



LAKSHMINATH BEZBAROA
THE MAN AND THE MISSION

B. H. COLLEGE, HOWLY

LAKSHMINATH BEZBAROA
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(A Collection of Critical Essays)

Compiled & Edited by
SUBHASH CHANDRA DAS
DR. SULTAN ALI AHMED



B. H. COLLEGE PRAKASHAN SAMITI
B. H. College, Howly

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PREFACE

It hardly requires to mention that Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa(1864-1938) occupies a glorious place in Assamese social life. The year-long celebration of the hundred-and-fiftieth birth anniversary of Bezbaroa throughout the state and elsewhere began on 14 October, 2013 and coming to an end on the same day of 2014. In this celebration programme, B. H. College also decides to join the rest of the state by making some humble contributions in this regard. In November, 2013, a symposium was organized on Bezbaroa under the aegis of B. H. College Sahitya Chora to pay our homage to this doyen of Assamese literature. Likewise a decision was taken on behalf of the college to publish a book in English containing the translated versions of some selected critical essays written by well-known critics as well as some pieces originally written in English. Subsequently, an editorial board was formed with Subhash Chandra Das and Sultan Ali Ahmed, faculty in the department of English, as editors. I express my gratitude to the editorial board for bringing out the book as per the decision. My sincere respectful thanks go to the well-regarded writers and critics for giving necessary permission to incorporate their essays in this book. I am also thankful to the translators for their hard work. I am deeply grateful to the honourble president Sjt Ram Avatar Sarma and other esteemed members of the college governing body for granting the sanction of necessary fund for this book.

I sincerely hope that this humble effort on the part of B H College to pay our homage to this architect of Assamese literature and to make him more accessible to and more familiar with specially the non-Assamese readers will be received well by the literary circle in particular and the society in general.

14 Oct.,2014

Dr. Bhushan Chandra Pathak
Principal, B. H. College, Howly

INTRODUCTION

This anthology of critical essays entitled *Lakshminath Bezbaroa: the Man and the Mission*, is an outcome of the humble effort of B. H. College family to pay an adulatory tribute to the doyen of Assamese literature and society on the occasion of his one hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary. The idea of the anthology was conceived in a symposium held in our college under the aegis of 'B. H. College Sahitya Chora' to celebrate that anniversary in keeping with the year long programme organized throughout the state and elsewhere.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa, a versatile genius, was not only a man of letters who tried his hand in almost every branch of literature with a mission to establish Assamese language as an independent entity, but also a social thinker, and an intellectual and philosopher who played a pivotal role in ushering in modernity into Assamese society, culture and literature. He is perhaps second only to Sankaradeva when his contribution to every sphere of Assamese life and society is taken into consideration. Sankaradeva's mission was social reform and reorganisation through religion. Bezbaroa nurtured a similar mission but he tried to accomplish it by exposing follies, foibles and vices of the contemporary society through irony and satire. He was also instrumental in instilling a sense of nationality consciousness among the people of Assam. In the context of present Bezbaroa studies in Assam, it has been observed that there is an urgent need to highlight his achievements and contributions in such a manner that can take him out of the narrow confines of the linguistic and regional limitations. Hence, our modest attempt in this anthology is to make Bezbaroa known through this book more widely in the national and international literary circles.

The anthology is a compilation of twenty five essays highlighting different aspects of his literary, cultural and social pursuits. Consequently, the essays by renowned scholars, both past and present, from Assam and outside Assam have been selected to that effect. Out of the twenty five essays, ten are original English essays; fourteen are translated from Assamese while one

is translated from Bengali. The editors make no claim of scholarship in showing the discerning ability in the choice of the critical pieces. While bringing out the book, our chief motivation was to pay our humble homage to Bezbaroa, and nothing else. Therefore, we have no wish to make the tall claim that these are the best pieces of critical writing on Bezbaroa. Rather, our humble submission is that the essays included here do not cover many of the aspects of Bezbaroa's multi-faceted personality and that is probably also not possible within the covers of a single book. Similarly, our failure in accommodating all the important critics on Bezbaroa is also deeply regretted.

It is our sincere hope that the critical essays collected here, apart from presenting a broad picture of the multifarious achievements and contributions of Bezbaroa, will also give the taste and flavour of Assamese critical writings, particularly through the translated pieces to those readers who are not acquainted with the Assamese language. However, it should be clarified that the task of retaining and transferring to the target language, the specific usages, idioms and nuances of the source language, that creates literary taste, is a very arduous one, if not impossible.

We express our deep sense of gratitude to the outstanding scholar-contributors and valued translators for their positive response to our request. We would like to thank the college authority for providing necessary funds and support. We also thank the members of the editorial board for their cooperation, Dipmani Das, in particular, without whose timely help and support the project would not have been materialized. Our thanks go to Shivam Offset, Barpeta Road and Bhabani Offset and Imaging Systems Pvt. Ltd, Guwahati for bringing out the book in time. Finally, we apologise for any inadvertent errors that might have crept in.

It is our sincere hope that if this modest venture of us is received well by the enlightened circle, both here and outside, then the effort of the editors will be rewarded.

Subhash Chandra Das
Dr. Sultan Ali Ahmed

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The Nineteenth Century Renaissance in India and Lakshminath Bezbaroa of Assam (1868-1938*)

Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterji **

The nineteenth century in the history of India has been of very great significance in the development of the culture and mentality of the people of India, although in the political and economic spheres her position was at a very low ebb. This century witnessed the establishment and full consolidation of British power in India- the erstwhile merchants of the 17th and early 18th centuries became *de facto* rulers of a great part of India, and the *Herrenvolk*, who were able to subjugate the people of India not only politically but also to a large extent spiritually. The intellectual emancipation of the Indian people was the greatest boon which came to India in the wake of British rule, and this formed what may be called the silver lining to the cloud. There were other periods in the history of India which were great when we think of the intellectual as well as spiritual attainments of India and her material as well as military progress and prowess: e.g., the Mohen-jo-Daro and Harappa age, and

* Till recently it was generally believed that Lakshminath was born in 1868, and owing to loss of records, Lakshminath himself thought he was born in 1868. Now it has been definitely established that the year of his birth was 1864.

** *Formerly National Professor of India in Humanities and an eminent linguist of international repute.*

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the period of the Vedic *Samhitas*. Then after that we have the great centuries during the 1st millennium B.C. (subdivided into the period of the *Upanishads*, and of Buddha and the great philosophers and thinkers), followed by the age of the Imperial Guptas, the age of the development of Tamil Culture in South India during the greater part of the first millennium after Christ and of the contribution of the early Andhra or Telugu and the Kannada dynasties, enriching the ancient civilization of India; the period of Rajput hegemony in North India, and of the glorious revival of Hindu culture in the Vijayanagara empire in South India (1340-1565); and subsequently, we have the two and a half centuries of Mogul rule and achievement. All these have their proper place in the sequence of history and culture in India. Each of these ages has its own special character and *cachet*, and the sequence can be perfectly understood. There were periods of depression also : e.g., immediately after the establishment of the Turks in Northern India, the 2nd half of the 17th century in the Deccan, and the rule of the decadent Hindu and Muslim states of the 18th and early 19th centuries. But the 19th century is unique in this way that here we have what may be called a new type of intellectual awakening in India, a sort of a true Renaissance. This was made possible by the contact of the mind of the Indian *elite*, particularly in Bengal, with the mind of Europe, through the medium of the English language and its literature.

