Chapter II: Life and Works of Debendranath Acharjee

2.1 Life of Debendranath Acharjee

2.1.1 A Disclaimer:

In Indian traditional ethos, Dronacharya is considered as partial incarnation of *Brihaspathi* (Teacher of gods) and his name is uttered as the most respected *guru* of India. The literary trail blazer of Assam who set new heights for Assamese literature namely Debendranath Acharjee used the pseudonym ‘Dronacharya’ in many of his literary works. Though his own use of ‘Dronacharya’ may have the hidden motif of satirizing the follies of Assamese society in order to rebuild and reform it in all spheres, yet any careful analysis of his life and works would justifiably establish him as one of the ‘Dronacharyas’ of Assamese literature. In fact, his certificate name for academic purpose was Debendra Nath Acharya, while he himself loved to adjoin his middle name with the first and be known as Debendranath. Also, he had no objection when the Bengali speakers often addressed him as Acharjee. Moreover, he did not give importance to the spelling of his surname, and the same may be the reason of spelling his first name, middle name and surname in various ways such as Debendra Nath Acharya, Debendranath Acharjya, Debendranath Acharya and Debendranath Acharjee in the copyright pages of his various published works. To maintain the consistency in spelling, the name as imprinted in the copyright page of his complete works i.e. Debendranath Acharjee is used in this thesis with permission from his family members (annexed in Appendix of this thesis).
2.1.2. Birth:

Debendranath Acharjee’s forefathers entered the province of Assam during the reign of Surempha (reign 1751–1769), or Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha from the historical town of Kannauj of Uttar Pradesh. It was Siva Acharya who first settled in Assam during the tenure of Ahom king Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha. Siva Acharya came to Parasuram Kund as a pilgrim and the spies of the king arrested him doubting him as a foreign spy. However, on interrogation, the king and his council of ministers were apprised of his extraordinary talent and offered him land and property for his permanent settlement in the river island of Majuli. He brought his family from Kannauj and settled down at Majuli until the King’s minister Purnanada Buragohain shifted him to the Gharphalia village of Jorhat.

His next generations of family members represented by Ramchandra, Umakanta, Gaurikanta and Jagakanta lived in this village. However, the son of Jagakanta namely Kirtikanta also known as Tankeswar shifted his family from Gharphalia to Garakhiyadol village. Kirtikanta was a learned and an influential person and his son Nagendra Nath Acharya married Jayantipriya Devi. Debendranath Acharjee was the eldest of the five children of Nagendra Nath Acharya and Jayantipriya Devi. He was born on March 3, 1937 in the village Garakhiyadol of Baligaon- four kilometer north to Jorhat town of upper Assam.

2.1.3. Education:

Acharjee received his primary education at Garakhiyadol Balak Prathamik Pathshala (presently 549 No. Garakhiyadole Prathamik Bidyalay). He completed his Middle English School from Baligaon Jagannath Barua Arjya Bidyalay. The speciality of this school was the compulsory subject of Sanskrit. There he studied staying at a private hostel of Muktinath Thakur. The family of Muktinath Thakur was a learned one; his widowed sister in law had an invaluable repartoire of folk tales, proverbs, riddles and stories from the Ramayan and the Mahabharat; the eldest son of Muktinath Thakur was a freedom fighter and educationist. This family left much influence on the literary career of Acharjee especially in infusing in him an interest in folklore and folklife. In an article in Debendra Nath Acharya:
Sristi Aru Chetana, Kamakhyacharan Thakur son of Muktinath Thakur mentions some personal traits of Acharjee as a student:

From the football field Deben departed to some place. After some days, we came to know that from the field he visited the Reading Club and Kirtichandra Library, and there he reads Bengali books, especially the works of Rabindranath ... he also loved to recite some of his songs and poems. He never had the habit of noting down. His brain was his Note Book. (91)

He obtained M.E. scholarship in 1953 holding first position and took admission in Jorhat Government Boys’ School. It is also to be noted here that the meetings he attended as a student at the Milan Mandir of Baligaon and the theatrical performance at the Baligaon Sanmilani Natyamandir left indelible impression on the literary career of Acharjee. In 1959 he passed B.Tech Examination from IIT Kharagpur with first class honours. He obtained Diploma in Civil Engineering from Imperial College of Science and Technology, London in 1962 and obtained post graduate degree in Civil Engineering from London University in 1964. Though he received his education in engineering from various reputed institutions in India and abroad, yet the education and environment of his birthplace provided the main impetus to explore folklore and folklife and eventually to make it an indispensable part of his literary ouvre.

