Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

This research project is planned to study critically *Birinchi Kumar Barua and his ideas on society, culture and history in the context of colonial modernity in India*. At the very beginning of this introductory chapter what comes to my mind is an editorial comment published in two leading print media immediately after B. K. Barua’s sudden death, one by Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya in *Sadiniya Navajug* (April 1, 1964) and the other by Lakshminath Phukan in *The Assam Tribune* (March 31, 1964) regretting that he remained almost unrecognized despite lifelong dedication to works both academic and organizational. Bhattacharya wrote, “He did not see any evaluation of his literary and other contributions during his lifetime. This has often been the plight of the writers and artists in Assamese literature and culture” (translated from Assamese). Phukan also wrote, “Death has come too soon for Dr. Barua who did not have the time to fulfill many of his missions. Assam has not honoured this great man the way he deserved”. Birinchi Kumar Barua (November, 1908 – March, 1964) had spent his most fruitful periods of life in contact with the emerging Indian Intelligentsia (the obituaries in the *commemoration volume*, 1966 by renowned scholars may be a point of reference) and the reputed academia across the country and abroad, particularly the ones in Calcutta. Obviously, no creative and critical mind could remain aloof from the intellectual temperament of colonial modernity in the first half of the twentieth century.
Most of the educated Indian people had got new orientation to shape their mind and thought. Eric Habsbawm has pointed out that the basic foundation of a society and other institutions run by a progressive elite minority, tolerated by the majority so long as peace and stability were guaranteed had to face a challenge from ‘the combined triple blow of the twentieth-century revolution in science and technology’. The first was to transform ‘old ways of earning a living’ followed by creation of a mass consumer society; and thirdly, the ‘decisive entry of the masses on the political scene as customers as well as voters’ (Preface, 2013: xiii). Habsbawm’s findings of the three basic features of the twentieth century when applied to Indian context bear additional importance. Relatively lower attention paid to agriculture and wellbeing of the peasantry created confusion and then a shift to alternative modes of occupation. For the vast majority of the agrarian-community, the shift was rather crucial; because without training and the required skill they were bound to be exploited as bonded labor. Thus, the colonial modernity in Indian context followed a hidden agenda to render the agricultural community helpless and to create a consumer society being dependent on a system controlled by the colonizers. Lack of educational institutions in the rural areas was subservient to the new regime.

Birinchi Kumar Barua (hereafter B. K. Barua) is found to be sensitive to this process of rural degeneration and through his creative writings he deals with the crisis faced by the social subalterns and his critical writings too cover a substantial area of culture and language – both being the creations of the peoples’ long-time community life. The Assamese rural society as it is portrayed had got the little motivation from the ‘progressive elite minority’ and the legacy of a protracted feudal regime could still be seen in their behavior and manners both in terms of arrogance of the rich and submissive prostration of the poor. Nowhere the writer is found to be indulgent in his attitude towards tradition and modernity. The relative weakness and strength of them do really epitomize the underlying tragic poignancy, the lingering impression of waste in the midst of enormous human potentiality. A major focus of the creative world
view lies here in situating peripheral realities of the social subaltern. The same concern may be equally discernible in his other works of critical enquiry. We may find it really interesting to explore B. K. Barua’s concept of a mosaic Assamese identity and perhaps the fact that Assam and other participatory racial components have something unique and significant to contribute to the formation of an Indian identity.

The makers of India, a phrase used by the historian Ramchandra Guha, had widely divergent views right from Rammohan Roy, M. K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore to Jotirao Phule and Syed Ahmad Khan. Interestingly Guha picks up Jotirao Phule who wrote in Marathi while dropping quite influential and brilliant personalities like S. Radhakrishnan. In one of his writings Phule held the government responsible for supporting a rule of racial discrimination. Caste apartheid as he argued has caused much injustice to the farmers of Sudra community. Phole’s debate bears significance in other areas though the caste discrimination is not that serious in the Assamese society due to cultural exchange between the Aryan and non-Aryan racial segments since long (a proposition very clearly reached by B. K. Barua). Jotirao Phule points out that “the shudra and atishudra (untouchable) farmer is slaving on his (owner) farms, along with women and children, day and night, until he is exhausted, and paying the various taxes, funds, etc. ,but our charitable government does not even think of educating the farmers’ children enough to enable them to read a book on farming or relevant notices in newspapers, and while lakhs of farmers do not have enough cloth and enough food, our government spends inordinate amounts of money on the salaries and pensions of people in the army, the police, the justice department who are employed to protect and ensure the farmer’s happiness and security” (Guha, Ramchandra (edit), 2010: 97).

