

## **Influence of *Ramayana* on Modern Assamese Poetry**

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### **Abstract**

The great Indian epic *Ramayana* was the origin source of the *great tradition* i.e. culture, not only of India but also of Nepal, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Thailand, Java, Cambodia and Indonesia. It is to be noted that the 'culture' may be described as the characteristics of a society. The 'characteristics' consist of every good work carried out by the human beings, i.e. language, literature, music, art, religion, cuisine and social habits. There are deep influences of *Ramayana* on Indian culture. Indian writers of different ages were influenced by the great epic. That was also seen in the writings of Assamese writers. Madhava Kandali, a famous Assamese poet of 14<sup>th</sup> century rendered the *Ramayana* to Assamese. That was not the beginning of the said influence on Assamese literature, as we have seen the influence on the Assamese oral literature also. The romantic and the modern poets had also great respect to Valmiki and to the *Ramayana*.

The influential Assamese literary magazine *Ramdheni* was republished in 1952 under the editorial leadership of Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and had set trends in Assamese literature. Poets of *Ramdheni* tried to combine the western literary styles with Indian ideals. They collected poetic elements from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and other *Puranas*. Thus, they were deeply influenced by the epics.

This paper aims to analysis the influences of the *Ramayana* on the poetry of *Ramdheni* age (1951-60) of Assamese literature. Discussions will be analytical and comparative.

**Key words:** *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Purana*, Assamese, Modern, Influence, *Ramdheni*, Indian, Poetic elements.

### **Introduction:**

The *Ramayana* is an epic with great poetic value. Its influences extend across centuries, countries and cultures. The poetic power of Valmiki has illuminated the lives of millions imparting lessons in various areas - personal, social and national values. It has set rules for war and peace. It has placed advices for daily life. The *Ramayana* has also set advices to follow during the times of crisis. It has advocated the importance of justice, virtue, love and sacrifice. It has also warned against greed and the evils of power. It is opined that the *Ramayana* is the *Aadi Kavya*, i.e. the

opening poetic writings, whereas Mahabharata is considered as the history. Scholars also opined that the Ramayana was written in 2000 B.C., and the time of composition of Mahabharata was first century. It may be noted that poet Valmiki sent some messages to the people through the story of Ramayana. Some Slokas (stanza) express love for people, nation and nature. Thus, it teaches us to love people, nation and the nature. For example -

Love for brother:

देशे देशे कलत्राणि देशे देशे च बांधवाः ।

तं तु देशं न पश्यामि यत्र भ्राता सहोदरः ॥<sup>i</sup>

(Deshe deshe kalatraani deshe deshe cha baandhavaah  
Tam tu deshah na pashyaami yatra bhraataa sahodarah.)

When Lakshmana became unconscious in the battlefield struck by the spear of Indrajit, then expressing deep sadness Rama said that one may have wives and relatives in every country but one cannot have a brother like Lakshmana in every place.

Love for mother & motherland:

अपि स्वर्णमयी लङ्का न मे लक्ष्मण रोचते

जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वर्गादपि गरीयसी !<sup>ii</sup>

Api Sarnamoyee Lanka Na me\ Lakshmana Rochate ।  
Janani Janmabhumihscha Swargadapi Gariyashi u

After their victory over Ravana, Lakshmana requested Rama to stay a few days in Lanka. Nevertheless, he could not stay for long. He remembered his family members and subjects in his motherland. Expressing his love for his motherland Ayodha, Rama said to Lakshmana that the golden Lanka could not satisfy him, because mother and the motherland were superior to the heaven.

The ancient holy books are very popular in the society. Therefore, poets collect symbols and imageries from the *Aadi Kavya* and other Epics. They use the characters like Rama, Sita, Ravana, Bivishana etc. as symbols to sketch on the characters of people in modern society. Even, T.S. Eliot also collected symbols from Indian ancient Purana. He used *Dammata*, *Dattam*, *Dayadham*, *Om Shanti* etc. Sanskrit words as symbols. Please go through the following lines:

These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymus mad again  
Datta Dayadhvam Damyata  
Shantih shantih shantih<sup>iii</sup>

Thus, we can state that Ramayana and other ancient Indian books spread influences on modern poets. Now let me specifically discuss the said influence on modern Assamese poetry.

### Analysis:

Assamese is an Indian language having almost 2 cores speakers, who are inhabitants mainly of the state of Assam. It has almost 1200 years old & rich literary history. The history of Assamese literature can be divided as follows:

1. Early age: 8<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Centaury
2. Ancient age: Stage I: 15<sup>th</sup> century to 1825 AD  
Stage II: 1826 to 1888 AD
3. Romantic age: 1889 to 1939 AD
4. Modern age: 1940 to present time

The modern age in Assamese poetry also begun after the World War II. Literary magazines *Jayanti* (1938-46)<sup>iv</sup>, *Pachowa* (1948-49)<sup>v</sup> and *Ramdhenu* (1950-63) were mainly responsible for that.