2.1.4. Social and Family Life:

Debendranath Acharjee’s father (Late Nagendra Nath Acharya) served as a Supervisor in a tea garden at upper Assam and his wife Late Jayanti Devi was a pious lady. However, both of them were voracious readers of epics and legends. Debendranath Acharjee, the eldest son of the family inherited this tradition of reading voraciously from his childhood – be it a matter of academic or literary studies. Also, his grandmother Jayanti Devi was a great story teller who loved being heard her stories by the grandchildren. Acharjee used to walk with her
listening to folktales in the evening hours. As mentioned earlier Acharjee excelled in his academic career and after establishing himself as the writer of his own destiny, Acharjee tied his nuptial knot with Mahasweta Acharya on January 18, 1967. Mahasweta Acharya, who retired as a professor and head in the department of Assamese from Handique Girls’ College, made relentless effort in a tireless manner to compile the entire literary repertoire of his published as well as unpublished works, which was compiled in 2011 under the title Debendranath Acharjya Rachana Samagra.

In her article in Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana (2007) Mahasweta Acharya wrote about the influential personality of Debendranath Acharjee:

Being the eldest son in the family Acharjee’s advice was sought by uncles in all family matters of the Garakhiyadol house ... He was loved by all his relatives and neighbours. His brothers and sisters kept him surrounded with love and respect. Therefore, he wrote to me-“you will receive enough love from everyone- you will have to love everyone. You will have to think for everyone’s well being. Once you see the environment, you yourself will change—probably with a lot of pleasure.” (110-111)

Acharjee’s lovable nature is aptly reflected in the above words of Mahasweta Acharya. Acharjee loved ethnic foods and also liked to receive guest and treat them with elaborate traditional meals. In leisure time, he enjoyed listening to the songs of Bhupen Hazarika, Hemanta Kumar and Sandhya Mukharjee. Indeed, Acharjee’s own interest in folk food habits and songs having folk elements led him to incorporate elements of folklife in his different works.

After eight months of marriage Acharjee stayed in Shillong to officiate as the Deputy Director of Technical Education. Here, he executed his plan of writing his novel Anya Yug Anya Purush (1970). Later, he joined as the Field manager at
Assam Gas Company in Duliajan and associated himself with several socio-cultural institutions. In Duliajan, he engaged himself in collecting the stories from history and oral traditions and completed his second novel *Kalpurush* (1976).

Acharjee possessed enough mental strength to overcome his physical conditions. At the age of thirty one, he was diagnosed with diabetes and gradually lost his sound health. However, he ignored his health and devoted himself to his literary work till his premature end on September 29, 1981. His posthumously published novel *Jangam* (1982) speaks volumes of his earnestness as a novelist. Noted scholar and educationist Shantikam Hazarika in *Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana* writes:

Debendra Nath Acharjee stood out as an extraordinarily rare phenomenon- an embodiment of virtue and talent, an island of excellence in an ocean of mediocrity infested with philistinic sharks. That such a man trod on this earth, that too an Assamese, would be a historical enigma. (105)

Truly, During his brief journey in the mortal world, Acharjee lived many a lifetimes in his brief sojourn with exemplary excellence as well as being a doting father and husband and a “historical enigma”(105).

### 2.2 Works of Debendranath Acharjee

Debendranath Acharjee was gifted with scholarly aptitude towards Assamese literature. Gifted with a photographic memory, his brilliance shone from a very young age. Though Acharjee’s well known works have been dated from the year 1957, he started his literary career from the year 1952 itself and his poem Sri Sri Sankardev (1952) stands as a testimony of his earliest works. However, most of his published works are products of the period between 1960 and 1980.