The makers of modern India including those that produced good and relevant intellectual debates in regional literature tried to situate colonial modernity in Indian context. Hiren Gohain is of the view that despite many
constraints of colonial economy the middle class Assamese writers could dedicate themselves to the selfless service of the nation. Along with a few tea planters and govt. officials, the major inspiration came from the lower middleclass. Literary practices were in real sense a service to the nation. It is also significant in this context that Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Padmanath Gohainbaruaah and many others inspired the young generation to form association to promote socio-political consciousness among the people and also to work for social welfare (Racanavali Vol. 2, 1914: 679-685).

Moreover, there is scope to investigate whether B K Barua identifies Assam as a land culturally shaped in the process of diffusion or one that reshapes the diffused materials of thought and faith with the tincture of indigenous practices. The latter seems to be more perceptible in our own situation. Besides his standard academic activities, he published against many constraints a monthly children magazine named *Ronghar* and the editorials contain B K Barua’s serious concern for the emerging socio-political situation at that time and sufferings of the peasants.

B. K. Barua had got opportunity to serve in some of the leading institutions like Calcutta University, Cotton College, Gauhati University in different capacity and finally in Indiana University, U.S.A. as a visiting faculty. Besides, he had been there in London University for two years to complete his research programme on the Cultural history of Assam (early part) and on his way back home he visited some of the leading centres of folklore research in the Scandinavian countries, particularly the Swedish folklore Archive at Uppsala University (details in Appendix 1). The mid century International Folklore Conference at Indiana University was held from July 21 to August 4, 1950 and *Four Symposia on Folklore*, a book on the proceedings of the conference, was edited by Stith Thompson. In this book published by the Indiana University, Ake Campbell has mentioned about a man from Assam and his interest in studying the methodology of folklore studies in Scandinavian countries. Dr. Birendranath Datta has found out this significant information and
‘a student from Gauhati, Assam’ is identified as no other than B. K. Barua himself. Campbell’s comment, according to Birendranath Datta, reveals some clues as to why B. K. Barua had visited the Scandinavian countries – the academic rationale behind the visit. Ake Campbell was the professor of folklore in the University of Uppsala, Sweden. Prof. Datta has quoted the relevant portion of his comment thus –

Several years ago a student from Assam wrote from London that he had just finished his doctor’s thesis and would like to come to Uppsala to study at our archives. When he came, the first thing I did was to ask him, “Why have you come here? You have taken your doctor’s degree at a very famous University in England and now what more do you think you could get from us? Here in Uppsala, of course, we do not have anything about Assam, and I think you could learn a great deal more about that in Oxford or Cambridge or London.” “Well” he said, “you see, in England they treat anthropology as having to do with primitive people, people without any history, and quite often they refer to them as wild people, just as if they were speaking of wild animals. Well, I think that India is not so very primitive and not so entirely without a history, since its history goes far back of the history of Europe. I think the anthropologists in England and in Europe, and the American anthropologists too for that matter should remember that there is no use speaking about people in India as being primitive people. They have now come to a new era.” This was just when India got its freedom, you see. “Now it seems to me that India, Indonesia and other nationalities of that kind, even some of the African Negro States, will eventually want to take up the study of their own history, a history of their own culture, on a broad basis. They would like to know how certain people such as the Europeans have taken up the same kind of study of their own culture. You in Sweden are looking upon your folk culture as a subject you can deal with.”
…… Now the man from Assam had a second reason. He wanted to introduce into Assam the study of the very many cultures that are already in Assam, and he wanted to establish archives there. He wanted these archives to cover not only the material culture but also the oral tradition and what some people call folklore. He continued, “In England I did my doctor’s thesis in Anthropology, but if I went to the folklorists in England – well it seems as if the anthropologists and folklorists had no contact with one another” (quoted in Garioshi Vol. XVI, No. 2, Nov, 2008).

We should bear in mind that Folklore studies in these places were not entwined around any hidden colonial agenda. Instead, it was a part of the growing interest in the study of human sciences. B. K. Barua’s conversation with Ake Campbell dispels all doubts about his colonial link in folklore studies and on the contrary establishes the fact that B. K. Barua had serious reservation against the colonial anthropological bias of folklore studies. During his research period in the University of London B. K. Barua must have been concerned about the importance of folk culture in cultural historiography and accordingly contacted the faculty of folklore department in Uppsala University for having some fresh insight into its research and preservation. Secondly, the old civilizations like India need to revamp their own historical research in the manner that some European countries have already done; for, without authentic historical orientation these countries shall always remain ‘very primitive’ and ‘entirely without a history’ in the eyes of the Europeans. Thirdly, decolonization after attainment of independence should follow an intellectual package of academic exercises that can reorient the land and people with a zeal for self discovery. To begin with such clichés to introduce B. K. Barua in the milieu of colonial modernity is not far to seek.