A great period of intellectual and spiritual ferment, and earnest and active desire to find her own soul— this was what made its advent in India, when the effete and decadent states of India came in conflict with the British and were receding into

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the background. These Indian states were leaving the arena entirely to the foreigners from beyond the seas, with their superior knowledge and organization and intellectual vigour and *elan*. The story is quite easy to follow. Intelligent people belonging to the upper classes, particularly in Bengal, where the English were first established as the ruling power after Plassey in 1757, were listless, and they were unhappy with the state of affairs in their own state and country. They found the Englishman in India forging ahead and easily acquiring a superior place. "What bread doth Caesar eat that he became so great?" - this was the question which filled the mind of the thinking Indians : and the answer was, their knowledge- the science and intellect of Europe, and their power of organisation. They were anxious to get a share of this knowledge which was the basis of their power, and they realised that they could have it only through the learning- the science and the humanities- of Europe, which then could come to them through the medium of the English language alone. Thus the coming of the English language acted as a sort of a magic wand to rouse the spirit of India.

The English people after they came to power were not at first very much interested in giving education of any sort to the Indians - unless it was along their own traditional lines, through Persian and through Sanskrit. Nobody at that time thought it seriously of bringing education to the masses, not even the people of Europe in their own countries. So, naturally, even after peace and order were preserved, under the domination of the English, education of the people was not the immediate concern of the English ruler in India. But it was the Indians themselves who wanted to know and to train themselves up for the altered

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conditions of modern life, as these presented themselves before them at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Through Hindu enterprise, the first great institution to teach English and to bring in the European system of training to Indian youth - the Hindu College was started in Calcutta in 1817. This was an epoch-making event, and it began to prepare the cultured and thinking people of India for the great role they had to play in bringing India in line with the rest of the world.

The first 50 years from 1800 to 1850, presented a stage of preparation, during which a number of eminent pioneers came into the field. They were mostly in Bengal, and some of them were also in Bombay as well as in Madras. There was one great man in Jhansi - Raghunath Hari Nevalkar, Governor of Jhansi under the Maharashtrian ruler the Sindhia from 1765 to 1796, who before 1780 did a most wonderful thing - quite unexpected and unheard of in his age, by teaching himself English and trying to learn European sciences through the medium of a work like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which came out in 1778 in its second edition. He had realised that the pre-eminence of the English and other Europeans in the political and economic domains of India was due to their superior knowledge of science and technology, and he wanted to make this knowledge available easily to his own people - for their intellectual and economic as well as military uplift. But somehow after he was removed from his position as Governor of Jhansi, his pioneer attempts failed, and the scientific laboratory (the first of its kind in India) and the extensive library and an observatory he had built at Jhansi were dispersed or destroyed. But it was in Bengal that the greatest amount of progress in this

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line was made, and this benefitted not only the people of Bengal but also that of the whole of India. Other provinces took up the task which Bengal intellectuals had started, and we have, particularly during the second half of the 19th century, a new awakening for the whole of India centering around the study of English and its literature and the European Humanities and Sciences.

During this period of preparation up to about 1850, we have in Bengal a number of great thought-leaders whose influence was pan-Indian. We have in the first instance a man like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, aptly described as "the Father of Modern India." Then we have a great Sanskrit scholar, and an orthodox Hindu too, like Raja Radhakanta Deva, who was a great educationist and a compiler of that very famous Sanskrit lexicon, the *Sabda-kalpa-druma*. Then there was Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, who aimed, as much as Ram Mohan Roy, to broaden the Indian mind and spirit by grafting on it English education side by side with the traditional Sanskrit studies. They were all great men in different walks of life - not only in education, but also in social reform and progress as well as in nationalistic feeling and patriotic fervour. The second half of the 19th century has been unique for India, and for the whole of Asia, too; and if we look upon human intellectual endeavour all over the world as a single entity, this intellectual awakening of India has also had its great significance and its repercussions on the intellectual life of humanity at large. This is now being slowly recognised in all the domains of life.

After the initial period of preparation, so to say, the active transformation of the Indian mind started, and was accomplished

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to a very large extent during the second half of the 19th century. Particularly during these twenty-five fateful years, from 1850 to 1875, Bengal, and with her the contiguous provinces of Eastern India, though to a much lesser extent, produced a galaxy of eminent men, some of them were quite geniuses of an international character - in the different walks of life, intellectually and spiritually particularly. We have quite a long series of writers and thinkers, poets and novelists, historians and essayists, artists and scientists; and in number and in importance they would be hard to match anywhere in the world, in any period of the world's history, when we think that during these 25 years - leaving aside the times before 1850 and also after 1875, we have had men like Haraprasad Sastri (1853). Bipinchandra Pal (1855), Asutosh Chaudhuri (1858), Jagadishchandra Bose (1858), Praphullachandra Ray (1860), Akshaykumar Baral (1860), Akshaykumar Maitreya (1861), Rabindranath Tagore (1861), Swami Vivekananda (1862), Dwijendralal Roy (1863), Kedarnath Banerji (1863), Ramendra Sundar Trivedi (1864), Kamini Ray (1864), Asutosh Mookerjee (1864), Kshirod Chandra Vidyavinod (1864), Ramananda Chatterji (1865), Hirendranath Datta (1868), Pramatha Chaudhuri (1869), Abanindranath Tagore (1871), Prabhat Kumar Mukherji (1873), and the great Sarat Chandra Chatterji (born a year later, 1876). Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864) can certainly be reckoned as one of this illustrious band, although he belonged to Assam and wrote in Assamese. He was a great link between Assam and Bengal. Prior to 1850, we note the advent of such great sons of Bengal and India as Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820), Akshaykumar Dutta (1820), Rajendralal

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Mitra (1822), Maikel Madhusudan Datta (1824), Bhudeva Mukherji (1825), Rangalal Banerjee (1827), Dinabandhu Mitra (1830), Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836), Bankimchandra Chatterji (1838), Hemchandra Banerji (1838), Dwijendranath Tagore (1840), Girishchandra Ghose (1844), Kaliprasanna Sinha (1845), Nabinchandra Sen (1847), Rameshchandra Datta (1848), Rajkrishna Ray (1849), and others.

During the present decade (1960-1970), we are now celebrating one or more centenaries of our great men every year. We are reminded of Periclean Athens and Elizabethan London when we think of the literary and intellectual development in Calcutta during the third and fourth quarters of the 19th century.

Bengal naturally, with Calcutta as the centre of British rule and British power and British culture in India, took the lead in this matter, and the intellectuals of Bengal were in the forefront of this new development. What is now Uttar Pradesh (or United Provinces of Agra and Oudh) was known as the North-Western provinces of Bengal, and Bengal comprised not only Bengal proper but also Bihar and Orissa as well as Assam; and even when an extended Assam was separated from Bengal in 1874, under a Chief Commissioner, it became just a pendant to Bengal. The people of the North-Western Provinces were not so very much interested in the intellectual ferment which permeated Bengal. But with Banaras as one of their centres, the people of the North-Western provinces, particularly in the eastern districts, all looked upon Calcutta as their ultimate source of inspiration in intellectualism and of progress in modernism. Panjab was still under the Sikhs right up to 1848; and though in Western U. P. and Panjab as well as the states of Rajputana

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and Madhya Pradesh (Central Provinces) the progress towards modernism was very slow, owing to the absence of the leaven of English, the intellectuals of the North-Western Provinces throughout the whole of the second period, the 19th century, as well as of Orissa and Assam were closely linked with those of Bengal. Through some thoughtless mistake, both in a knowledge of the realities and in state-craft, the Bengali language was made the medium of administration and education in both Assam and Orissa, which were looked upon as parts of Bengal. This mistake was rectified later on - but from 1826 to 1873, the administrative languages for the Assamese people were English and Bengali, and Assamese children at school were taught through the Bengali language. Owing to the closeness of these two languages to each other, and because it was a Government order, the Assamese people and Assamese students accepted Bengali, but from the beginning this was under protest which grew in volume as the years passed. Similar was also the case of Orissa. But the fact of the thing was that almost right down to the end of the 19th century, the mental mould of three generations of Assamese and Orissan young men who were mostly educated in Calcutta, or through the English language (with Bengali in the offing), in Gauhati and Cuttack, was the same as that of the Bengalis. They never considered themselves to be Bengalis, certainly; and they were conscious of their separate linguistic and cultural entity as they had their sense of duty to their own past history which was different from that of Bengal: Assam was virtually independent up till 1824, and Orissa was under the Marathas up to the year 1803, while Bengal came under the British in 1757, having been under the Turks and

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Afghans and Moguls from North India from the 13th century to the middle of the 18th.