Most of Acharjee’s published works were critically acclaimed and also won prestigious awards. He used his spare time for writing. Initially he started penning
satirical articles for newspapers under the pseudonym ‘Dronacharya’. His literary works include various essays, short stories, poems, children’s literature and a few significant novels.

Debendranath Acharjee (1937-1981) was not blessed with a long life, not even with the average life span. In his short lifetime, he contributed immensely to the different genres of Assamese literature enriching it with many hitherto forgotten aspects folklore and folklife. In a memorial lecture organized by Debendranath Acharya Memorial Trust in 2006 (published in Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana), noted scholar Nagen Saika commented:

He lived only for forty four years. But as it is always said that a man’s life is measured not by the age he lived –but by his works. The works that Debendranath Acharjee did in just forty four years, there may not be a second person who can do the same in eighty eight years; therefore, it has found no relevancy as to the matter of how much years did Acharjee live, but what is relevant is his contribution and his works will always remain relevant in our socio-cultural-literary life. (1)

Truly, Acharjee had profound faith on the cultural tradition of Assam, and through his works he always tried to imbibe a spirit of nationalism. His works, therefore, aimed at inspiring the people of Assam with a sense of love for the better development in socio-cultural front. Acharjee loved life and mixed with all segments in the society; he took up pen to glorify life and cultures and to instill wisdom that promotes tradition but evades the supernatural. Following is a list of Acharjee’s published works:

Novels

(i) *Anya Yug Anya Purush* (1970)

(ii) *Kalpurush* (1976)
(iii)  *Jangam* (Posthumously in 1982)

Children’s literature

(i)  *Ramdhenu Kar Dhenu* (1972)

(ii)  *Hatipati Sikimiki* (1979)

Short story

(i)  *Halibhakat* (1969)

(ii)  *Paap* (1970)

(iii)  *Dadhishi* (1977)

(iv)  *Haladhiaya Saraye Baodhan Khai* (for children- 1979)

Articles

(i)  *Axomar Odyogik Vikash aru Sahityat Iyar Pratiphalan*

(ii)  *Prospects of Industries based on Natural Gas* (Published in The Times of India on December 07, 1979)

As mentioned earlier, three from the above list of published works were awarded. *Ramdhenu Kar Dhenu* received Premadhar Dutta Memorial Award for best children’s literature in 1972 at Assam Sahitya Sabha, Mangaldai Session; Axom Prakashan Parishad Award for his novel *Kalpurush* in 1978 and Sahitya Akademi Award (Posthumously) for his novel *Jangam* in 1984.

Besides the published works mentioned above, Acharjee wrote many excellent literary works which were left in the form of manuscripts only. However, with the publication of his complete works postemously in 2011, Acharjee’s reputation as a versatile writer was more firmly established. In addition to his already published works, this posthumous work includes two novels *Raktaraag* and *Bekar Niketan*, ten short stories, many poems, many literary pieces for children, many articles and one play.

The narrative of *Anya Yug Anya Purush* develops round the events of Assam history from the time of the arrival of the East India Company to the onset of the World War I. The story filters through the memory of the narrator as he
recalls someone called Beng Belestar and the stories that he had heard from
Belestar in his childhood. Again, Belestar’s narrative too is intermixed with stories
he had heard from others, though he is an eye witness to most of the events. This
double or multiple narrator technique helps retain historical distance and
objectivity all throughout the novel. Use of chaste spoken Assamese diction and
idioms is a unique feature of Anya Yug Anya Purush and thus the novel becomes
an interesting document of everyday speech in folklife. It is as if hundreds of such
long forgotten expressions were recalled to life in the novel. This novel is a rare
combination of historical objectivity and creative literature. Most significantly, the
novel serves as a document of every aspect of Assamese folklife in the given
period of time.

Acharjee’s second novel Kalpurush narrates historically a period of the
Ahom rule roughly from 1639 to 1673, beginning at the repeated Mughal invasions
and culminating at the historic Saraighat battle. However, the novel also stands as a
cultural document typifying many aspects of folk customs prevalent at that period.
The novel amplifies many traditions followed by the Ahom rulers and their
subjects. Especially, the central character of the novel Nadai Sajati divulges many
mythical events and cultural occasions associated with the life of the common
people. These events and various aspects of folklore and folklife of that period of
the Ahoms find adequate expression through Acharjee’s unique narration. Proverbs
and sayings, traditional agricultural practices, dress habits, foods, festivals, rituals,
everything gives the reader a feeling of nostalgia down the history of Assam.

