
On the evils of opium eating:
Reflections on Nineteenth Century Assamese
Literary Reformist Discourse

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Abstract:

The article attempts at an understanding of nineteenth century Assamese reformist discourse as upheld by the Assamese creative literature. Acknowledgement of the evils of opium eating also echoed in several literary outpourings of the nineteenth century, which sought to combine entertainment and reform. Facilitating an understanding of the nineteenth century reformist discourse are two Assamese satirical texts by Hemchandra Barua and Dutiram Hazarika. They enable an evaluation of the perception of the Assamese mind in the nineteenth century towards issues of social reform. Both texts reveal a strong sense of antagonism towards those traditions which nurture the perpetration of social practices as opium consumption which, as it was widely upheld by the Christian missionaries, the medical opinion and the social reformers had resulted in both physical and mental degeneration of the people. The idea that opium addiction was synonymous with backwardness and degeneration made the intelligentsia adopt as its agenda the amelioration of the “opium evil.” These texts, resorting to the use of satire, wit and humour, spearheaded an innovative reform agenda.

Key words: Opium, Assam, Literary, Social Reform.

Literature and society are inextricably interwoven. Both share a symbiotic relationship, influencing and inspiring in the act of co-existence. Late 19th century Assamese literary compositions

display a strong tradition of an engagement with the issue of social degeneration and reveal a concern for the propagation of socially relevant messages. This understanding of the idea of social corruption was facilitated through the colonial encounter and the supplanting of the pre-colonial beliefs and practices with its (colonial) ideas and institutions, which altered the very nature of the prevalent socio-economic set-up in Assam. Although it is generally suggested that Assam enjoyed a liberal social atmosphere since pre-colonial times, and was free of the many ills plaguing the other provinces of colonial India, such as the evils of sati, infanticide, dowry, untouchability, yet, the widespread prevalence of the opium addiction, which was believed to be ‘threatening the very survival of the Assamese people’ emerged as a key aspect of the Assamese backwardness.

Such a portrayal of the Assamese society began when the Christian missionaries together with the newly emerging Assamese intelligentsia initiated an attempt to highlight the evils of opium through their literary works. The present article aims at understanding the nineteenth century reformist discourse upheld by two vernacular satirical texts, *Kaniyar Kirtan* (1861) (Barua 1861/2003) and *Rasik Puran* (1877)¹. The author of the first text was Hemchandra Barua while Dutiram Swarnakar Hazarika is credited with the latter one. The article attempts an evaluation of the texts to comprehend the thought-world of 19th century colonial Assam towards issues of social reform.

‘Spirit of the Age’

The period between 1835 and 1857 witnessed the cultural consolidation of the British power in India and also the growth of Indian ambivalence towards the British rule. The colonial policy of the promotion of Western science and English learning to create a class, which according to Macaulay would

¹ D. Hazarika, *Rasik Puran*, (1877) Unpublished manuscript obtained from Sonadhar Das Senapati of Shillong by Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati.

be ‘Indians in blood and colour’ but Europeans in ‘taste opinions, moral and intellect’ created tensions in the Indian society. Engagement with the ideas and ideologies of the West enabled an insight into the shortcomings of the Indian social and religious traditions, which was also under attack from the Christian missionaries. However, alongside the ‘civilizing mission’ embarked on by the colonial administrators, there developed the ‘revivalist movements’ as a counter to the British portrayal of the Indian society as corrupt and barbarous and the reformist anxiousness to reconcile their love and attachment for the West.

Calcutta being the seat of colonial administration, it became a ferment of intense activity in social, literary and cultural spheres. Witness to the “exciting intellectual festivities” (Cf. Misra 1985) of Calcutta there were Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Jagnaram Khargharia Phukan, and the first generation of Assamese intelligentsia. Haliram Phukan’s son, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59) and Gunabhiram Barua (1837-94) were amongst the first generation of English educated Assamese intelligentsia to pioneer the same zeal for upliftment of the Assamese society. The Assamese intelligentsia, like their counterparts in Calcutta, the Bengali ‘bhadralok’, shared the same fervour for amelioration of the society ills.