We can certainly presume that his involvement and association with so many different academic projects throughout his brief career dedicated to a study of the past history and culture of Assam, reflect on the growing
consciousness borne out of colonial modernity. Western modernity came to India as an integral part of the British colonial design. Though the basic tenets of modernity remains the same, its application in a non-western social space with the politics of dominance and rule points to an ideological character, a phenomenon of a discursive nature. The most obvious initial impact was a resistance built up around the view that western modernity would rob the people of their own identity, indigenous worldview and the long cherished spiritual tradition. The situation was really ambivalent. The nationalist ideology revolved around the western knowledge, rational approach, civil society, democracy, emancipation of women, franchise, secular education and a liberal, humane endeavour for realization of the material wellbeing; but it opposed at the same time the colonial design of dominance and exploitation. What appears from such paradoxes is that the enlightenment-induced supremacy of knowledge pushing the frontiers of human achievement to still further zone has adaptability to the different ideologically polarized thought. Though some of modernity’s contesting ideas came to be greatly challenged and arrogance of rationality began to blacken the face of humanity, it nevertheless offered a great moment for resurgence of a nation with necessary realignment and revaluation. The Indians who felt an earnest zeal to reform the old ways of belief and notions about life and society found our traditional society full of evils and ‘privileges based on birth, social hierarchies’ and economic constraints. They accepted western package of colonial modernity e.g. liberal education and rational worldview (Basu, Pradip (edit), 2011: 6-7).

Now, what is precisely B. K. Barua’s response? He was neither a revivalist with apprehension towards the new ideological shift, nor a hardcore reformist favouring recovery of a society from the mire of old and stale worldview. Instead of joining hands with the political activists and their clamour for liberty and freedom, his mission, as may be presumed, was to reinterpret the past of an otherwise stagnant society in the light of the modernist epistemological tools, to find out the lingual, cultural and historical
roots to which a growing nation owes its origin. This then may be projected as the starting hypothesis of the research project.

B. K. Barua and his creative and critical worldview still remains a virgin soil. It is yet to be fully explored to its real merit which may be a significant addition to understand the complex evolutionary process of an Assamese identity. Even a cursory glance at his area of interest (Appendix 1 & 2) encompassing history, culture, folk culture, language, literature and medieval society may provoke an intellectual enquiry. Hypothetically speaking, B. K. Barua is an accomplished creative writer and chronicles with artistry a typical Assamese society at a very difficult transitional period. He is remembered, above all, as an authority on the socio-cultural history of the province and its subtle links to the ancient Indian tradition and cultural heritage including Pali-Prakrit language and the Buddhist literature. His critical works on the little and great traditions i.e. folk culture and cultural historiography depending mostly on inscriptive, epigraphic materials and the authoritative Sanskrit texts, appear to have a penetrating insight into peripheral realities, the worldview created by the people at the margin, and is enthused to see a rare fusion of materials both classical and folk. This harmonious blend of the creative and critical powers in him perhaps made him freely move in the domain of the elite and the folk as well. Nagen Saikia in this respect makes an interesting comment when he writes, “At the news of Barua’s death, I wrote a letter named ‘Birinchi Bhavan’ to the Asam Bani. I felt the need of establishing a memorial centre in the name of this man in whom there is a harmonious blend of scholarship and creativity. I thought there was only one man in Assam capable of writing a comprehensive history of the Assamese people and he was Birinchi Kumar Barua. In later periods, this idea was all the more confirmed when I had gone through the book Bangalir Itihas by Niharranjan Roy” (Prakash, Feb., 2015: 12, translated).

Folklore studies among its other great objectives gives recognition to the potentiality and creativity of the folk, the bottom layer of the human society
(the idea of the bottom layer in reference to *the subaltern* is dealt with by Spivak in *During edit.*, 2010). In the Scandinavian countries, folklore research had got reoriented with a sociological vision and at Uppsala there began a process of archiving the folklore materials for preservation. Its study was not to focus on the neglected ‘Other’ to promote the colonial machinery of exploitation; but perhaps to create an empirical field of folkloristics (Bhattacharya, Kishor, 2003: *Viswakos*, Vol. 5). Birendranath Datta has made the point clear elsewhere that B. K. Barua was not satisfied with the colonial anthropological approach of British folklore studies (*Katha Barenya*, 2006, *Garioshi*, 2008). B K Barua had visited the folklore archive at Uppsala University during his Scandinavian tour and came back with some concrete plans and ideas to introduce in Assam an internationally acclaimed branch of epistemology i.e. folklore research. He implemented various programs of research with a group of young talented research-scholars in this field. Dr. Prafulla Dutt Goswami was the pioneer of the group who had successfully conducted folklore research i.e. the ballads of Assam under Barua’s supervision.