The poets of the *Ramdhenu* age<sup>vi</sup> (1950 –1963) of Assamese literature were greatly influenced by the Ramayana. The influence is very much pronounced in the poems of Navakanta Barua (1926-2002), Hem Barua (1915- 1977), Mahendra Bora (1929 – 1996), Nalinidhar Bhattacharya (1926- ) and others. They have illustrated the hopes and frustration of modern people with the help of symbols and images taking from the society. They have also picked up characters, symbols and images from the epics *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*.

The literary magazine *Jayanti* first introduced the passage of the trend of modernity in Assamese poetry in 1943. It should be stated that due to the disadvantaged situation created by the World War, publication of *Jayanti* was brought to an end in 1942. Then, a group of young writers re-published the magazine with a new ideology or identity, which was rightly called progressive ideology. Hem Barua was the leading poet of that period. He was a college teacher in English literature and a serious reader of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Thus, both Pound and Eliot influenced him. Hem Barua had also study on ancient Indian literature. He collected symbols & images from ancient books like Ramayana and Mahabharata. Please go through the stanza quoted bellow:

No fear. On our ploughed soil, there is the *Ashoka* jungle's  
 Detained Sita. (Golden Deer on front side, *Durba* grass in its mouth.)  
*Shakuntala*, the raw turmeric forms your body colour.  
 I will burnt myself to make ashes .....<sup>vii</sup>

Hem Barua sketched the decadent situation of the modern society, which was devastated by the World Wars. He noticed that the intensity of moral values is decreasing day by day. People are making fraud and nonsense in the name of religion. Acting on a role of a religious daughter in law, prostitutes are busy in reading Ramayana to cheat other people. The poet outlined this scenery nicely:

..... Reading of Ramayana by a prostitute and  
Tip of vermilion on her forehead.<sup>viii</sup>

It is to be noted that Navakanta Barua<sup>ix</sup> was the leader of the *Ramdhenu* group of poets. Like T. S. Eliot, Navakanta Barua became very sad when he saw the poor condition of the old Indian wealth and heritage.

*Ravana* is a long poem in a collection composed by Navakanta Barua. The poet took the character of *Ravana* from the *Ramayana*. *Ravana* was wise, forceful. However, he became the victim of his miserable fortune for which he was unable to do justice. *Ravana* has to do something, which are against his will. The modern rulers are also always doing something, which is not for the poor people of the society:

The news of mind in clouds of your eyes.  
The news of mind in breath of you.  
The news of mind on your  
Forehead cools as the moon.<sup>x</sup>

The poet took the famous character *Samrat* (Dhritarastra) from the ancient history i.e. from the *Mahabharata*. *Samrat* was the king of Indraprastha . The mental sufferings of the *Samrata* are the subject matter of the poem. On the other hand, 'Ravana' represents the leader of a modern society. The poet expressed the mental sufferings of a modern leader with the help of this poetic symbol *Ravana*. The poet saw the performances of the leaders of modern India. He also felt the mental sufferings of educated people of the society.

It is to be noted here that like T.S. Eliot, Navakanta looked into the decadent situation of the society. The poet described *Ravana* as a lover who belongs to that society, who wanted to die by expressing the love for his beloved:

I shall die just loving you,  
as your beauty fades  
my strength and heroism will wane  
Its impossible to make life immortal!  
Only by fulfilling life, our love will be history.

*Ravana* represents the unsuccessful lovers also. He could not control the new situation in the field of love. So he failed and at one point of time, he might be dead as an unsuccessful lover.

But this lover's death may be a lesson to other lovers, and thus it may become a history of unsuccessful love-story. The Poet Says :

The message of my death will be spread  
by the tradition for long,  
my unsuccessful love will see the example  
in the restless dreams of lovers for years.  
By the pride of our death  
life may be immortal.

On the other hand, with the help of the character *Ravana* of the *Ramayana*, the poet also described the life struggle of middle-class people of the society. There is no end in the hopes and aspiration of the middle class people in modern society. Sometimes they become materialistic, sometime imaginative, sometime emotional and sometime realistic. The middle class people of the society becomes restless. This restlessness is nicely drawn in the poems of Navakanta Barua. We can see these lines from *Ravana* :

I shall not be immortal -- since not fare of death  
I am a creator, whose creation's life has no stability,  
no home to be tired.  
I am a student of that time  
of early artist.

.....  
I am *Ravana* that graduate of time,  
my teacher is beyond quality holder  
the supreme time *Nataraj*.  
On spot of my dream twinkled sea of time  
waves of dances.

Modern people live with a dream; dream of peace and happiness. But this remains a 'dream' only. Because the time they faced was not on their side. There are always clashes between their 'dreams' and the reality. So, they became unhappy and disquiet.

Now, forest of *Ashoka*,  
The endless sorrow of mind will become  
nice with the help of poetry.  
There is no palace, no emperor here  
There is no world here, only I am here.  
I am here, you are here --  
and there is the truth the endless stream.

The poetic character drawn by Navakanta i.e. the *Ravana* is the representative of a modern educated, restless lover --

I am *Ravana* that graduate of time.  
I am *Ravana* that worshiper of love beyond love.  
I am *Ravana* that reader of poem beyond poetry.