Unlike Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua who were direct witnesses of the ‘intellectual festivities’ in Calcutta, Hemchandra Barua (1835-1896) was devoid of any direct exposure, and had not received any formal training in English. Nevertheless, his literary pursuits and contribution to the social cause rank him amongst the pioneers of modernity in Assam. Devoted to his literary pursuits, he boldly asserted his non-conformist attitude, was a social revolutionary and a humanist with a zeal for community welfare. Born to a traditional and conservative Brahmin ‘dangoriya’ family of Sibsagar, in 1835, his early days coincide with Lord Bentick’s promulgation of the introduction of learning Western science and English language and or even the Victorian mannerisms. This was, however, much despised by the orthodox sections of

the community and there was much aversion to the learning. Having lost his father in his childhood, he was reared in a traditional social milieu. Despite opposition of his orthodox guardians towards his English education, his training in English language was facilitated by the Commissioner of Sibsagar, Capt. Brodie and Parmananda Bharali, an Assamese pundit. Raja Rammohun Roy and Henry Vivian Derozio, the pioneers of the renaissance in Bengal were his icons. However, Hemchandra Barua chose to tread a moderate path, avoiding the extremist approach towards reforming society that was pursued by the 'Young Bengal Movement' of the Derozians. In fact, this was a characteristic of the Assamese intelligentsia - that of professed loyalty and never attempting a radical break from the established norms. Nevertheless, Hemchandra Barua openly declared himself an 'agnostic' and did not observe rules of commensality.

Hailed as one of the key modern prose writer in Assamese, he wrote not only prose but also textbooks, grammar and dictionaries. Among his works are *Adhipath* and *Pathmala* textbook, *Asamiya Vyakarana* (1856), a grammar, *Asamiya Bhaskar Padhasaliya Abhidhan*, a school dictionary and *Asamiya Hemkosh*, an etymological dictionary. Barua had also written boldly and sensitively on the subject of women's unequal status in the society. His support was based both on personal sentiments as well as on the claims of reason. In fact, his open defiance of the societal norms had earned him ostracism from his community. That he had chosen to live a solitary life with the wrath of his community was testimony enough of his conviction to the cause which he advocated. Yet he was not above ambiguity of thoughts and deeds. He was also a keen observer of social systems and transitions as is revealed in his *Notes on the Marriage System in Assam* (1892), which is Barua's only English composition, upheld as an epoch-making work by scholars for its treatment of the subject, and its analysis (Cf. Bhattachary 1996). His literary works reveal his strong concern for social reform. In his novel, *Bahire Rang Sang Bhitare Kova Bhatari* (1876), he criticized the social customs and religious hypocrisy through supposedly

respectable characters. In 1861, he penned a drama, *Kaniyar Kirtan*, a satirical work on the question of opium consumption in Assam.

Positively antagonistic to the importation of English learning and Western attitudes and mannerisms, there were the remnants of the Ahom nobility, who represented and upheld the orthodox attitude of the old landed gentry. However, though trained in the conservative traditions of learning and slow in responding to the ideas of the age, they did not remain passive spectators to the crisis in the society and actively responded to the need for revival and reinstating the *status quo*. Dutiram Swarnakar Hazarika², represented an accomplished Assamese gentleman of the ‘older type’, thoroughly impregnated with the ideals of the pre-colonial culture.

Dutiram Swarnakar Hazarika (1806-1901) was himself a close spectator of the decadence of the Ahom supremacy. His metrical chronicle, *Kalibharat*, deals with the reign of the Tungkhungia kings, beginning with Sulikpha Lora Raja, including Gadadhar Singha, Rudra Singha, Siva Singha, Pramatta Singha, Rajeswar Singha, Lakshmi Singha and Purandhar Singha, who have been treated elaborately, the author continuing his account up to the execution of Maniram Dewan in 1858 and the transfer of the territories of the Honorable East India Company to the authority of the British Crown. This book therefore can be regarded as a complete history of Assam from 1679- 1858.