An Assamese scholar conceptualized in his indigenous way the European critical theory and epistemological tools to review the vast domain of our cultural tradition, the folk-heritage with its lineage to the present form of our socio-linguistic and cultural identity was really fascinating. It is, broadly speaking, the *Bkbian folkloristics* or the accepted manner of folklore studies introduced in Assam that facilitated an enquiry into the morphology of an Assamese identity. What is precisely meant by an Assamese mind and for that matter an Indian mind? What are the diverse materials and their sources that go to the making of his/her physical shape and inner, emotional make-up? Who are the people that may be identified as his/her remote and immediate ancestors? Cross fertilization of issues and an interest in discovering the evolutionary logic began to play a role while preparing for massive nationalist agenda. Both western modernity and its politico-economic avatar of colonialism sensitized at the same time bottom-up resurgence – importance of
the micro focus in nation building. There is perhaps no doubt about the fact that scientific study of folklore can answer most of these questions. So this is one dimension of using the intellectual package of modernity in the field of socio-cultural and historical studies.

Colonial modernity entails many epistemological packages subsequent to the age of enlightenment. It is ‘coterminous’ with the civilizing mission of European imperialism in terms of rationality, liberal education, scientific enquiry, urban values causing rapid dislocation of traditional social order and folklife. Thus, Indian society in the early decades of twentieth century was in fact a virgin soil for introducing modernity. Its colonial lineage, exploitation of resources both human and natural posits a serious moral question. Along with this, modern health care facilities, rule of law and transportation facilitated further mobility across physical and cultural spaces (Ashcroft, Bill et al, 1998). Exploitation, overt and covert, affected all the people but the benefits and facilities did not percolate down to the masses. If the front door was opened obliquely to the intellectual resurgence abroad our back doors remained wide open to the colonizers for rampant exploitation of resources. It was obviously a paradoxical and extremely complicated situation.

The Assamese intelligentsia while accepting this western epistemological tool devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the study and research of our society, culture, language and socio-economic dynamics. Some of them like Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Banikanta Kakati, Birinchikumar Barua, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla had been engaged in diverse activities aimed at scientific enquiry and research, resurgence of political ideology etc. There is no doubt that western epistemological tools were used to promote scholarship and also to resist colonial regime (Gohain, 2013, 2014). Resistance is not a matter of mere political confrontation or rejecting modernity as ‘theirs’ not ‘ours’ sort of posture. It is basically an outlook, an ingenious way of looking at things and a liberal intellectuality that should be fashioned in
the image of everyone on earth. Precisely speaking, it is more a part of human heritage than an epistemological specialty and intellectual privilege of Europe.

Native scholars of the colonized land acquired the intellectual apparatus and liberal, secular democratic worldview from the west and valorized their search for the preservable assets of their tradition and identified at the same time the despicable and disposable feculence. Bezbaroa’s satire, as for example, is the product of a modern worldview – as it were, the farmer’s spade used to remove dirt and weed from the cornfield. B. K. Barua’s fictional narrative engages a sustained pull between modernity and tradition. The contesting ground of both tradition and modernity has been focused to drive home the point that the former is not a matter of worship nor anything sacred; the best in tradition is to be cultivated and the worst of it is to be left out as something naïve and uncritical. Modernity, on the other hand, is destined to be hollow, devoid of any commitment whatsoever, if its intellectual subtleties have run up into sheer consumerism and a cult of privilegisation of the few. This is what B. K. Barua’s creative world of fictional prose has left for us as its final impression. Accordingly, his critical investigation too does not centre on the metanarratives of the classical tradition. The folk and classical interpenetration has been the major focus and thereby points to the importance of peripheral importance. My attempt here will be to show this and other points about a society seen from below and caught in the contrary pull of tradition and modernity.

B. K. Barua had his upbringing, academic training and beginning of professional career in the colonial milieu; and didn’t live long to see India’s post-colonial destiny. Less than one and half decades of the post-independence period proved excruciatingly painful. As pointed out by some critics, motifs of death and extreme form of human sufferings of his fictional characters constitute an allegory of a nation’s autobiography, the author’s own perception of treacherous deal and degeneration of human values. Ironical enough, B K Barua, one of the great founders of Gauhati University was victimized in the
politics of power and compelled to leave the University campus bearing the charge of corruption and so on (Bora, Edit, 2005; Bora, 2013). What P. D. Goswami terms as ‘an over dose of democracy’ frustrated all noble efforts and sincere dedication behind the establishment of the highest institution of post-graduate education (for detail information, Phali Lowa Buranji, by Dileep Kumar Dutt may be consulted). If a university, a centre of learned community, cannot integrate great thought with noble action, it bears heavily on the psyche of the nation. As B. K. Barua’s birth, upbringing, education and occupation of an academician suggest his excellence in the changing milieu of colonial/postcolonial dynamics, his career of a scholar-literateur has been rich in humanist concern, imaginative energy, and scholarship in medieval Assamese literature, literary and cultural historiography. Broad and diverse as it appears to be, a critical study of his work and thought may be quite illuminating and may enable us at the present situation to seek answers to some of our disturbing questions.

