

**LABOUR CONSCIOUSNESS AND CLASS STRUGGLE  
IN COLONIAL ASSAM : SOME REFLECTIONS ON  
DR. BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYA'S  
NOVEL PRATIPAD**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The emergence of the Labour consciousness and the spirit of trade unionism can be considered an inevitable phenomenon of the modern industrial set-up. Importantly, such consciousness has been accelerated in different parts of the globe including India after the historic Bolshevik Revolution and the industrial hubs of then Assam were also not exceptional from this fact as various labour unrest, strike and movements have been registered across the region during the said era. The strike of Digboi Oil Refinery that occurred during the third decade of the previous century is one of the major developments in this regard which had not only paralyzed the colonial administration surrounding the refinery but also been able to draw international attention due to its magnitude and class solidarity. The novel Pratipad authored by Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, a versatile figure of Assamese literature is solely based on the said strike of Digboi*

*Oil Refinery. Here, the novelist has portrayed a vivid description of the lived experiences of the labourers of Digboi Oil Refinery ranging from class discrimination to class solidarity along with focusing on various socio-economic dynamics of the contemporary surrounding society. Hence, the present paper aims to shed some light on the scenario of society, politics and labourconsciousness of Digboi Oil Refinery and its surroundings in the light of the novel Pratipad.*

**Keywords:** Digboi Oil Refinery, Labour, Union, British.

### **Introduction :**

The name of Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya (1924-1997) occupies a special position in the greater realm of Assamese literature especially that of Post –War era. Recipient of the Jnanpith Award, the highest literary award in India, Bhattacharya also served as the president of the prestigious *Asam Sahitya Sabha* during the tenure of 1983-85. Bhattacharya has enriched Assamese literature through his various creations ranging from short stories to novels. *Mritunjay, Iyaruigam, Pratipad, Aai, Ranga, Megh and Nasta Chandra* are some examples of noted novels authored by Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya. It has been widely observed that most of his novels have socio-political orientations showcasing contemporary diverged social and political issues. Importantly, among his novels, *Pratipad's* novel is a widely read one based on the historic labour unrest of Digboi Oil Refinery that occurred in 1939 and its surrounding narratives.

In short, the present article is prepared with a view to unfolding the dynamics of labour consciousness and class struggle carried out by the labourers of Digboi Oil Refinery in the light of the said novel.

**Background of the Novel :** The said novel authored by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya is based on the strike initiated and carried out by the labourers recruited in Digboi Oil Refinery during the closing years of the third decade of the preceding century. It is a widely accepted fact that the sense of labour solidarity and labour consciousness emerged in India during the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the effects carried out by some philanthropic personalities like S.S. Bengali (Sharma, 1971, pp.151-152). Here, the fact must be mentioned that the historic labour strike of Digboi Refinery sparked in 1939 and the labour consciousness in colonial India got accelerated after the Bolshevik Revolution that intensified labour consciousness among the different corners of the globe and Indian subcontinent was also not exceptional this fact (Banerjee, .2005, p.4). For instance, the Madras Labour Union, the First Indian trade union in the modern sense came into being in 1918 just after the above-mentioned revolution (Sharma, 1971, p.78). Along the same line, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), being the first trade union with a national outlook appeared in the national landscape with Lala Lajpat Rai as its founding President accordingly in 1920 (Meena, 2007. P. 208). Importantly, the influence of such an environment had also been recorded in different parts of Assam as several events of labour unrest, agitation and strikes carried out by the labour class had been recorded in various pockets of the region including the Digboi Oil Refinery.

The novel depicts the distinct narratives of the contemporary socio-political fabric of the greater labour class of Digboi Oil Refinery along with shedding light on the political spectrum of contemporary India.

### **Reflection of Contemporary Society and Class Differences in *Pratipad* Novel**

The novelist has made a rigorous attempt to showcase the contemporary social and political fabric of the country in general and the surroundings of Digboi Oil Refinery in particular. The novelist, at the very outset of the novel, has vehemently opined that “No specific Hero or Heroine is there” The novelist has portrayed the day-to-day life, struggle and daily narratives vividly. Characters like

Dandi, Durga, Nayanmoni, Pannu and others portrayed the daily life, struggle and conflicts of the workers recruited in the said refinery. Hence, it would not be an exaggeration to say the said novel is the living saga of the society and politics of the contemporary era about the Digboi Oil Refinery.