Dutiram designates his book as *Kalibharat*, literally the ‘epic of the Kali age’. The devotional spirit of the author saw in the rise and fall of kings the intrigues and machinations of ministers, the secret manipulations of conspirators and assassins, and the depredations and atrocities of the rapacious neighbours, a fulfilment of the prophecies regarding the Kali-

² Dutiram was trained in the craft of a goldsmith and he was skilled at minakari, which is the art of setting delicate jewels on green surfaces. See *Introduction*, Surrya Kanta Bhuyan, *Asamar Padya- Buranji* (1932), p. xii.

yuga, so commonly found in the Vaishnava poetry. The title itself is a comment on the evils of attachment to the affairs of Earth in supersession of the higher demands of man's spiritual nature. Dutiram was a man thoroughly conversed with the historical lore of his country, and Raja Purandar Singha freely invited him to his palace to listen to the stories of Assam history (Bhuyan 1932, xi-xii). Dutiram's wisdom and keen sense of history was acknowledged and highly appreciated by the contemporary Ahom king, Raja Purandhar Singha. Impressed by his erudition, Raja Purandar Singha, including the Raja's son and heir apparent, Kameswar Singha, allowed him unrestrained access to the traditions preserved in the Ahom royal families.

Dutiram was born to Sonabar Hazarika, at Chokikhat in the town of Jorhatn (Assam). His grandfather, Saha Hazarika was a powerful officer of the reign of Lakshmi Singha. Saha was attached to the 'Bacha khel' and was in-charge of five or six thousand archers. Dutiram was educated in his childhood in the tol (traditional institute of learning) of Bhayaram Barpujari at Jorhat and was a disciple of the Satradhikar (head of Vaishnavite monastery) of Dihing. He was thoroughly read in the Assamese scriptures and the ecclesiastical history of the country, cultivated music, participated in the 'bhawanas' or enactments of Vaisnava dramas and 'led a deeply religious and pious life'. S.K.Bhuyan, in his introduction to his *Padya Buranji* (ed.) remarks, "the fact that the Baniya community could produce a man of Dutiram's erudition and culture in the beginning of the British connection is of considerable significance." (Bhuyan 1932, xi)

Dutiram is also credited with the authorship of *Rasik Puran*, a satirical account of the origin and evils of intoxicating drugs, kani (opium) bhang (Indian hemp), dhapat (tobacco) and datura (jimson weed).

The Reformist Agenda in Nineteenth Century Assam:

The Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) facilitated the commercial and cultural encounter of the 'colonial' with the

indigenous social and cultural environment. This interaction initiated a shift from the medieval economy to a cash-centred economy. Casual surveys reported the natural endowments of the province served as a catalyst and the treaty of 1826, which followed the extermination of the rulers of Burma, supplanted the sexagenarian dynasty of the Ahoms with the colonial apparatus of the British East Indian Company.

Colonial encounter not only transformed the economy but involved also a cultural metamorphosis. This was a direct outcome of the supplanting of colonial apparatus of administration, where the evolution of new land laws, trade and property relations fostered a major restructuring of the agrarian landscape. The forces of 'Westernization' and 'Modernization', which had so long eluded the province, unlike Calcutta, gradually set at work, altering the basic economic and social structure and fostering the emergence of a new class, the English educated Assamese intelligentsia.