I am *Ravana* that tired in the wave of the world.

Hem Barua has also illustrated the decadent situations of modern society with the help of symbols and images taken from ancient and modern history of the society. *Jatrar Sesh Nai* (The incomplete Journey) is a beautiful poem, which was published in *Ramdhenu* in 1955.

Sita is in the trench of our plough  
 The golden deer is also with us.

Mahendra Bora has described the present history of the society as ‘the Ramayana of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’. In his famous poem *Ghadhuli* (The Evening), the poet sketched out the nice scenery of an evening. The evening was joyful, as young girls had created attractive state of affairs by making clatter sounds with shoes on roads and smiling loudly. As if, they were standing for an undesired mixed formation of styles of eastern and western. Quoting Ramayana with Eve, Casanova, Isadora Duncan and Byron, the poet sketched irresponsible behaviour of new generation towards their culture.

The highway becomes joyful today by young girls’  
 Last resonance of smiles. An undesired mixture of  
 Clatter sound of young lady’s shoes  
 With smiles of an Eve.  
 Ramayana of the twentieth century,  
 Byron, Casanova, Isadora Duncan,  
 Adverse show.<sup>xi</sup>

Bora describes the present day sceneries with the help of poetic symbols and images. In the time of Ramayana, *Ratnakara* transformed himself to *Valmiki*. That means evil purified itself to good. However, in present time one cannot find a *Valmiki* in the society. That means, today evil cannot be purified to good.

Only once, in history *Ratnakara* altered himself to *Valmiki*  
 In searching of ashes of Valmiki today archaeologist becomes mad.<sup>xii</sup>

Nalinidhar Bhattacharya, one of the progressive poets of Assam also collected poetic elements from Ramayana. In the poem titled *Padatik* (the traveler), he sketched *Sita* as a symbol of new construction. Writers can construct the society by making change from evil to good with their writings. Bhattacharya makes this statement with the help of a nice poetic symbol *Sita* in his poem.

Tune of new creation. Don’t hear? On the pulled across soil in ploughing  
*Shanti Sita* rises. Write up is our sword. We proceed.<sup>xiii</sup>

## Conclusion:

We can conclude our discussion as follows:

1. There are influences of ancient books like Ramayana on modern Assamese poetry.
2. The modern Assamese poets are serious readers of ancient Indian literature like *Ramayana*. Therefore, they were influenced by the *Ramayana* and other books of ancient time.
3. Modern poets have collected poetic elements from the *Ramayana* to create symbols and images.
4. They use the characters like *Rama*, *Sita*, *Ravana*, *Bivishana* etc. as symbols to sketch on the characters of people in modern society.
5. *Ramayana* contributed a lot in development and enrichment of Modern Assamese Literature.

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## Notes & references:

- <sup>i</sup> The Ramayana, (*Lanka Kanda*)
- <sup>ii</sup> The Ramayana, (*Lanka Kanda*)
- <sup>iii</sup> What the Thunder Said/ The Waste Land
- <sup>iv</sup> Famous poet Raghunath Choudhary was the first editor, whereas, Kamal Narayan Dev & Chakreswar Bhattacharya were the most successful editors (joint) of Jayanti. They jointly edited the magazine from 1943 to 1946.
- <sup>v</sup> Edited by famous modern poet Hem Barua.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Ramdheni* was a famous Assamese literary magazine. It created literary history by introducing modernity in Assamese literature. This magazine was edited by four writers, namely Indrakamal Bezbarua (April – August, 1950), Maheswar Neog, (September 1950 – October 1951), Kirtinath Hazarika (November 1951 – March 1952), Birendranath Bhattacharya (April 1952— May 1963). However, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya was the successful editor as his editorial leadership became successful to form modern trends in Assamese literature.
- <sup>vii</sup> There is no end to a Journey, A translated (from Assamese to English) version of a stanza
- <sup>viii</sup> Translated (from Assamese to English) version of a stanza of the poem titled *Balichanda*.
- <sup>ix</sup> Navakanta Barua published eight collections of poems. These are —
  - (1) *Hey Aranya Hey Mahanagar* (O' woodland O' city) (1951)
  - (2) *Eti Duti Egharati Tara* (One, two, Eleven Stars), (1958).
  - (3) *Jati Aru Keitiman Sketch* (*Jati* and Some Sketches) (1960)
  - (4) *Samrata* (The Emperor), (1962)
  - (5) *Ravana*, (1963)
  - (6) *Mor Aru Prithivir* (Mine and World's), (1973).

(7) *Ratnakara*, (1986)

(8) *Dalangat Tamighara* (The tent on the Bridge), (2000)

<sup>x</sup> Translated (from Assamese to English) version of a stanza of *Ravana*

<sup>xi</sup> Translated version of a stanza of the poem titled *Ghadhuli* (The Evening),

<sup>xii</sup> Translated version of a stanza of the poem titled *1984*

<sup>xiii</sup> Translated version of a stanza of the poem titled *Padatik* (the traveler).