It has already been mentioned that the historic labour unrest at Digboi Oil Refinery occurred in 1939. Hence, the novel has lucidly depicted the various conflicts and contradictions that occurred between the colonial refinery authority and the labourers belonging to various ethnic and linguistic groups. The novel vehemently depicts the vulnerable and pathetic conditions of the labourers recruited in Digboi Oil Refinery. The labourers were deprived of their basic rights of survival and there were no provisions for proper medical facilities for the workers. Further, no leaves were granted to labourers during their respective festivals even in case of death of the dear ones too. The novelist described “*Eid, Puja Nanakar Janma Tithi Buddhar Janma Tithi Kotu Sutinapa Manuhe.....Suti Bisarile Sahabe Koi, Emanbur robot kam khoti hole Company r xhoti hobo*” (Bhattacharya, 1987, p.11). (Meaning- No provision for a holiday for labourers on account of their respective festivals ... Authority says, while requesting for leave, leave for lots of such festivals will result in loss of company” The labourers were even devoid of hygienic and humane settlements. Houses with only two rooms were provided to the married labourers along with ordinary and unhygienic toilets that spoiled the surrounding environment of the entire settlements, especially during summer. Such pathetic living facilities, as illustrated by the novelist, compel the labourers to stay away from their families. For instance, Chandi, a central figure of the novel, opted for night duty and go for listening religious preaching of Swamiji of Ramkrishna Mission in case of no night duty. Such a pathetic depiction of the labourers is nothing but the implication of what Karl Marx termed as alienation. According to Marx, alienation is the distortions of human nature that are caused by the domination of the worker by the “alien will” of the capitalists (Ritzer, 2018, p.55).

On the other hand, the novelist also penned down the privileges and various perks enjoyed by the British of the same company. The novel describes a lavish

way of life led by the British along with narrating the fragile and worst living scenario of the labourers. Further, there was a clear distinction between the labourers and their colonial masters in case of availing of medical facilities. The British were entitled to get medical care and facilities for minor ailments where as the authority was reluctant to extend medical care to the labourers even in case of medical emergencies and life-threatening conditions. For instance, the physician of the company was busy treating *Sahab* (British master) even the wife of Chandi, an ordinary labourer recruited in the company, was in critical condition and her demise was so imminent. Chandi, out of great resentment and grief, says to one of his colleagues that his wife is not a Ma'am Sahab, so the physician has no time for her !!! (Bhattacharya, 1987, p.11).

Hence, the novel portrays the class differences among the labourers and their colonial masters of the Digboi Oil Refinery in a lifelike manner.

### **The Gender Issues**

The novelist hasn't confined the narratives of the novel skipping the gender issues. In contrast, adequate attention has been paid to unveiling the dark scenario of the refinery wherein the female sections of the labourers were exploited and molested in various forms by the colonial authority of the company. The novel vehemently depicted the vicious scenario of the British of the company with extreme misogynistic orientation who did not have any sort of reluctance to indulge in adultery. The daughters of the labourers had often to hand over their virginity to the lustful British. Even the contemporary rigid society also had reservations towards such victims and treated them as inauspicious ones. Jaibunnicha, in the novel, represents such a woman whose mother was also a victim of the lust of the British *sahab*. Jaibunnicha's widow's mother was sexually abused by one *sahib* and Jaibunnicha was born accordingly. After attaining her puberty had to fulfill the perverted lust of the *Jilapchisahab*. She acted as an ordinary worker during the time and had to indulge in sexual copulation with *Sahabat* night !!!