Literary contributions to the *Samachar Darpan*, *Samachar Chandrika*, *Hindu Patriot* enabled discussions and disseminations of reformist ideals and found worthy counterpart in *Orunodoi*, *Jonaki*, *Bijulee*, *Banhi* and *Asam Bandhu*. Although a mouthpiece of the Baptist society, *Orunodoi* (New Dawn), released a new stream of ideas relating to important aspects of social life. It certainly succeeded in infusing a spirit of rationalism and social awareness into the Assamese intellectual world. There was no major social reform movement in the 19th century Assam and it was through the medium of the *Orunodoi* (1846) that an attempt to reform one of the prominent social evils of the society was initiated - '*kanikhowa*' (opium eating) and '*kanipankhowa*' (opium smoking). Through a number of articles on opium consumption and its aftermaths, the first one appeared in its inaugural issue, *Evils of Opium*, (January, 1846) followed by *The Death of*

an opium-eater (May, 1846), *Kani lukor Katha*, (June 1860), *Kani Erabor Katha* (June, 1861)³.

Acknowledgement of the evils of opium eating also echoed in the literary outpourings of the nineteenth century, which sought to combine entertainment and reform through satire and wit. Hemchandra Barua's *Kaniyar Kirtan* (1861) and Dutiram Hazarika's *Rasik Puran* (1877), belong to an innovative reform agenda, resorting to the use of satire, wit and humour. Though medieval Assamese literature is vast and rich, there are not many writings that can be ascribed to the genre of satire. Certain elements of social satire, however, may be noticed in the literary works of Sankardeva⁴ and medieval biographies of religious preachers and saints. For instance, the humorous depiction of the greedy priests in *Harishchandra-Upakhyaana* of Sankardeva is partly satire, aimed at the priestly caste of the time. Similar satirical comments or incidental satirical descriptions, though meagre, are noticed in *Guru-Charit Katha*, a voluminous work dealing with the important Vaishnavite preachers of the 16th and 17th centuries (Lal 1992, 3839). Satire as a distinct genre emerged in the 19th century under the influence of English satirical literature.

Both literary compositions are in the language of the masses and have embedded satire, wit and humour, so as to create awareness against the evils of opium consumption, prevalent in the Assamese society and which, as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan expressed in his Memorandum to A.J.M. Moffat Mills, who was deputed to investigate into the conditions of the province of Assam in 1853, "[...] has converted the Assamese, once a hardy, industrious and enterprising race, into an effeminate, weak, indolent and a degraded people" (Cf. Mills 1854)

Kaniyar Kirtan (1861) and *Rasik Puran* (1877), happen to be literary contemporaries, drawing their source of

³See notes in T. Misra. 1985. "Social Criticism in Nineteenth Century Assamese Writing, The Orunodoi." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20: 1558-1566.

⁴ Srimanta Sankardev (1449-1568) was a noted Bhakti saint and philosopher of Assam, the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam.

inspiration from a common issue - the opium question. Assam had already passed under colonial hegemony, and opium as an ‘inveterate evil’ had already been acknowledged. Mills, in his *Report on the Province of Assam* summarily agreed to what Anandaram Dhekial Phukan thought of and thus claimed that “[...] 3/4ths of the population are opium-eaters and men, women and children alike use the drug.”

It was in this context that both *Kaniyar Kirtan* and *Rasik Puran* came to play a decisive role in determining the trajectory of the reformist discourse. Drawing inspiration from the zeal of Raja Rammohun Roy and the revolutionary tenor of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Hemchandra Barua’s *Kaniyar Kirtan* (1861) reveals his detestation for redundant social customs and religious hypocrisy and a genuine concern for social reform. His reformist temper drew sustenance from his interactions with the intelligentsia of Bengal through the medium of *Orunodoi* as well as from the writings of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua. Their writings were relevant to the times and directed against social evils. The opium question in Assam figured prominently as an evil and curse which demanded an immediate redressal. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan submitted a Memorandum to Mr. Moffat Mills, arguing that

Opium has been universally the sole cause of undermining the health and physical condition of the whole population. It is used by the young as well as by the old. He urges upon the Government to provide speedy and effectual remedies to preserve the country from degradation.