Jangam is the third novel written by Debendranath Acharjee. This is the
story of a journey back home of a group of Indian people from erstwhile Burma
fleeing the atrocities of the nationalist Burmese people and the victorious Japanese
army. It is a journey through dense forests and treacherous mountain terrains and a
story of dislocation and migration which are important issues and concerns in
contemporary literary discourse. For generations Burma remained the adopted
homeland of this group of people but sudden turns of events in the world history
forced them to leave their adopted homeland. However, the narration does not start
with the journey itself. It begins with the description of the slow pace of life of the
farmers of Burma. The novelist successfully centres his story line through his
narration of the folklife during the Second World War by integrating various elements of folklore. A remarkable feature of this novel is that the creative genius of Debendranath Acharjee found free and full expression here. While the rigid frame of social and historical contexts are clearly discernible in his earlier two novels, his novel Jangam is marked by an epic expansion. So far as the portrayal of folklife is concerned, Jangam does give a detailed picture of everyday life of the people before the tornado of Second World War stikes.

Raktaraag is the fourth novel of Debendranath Acharjee. The conflict between Magadh and Koshal is the central subject of the story. Ajatsatru’s love for Bajira is the driving force of the story. The use of language of Raktaraag too is remarkable. There is extensive use of Pali and Prakrit words in this novel. The purpose of the author in doing so is certainly to make the story convincing and retain the objectivity of the historical elements incorporated in it.

Debendranath Acharjee’s Bekar Niketan is a novel centering round a family drama. The protagonist of the novel is Mrityunjay Barua, who is suffering from memory loss. The narrative of this novel too is marked by a lucid, spontaneous and idiomatic language.

Debendranath Acharjee tried his hand at writing short stories too. But he never called them short stories himself. The title of his story Dadhishi is well justified. This is the story of a village chief called Mahuram Gaonburha and his sacrifice for the cause of his village. This story offers a critique of the social system and government mechanism. The fact that development project without foresightedness is meaningless has been highlighted in the story. Halibhakat is a story written in the backdrop of the past rural life of Assam. The language well expresses the theme and the temporal backdrop of the story. The story entitled Paap (Sin) too is written in the same tune. Shabir (Static) is written in the context of economic inequality gradually making its way into the contemporary Assamese society. The story Rama Pandit too is character oriented. Abrupt ending, an important feature of short story, has been exploited finely in Miss Deshmukh. Likewise, in the story Bhikshoo (The Beggar) the story Tommy too is dominated by a satirical tone. Railjatra is based on the narration of familiar incidents. Gargramat
Khankhana is based on history and ends in tragedy. Its language well suits the content of the story. Gali Aru Rajpath is all about human compassion.

We remember Debendranath Acharjee as a poet also. He has two collections of poems to his credit- Pallavi and Kabita Kabita, the former comprising of nineteen and the latter fourteen poems. The collection Pallavi was named after his eldest daughter Pallavi Acharya.

Debendranath Acharjee will be remembered for his invaluable contribution to children’s literature in Assamese. Akhil Chakravorty in his article published in Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana aptly remarks:

Late Debendranath Acharjee who with his Anya Yug Anya Purush, Kalpurush and Jangam established himself as a prolific writer in the literary scenario of Assam was basically an able engineer. In hand of this successful engineer, the children literature of Assam also had an opening of a new door in children literature of Assam especially with his Hatipati Sikimiki and Ramdhenu Kardhenu published during his life-time. With these two publications alone we can deduce his familiarity with the minds of children and his interest for children literature. (65)