The intellectual atmosphere and the cultural *milieu* which gave to Bengal and India the giants of Bengali literature during the second half of the last century also gave to Assam its greatest personality in modern Assamese literature, the real builder of modern Assamese literature in all its various aspects, namely, Lakshminath Bezbaroa. He was not alone in this. He had some peers of his own in the field; and they also nobly supported the development of the intellectual life and of the literature and culture of Assam. Similarly, in Orissa also there were the creators of modern Oriya literature whose names (like those of Gauri Sankar Ray, the journalist, Radhanath Ray, the poet, Madhusudan Rao, the poet, and Phakir Mohan Senapati, poet and novelist) are as illustrious as those of Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Maikel Madhusudan Datta, Ramesh Chandra Datta and Girish Chandra Ghosh and the rest in Bengal. So far as the North-Western Provinces are concerned, we have among other names, slightly less illustrious, that of the great Bharatendu Harish Chandra, who was the real builder of a modern and a national literature using the Hindi language; and Bharatendu can also be called another great personality in the domain of Indian literature in Eastern India during the second half of the 19th century.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa was thus an illustrious son of India, and a member of the galaxy of the great men and women who raised high the name of India during the last century. Although the Bengali people, by virtue of their numerical preponderance and their first response to the culture of Europe, dominated

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the scene in Eastern India, Assam and Orissa were equally associated as parts of Eastern India in this intellectual revival and literary and artistic, cultural and spiritual renaissance. When Lakshminath started his schooling in Assam, for over a generation the Assamese- speaking people were being brought closer to Bengails by their being made to have their schooling through the Bengali language, and not through their mother-tongue Assamese. This was a great evil, but not an unmixed evil. It meant, what was very important for the cultural building-up of the Assamese men and women, a closer participation in the wider intellectual life of the numerically bigger people who belonged to the same linguistic circle. Although Assamese history was different and the Assamese way of life had also its independent development from that of Bengal, yet there was their common heritage of Hindu culture and Hindu way of life, Hindu religion and Hindu philosophy, which transcended all linguistic and provincial differences. In any case, in spite of the righteous protest against the enforcing of Bengali as the language of the school in Assam, there was no difficulty in co-operating with the Bengalis and participating in a wider cultural life which embraced specially Eastern India.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa in this way picked up Bengali from his very early age. But while in Assam, as a sensitive boy with an artistic soul as well as a penetrating vision, he easily became alive to the great and good things in the social and cultural life of Assam. He belonged to the Assamese *elite*, being born in an exalted and well-to-do Brahman family which was distinguished for its Sanskrit learning and skill in Hindu medicine, besides being fully responsive to the call of the *Vaishnava* religion which

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had become the most profound influence in Assamese life. It was the faith of the Mahapurushiya sect, which was founded by Sankaradeva and continued by his disciple Madhavadeva (15th-16th centuries). Sankaradeva was in a way a Chaitanya, a Kabir and a Nanak, all in one, for Assam, and his profound faith in the One God, who is Vishnu or Krishna, was one of the elevating forces in Assamese life. Lakshminath used to enter into the religious and artistic life of the *sattras* or Vaishnava temples and monasteries of Assam which were havens of plain living and high thinking, and of religious and mystic life and experience, where the Assamese Hindus found all spiritual solace. The atmosphere of the life of the people of Assam was still full of the memories of their days of independence. The Assamese were never wholly subjugated by the Muslims, and it was only the Burmese, during the first quarter of the 19th century, who raided and virtually conquered their country, and treated the population most cruelly. The surroundings of Assamese Hindu life were at the same time much more liberal and flexible than of Hindu life in Bengal, although among the upper classes orthodoxy was still a force to be reckoned with. During his school days in Assam Lakshminath had teachers, both Bengali and Assamese, and fortunately he had a Bengali teacher, Chandramohan Goswami, who was a very good master of English and a very fine teacher and disciplinarian, who also obtained the spontaneous respect and affection of his pupils. Lakshminath had mentioned that he had one great defect- he was addicted to drink, which was, according to Indian standards, quite an unpardonable vice, particularly in a teacher. On the whole, he received the best that was available for him in Assam in the

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matter of education. After that, as it was customary in those days, because there was as yet no strong tradition of a college education in Assam, he had to come down to Calcutta for his studies in college or university.

This stay of his in Calcutta for his college and university training was the second great turning point in his intellectual and aesthetic life. During his boyhood days in Assam under the affectionate care of his father in an orthodox Hindu and Vaishnava home, full of the fine atmosphere of religion and devotion which was so natural because it was traditional and spontaneous, he had unconsciously imbibed to the fullest the deep spiritual culture of Assam, and this he developed later in life intellectually by study and knowledge. He immersed himself in the midst of all the intellectual movements in Calcutta which filled the air. Reform of Hindu society was one of the most passionate urges of a section of young men of the times. The new world of Europe was discovered through English literature and this brought out the hidden forces of the Indian mind among both the Bengali and the Assamese young men of the better and of the higher intellectual type. It was frequently with the young men of those days that the English classics which they began to read in college opened for them the doors to the magic world of European literature. The same was the case with Lakshminath Bezbaroa. The beauty of English poetry first came to him, when he was reading at college as one of his text-books, Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics*. Then the Bengali literary renaissance was at its height. Bankim Chandra and Maikel Madhusudan Datta, Rangalal Banerjee and Hem Chandra Banerjee were already in the ascendant, and the great

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solar luminary of modern Indian literature, Rabindranath Tagore, had already risen to lighten up the domain of Indian literature and Indian thought.

Lakshminath plunged himself into this stream of intellectual awakening, and with two of his fellow provincials from Assam he tried to bring the message of this culture to his own people through their mother-tongue. The Assamese students who were studying in Calcutta— although their number was not very large— formed themselves into a Society for the Development of the Assamese Language (Asamiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha), and they placed certain high ideals before them. Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Chandrakumar Agarwala as well as Hemchandra Goswami began to start writing both creative and reflective literature of a new type in Assamese.

More than any place in Assam, Calcutta became the real centre of a progressive literary and cultural movement for the Assamese people; and the real modernisation of the mind of Assam began with Lakshminath Bezbaroa and his group. This group included most of the promising Assamese students who had come to Calcutta for education. The Society they had started for the development of the Assamese language and its literature did pioneer work of a most valuable kind. Under the editorship of Lakshminath, two journals were published, one after the other, and they ushered in a new epoch in Assamese literature - the *Jonaki* or 'Moon-light' and the *Bahi* or 'The Flute'. Assamese literature greatly turned the corner towards its modern development with these papers during the last decade of the 19th and the first two decades of the 20th century.

Lakshminath was a person with a great independence,

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and he could not stand any kind of injustice. While he appeared in the Law Examination, he was forced to start a case against the University of Calcutta for what was palpably an unjust measure. After the students had appeared at the examination, according to the rules of the university, when a certain percentage of marks was already fixed as the minimum for a pass, this percentage was raised by a number of marks. This was a sensational case started by an ordinary student from far-way Assam; and just to maintain the prestige of the university, Lakshminath was made to lose the case. He became so disgusted that he left the university giving up the idea of studying law, and took up a new profession, that of business. He took up the timber line with a compatriot from his part of the country, Bholanath Barooah, and for a long time he was in this firm of Messrs B. Barooah & Co. In connexion with his business he had to stay in Calcutta, and it is later that he on his own had an establishment at Sambalpur (formerly in the Central Provinces, now in Orissa) which became a second home for him.