Composed in the year 1861, *Kaniyar Kirtan* reflects the sensibility of a social crusader. It set for itself the avowed objective of ameliorating the sufferings consequent upon indulgence in opium, the pain of a society which bears witness to a continuous erosion of values due to its hypocrisy and superstitions. *Kaniyar Kirtan* is written in the form of dialogues, dominated by satirical elements. Each individual scene is divided into *darshan* (acts). Barua’s satire is ruthless, devoid of sympathy and is often set in contrast with the ‘jovial, with brilliant wit and inimitable twist of words and expressions’

of the satirical literary writings of his more illustrious successor, Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938).

Kaniyar Kirtan is a sensitive portrayal of a wealthy middle class family of Bhadreswar Barua a Mauzadar (revenue official) of Sonargaon Mauza (revenue division), whose only son, Kirtikanta, is addicted to opium. Despite repeated attempts of his entire family, he is unable to get rid of this noxious habit. His family gets entwined in a debt-trap, and is stripped of its mauza. His wife, Chandraprabha, who is introduced to the habit of opium by her husband, Kirti, dies and he (Kirti), is left in an emaciated state, awaiting death, in a hospital.

The narrator's comments are embodied in the narrative. It highlights the erosion of values, following the proliferation of the opium vice and its penetration in society. He directs his satire at Padmapani, a Mahapurushiya Gossain (the head of a Vaishnavite monastery), himself a *kaniya* (opium-eater; a word of reprobation) who, at the ordination of a disciple into his monastic order, administers him vows of abstinence from intoxicants, opium, liquor, tobacco etc. Padmapani speaks out to his disciples, "Intoxicants, our guru says, are a curse. Abhor opium, tobacco, and smoking. Even the medicinal use of such substances is a sin. Do not consume them even if you are so advised by the doctor. Since a person addicted to them understands and knows only *kane*. He falls into this noxious habit and is ruined..." (Act III, pp. 7-8) (my translation)

Barua mocks the hypocrisy of the upholders of religious sanctity and moral order, who themselves are slaves to the opium vice. "What low morals of even Saints and Mahantas (priests) to fall to this habit. People who are addicts belong to no religion, they are only worshippers of '*kane*'" (Act I, p2) (my translation)

In Kirtikanta's realization of the self-destruction through indulgence in opium, while awaiting his end in a hospital, is reflected Hemchandra Barua's remorse at the wretched condition of the opium eaters and the destruction it had wrought upon an entire generation of the Assamese people. In the lines below, one can detect the summing up of the essence of his literary concern with the opium question.

“Behold! Opium is a deadly poison, an opium-eater is a mental wreck, alas! alas! How pathetic, opium has ruined Assam.” (Act XXX, p35) (my translation)

Himself a staunch enthusiast of English learning, he strongly condemned the conservative opinion which held a strong aversion to the study of the English language. His character, (in *Kaniyar Kirtan*), Bhadreswar Barua, the Mauzadar of Sonargaon and a remnant of the fading Ahom nobility, refuses to allow his only son, Kirti, to undergo English education. In it one can find reflected Hemchandra Barua’s agony on his being denied the opportunity to undergo a formal training in English, due to the refusal of his orthodox guardians. This receptivity forms a significant characteristic of Hemchandra’s writings. His personal reminiscences and experiences are reflected through his literary compositions. Faint indications of his remorse at linguistic colonialism as well as the imposition of the colonial apparatus of administration (Mauzadari is a colonial construct), which paved the way for the transition to cash-centred colonial economy with innumerable hardships for the peasants, is apparent in his writing. *Kaniyar Kirtan* was much appreciated by the masses. The following words in the preface to the first edition (in Oct. 1861) testify to the wide appreciation: “This little pamphlet which was composed with the view of exposing the mischievous effects of opium eating, which had long been preying upon the very vitals of Assam, was first published in 1861 with the pecuniary aid of Babu Oostabananda Gossain, Deputy Inspector of Schools. The author then was far from entertaining a hope that it would meet with so good a reception from the public and was therefore agreeably surprised to find that all the copies of the first impression were readily disposed of, which if a warm acceptance of a book by the public at large, is any criterion of its merits, spoke favourably of the work.”