However, the novel also narrates the emergence of gender sensitization among the workers, especially the feminine ones. For instance, the characters like Lachmi, Pannu and others represent the pragmatic females of the same society. Pannu, as described in the novel, has vehemently opposed the proposal of marrying Ramu, a man the age of her father. Despite being born into an ordinary family, Pannu opted to become self-reliant through the means of education. Similarly, Nayanmoni, another revolutionary female character in the novel chooses her life partner on her own tackling all the constraints posed by her parents and society. She also went for education and learning music even after her wedding. Further, Lachmi is another revolutionary character who exhibited her calibre by opposing and spoiling the nefarious intention of Birbhadra, the contractor who wanted to molest her physically. She also set examples of pointing out the drawbacks of contemporary society especially that of the male ones. Nevertheless, the novel while presenting the fragile gender dynamics of contemporary society also showed the seed of gender sensitization through the above-mentioned pragmatic and revolutionary characters.

***Pratipad: Emergence of new light***

As per the Vedic lunar calendar, the term *pratipad* denotes the first day after the amavasya (the dark moon) that leads towards the full moon. Hence, it represents the initiation of the journey from darkness to light, from solitude to solidarity, from age-old domination to liberation.

It has been widely perceived fact that modern industrial set-up and intensification of labour solidarity cum trade unionism are both sides of the same coin. The Digboi Oil Refinery also witnessed such spirit of labour sensitization which resulted in historic labour unrest listed with a golden script in the greater saga of the labour movement of colonial India.

The introduction of modern machinery is widely considered detrimental to the utilization of human labour as the former ones are equipped with producing

more outputs compared to manual or human labourers. The company authority's planning to install new machines sparked widespread controversy in and out of the refinery. Such news eventually resulted in massive resentment of the labourers. The novel also depicts the initial phase of uniting the labourers and the creation of a trade union of the labourers.

The novel also deals with the political dynamics of a contemporary era when the leadership of the Indian National Congress tried to make inroads towards the realm of labourers of Assam. For instance, the refinery met with an accident claiming the lives of four labourers. However, the authority concerned was busy with a Christmas party during the accident and didn't take any measures to provide compensation to the bereaved family members of the labourers who succumbed to the accident. On the other hand, Janardan Goswami, local congress leader informed the provincial congress governments headed by Gopinath Bordoloi regarding the fatal accident and complained to the government about the negligence shown by the company authority towards the labourers who lost their lives due to the accident. Importantly, the company authority responded to the query of government towards the accident just as "Minor cases of accidents, some unavoidable deaths, due to medical attendance given" (Bhattacharya, 1987, p. 108). Apart from this, the novel also depicts the scenario of the historic visit made by Pt Jawahar Lal Nehru to Assam and its far-reaching impact on the political spectrum of then Assam. This visit of Nehru intensified the sense of unionism among the working-class population of then Assam (Guha, Amalendu, 2004. pp. 16-7.)

The novel also depicted the developments of World War II and, the acceptability of Gandhian ideas not only among the common masses but among some Britshers too. Further, the author has given a vivid description of organizing the labourers under the banner of a union and articulating their twelve-point demands. Further, the novel also incorporated the tactics of company authority to make the attempts to unionize the labourers futile. The labourers who actively participated in the activity of labour union were laid off and the attempts had been made to create

communal sensation among the workers so that the unity and solidarity of the labourers can be weakened on religious lines. Further, the novelist sheds adequate light on the acceleration of the organization of the union and their organized activities ranging from approaching the Labour Commission to mitigate their respective demands to paralyzing the entire refinery and the town. The novel ends with a scenario indicating the imminent fall down of the British empire and the emergence of a new light, a new ray and indeed *Pratipad!!!*

Thus the novel acted as an anecdote of the transition of class differences to class solidarity. Different characters from different backgrounds and different personalities have made the novel enriched enough to unveil the scenario of the historic labour unrest of Digboi Oil Refinery which occupied a distinct position in the greater history of the labour movement in India.

### **Conclusions :**

Concluding the present discourse, it would be remarked that the novel *Pratipad* authored by Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya reflects the socio-political dynamics of the labourers working at the Digboi Oil Refinery. The novelist has been able to shed adequate light on various socio-political aspects of the said era including the catastrophe of World War II, acceleration of anti-colonial struggle and many others. In short, the novel *Pratipad* can widely be considered a living document portraying the historic labour unrest of Digboi Oil Refinery and its surrounding unsung stories in a fictional yet lucid manner.



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