A Synoptic Outline of the Research Project, and Literature Review:

B. K. Barua is yet to be introduced in the full length of his merits. Certain vital aspects of his research into the field of socio-cultural historiography, some root-searching initiatives which were subsequently developed into major projects by his talented student-scholars, his creative use and theoretical analysis of the Assamese language are a few of them. His novels and short stories too reveal those powerful aspects of serious sociological concerns. The multifaceted dimensions of a colonial society confronting the challenges of a new capitalist economy, polity and the rise of a powerful middleclass mentality have been focused at the centre. What we try to project without cliché is that B K Barua’s creative writings situate a social logic – the gradual entry of a capitalist economy acts like a double-edged sword. It strengthens the landed gentry and creates an educated middleclass most of them being selfish and non-committal on the one hand, and dislocation of the peasant society without any alternative mode of livelihood on the other.
In such typical circumstances, the narratives articulate the peripheral realities of the social subaltern to focus on the privileged center. The village ecology in terms of both nature and manners gradually degenerate and is terribly inflicted by the growing tension and the mounting misery of the common people. But social ecology has for years together sustained the major portion of the culture we inherit today. In a broad sense of the term, social ecology, it has been the foundation of the central human values too; for values are the products of a community life. No culture is produced in isolation. The folk in a multicultural ethos apply their imaginative and highly creative mind to the works they produce. Weaving is both a means of earning and an art that the young girl must learn before marriage. They procure their needs of life by dint of their labour. The _Ahat_ and the _Jari_ trees are found in abundance in the village site which provide food and shelter to the birds. Inculcation of values, felicity of expression, creation of art and craft all these keep the village life self sufficient. B. K. Barua finds in this what Mazharul Islam calls ‘the pulse of the people’ (Islam, 1985). Spread of education has little impact upon the general wellbeing of the people. On the contrary, it leads to the formation of new social units with the least concern for social and moral values. On the threshold of a nation in the making such complexities bear a disturbing prophecy and as a social chronicler B. K. Barua peeps deep into the collective consciousness.

Critics seldom refer to or make just a casual comment on the folk-paradigm so centrally connected even in a total evaluation of his career. The folk is not just his passion for retrieving and preserving certain relics of the past; our oral tradition. We will try to analyse in some details how the entire social history can be arranged from his initiatives in folkloristics. At least, the recent ideas on social history revamping a bottom-up tendency to resist the top-down predilections prepare folklore to play a vital role. When we allow folklore to emerge in the discourse, questions of subalternity and importance of peripheral realities in nationalist perspective of historiography stands out clearly. A pioneer cultural historiographer happened to be the first scientific investigator of folk culture and declared unequivocally that the cultural history
of a nation cannot be compiled correctly depending on data gleaned from copper inscriptions and other epigraphic sources. Folklore studies could be an indispensable corollary for reliable and impartial historiography.

B. K. Barua’s great work *Asamar Loka Samskriti* (Folk Culture of Assam) and some of the basic tenets of his *A Cultural History of Assam* deserves further studies in this regard. All his works taken together can perhaps be viewed as an expanded metaphor of a soul in its making, a self undergoing a complex process of historical evolution. Eric J Evans, the Emeritus Professor of modern history in Lancaster University, wrote in an introductory essay on social history that “the primary fields of enquiry were social groups which lacked both wealth and power. Social history was widely considered to have a ‘bottom-up’ approach, offering a welcome and necessary corrective to a dominant ‘top-down’ historiography overwhelmingly concerned with the doings of emperors and elites” (The Institute of historical Research (c)2008, http://www.sas.ac.uk). Folklore materials if scientifically studied may provide the valued information of the nature of social labour and behaviour of the social groups.

Some of the available critiques on B. K. Barua’s ideas on society culture and history can serve as a starting point to arrive at some conclusive findings. Besides the two path-breaking analyses on his creative literature by Hiren Gohain (now compiled in the *Racanavali* -vol. 1), and Bhaben Barua (1966, another article reprinted in Bora, 2008), some other critical reviews by Gobindra Prasad Sarma (2002), Probhat Bora on *A Cultural History of Assam* (Viswakosh Vol. 6) and the novels (2013), Lalit Kumar Bora’s introduction to his English rendering of *Jivanar Batat* (2013), Krishna Kumar Misra’s research work – *a comparative study of the novels of Birinchi Kumar Barua and Prafulla Dutt Goswami* are important and illuminating. Synchronizing the birth centenary of B. K. Barua *Gariyashi*, the monthly Magazine brought out a special issue and Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua College, Puranigudam also published a centenary volume (*Birinchi Kumar Barua: Jivan aru Karma*, edit.