Kaniyar Kirtan was staged at Sibsagar and in various parts of the province. Acknowledgement of the existence of an evil led people to understand and appreciate the socially relevant message in the play. The Royal Opium Commission which visited India in 1894 was aware of the efforts of

Hemchandra Barua, and he was asked to appear before the Commission in Calcutta, which he was unable to do out of health reasons. However, he got his *Kaniyar Kirtan* translated into English with the help of Upendranath Barua, one of his ardent supporters, and sent it to H.J Wilson, a member of the commission (Saikia 2000, 218). Yet, his written statement to the Commission exposes the ambivalent attitude of the newly emerging intelligentsia, who were a product of Western thought and self-professed loyal collaborators of the Empire in its 'civilizing mission'. "The people of Assam are naturally disposed to use opium for non-medicinal purposes and are not, I believe, willing to bear any part of the cost of prohibitive measures, nor can they afford to do so" and "Sale of opium by the Government should not, I think, be prohibited for non-medicinal purposes. Such prohibition is not, in my opinion, practicable."

That the Assamese middle class at large remained loyal collaborators in this colonial enterprise provides an angle of thought to understanding why, though proclaimed an evil which needed immediate eradication, the colonial policy always stopped short of prohibition. Nevertheless, Hemchandra Barua was the "leading lights of the Assamese society" and with his death in 1896, "there was none to carry on the unfinished war against poppy."

Alongside the anti-opium rhetoric of the English educated Assamese intelligentsia, there can be placed the thought-world of the conservative sections of the community and their attitudes and reflections towards the issue of opium consumption. Dutiram 'Swarnakar' Hazarika's poetical composition, *Rasik Puran*, provides a very interesting account of the origins of the intoxicating drugs, their consumption along with their physical, social and psychological ramifications. It makes use of a popular format, the Vaishnavite model of poetry, with its lucid but racy style to present a convincing picture of the society of the time steeped up in indulgence and intoxication. What adds a special dimension is the attribution of divine origins and personification of the intoxicants and can be read with the advantage and understanding by "ordinary villagers whose literary equipment does not range beyond the

faculty of reading and writing.” The imageries and similes used by the author have been mainly taken from everyday life. The all-pervasive destruction wrought by the cultivation, manufacture and consumption of opium on the health, morality and psyche of the general populace and the need to restrain the further inroads of the drug by educating them became the urgent concern of a section of the community, who yielded the power of the pen to become active social reformists. Information is wanting on an accurate date for the composition. However, the reference in the concluding paragraph to the clever commercial policies of the company and the antagonism towards the colonial exploitation reveals the attitude of a section of people whose thoughts and ideas were averse to the penetration of ‘Western’ ideas. Instead, they could see in the policies of the Company imperialistic tendencies and commercial considerations, certainly not without reason.

Greedy merchants of the Company signed a treaty,
To amass all the wealth for themselves,
Saw how half the people of Assam are opium-eaters
They saw how people cultivated opium
Struck upon an idea to amass the huge profit from
opium for them
Dumped in cheap opium
Then banned its cultivation
And divided the land into mahals (folio xii) (my
translation)

Corroborating the information embodied in the verses above with contemporary colonial and vernacular records, the signing of a treaty probably refers to the *Treaty of Yandaboo* (1826 C.E.). A.J.M Moffat Mills, in his *Report on the Province of Assam*, recommended the suppression of private cultivation of poppy and introduction of *Akbaree* (Government or Treasury), opium for the consumption of the people and increasing the rates of revenue assessment on land. The Government’s declared objective was restricting the habit, though it was realized soon enough that the motive was commercial-profit maximizing.