Lakshminath was quite a pioneer in many forms of literature in Assamese. Of him it may be said, as Dr. Samuel Johnson had said about Oliver Goldsmith, that "there was no branch of literature which he did not touch, and there was nothing he touched which he did not adorn." A cursory glance over his published works would show the range of his literary output. He was primarily a *prosateur*, although he published some beautiful lyrics and songs which are unique of their kind in Assamese. He was also a humorist and a satirist of social life and social ways. He had a broad sympathy for humanity, and this sympathy was illumined by his good-natured humour. He

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created a unique type in Assamese literature, and that was the personality of Kripabar Barbaruwa. The Kripabar volumes are racy of the Assamese soil, and they are so very popular that they have given to Lakshminath the sobriquet of "CharlesDickens of Assam." He wrote one novel, and besides brought out two collections of folk-tales, and seven dramas. He has a number of penetrating studies of the great religious personalities of Assam like Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. His several volumes of serious essays, literary, cultural, political as well as religious, are also outstanding creations in modern Assamese literature. And above all, one of the finest books in Indian literature is his Autobiography (*Mor Jivan-Sowaran*).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa's life was not a sensational one—it was that of a highly cultured gentleman who was in business, but who by his pen brought about an intellectual and even a spiritual renaissance in Assam. His influence has been working silently, and with the passing of decades his importance is becoming more and more strongly established in the domain of Assamese literature and culture.

There have been some very fine studies of his work and his life. But there should be a study of Lakshminath in the background of the modern 19th century Renaissance of Indian literature and Indian thought. It has had a nationalistic background, although this renaissance accepted at the same time all the great things of Europe and the West which came through the English language and literature. As I have said before elsewhere, here we have both *Yoga* or Addition of Good Things from the outside which we require and *Kshema* or conservation of all Great and Good Things in our own Culture.

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To my mind, Lakshminath Bezbaroa's most intimate and most human work is his Autobiography. Here is disclosed in a very straight forward, and one might say, in a *naïve*, artless manner, a rare personality, which was that of a great and good man with high ideals in life and thought, and who was at the same time a most loveable man. The plain unadorned manner in which he has given an account of his marriage while a student in Calcutta with a niece of Rabindranath Tagore forms a most beautiful little romance in life and in literature. His parents at home in Assam were anxious that he should marry in Assam in an Assamese Brahman family, and this was the orthodox Hindu caste usage which he was expected not to break. But in Calcutta, through force of circumstances, which he has narrated with such unconscious art in his book, his marriage was settled with a grand-daughter of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore. His domestic life was most happy, although he had not met his wife before the actual ceremony of his wedding. The marriage took place on March 11, 1891 at the residence of the Tagore family in Calcutta, presided over by the venerable patriarch, Rabindranath's father. The ritual was a beautiful combination of the orthodox Hindu or Vedic rite (within the reformed atmosphere of the Maharshi's rigidly monotheistic Brahma faith) and the customary Bengali Hindu rites of folk origin. After the ancient Vedic ritual of the *sapta-padi* or 'seven steps', taken by the bridegroom and the bride together, with the reading of the Vedic mantras, was gone through, there were the *stri-achar* or "women's rites" and then the *subha-drishti* or "the Auspicious Look" (when under a closed awning the couple had their first look at each other when their eyes must meet), and the young

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wives and daughters of the house chanted the traditional lines—"Come, come all, let us welcome the bridegroom, all gold he is, by blowing the conchshell. See, friend, do not lose your heart under this canopy." Lakshminath has given all these details in his Autobiography, and there cannot be any better commentary to his sense of happiness in his wedding and in his wife.

His love and respect for his wife, and the fact that he owed to her so much for his happiness in life, comes out beautifully in this book. Lakshminath bore a most loving and sincere tribute to her personality, her character and her accomplishments. After years of married life, he noticed that his wife was never capable of telling a falsehood, and that she was held in great affection and esteem because of her piety and her religious character. And so it was remarkable, that according to her own statement, she had a dream of Lakshminath as her future husband long before their marriage. In this matter, Lakshminath got over his scepticism and indulged in a mystic digression in his Autobiography, which in its simplicity and sincerity is a fine expression of his exaltation of married love to a supra-mundane plane. It is remarkable that some of the sons-in-law of the Tagore House turned out to be most eminent men in literature and in life, like, for example, Pramatha Chaudhuri, the eminent Bengali *litterateur* (who married Indira Devi, the daughter of Rabindranath's second elder brother Satyendranath Tagore); Sir Asutosh Chaudhuri, elder brother of Pramathanath, distinguished High Court Judge and literary man (who was married to Pratibha Devi, the eldest daughter of Rabindranath's third elder brother, Hemendranath Tagore); and

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Lakshminath himself (who was married to Prajnasundari Devi, the second daughter of Hemendranath Tagore) : and we should also mention Krishna Kripalini (who was a young barrister from Sindh and who had worked with Mahatma Gandhi, and then joined Rabindranath's University of Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan in 1934 as a Professor, and married Nandita Devi, grand-daughter of Rabindranath Tagore himself, in 1936 her mother Mira Devi, being the poet's second daughter). It is significant that when Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, the poet's father, blessed the young couple after their marriage, he gave a golden pen to Lakshminath, wishing him as his blessing that he would create great literature through this pen: to the bride, his grand-child, Prajna-devi, he gave some lovely roses, and touching her head wished for her that her good name might spread like the fragrance of the flowers: and that was a prophecy from a sage and a saintly man which was more than fulfilled. Lakshminath has recorded this beautiful incident in his book.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa always maintained the independence of his mind and character and the dignity of his people. Married into the Tagore family, which was among the *elite* in the whole of India, he retained his sense of pride in his own family and its social and cultural atmosphere and antecedents. In this connexion, he has mentioned one little incident in his life (at two places in his Autobiography, which shows that he appreciated the position very much). His Headmaster in the school at Sibsagar, in Assam, was a Bengali gentleman named Chandramohan Goswami, who had a great affection for him. and he also had the proper respect for his master at school. His teacher met him in Calcutta after his

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marriage, and the master told his former pupil that he was very glad that he had married into the Tagore family. But he admonished him to maintain the dignity of his own family also: "Tell them that your own people are as eminent in Assam as the Tagores are in Bengal; and in any matter, do not accept any inferiority." This advice made Lakshminath very happy, and he made his respectful salutation to his teacher by touching his feet at these remarks, and he has made this observation. "How noble is the heart of a Bengali of the highest class!"

Lakshminath came most closely within the cultural orbit of the Tagore family by his marriage, and in literature this family was unquestionably the leading one in modern India fifty years ago. Its position was much further advanced by the advent of Rabindranath. It was expected that Lakshminath would be absorbed in the Tagore tradition and become a writer in Bengali. But Lakshminath had a very vivid sense of pride and affection for his own language and its culture and for the history and institutions of Assam. All this was while he took an active part in the cultural life initiated for Bengal and India within the Tagore family through music and the drama, through lyric poetry and literature of thought and power in all the walks of life. He always stood up for the separate cultural identity of Assam, although it was within the common East Indian and pan-Indian orbit. There used to be discussions which were conducted with some warmth with some young men of his wife's family about the position of Assamese *vis-a-vis* Bengali, and he never subscribed to the idea that Assamese was a form of Bengali. Rabindranath Tagore himself used to take part in these discussions. But when he realised that Lakshminath was very

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strong on these points, he did not take any further active part in these talks. Years later, when he met Lakshminath and his wife—his niece Prajnasundari— at Shillong in Assam, he made an observation, in a spirit of mock seriousness, that Lakshminath and others have detached Assamese from Bengali, and that has deprived Bengali writers and publishers of a large number of their likely readers. But Rabindranath fully appreciated the position of Lakshminath and the importance of the work that he was doing for the rehabilitation of Assamese and creating high literature in it. After the passing away of Lakshminath Bezbaroa in 1938, which was just three years before Rabindranath himself died in 1941, Rabindranath wrote thus: "When each province of linguistic area within India will have the fullest wealth of its own language coming out with all brilliance, then alone among these provinces the interchange of their best gifts will be complete and perfect, and in this way alone the bridge of unity based on mutual respect will be established. During his life this great service of Lakshminath Bezbaroa was a tireless one. I only express this wish that through his death may this great influence of his continue to have greater and greater strength."