Probhat Bora, in his critique on *A Cultural History of Assam* says that B. K. Barua adds a great dimension to cultural historiography by scintillating an Indian perspective to it. The objective analysis of a folklorist and the inventiveness and profound insight of a creative genius, all synthesized into a harmonious balance to make his cultural history a unique model for all time. With concrete evidence of the unique character of Assamese culture, it is postulated to be an integral part of India and Prof Bora identifies such intellectual and imaginative exercises at finding out the regional nuance and variety as the avowed goal of Assamese intelligentsia (2007, in Viswakos; 279, Vol-V11 (history), edit. Rajen Saikia). We can deduce a basic proposition from it that a folklorist well trained in creative imagination is capable of creating a great space for trans-cultural mobility and redeem historiography itself from its aristocratic lineage (Ashcroft et al, 1998). It would not be a fair judgment to project B. K. Barua as championing the cause of Aryanisation in total disregard to his long time engagement in folklore research and study of the Buddhist tradition. In fact it is true to all folklorists in a multicultural zone. Articulacy of peripheral realities through folk culture gives new dimension to the patriarchal dominance of Sanskritised cultural values. It is very much clear in his works be it folklore or literary and cultural historiography. Even in his estimate of the early Vaisnavite period he takes note of the presence of the regional folk mind and the typical Assamese rural ethos, as for example, in the rendering of the Sanskritised epic into the vernacular, and Sankardeva’s entire cultural renaissance.

In a critical ambience of colonial modernity B. K. Barua turned his mind to issues sociological and historical. He has been successful while applying his insight and scholarship to evaluate Assamese literature on the one hand, and
produce hitherto unsurpassed creative works on the other. His own comment in his *History of Assamese Literature* (1964) is that *Bina Barua* in *Jivanar Batat* ‘tries to assess unique social value’ by turning his eyes to those who are neglected by society. Such articulacy of neglected marginality is also brilliantly portrayed in his *Seuji Patar Kahini*. The wider socio-cultural-political issues as subsumed into his narrative structures produce a strong moral sense, sociological vision and subaltern realities. We see here a society in its transitional period caught between the opposite pulls of tradition and modernity. Hiren Gohain’s analysis of the treatment of tradition in *Jivanar Batat* is significant in this context. As he suggests, the novelist does not prove his alliance to socialism or Marxist way of social transformation; but he had that moral uprightness and intellectual curiosity to reveal the bedrock of the Assamese social psyche and review with accurate historical sense the usable past and its disposable mire of tradition as well (op cit, *Oitihya aru Jivanar Batat*, 2013). Thus, it appears that his novels can be read as an allegory that transcends its fictional world.

**Objective & Methodology:**

The objectives of the proposed project appear clearly from the discussion above and may be summed up as follows –

- Evaluating sociology of B. K. Barua’s creative writings in the light of some of the basic tenets of literary sociology. The sociological embryo in the womb of fictional representation is expected to focus on the complicated relation between the colonizer and the colonized.
- A review of the existing critical opinion or assessment on the creative and critical worldview of B. K. Barua and relate them to questions of subalterity and peripheral realities as the central focus. His fictional narratives may endure an investigation as social allegory articulating marginality of the social subalterns.
- B. K. Barua’s specialty as a literary and cultural historiography. The nationalist perspective of historiography based on micro analysis of the
regional variety and nuances of socio-cultural components is Barua’s forte as a historian. Issues of sociological importance and humanist perception scintillate through his entire range of academic interest from fiction to folklore.

❖ To see whether there can be an anticipation of subalternity in historically oriented issues using what may be termed as folk-paradigm. The central thrush of his practices in history is a ‘bottom-up’ sort of investigation and such an approach though not acceptable to the rationalists among the historians, may stimulate resituating historical consciousness somewhere beyond the classical sources of history.

The entire project follows basically an analytical methodology. It demands little field works, though informal chats with some of Barua’s family members (his wife Shanti Chayya Barua, son Raj, and Cousin Parthasarathi Barua) have been quite illuminating. Partha Sarathi Barua is one among them who shared a good deal of family matters that helped us in understanding the man and his mental makeup. The thesis broadly contains five major chapters v.i.z i) Introduction; ii) Sociology of B. K. Barua’s Creative Writings – a study of his novels and short stories; iii) Folklore or Folk culture – articulacy of subalternity and sociological vision; iv) B. K. Barua and his historical writings: Nationalist Perspective and anticipation of new dimensions; and v) conclusion.

An unconventional biographical titbit and a brief account of his organizational activities:

We have incorporated here in the Appendices 1 & 2 Barua’s life-sketch and a bibliography of his works prepared by Maheswar Neog for the commemoration volume published in 1966. These are prepared so perfectly and in such accurate measure that there is hardly any need of a fresh compilation. But some little family matters available at first hand sources may help us discovering the man along with those in the appendix 1. The materials that present another dimension to B. K. Barua’s personality are some letters
and a recently published satirical One-Act play. Letters written on different occasion to some family members are the solitary guide to some great discovery. Partha sarathi Barua has made such an unconventional search into the illustrious life of B. K. Barua, a much acclaimed towering personality of the twentieth century Assam (article in Bhoomi, Vol-3, 2008: 112-131). Parthasarathi Barua starts his foragings with a comment “we have tried to extract clues to find out Birinchi Kumar Barua in homely environment from his own writings; because he had his access to multi dimensional issues even in his family correspondences. We have just found out such writings which have been imbued with emotion, feelings, and the oblique connotation of the socio-political situation of that time. But most of these writings were not written in his name” (Ibid, 112, translated).