Poppy cultivation was banned in 1861 and the *Mahal System*, referred to in the closing stanzas, was introduced in 1877. Under this system, the right to sell opium in a particular *mahal* (revenue division) in Assam proper, was given to the purchaser of the license. He was allowed exclusively to sell opium at a definite number of places within the *mahal*. This *Mahal System* did not work satisfactorily, as the authorities could not exercise sufficient control on the mahaldars, and the Government reverted to the system of licensing individual shops in 1884. This takes us to assigning a tentative date for the composition - in or around 1877 C.E. The manuscript of this book was obtained in May 1932 from the custody of Sonadhar Das of Senapati in Shillong. He had handed over the manuscript of *Rasik Puran*, to the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS), which he had obtained from Dutiram's eldest son, Kamalapati Hazarika (Cf. Bhuyan 1964, xii). Guwahati Das, a leading spokesman of the lower caste groups was the President of the *All Assam Depressed Classes Conference*, held in Shillong on the 6th of January, 1929 (Kshirsagara 1994, 384). In the wake of new political programme of separate electorates, proposed by the Simon Commission (1927), the Conference raised the demand for a separate electorate for the 'depressed' classes.

In *Rasik Puran*, it is attempted a short life sketch of *aphu-guti* (opium), *dhapaat* (tobacco), *bhanga* (Indian hemp), *datura* (jimson weed), an explanation of the wider social and cultural life of intoxicants, the mode of consumption, the percolation of intoxicants to the lower strata of the society, the method of cultivation, the commercialization of opium under the East India Company, while it attacks the shrewd commercial policies of the Company. Mythological origins of the intoxicants and the personification of opium, *bhanga* and *datura* as 'fallen women' are an attempt at weaning away people from falling into the clutches of *aphu* (poppy), *bhanga* (hemp), *dhaapat* (tobacco) - these intoxicants being personified as 'fallen woman' too. Attributing divine origins to the origin of intoxicants, it initially emphasizes the role of opium as a stimulant, an energizer and an aphrodisiac, which slowly

translates into addiction. On reaching this stage, one is entrapped and knows no escape.

How Arjuna relished the taste of opium,
Which took away all his fatigue and lethargy (folio vi)

Eaten if without knowledge of its nature
Will rob you of blood, flesh and unfold miseries (folio vii)

Is evil worse than poison
Takes away your breath and makes you await death
(folio vii) (my translation)

Aphu-guti (Opium) has been projected with all its virtues and vices, encoding various meanings. It could do the eater good of kinds, which transcend sustenance, and evil of kinds, which are worse than poison. It enhances and sometimes degrades the quality of life. It can change the eater for better or worse. It has spiritual and metaphysical, moral and transmutative effects. The verses edify how the downward percolation of opium, which was hitherto a luxury enjoyed by the Ahom nobility, had led to a “redefining of the social life of opium.” With the participation of the lower classes, opium smoking became a visible social problem. The corruption and moral degeneracy which is consequent upon indulgence has been emphasized. An opium sot resorts to thievery and ruins himself and his entire family once enslaved by this substance. He is much despised and ostracized. The fear of social ostracism, it was felt, would be effective in weaning people away from this habit. Didactic in tenor the historical information available in the composition affords a glimpse into the cosmos of knowledge and ideas, which an ‘accomplished gentleman’ possessed in those days.

As yet, there is absence of any information on a public performance of *Rasik Puran*. The manuscript and transcript are available at DHAS (Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati), and remains unpublished. As such, it is to speculation that we can resort to. Who were the supposed consumers of the composition? Was it ever meant for the masses, although it is highly moralizing in tone? Who was the

poet attempting to reform the classes, the masses or both? In his Introduction of *Asamar –Padya Buranji*, S.K. Bhuyan introduces Dutiram: “[Dutiram] was a disciple of the Satradhikar of Dihing and had cultivated the arts which were regarded in those days as indispensable equipments of an accomplished Bhakat. Dutiram was thoroughly read in the Assamese scriptures and the ecclesiastical history of the country; he cultivated music and participated in the bhawanas or enactments of Vaisnava dramas.”