And this has actually happened in Lakshminath Bezbaroa's life, and also after his having been joined to the Immortals. We should look upon Lakshminath as one of the great names in the history of the modern Indian literary and cultural renaissance— as person who was fully appreciative of all great thing in literature, not only in his own language, Assamese, but also in the sister-language Bengali, as well as in the great Mother and Nurse of all Indian Speech, Sanskrit; and moreover, as one whose life

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was an embodiment of sweetness and light.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa has been given by the *literati* of Assam the sobriquet of সাহিত্য-ৰথী, Sahitya-rathi, an epithet which is rather in the epic and heroic vein, as it means " a chariot-borne Warrior in the Field of Letters", like the heroes of the Mahabharata and the Iliad in the field of battle. I would like to give him also another epithet which would be quite in keeping with his pre-eminence in his own domain where he has attained immortality : বাঙ্‌ময়-দেশিক Vanmaya-desika, or "the Master and Guide in Letters"; or বাঙ্‌ময় Vanmaya-vilasa or "the Grace of Letters"; and we might add the word অসম, Asama, to it, to mean both "incomparable" and "Assam" অসম বাঙ্‌ময়-দেশিক or অসম বাঙ্‌ময়-বিলাস Asama-vanmaya desika or Asama-vanmaya vilasa.

Bezbaroa

Dr. Banikanta Kakati*

(Translated from Assamese
by Rabindra Bhattacharyya**)

Scholars are of the opinion that there is an 'atmospheric zone' stretching four to five miles around our earth. All the creatures have been sustained in the said zone. This atmospheric zone has entwined all the living creatures in one thread and helps us realise the undivided life-force existing in the earth. In the same way, each living sect of human race and society is also encircled by a 'thought-zone' and the periphery of such a 'thought zone' determines the mental or social advancement of that sect or society. Each and every individual is thus either helped or inspired by this 'thought-zone' to perceive the feelings of oneness in a society or in a sect, he belongs to. The more the periphery of such a zone is extensive and agog with ecstasy, the more it becomes the witness of the progress of a multi-faceted national life. When the sun sets, the planets and the stars show the pedestrians their paths by the reflection of their lights. It may happen that some races of men get extinct from the earth, but the glory or the reflection of the mental development of such races keep the society ever illuminated.

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National literature is the direct manifestation of this 'thought zone'. As much the national literature develops, so much we become conscious about our life, our race or the society we live in and also as an individual, belonging to that society, we relish the sweetness of community life. We also generally get inspired by the incentives, thinking that we exist belonging to a common thought-process. In accordance with the spirit of different ages, the people who have been helping in such a development of national life are being distinguished and glorified by adjectives like - 'sage', 'poet', 'philosopher', etc. and the society also does not lag behind in showing its eternal respect to them.

The purpose behind this Association is to show the collective respect to a man, the respect which has so far been shown individually enough, who, by his literary activities expands the periphery of our national life. Shrijut Lakshminath Bezbaroa has been continuously offering his selfless literary services to Assamese literature for more than a quarter of a century. He makes every Assamese, old, young and even a child to laugh and thus gives enjoyment to everybody. The people of Assam are indebted to him for giving them an unbiased, genial, free laughter in a life of monotonous existence. This Association will consider the various qualities and characteristics of his writings in future, but in this present attempt, the sole aim would be a tentative and a short description regarding the general characteristics of his writings, his place in Assamese literature and his contributions to the 'thought-zone', described above.

Bezbaroa is one of those, who, at the last phase of the nineteenth century, published *Jonaki*, a magazine from Calcutta, in order to augment national sentiment. His fellow workers,

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returning to Assam, having been influenced with the sentiment of the publication of *Jonaki*, and with that spirit in their minds, started to enrich the Assamese literature with their individual efforts. But there is no gain saying of the fact in the writings of none of these writers we find the same innate and intrinsic qualities and idealism of *Jonaki* and its transparent expression, except in the writings of Bezbaroa. The light of that idealism has influenced the life of Bezbaroa and in all his writings there is the reflection of that idealism and even today also we have been noticing in him the same progressive, idealistic undying development.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa has spent his entire life outside Assam. Even by his marriage also, he was equally connected with the outside. Since his completion of studentship, Bezbaroa had totally adapted himself to the thoughts and ideas and livelihood of the outside. Generally speaking, we might not have to find even the very trace of such a person in our society. We have seen so many people expressing their pride referring to their genealogies and thus asserting that they have visited foreign countries, though they live in Assam. But Bezbaroa is an eternal rebel against any sort of foreign influence. As some poet says,- "My heart is in the Highlands where I go", in the same way, wherever Bezbaroa may stay, his heart is lying in the forests of Assam, may he enjoy the sweet savoury with the Bengalis, yet his mouth waters in the sweet memory of *Kahoodi* and *Kharali*. The more he has experienced the foreign traits either in eating, living or deportment, the more his heart shows its strongest attachment to his traditional Assamese world. If we carry a flag of clothe very fast forward, its front side always flutters

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backward. Take Bezbaroa out of Calcutta and leave him in a forest of Sambalpur, his mind by repeated scrapping and scratching will tend toward Assam.

A profound sense of patriotism and love for his native land has been expressed through each and every word of Bezbaroa's writings. All his writings are replete with such feelings of patriotism. Through all of his writings, ranging from humour and satire, even to his spiritual ones, permeates the spirit of patriotism. His thoughts and language are the repeated practice of his attachment to patriotism. Patriotism is the governing spirit behind Bezbaroa's literary creations.

Creation of a feeling in every drop of blood with the sentiment of national well-being and glory is the greatest contribution of Lakshminath to the people of Assam and thereby he creates a national 'thought-zone'. All of his writings, beginning with *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, *Kokadeuta aru Nati Lora* to the historical novels like *Sati Jaymati*, *Padum Kuwori* etc. he describes patriotic historical incidents of Assam of yore. While depicting the life history of Mahapurush Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, he delineates every incident and their characters with a spirit of patriotism.

Consequent to his living outside Assam since his childhood and thus growing-up gradually in a totally different culture, an educated and highly talented writer like Bezbaroa might have written either colourful foreign love stories or horrific short stories and thus could have made the Assamese people thrilled and dumb-founded. Contrary to all this, he starts writing stories like *Dambarudharar Premalap*, *Jogora-Mandalar Premabhinay* and *Bhempuriya Mouzadarar Keerti*. All the real

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and possible pictures of the Assamese society have been beautifully depicted in a life-like manner in his writings.

As the poet sings *Atisnehe Papashanki* (Too much love begets too much sin), for a mad-lover, the faintest scratch on his or her beloved assumes the proportion of a grave wound. Bezbaroa loves and respects his motherland Assam so much that if an outsider inadvertently does something to malign or tarnish the pride of Assam, he leaves aside the tale of the 'Enormous Bird' relating to Assamese opium eaters, and assumes the furious stature with sword and shield in hand.