Like Patralekha in case of Bezbaroa, we have also a bunch of such discursive correspondences, letters written from America to his wife and letters written on some other occasions to family relation or to friends on literary and personal matters. Besides Professor Baruar chithi, the personal letters when compiled would reveal the man in homely environment with a deep sense of humour and bliss of family life with Shantichayya, nicknamed Makhani. In a rejoinder to a letter written by Makhani to the wife of Makhani’s elder brother who was once a student of B. K. Barua at Cotton College, he wrote, “I moved like a storm and took away Makhani from you. That is what might make you resent against me. But it restores a shade of peace to my wandering life and an order returns to my indiscipline life (mind it, it is not that Joyashree returns). Makhani is now introduced in the kitchen away from her Rabindranath. From poetry she is being engaged in cooking curry with cauliflower, from flower garden to kitchen garden”. He also teases Makhani by humorously suggesting that Makhani feels like returning to Shanti Niketan so as to avoid chores; and that just one month of family life has been so much for him due to the growing power of the women etc. Perhaps Makhani left the letter half-written and Barua wrote his portion in the back page, for which Makhani had to add, ‘Hope you’ll not believe a single word of the letter overleaf. I have been accustomed to such
pranks and jokes’ (Ibid, 2008). It is clear from this and other letters that Shantichayya was the inspiring lady behind B. K. Barua and though she belonged to an Assamese aristocratic family she had all her necessary trainings of an upright, studious, socially committed self-esteemed lady who had remained an ardent follower of Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Both B. K. Barua and Shantichaya could maintain such high ideals and culture in their family that everyone had got equal treatment without discriminating between caste and creed. Even after his sudden death his wife maintained her self-esteem and had to supplement her royalty income with some sort of a business. She had reportedly prepared soups and cutlets at home for sale. We mention this bit of information to realize a situation that befell the family of an internationally acclaimed scholar and one of the founders of Gauhati University who was subsequently accused of malpractices. Bani Barua of Tezpur in an obituary remembers Shantichaya as the most compatible life-partner of a great figure who often had accompanied him to the University for planting trees in the campus (Shraddhanjali – obituaries at her death, 2013).

The poet, Jatindranath Duarah used to write letters to Birinchi Kumar Barua despite their difference in age. But they could develop almost a friendly relationship and Barua eventually had become an inspiration for Duarah who was a lonely and bashful man. Upendra Barkataki refers to a part of the correspondence in his Patra- Sahityar Subas which highlights how B. K. Barua’s inspiration was central to his literary activities and how Duarah was apologetic in his approach because B. K. Barua was always carrying heavy work-loads on his head. “We have not set you there in the forest of Guwahati like a deer. We only want you to clear a fresh ground there by removing the bushes in order to build a royal palace”......etc. Here we find the great faith reposed on B. K. Barua for the establishment of Gauhati University (2011: 116-120). The Academy for Cultural Relations of which B. K. Barua was the president until his death is one of his dream organizations. He had a plan for forging unity and integration among the different communities through cultural exchange. It reflects B. K. Barua’s interest in the integrative aspect of culture.
As reminisced by B. C. Lahkar “Dr. Barua dreampt of making the Assam Academy an international center of cultural and intellectual activities and to have exchanges among scholars, literateur, historians, writers and social and cultural workers of various countries of the world” (Commemoration Volume, 1996: lxviii).

Barua’s contribution in the establishment of the first University in Assam is another great example of Barua’s organizing capacity. He was instrumental in devising plans for creating mass awareness in support of a University and to make the government listen to the public demands. Meetings, public demonstrations, publication of articles in the newspapers etc. were conducted simultaneously at different places and he was the man behind a series of parleys with Gopinath Bardoloi to convince him to act as the head of the University Trust Board. Barua continued to serve the institution in various capacities as a dedicated teacher, academic administrator, secretary of the classes, Dean of the faculty of arts, research guide to doctoral candidates, and able coordinator of UGC grants for development.