It is highly probable that *Rasik Puran* must have been performed as a Bhawna (Vaishnava drama) in the Satra of Dihing (Dutiram was a disciple of Satradhikar of Dihing). Further engagement with sources might be revealing.

Concluding Remarks

In the nineteenth century, there was no clear cut distinction between reformist and entertaining writing, between oral and written tradition on one hand and modern writing on the other. The literature of the period is a product of the society, and the authors were witness of the times and agents of change. Set in a colonial milieu, both *Kaniyar Kirtan*(1861) and *Rasik Puran*(1877) documents the rhetoric against opium consumption in Assam, one facilitated by colonial interaction and the other emerging out of the disenchantment with it. The acknowledgement of the indulgence in intoxicants and the consequent degeneration form the dominant themes with the reformist agenda aimed at influencing the minds of the general populace. In this context, it is important to analyze the reactions of the masses, the majority of whom were believed to be opium-eaters.

Interestingly, Hemchandra Barua’s *Kanyiar Kirtan*, maintains a stoic silence on the *Phulaguri dhawa* (uprising)⁵ -

⁵ Around 106 kms east of Guwahati and 17 kms west of Nagaon, the riots of the small village of Phulaguri in Assam organised as is claimed, the first peasant revolt in Assam. It was less of an opium eaters revolt and more of an outburst against the interference in their traditional ways of life with the introduction of exorbitant taxes, cash economy which had taxed the limits of

an uprising of the peasants against the prohibition of the poppy cultivation, which coincided with his composition of the play. It needs to be mentioned that the uprising had been ruthlessly suppressed following the murder of Lt.Singer by the outraged peasants. The peasant's strong resentment against the prohibition of poppy cultivation, as is generally upheld, shattered the domestic economy of the areas where the per-capita consumption of opium was the highest (Baruah 1997, 500-501).

Why was it that Hemchandra Barua chooses not to mention about this (Phulaguri uprising) outrage of the peasants? Was it as Hiren Gohain argues that the British did not permit the unrestrained growth of the middle class in Assam and ruthlessly suppressed any movement or any person which disturbed the tenor of their colonial exploitation? To prove his point, he cites the meteoric rise and fall of Maniram Dewan (Cf. Gohain 1973, 11-26). Also, Hemchandra Barua was in the service of the colonial government and deliberately chose to tread a moderate path. In fact, Anandaram Phukan, although deeply impressed by the *Young Bengal Movement*, never approved of the revolutionary ideologies preached by Vidyasagar, and advised Gunabhiram to exercise restraint in expressing dissent. This ambivalence of the English educated Assamese intelligentsia stands in sharp contrast to Dutiram's verbal polemics in *Rasik Puran* at the colonial commercial policy. The tenor of *Rasik Puran*, though witty and jovial while describing the origins of the intoxicants, gradually drifts to being a severe diatribe aimed at the exploitative economic policies of the British East India Company's commercial policies. Nevertheless, *Kaniyar Kirtan* and *Rasik Puran* arise from a genuine concern for amelioration of the evils of opium-eating.

endurance and they rose in protest. The death of Lt.Singer was construed by the British as an unacceptable act of crime committed by a savage nation and they unleashed terror among the people of the village. Refer to H.K.Barpujari. 1992. *Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol.III. Guwahati.

Another important aspect not to be missed is that elements of wit, humour and satire were aimed at reforming through entertainment. In such an attempt, they present a kaleidoscopic view of the nineteenth century Assamese society, polity and economy. As a central interest, we have a narrative of the social evils, dominantly that of intoxication plaguing the contemporary Assamese society.

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