In the first-half of this twentieth century, some immigrants, now living in Assam, together with some outsiders have been trying to unfurl their victory-flag, faux passing that the Assamese people and Assamese language is a by-product (jargon) of the Bengali people and language. The first whistling crescendo of the victory-cry of this was heard in 1909 at *Gouripur Bangiya Sahitya Parishad*. Shrijut Padmanath Bidyabinod, the retired Professor of Cotton College (now Mohamohopadhyaya) was the President of that *Parishad*. At that time *Bahi* was an *avant-garde* publication of Assamese Literature. We were students of lower classes in High School at that time. We did not understand much about the logical side of the quarrel, but the serial publication of articles by Bezbaroa (mixing bitter and sweet) under the caption *Asomiya Gouripurat Bangaiya Sahitya Parishad*, gave us immeasurable ecstatic enjoyment and we were more attracted by his humour, rather than his arguments. We still remember his address to the President as 'Bidyabinod Bhaia', and similar references. Whenever we noticed Prof. Bidyabinod in the college, those remembrances came back to us. That very

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national respect and sentiment and his protest against the outsiders did not allow it to flourish long. After that, the *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* had another sitting near Kamakhya Hill, and, subsequently vanished forever. Bezbaroa was present in the *Asom Sahitya Sabha* session held in Dhubri. The article which he had read there expressed his self-respect and his intolerance against the *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* and his words diffused like sparks. With the publication of *Awahan* from Goalpara, the attempt of the outsiders to conquer Assam with their language came to an end. Bezbaruah's long and persistent endeavour became successful in the long run.

When the outsiders failed on the language issue, they started looking for new avenues and ultimately they sowed the seeds of dissension in Assam from one end to the other, which was once confined only in Lower Assam. They announced that the '*Vaishnavite Religion*' in Assam is a self-made (hybridized) eruption of the *Vaishnavite* Philosophy of Chaitanyadeva of West Bengal. They said that Sankardeva must be either the disciple of Chaitanyadeva or the disciple of Adaittyacharyya. They further held the view that if Sankardeva was not the disciple of Chaitanyadeva, then Damodardeva must be the disciple of him. The '*Mowamorias*' have written down with their blood that the foreign social rules, foreign pursuits are totally anathema to the Assamese people. Hence Bezbaroa again appeared on the battlefield. He tried to establish the purity (originality) of Assamese manners and customs, that our Assamese way of worshipping, our customs are not a camouflage of the immature ideas propagated by the outsiders, that our social manners and customs are appropriate enough to be our

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national culture and even though such a cultural heritage is not superior to the outsiders, yet it is not inferior to those of the outside cultures. He proved this by his meticulous reasonings and citations from various scriptures. As a consequence of this, there started the modern method of writing the biographies of the *Mahapurushas* and the contemporary discussions on ancient Assamese manuscripts about the social manners and customs etc. as these were inscribed in them. With the disappearance of the newspaper *Asam Pradipika*, published from Dibrugarh, the secret invasion of those outsiders on Assamese society and religion also came to an end.

Although these aspects of Bezbaroa's writings are fit to be discussed in the special convention of the Parishad, yet, we have slightly hinted here to explain it elaborately that his absolute patriotism kept him always ready to fight against anything that may tarnish the glory of Assam and Assamese people. He never hesitates to use the rude and harsh words to his rivals despite having good personal relations, if they happen to show any disrespect to his patriotic feelings.

Many people, misunderstanding this unison of truth in Bezbaroa's writings, often criticise him as of being narrow in mentality. But the basis of real criticism is that, an elaborate discussion is required on each and every piece of his writings and then to find out the general principle out of the whole. An unbounded patriotic feeling may surpass the limit but that does not suffer from narrowness. The literature of Bezbaroa is the glowing example of his ever awakened patriotism.

The second great contribution of Bezbaroa is his language. Unless there is a national Vernacular, the national literature can

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not flourish. At present, there is rarely any instance of literary style in Assamese literature other than that of Bezbaroa. The pure indigenous Assamese words and their appropriate use in appropriate places to carry forward an appropriate thought, creates a tinge of melody,— the examples of which are found in *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, *Kokadeuta aru Nati Lora*. A trifle matter robed in the language of Bezbaroa turns out to be very enticing.

Dr. Jhonson, while appreciating Addison for his style of writing said that, those who want to write pure, lucid and luscious English, should at first read the writings by Addison. Without excluding myself, to all the enthusiastic Assamese writers, I would like to suggest that, to attempt to write in Assamese, without giving proper attention to Bezbaroa's style will be an injustice to the Assamese language.

The third great contribution of Bezbaroa is the introduction of humour in Assamese literature. Humour, in reality, is rare in literature and, to say for certain, it is so much difficult to express it in literature that without original talent no writer can apply it appropriately. Without explaining the characteristics of Bezbaroa's humour, we may undoubtedly say that, that aesthetic quality by which the thought-provoking ideas find an easy inlet into our mind, which turns our studious labour into happiness, that quality, which transcends all the limits of aesthetic qualities and even getting indulged in it at the optimum level does not bring boredom to our mind, that humour of Bezbaroa has kept each and every sentence of his writings rejuvenated.

Ever awakened patriotism, magnificent style of composition and the genial humour,— with these three factors

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Bezbaroa's excellence has expounded in all the aspects of literature. Right from the songs, dramas, poems, *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, short stories, novels, to the portrayal of characters, there is not even a single aspect which his genius has left untouched. Later on, we shall discuss in which particular field of literature Bezbaroa has shown his all-round super-excellence, but at the present context, we must have to admit that he has given us writings in all branches and of pure enjoyment.

In conclusion, let us say that literature is but the sound and echo of thought and also the sound and echo of national thought process. The more the national life echoes forth the national thoughts, the more it remains alive. The sole objective of the Parishad should be to endeavour, so that the incentives given by the thought of Bezbaroa's writings echoes forth in national life.

A Note on Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa

Annada Sankar Ray*

It is now well established that Lakshminath Bezbaroa was born in 1864, four years earlier than generally believed. He himself was uncertain about the date as his horoscope had been lost. This document was discovered recently and there is no longer any scope for doubt.

When he left Assam never to return except for short visits and, in the end, to die, he was a young man of twenty-two, not eighteen. For higher education, boys were forced to make the long arduous journey to Calcutta in those days as there were no colleges in Assam. Lakshminath wished to graduate and take both the M. A. and B. L. examinations before embarking upon a profession or, if luck favoured him, go abroad like his elder brother, Golap.

Three apparent accidents determined his fate in Calcutta. He met Chandrakumar Agarwala, another student from Assam. Chandrakumar was a born poet. He made it possible for Lakshminath to contribute to literature by providing him with a magazine. Up to that time Lakshminath had shown little interest in writing. Apart from a few pieces of prose, mostly polemical, and one or two poems, there is no evidence of literary

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activity. He did not take seriously to writing until he was at least twenty four years old. With him and Hemchandra Goswami, Chandrakumar edited and published an *avant garde* monthly journal named *Jonaki* (the firefly). They wished to illuminate the dark landscape of Assamese literature and put Assam on the map of the literary world.

The second lucky accident was his marriage to Prajnasundari Devi, a granddaughter of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore. She was also a niece of Rabindranath. The proposal came, as was the custom of the time, from the girls' people. His family opposed the match and Lakshminath had no independent income of his own with which he could support a family. He had failed his exams. A good job with the Assam Government was offered to him but he did not like the idea of becoming a member of the British establishment. It is possible that he wished to remain in Calcutta where the doors of the best cultured society had been opened to him through his wife's connections. A businessman named Bholanath Borooah came to his rescue and took him into partnership, an accident which made him economically independent.

This partnership did not last, however. He carried on for a time by himself and then took a job with a European firm. The firm sent him to Sambalpur in Orissa. So it was that he was obliged to leave Calcutta and Howrah after a residence of thirty happy years. He had benefited greatly from the society of the brilliant galaxy of talented men belonging to the Tagore family and their circle of friends. Both he and his wife often participated in the cultural functions arranged by this group. He had written steadily down the years.

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He was pleased when he was sent to his own province, Assam, and moved to Gauhati. His work took him into the forests, however, and they were dangerous. Eventually he resigned and returned to Sambalpur. There he set up as an independent timber merchant. Once again, in his old age, he was forced to make a fresh start. He did not, however, write for money although he could easily have taken to the profitable text-book trade.