Anima Datta remembers her ideal teacher in a commemorative note as one who among other noble qualities of head and heart excelled in teaching with scholarly authority and amazing clarity. Every tree in the University campus, every piece of brick used in the buildings will speak about the uncompromising commitment of this man (Garioshi, May, 2008). P D Goswami further writes in his obituary, “….. it was at his initiative that the University Grants Commission gave to the University funds for the translation of the Mahabharata, for the establishment of a department of Manuscripts, and for the institution of the Tribal Culture and Folklore Research Scheme. Professor Barua repaid his debt to Dr. Kakati by raising fund and setting up in the University a lectureship in the latter’s name”. Krishna Kanta Handique, the then Vice Chancellor of Gauhati University also appreciated his efforts in instituting the memorial lecture in the foreword to the book, The place of Assam In the Civilisation of India by Dr. S. K. Chatterji – “Our thanks are due
to Dr. B. K. Barua, the successor of Dr. Kakati (B. K. Kakati) in the chair of Assamese literature, for organizing the collection of funds for instituting these lectures.” B. K. Barua could influence the responsible persons in the state’s capital as well as in New Delhi. Besides, as a member of the Executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi in New Delhi he supervised the Akademi’s work in Assamese. There is no end to B. K. Barua’s contribution to the establishment of educational and cultural institutions. Barua realized that a healthy growth and expansion of collegiate education in Assam was essential for lasting performance of the University. Well organized colleges alone can provide the desired intellectual atmosphere in Assam and with this aim B. K. Barua toured the whole of Assam and visited many colleges with two of his senior colleagues S. C. Rajkhowa and Harishchandra Goswami, tried to understand the problems of the colleges and strongly pleaded before the University Grant Commission for liberal grants to the colleges.

It was again the untiring efforts of B. K. Barua that the Gauhati Commerce College came into being in 1962 (B. C. Lahkar, Ibid). Mahendra Bora regretted in a commemorative editorial of Monideep that only few people could respect the towering personality of B. K. Barua. One of the great founders of Gauhati University who had to move from door to door with the begging alms in hand for raising funds had to bear the most inhuman treatment from certain section. It would not be an exaggeration of facts that the imbalanced report prepared by the enquiry committee did really quicken his death. Mahendra Bora further wrote that Barua stood far above the crudeness of the report. The rich library of the University is the imperishable achievement of this man and the publication department of the University will ever remain indebted to him (Geeta Bora et al, edit, 2005:132).

Thus, B. K. Barua offers an exciting career. It can be seen from different angles first as a student who was simply brilliant and could be engaged with social activities like founding a club and a library while in school; second, as a hardworking commited teacher who was ever ready to inspire aspiring
students with all sorts of help. While in America with specific assignment of a visiting professor, he could spare time for his students in Assam for selecting research topics and preparing bibliography (Datta, Anima, Garioshi, 2008 : 38). It is said that with B. K. Barua’s joining the cotton College, the Assamese department got rejuvenated with activities; third, as an **educational and cultural organiser** he has rendered his service to the foundation of a number of institutions right from the *Gauhati University* to the *Academy for Cultural Relations*, from the *Gauhati Commerce college* to the Gauhati University Committee of the *World University Service*. The W.U.S. T. B. ward, as reported by Anil Ratan Barthakur, was in-fact the brain child of B. K. Barua (*Commemoration* Vol. 1996: Ixxv). Fourth, as the **pioneer of folklore and cultural studies** with the latest information of folklore archiving at Uppsala University which had helped him in planning a folklore department in Gauhati University along with other academic works. Finally, through his **creative and critical faculty** the history, society and literature of Assam had received an integrated intellectual focus. We have so far been able to explore some fundamental aspects of his ‘creative energy’; but the basic tenets of B K Barua’s critical mind is yet to be explored on broad and critical outlines. Hence, a humble attempt has been made to deliberate on such issues very intimately connected with an Assamese identity – its history, society and culture. All the ambivalence and irony of colonial modernity appear to have found a representation in his negotiations. In retrospect some of his works will cease to have their significance in the fast changing socio-political scenario. It would be rather very essential to keep in mind the typical situation that prevailed during the closing decades of British colonialism and the early decades of our postcolonial destiny while evaluating B. K. Barua and his works.

We believe that an objective and critical study of the makers of Assamese society, culture and literature in the colonial and postcolonial period has got its greater relevance today Vis-a-Vis the prevailing unrest, ethnic chauvinism and sectarian politics combined with the dynamics of capitalist
market economy. All integrational projects have been destabilised; the things of our cultural heritage, the roots of our collaborative venture have started falling apart and the collective consciousness eventually faces the precipice in the present situation. Birinchi Kumar Barua and Bishnu Prasad Rabha both had touched the pulse of the people, the vital cords for a sort of national pulsation from ideologically different perspectives. The former had followed the liberal humanist perceptions duly certified by the prevailing standard norms of academic research, more logical than emotional; while the later applied certain principles of the communist ideology foregrounding an immeasurable lineage towards ethnic preoccupations. But nevertheless both of them had developed a searching focus on the peripheral realities. The character of their analysis is basically integrational. Besides, both of them were creative genius in their respective domain.