The most remarkable among the children’s poem is Ramdhenu Kardhenu. The writer here narrates many facts about Assam in playful rhymes – its climate, its landscape, flora and fauna, twelve months, places, etc. in rhyme. The poem Brahmaputrar Biya is all about the rivers of Assam. It is full of geographical information, but that does not make its reading tedious by any means. Not only the children, even adults enjoy reading this book. Prakritir Dukh (Sorrow of Nature) is a poem about fruits. Fruits like Bagh Asora and Jetuli Paka here assume the role of characters. Another mentionable poem is Barasun Barasun (Rain, Rain). Certainly, the act of writing poems like this is impossible without an intimacy with nature and also an inherent creativity.
Acharjee brings together nature and Archimedes’s theory with a storyteller’s deftness. Naturally, one is reminded of the writer’s mastery over language. These compositions appear to have been written with the view of enhancing children’s imaginative and expressive power. Acharjee’s Hatipati Sikimiki (The Glittering Milky way) too is an invaluable addition to his bulk of children’s literature. Two features of the book are remarkable—one is form, the other is language. Sometimes the narrative style is one of conversation, sometimes that of storytelling. The language is simple, lucid and spontaneous. Thus, whether in Anya Yug Anya Purush or Hatipati Sikimiki, Debendranath Acharjee repeatedly establishes the charm and wealth of Assamese language. This book is a compilation of ten articles that can be read like textbooks on nature. The story Halodhiya Saraye Baodhan Khai (The Yellow Birds Eat Bao-Rice) is all about the zoological features of birds. Padya Padya (Poem, Poem) is a collection of thirteen poems. Chakradharar Biloi (The Problem of Chakradhar) is written with the idioms of Assamese language. There is not a second instance of such a poem in our language. The poem Melengoar Mei (The Meeting of Meleng) too is a poem of word games. This poem speaks volumes about the linguistic innovations of Debendranath Acharjee. Thus, though small in volume, Debendranath Acharjee’s children’s writings occupy a distinguished place in Assamese literature.

Debendranath Acharjee also leaves his mark as a thoughtful writer. Especially his collected articles entitled Sinta Boisitra (Diverse Thoughts) and Sintadhara (Way of Thinking) establish Acharjee as a fearless writer with political consciousness, foresightedness and nonconformity.

Acharjee’s Debendranath Acharjee Rachana Samagra (2011) also includes ten miscellaneous articles of immense importance. The topics of such articles range from Rasleela, Bashag Bihu to scientific articles like Prospects of Industries based on Natural Gas. This miscellaneous section also includes one article assessing the historical novel and history of language. In another article Acharjee writes about his impression of Assam. In this article Acharjee justifies his stance on culture, the stance which actually forms the basis of the works
selected for this study. In his article published in *Debendranath Acharjiya Rachana Samagra*, Acharjee writes:

The culture of Assam is a mixed culture of the Aryan, Kirat, Dravidian, Austric and Negrito cultures. The Aryan who started migrating to Assam from the 4th century AD has advanced a sizable contribution towards Assam’s culture but the Aryan culture itself got substantially metamorphosed under the influence of the other older local cultures thereby evolving an altogether new form. This influence is evident even in the fields of religion. During the time of Sankardev, a stream from the mainstream of All India Culture also flowed to Assam. The use of beetle nut is Mongolian; weaving, silk work, and cattle rearing are of Tibetan origin. Profuse use of plantain trees and fruits are habits derived from the Austric root. The main base of the earlier society being based on agriculture, most of the festivals in Assam is also based on agriculture.

Presently under the impact of industrialization the shape of traditional culture is passing through a phase of transformation. The economic environment and the western way of life have changed the agriculture based economy to a great extent. The current time will reform the traditions and a culture will emerge from the continuous process of accepting some new and rejecting some old values. (594)
Truly, the reformist zeal (in the process of accepting some new and rejecting some old values) marks the entire representative works of Acharjee. And, the vehicle that Acharjee uses to usher reform in the society was the incorporation of cultural elements in the different genres of literature. Indeed, in all the genres used by Acharjee, the presence of folk forms and folk life is unmistakable. Therefore, many of his works (novels, short stories and poems/riddles and the one-act play) are replete with the ingredients of folklore and folklife of greater Assamese society.

Clearly, Debendranath Acharjee unearthed history in amalgamation with tradition and created such literature that makes him a literary trail blazer. Acharjee’s literary works reflect all those matters of life that throw lights upon our rich cultural heritage, treading on which a resurgent civilization will flourish.
Works Cited


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