Jonaki was discontinued after a few brilliant years and Lakshminath was without a magazine to which he could contribute regularly for the next fourteen years. We then find him writing for Padmanath Gohain Barua's journal. *Usha* (Dawn). One of his articles got the editor in trouble. Lakshminath had poked fun at the Anglo-Indian community. The authorities were displeased. He decided to bring out a journal of his own and *Bahi* (the flute) appeared. *Bahi* continued for some thirty years and exerted an enormous influence on contemporary Assamese literature. Lakshminath had begun to publish his works in book form during the period he was without a magazine and he continued to do so as long as he was in Calcutta and Howrah. The number of his publications fell when he moved to Sambalpur. Was his creative energy beginning to flag or was life in Orissa less stimulating than the life of Calcutta? As he grew older his writing became more critical than creative, less secular and more theological.

Assamese literature developed along lines parallel with Bengali literature in the period between the two World Wars. The younger generation was weary and disillusioned with Romanticism: it was sceptical about religion. It turned for

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inspiration to Western writers, not to their own senior men. But Lakshminath's love for Assam and the Assamese was so great that it showed itself in every word he wrote. Distance intensified it. So great was his spirit that it came gradually to pervade the mind and heart of Assam, bringing him the homage of the whole province. Every visit to the land of his birth was a triumphal procession. Historians of Assam and Assamese literature now refer to the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth as the Age of Bezbaroa. That they do so does not mean there were no other great writers living during that time. There were. But it was Lakshminath who set the standard for Assamese in much the same way as Rabindranath did for Bengali. He kept it high.

Lakshminath was, like Rabindranath, a Renaissance figure. His predecessors in Assam were Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua. These were the men who modernised life and literature in Assam, welcoming the new ideas that were coming in from the West and the concomitant revaluation of the past. All of them were social reformers. In Lakshminath their dream was realised. His life epitomised their ideas of what life should be. His childhood was spent in the countryside of Assam, freely roaming her valleys. He knew the common people well. He had a sure touch in the use of their speech and knew some tribal dialects. The twenty-two years before he left for Calcutta were years of apprenticeship to Assamese life and language although deficient in conventional scholarship. Nature was the book from which he learned most. His return at the end of his life, to die on the banks of the Brahmaputra river, was like a tryst with Destiny.

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The Assam period was the bedrock upon which all his later achievements were built. He was less of a successful student when he left school than a boy imbued with a profoundly religious spirit. Yet his faith was no narrow doctrine. He remained a Vaishnava although he married into the *Brahma Samaj*. Towards the end of his life, presiding over the Ramakrishna Centenary Adalat at Sambalpur, he summarised his faith in the following words : "All religions are based on truth; and Truth is God. They are the different paths leading to God." He bore with equanimity the conversion of his youngest daughter to Christianity. Personally he was a staunch follower of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, the two great saints who are set in the heart of old Asamiya culture.

Assam was taken over by the British seventy years after Bengal. Western education was later in coming to it. The people had fresher memories of their unsubjected state. The Renaissance which swept over the whole of India, producing the India of today, came late to Assam, late by fifty years. Lakshminath Bezbaroa belonged to the third generation of Indian intellectuals. Derozio and 'Young Bengal' constituted the first. Michael Madhusudan Dutta and Bankimchandra Chatterjee belonged to the second. In Assam the first generation was missing. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua constitute the second.

The problem confronting the first generation was how to pour new wine into old bottles. Assamese possessed prose. Many other languages did not, and one had to be evolved before modern ideas could find adequate expression. The second generation had to fashion prose into a flexible and subtle

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medium for intellectual debate, to bring it closer to the speech of the people. The third generation spoke to the people in their own language, making the fruit of the scholarly pursuits of the first two generations generally accessible. Asamiya possessed a distinct advantage over many other Indian languages in this respect. The distinction between a Sanskrit-like *elite* form and a Prakrit-like folk idiom was never very sharply defined in the speech of the people, thanks to the Vaishnavas and Ahoms. Lakshminath Bezbaroa was closer to the common people than many Bengali writers of his time.

Modern Asamiya literature is scarcely a century old; modern Indian literature a century and a half. What splendid figures created them ! How many of Bezbaroa's books will be read at the end of the present century nobody can say but about his greatness as a writer and a man there can be no doubt. India can well be proud of him for in him was united an awareness of India's' identity and Assam's rich individuality. He was, at one and the same time, particular and universal. This awareness gave him a self-confidence which enabled him to be friendly with all, high and low, without distinction.

The Literary Genius of Bezbaroa

Jyotiprasad Agarwala*

(Translated from Assamese
by Dr. Sultan Ali Ahmed**)

Many people hold the view that it is difficult to perform Lakshminath Bezbaroa's plays. They are not fit for acting. But this writer does not favour this view at all and he is ready to demonstrate that Bezbaroa's plays will be highly successful on the stage. Apart from possessing all the technical things of a drama, Bezbaroa's plays are also properly endowed with those special inner qualities which make a drama successful on the stage. Let us first consider the question of stage itself. Because, without the presence of actions, a drama, despite being enjoyable as a literary piece, runs the risk of being unsuccessful as a performance. Action may be both physical and psychological. Generally, in plays with actions there should be more and more scenes with physical actions. It is quite evident to the readers that Bezbaroa's plays are not full of speeches, but of physical actions. Then come to the other interests, such as, story, grip, movement, suspense, climax, etc-and all these are abundantly there in his plays. Then, why is there such a myth regarding his play? Or, why his plays could not have been successfully staged

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when such attempts were made in some places ? The main reason for this is the overwhelming and all pervading influence of Bengali theatre. Our Assamese actors have been so accustomed with the style, manners, dialogues, songs and music of Bengali theatre, particularly the artificial dialogue deliveries of that theatre, that they have become incapable of performing in Bezbaroa's plays which are essentially Assamese in there dialogues, expression of ideas, realism and naturalness. When these actors perform in the Assamese theatre imitating the same style of the Bengali theatre , the performance looks like caricatures. If somebody utters this dialogue from Bezbaroa, 'Tuponi tuponi - phutukar phen xopa', in the manner of rhetoric-based drama of the famous Bengali playwright D. L. Ray, then it will definitely appear ridiculous, and such things frequently happen on the Assamese stage. That the manner of dialogue delivery in mythological, historical and social plays will be different from each other is generally known to all here but they pretend to be ignorant of it. The natural acting given by this writer in his recording of the *Jaymoti* was ridiculed by many, then , the acting in the play *Shonit Kuwari* was in the true mode of theatre-many people were found to have opined in that way .But we should all keep in mind that we should consider what kind of acting is required in what kind of play in order to create the atmosphere of drama, the illusion of drama. In our country, the theatre houses and other instruments can not be called very rich. Particularly, in the theatre houses, Assamese scenes, canvasses etc are hardly seen; (of course they are now seen in one or two theatres). This is another reason for the inexpressibility of Assamese beauty in the drama in addition

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to the negligence in acting the genuine Assamese drama. If an Assamese drama can be performed with genuine Assamese settings, Assamese tools, genuine Assamese decoration, make-up, and genuine Assamese dialogues– and if the Assamese actors can act entertainingly, then why Assamese audience will not get pleasure out of it? Particularly, when the playwrights have those kinds of play at their disposal. Of course, there is another thing– the corruption of the taste of the Assamese people .But now, during the last ten years there has been some positive changes in their taste, still Assamese people are yet to develop a chaste taste for the theatre. Besides, the taste for fine arts among our educated section is in a very nascent stage. We must keep out one or two exceptions here. In my observation, the common Assamese audience, both the higher educated and the semi-educated, do lack a high sense of taste and can not properly appreciate dramatic literature and specially music of first rate in quality. At times, due to the circulation of second rate things, they look away from the first rate things– and the real first rate things languish ignominiously after being appreciated by one or two. On the other hand, the second or third rate things assume the revered position in the *Manikut* (a high place in Assamese *Namghar* i.e. prayer house) and get the offerings from the audience, from that high position they hardly pass even a side glance to the first rate things, and due to the great bustle created by these second or third rate things, the providers of the first rate things choose to remain silent honouring this Sanskrit dictum, *Dorduro jotro bokta totro mouno hi shovonong'* (where the wicked is the speaker, it looks good to be silent) and finally they leave the *Namghar*. Such type of things occur not only in the *Namghar* of Assamese

