forms is abandoned while the other is still a living tradition. It must be pointed out that the wall paintings and sculptural reliefs were more integral part of common life as they were accessible to the common masses unlike the illustrated manuscripts which were exclusive in nature, kept in the secluded sacred interior of *Satra* premises to be accessed only by a selected few like the *Satra* dignitaries and privileged literati. Woodcarvings and sculptural reliefs painted on the walls had a definite functional objective to serve. Apart from being used as decorative embellishments of the *Satra* architecture, they played role similar to the fresco paintings of medieval European church of being the vehicle to spread the gospel amongst the masses. Thus this art form came up as a visual medium within the distinct indigenous traditions to become an integral part of folk – life. In general, the manuscripts seem to be more refined and sophisticated with free flowing delineations, and exhibit finer handling of other pictorial elements as compared to the woodcarvings and sculptural reliefs. However this can be attributed to the fact that the smaller medium of manuscript painting has inherent advantages in these aspects. This is also the reason why the carved and painted panels are mostly simple, direct, and comprehensible which enacts a crucial moment of a narration rather than the entire sequence of events. The task becomes more challenging as one has to execute the narration within the limited space available conforming to the pre-determined architectural set up. (The most imaginative and appealing capability of these artists is evident in the technique of utilizing the negative spaces of the pictorial design to carve out decorative windows which serve the dual purpose of admitting light and air besides enhancing the aesthetics of the structure/design.) Therefore taking the foregoing into account, the art of woodcarving/sculptural relief may be considered as an extended form of manuscript painting in spite of the visible mediumistic/technical differences between the two. It may be stated that manuscript painting predates

decorative woodcarvings/sculptural reliefs since it is logical to execute a concept on a smaller scale and subsequently scale it up in size.

THE EVOLUTION – A HISTORY OF APPROPRIATION AND ASSIMILATION:

The two related art forms thrived side by side till early nineteenth century. However after the decline of the Ahom Kingdom and advent of colonialism, the genre of manuscript painting lost its patronage and gradually faded out. Woodcarvings and sculptural reliefs on the other hand continued to thrive as a vehicle of popularising traditional Vaishnavite sermons. Reaching the masses was all the more important after the coming of the Baptist missionaries who tried to woo the masses from the grasp of pagan deities with missionary zeal. The *Satras* were competing with the missionaries to retain their disciples whose relations with the *Satras* were not only spiritual but also material since it were they who provided the tributes that a *Satra* needed to survive. Communications and inter-regional interactions underwent a quantum change after the advent of the British. With the coming of railways it became possible for even a relatively less wealthy person to visit other parts of the country especially for religious, educational and commercial purposes. Cheap rail travel made it possible for an *Adhikar* or even a minor *Satra* to visit Calcutta with his entourage for Ganga Snan. In lower Assam, it was quite common for a Brahmin to have several disciples amongst the landed gentry of East Bengal and Cooch Bihar. They would undertake an annual visit to these disciples for carrying out puja and also to collect tributes. Brahmins were also engaged as priests in *Satras* especially those belonging to the *Brahma Sanghati* where idol worship was practiced. Thus the people, both social elite and commoners had encountered the sweeping changes both in the realm of life and art either first or second hand. On a broader context, Victorian illusionistic art, naturalism/academic realism and the notion of artistic progress took root in India around this time and new genres such as oil paintings were introduced. The artist began to lose his previous faceless character and gained a new status as an individual 'gentleman artist'. The first of the gentleman artists Raja Ravi Varma whose particular adaptations of western techniques – using European perspective and figure-model, with Hindu and nationalist imagery – evolved into India's ubiquitous, gaudy, glossy painted pictures of gods and goddesses, called "calendar-art". His oleograph prints were spread all over the country

thanks to the advent of printing presses (An example of which reached even the remote town of Margherita in the eastern corner of India). Calendar art began to play a major role in the lives of average Indians as objects of devotion, advertising agents in the form of business giveaways and as an affordable decorative essential. Besides portraying the mundane concepts of love, romance, devotion etc., they continue as reflections of significant temporal events, ideas and personalities from the rise of nationalism to the Kargil War. The emergence of bazaar paintings was another significant phenomenon of the Raj. "Patuas" migrating from rural Bengal to Calcutta to set up their practice around the Kalighat temple created a new school of art where from mythological depiction to the impressions of dynamic social environment of urban Calcutta and its Babu culture were recorded. Being mass produced and affordable, these were prized by the low and middle-income groups as objects of art. All these along with the media of theatre and newly introduced bioscopes contributed to the growth of a popular culture whose form continues to be transformed over time till today. No wonder that these changes would have repercussion in the living art traditions. Thus the changing socio-political and cultural arena brought about by the colonialism also began to get reflected even in the *Satra* related art "praxis" especially the living art form of decorative sculptural relief, registering a deviation from the standardized canons of visual narrative. New assimilations / departures further heightened its hybrid folk-classical-popular character. The foremost change was in the material – wood and mud plasters at places replaced by cement as concrete buildings began to replace thatched construction and synthetic dyes taking the place of *hengul* and *haital*. The sculptural relief on the walls of the Srihati *Satra* of Sualkuchi is a witness to these changes about which we discussed in the foregoing as a subtext to draw a link between the modern and pre-modern and to establish it as the first instance of identity formation in the paradigm of art in Assam.