We celebrate the death anniversary of Bishnu Rabha every year on 20th June with great fanfare, but no proper estimate of this versatile genius has been ever made. On the other hand, we have seen attempts to overlook and underrate his revolutionary ideals and his effort to overthrow the existing political system being used against the interest of the downtrodden people. Bishnu Prasad Rabha (1909-1969) was an artiste, a writer, a dedicated researcher of art, culture and literature, and also an advocate of social reformation for liberation and unification of the exploited and downtrodden people. Dr Sibnath Barman rightly describes him as a symbol of the Assamese Renaissance. He believed in the efficacy of art as an instrument of social change and did not confine himself to the ivory-tower of art. He felt the urgent need of joining the fight against social injustice, exploitation and all other sinister forces working for division of the society in the name of caste and community. Having witnessed and experienced a complex socio-economic situation in Assam and the problems arising out of it during and after the freedom struggle, Rabha resorted to both art and political ideals to bring about changes in the society. His acquaintance with Marx and Lenin gave him a new insight to study the life of the downtrodden masses, empathize with them and work for their socio-economic uplift. His objective of working for the amelioration of the exploited masses encouraged him to search for his role model in Leonardo da Vinci, Lord Krishna and Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva. These three legends of versatile talent provided Bishnu Rabha with his desired role model for becoming an artiste, a writer, a musician and a social reformer. Bishnu Rabha did not follow the legacy of his father, who was a rich landlord and a police officer serving the British government, rather he chose the path of revolutionary to work for the poverty-ridden masses. He did his matriculation from Tezpur Government High School in 1926 and had his collegiate education from St Paul’s of Bangladesh and Victoria College of Kochbehar. But, Rabha did not complete his higher education and joined the Indian freedom struggle. His association with the freedom struggle put an end to his student life, but it paved the way for remarkable changes in his life. Rabha was inspired by the nationalistic sentiment during that time, but his nationalism was free

from all narrow-minded ideas and racial or communal prejudices. He dedicated his life for establishing a society which could ensure equal and rapid development of the people belonging to all castes and communities. Rabha put much stress on inheritance and enrichment of our cultural heritage, which, he believed to be carried on along with socio-economic development. He believed that for enrichment of the great Indian cultural tradition we must cultivate and enrich the Assamese culture which is only a part of it. While his associate Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla went to Germany for training in film-making, Rabha embarked on his mission of exploring our cultural resources preserved in the namghars and the xatras and also in the hearts of the common people of the state. During the time of the World War II, Bishnu Rabha travelled from one place to another and had the rare opportunity to see from very close the life of the various tribes living in the hills or in remote places of the plains and discover their cultural resources. Rabha aimed at undertaking some practical measures for socio-economic development of the tribals, who were yet to get justice from the existing social system. Bishnu Rabha believed that for consolidating the foundation of the greater Assamese nation we must ensure growth and development of the language and literature of every community living in Assam. Rabha himself wrote a good number of poems, songs, novels, short stories etc. in Assamese, but he never ignored or underrated other vernacular languages of the region. Had we honoured the far-sighted and liberal observations of Rabha, we could avert many of the troubles that the State had experienced in the last couple of decades for the chauvinistic attitudes of some leaders. Rabha was well versed in many languages like Nepali, Bodo, Bengali, Assamese etc. and was well acquainted with the culture of every community. It is no wonder that every community recognized him as a member of that community. In fact, Rabha was an epitome of the assimilation of diverse languages and cultures in the Brahmaputra Valley, which is incessantly going on till date. Rabha’s contact with the Indian Revolutionary Communist Party in 1945 had brought about a sea-change into his thoughts and outlook. When the Indian National Congress fought to liberate the country from the clutches of the British colonial rule, Rabha advocated for

liberating the country from the native forces of oppression and exploitation represented by the zamindars, mahajans etc., besides liberating her from colonial rule. He also believed that we must get ourselves rid of the British colonial force, but to wipe the eyes of the poor we must also establish the Panchayati Raj by abolishing the old social system to stop exploitation of the peasants and the labourers. His association with the Communist Party helped Bishnu Rabha broaden the horizons of his mind and know the sufferings of the exploited masses. Rabha thought that the rich cultural resources of these people could be used as a vehicle of change. His achievements like Asomiya Kristir Somu Abhash (An outline of the Assamese culture), Asomiya Kristi (The Assamese culture), and Mukti Deol (The temple of freedom) reveal the change taking place in his outlook. Rabha tried to interpret art, music and literature in terms of class-difference and the power structure in the society. We can call Rabha a pioneer in the branch that later came to be known as Marxist criticism having its ground in the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx. Depiction of the harsh reality in the existing society and the toil and suffering of the poor occupies an important part of his creations. He wanted to use art and literature as a means of uniting the masses against oppression and for change. Rabha even took up arms to launch a battle against the landlords and the government, the latter, he believed, provided safeguards to the social oppressors and he raised the demand for giving the cultivators their legitimate rights over their own land. He held that only the true tillers of the soil should have right over their own land and he continued his struggle for this cause till his death. Rabha never insisted on making art exclusively a medium for social change, nor did he deny that art is an end in itself. But his writings bear evidence of his belief in the power of art as an instrument of social change. The life of the common people of Assam along with their pains and pleasures found significant expression in his works. His conviction was that art has the power to encourage unity and solidarity among the downtrodden people of the world and disseminate the message of a revolution for changing their lot. But art did not lose its aesthetic qualities in his hands, nor did it become merely a tool for demonstrating his political ideals. We can boast of the

peerless creations of the revolutionary artiste. The ideals for which Bishnu Prasad Rabha had dedicated his life and the creations that have enriched our art, music and culture deserve more attention and profound academic study. Unfortunately we have not seen any serious attempt to make the new generations aware of the great ideals and priceless contributions of this revolutionary artiste. The government and the universities of the state should take initiative to encourage studies by the youths about the life and achievements of this versatile genius.