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literature but in the temples of other literatures as well. The plays by Bezbaroa face a similar fate and the playwright Bezbaroa has the same lot. There are more people to appreciate the other aspects of his genius, but there are very few discerning critics to appreciate the true merit of his plays. The main reason for this is the then prevalent non-native trends, non-native tastes and a very low standard of cultural sense among most of the audience— and the Bengali dramatic literature,— mode of acting,— music, songs— were all very powerful and influential throughout the state of Assam; and surrendering to that mighty influence, the Assamese people, having no taste or cultural sense, are clamouring against the Bengali theatre or non-native literature and theatre all the time— or may be, as they are really battered by this onslaught, they are trying to get rid of it— but at the same time this very people have transformed the theatre stages of Assam into platforms for the propagation or proliferation of Bengali literature, Bengali culture, Bengali songs and Bengali mode of acting— and then they are also making an all out effort to resist it and then lamenting over it putting the blame on their own destiny! How strange! The exhibit of this strange manners of the Assamese people for the last thirty years must be called 'wonderful', 'wonderful' as Jahanara uttered in a play by Dwijendralal Ray.

If variety is to be created in literature then there is the necessity of a variety of experiences in the life of the litterateur. Particularly, if the playwright and the novelist, whose relationship is with the nature of the individual man as well as of human society—do not peep through the lanes and streets, roads and huts, lows and ups, ins and outs of the inner world of individual

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and society-then how will he acquire a broad knowledge of the society and the individual? That is why a playwright needs experiences of wider range regarding human life. However, if the given society or human nature lacks variety, then the picture of that society or individual will also lack variety. Generally, the common people, failing to notice any variety in the otherwise monotonous day-to-day life of the society, assuming the lack of any material for drama or novel, vigourously looks for it in their imagination with no result and then get frustrated. But the real playwright or novelist can discover variety in the ordinary, and then colouring it with his imagination can create a beautiful entertaining thing. That Bezbaroa is a master of it has been so nicely exhibited by his characters like Pithu Changmai, Torbori, Pijou Gabhoru, Chenehi, Rupohi and others. Picking some characters from the Assamese society who lead an ordinary day-to-day life, Bezbaroa has, adding some colour from his imagination, presented them before the audience in such a manner and with such qualities of dramatic personae that the audience has been greatly satisfied. Here lies the uniqueness of the playwrights-here lies their expertise. Dalimi is a Naga girl, so many Naga girls like her have come to our real life and gone, one or two must have also appeared in the plays by some playwrights,- but this girl with an ultrasensitive mind has made the Assamese literary wood vibrant with her songs- and this Dalimi is created by a playwright- if today we search out the whole world to find out Bezbaroa's Dalimi we can not find her, she will make us, like some mysterious beings, chase her in vain, but she would never appear in flesh and blood. Do we need to elaborate anything more on that Bezbaroa, the creator

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of that girl Dalimi? Let Dalimi go out, breaking the Chinese wall of the Assamese language, into the large world– you will see that her songs are reverberating in the literary and cultural firmaments of the whole world– you will see that this mysterious image has won the hearts and souls of the sensitive audience across the world provoking discussions on her. And you will also see that they have sent to Bezbaroa gifts like chrysenthimum from Japan, roses from Persia, Jasmine from France.

Here let me share a small incident. The sound engineer and the others who came from Punjab in connection with the making of the film *Jaymoti* were so enamoured with the character of Dalimi that– they kept on singing her songs without understanding the meaning of them. After their returning to Punjab, we had to go to Lahore, for the printing of the reel of *Jaymoti* in Lahore, and we had to stay at their home– then we were astonished and stunned to see that the small kids of that family were singing 'ota-ote -hale-jale o' more pokhili o', the song given in the lips of Dalimi! Their parents had told them the story relating to the character of Dalimi, made them listen the songs by singing, the children were impressed by the songs and they kept singing the songs, that too without knowing the meaning. From this it can be understood that the character of Dalimi, even remaining behind the veil of geographical limitations, has reached such a height; if she is brought down from the hills of Assam and taken to the plains of india, what will she not be able to achieve?

(Translated excerpts from Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's original Assamese essay "Bezbaroar Sahitya Pratibha".)

Assamese Nationality Consciousness and Lakshminath

Hemanga Biswas*

(Translated from Assamese
by Dr. Sultan Ali Ahmed**)

The Age of *Jonaki* in Assamese literature is a significant period as it marks the establishment of Assamese nationality as an independent entity. The Assamese people constitute a separate nationality in terms of geographical unity, history and culture. The scholars engaged in the service of Assamese literature and culture during the *Jonaki* Age were basically motivated by this spirit of Assamese nationality.

Assam was captured by the British forces from the hands of the Burmese in the year 1826. It was a time when the innocent Assamese people faced the twin dangers of the repression : by the Ahom monarchs on the one hand and the frequent aggressions by the Burmese. To make the matter worse, there was the British regime and its exploitation of the Assamese peasants. There was an armed rebellion against the British rule in Assam in 1830 itself which was led by Piyali Phukan but it was brutally repressed by the British government and Piyali Phukan was hanged. In 1858, Maniram Dewan, another rebel

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against the British rule, was also hanged citing his alleged links with the mutineers of the great Sepoy Mutiny of 1857.

However, the British government also created a new young group of Assamese people, who were educated in the Western system, in order to fulfill the commercial and capitalist requirements of the British. Besides, the British government in Assam imposed a uniform economic and political regime through the entire state of Assam which eventually worked for the unification of disparate and scattered ethnic and tribal groups and communities of the state. Simultaneously, the ideas of Western nationalism permeates throughout the whole territory of Assam and its people. The waves of the great Bengal Renaissance unleashed by the atheist 'Young Bengal' movement of Derozio and the Vedic monotheistic liberal *Brahma* movement of Raja Rammohan Ray also inundated the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. In Assam, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1829-59) was the pioneer of the Assamese Renaissance and the liberal nationalism. He was a student of the famous Hindu College of Calcutta (now Kolkata). He was the leader of the newly emerging bourgeois class of Assam, he first nurtured the dream of an Assam in which the steam engines would replace the fragile boats of the Brahmaputra, the brick-made houses would replace the thatched huts and cottages, modern education through schools would spread at every nook and corner of Assam. He is also the first architect of modern Assamese language and literature.

However, there was a strong barrier to the independent growth of Assamese nationality consciousness and separate identity. This barrier was the imposition of the Bengali language

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as the medium of education in Assam by the British imperialists such as W Robins, Inspector of Education Department, Francis Jenkins, the Revenue Commissioner of Assam. The logic behind their divisive decision was that : "Assamese is a *patois* of the Bengali language."As a result, Bengali was introduced in the schools of Assam from 1836 to 1872. Since then the struggle for the establishment of a separate identity of the Assamese people took the form of the struggle for the establishment of the Assamese language as a separate and independent language. Unfortunately, this struggle, instead of turning against the British imperialism, turned sometimes against the Bengali language and the Bengali people. The Bengali bureaucrats, settled in Assam and loyal to the British government, added fuel to the fire. The bureaucrats as such do not represent any community or people. But there were many among the educated section in Bengal who also held the view that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali and openly propagated this view - which inevitably created adverse reactions and repercussions among the patriotic Assamese people. The educated section of the Assamese people were loyal to the British at that time. On the other hand, the Christian missionaries were the great votaries of the Assamese language. So, the real character of the British imperialism was not clear to the Assamese educated section. However, the great scholar in linguistics, G. A. Grierson, proved it irrefutably that Assamese, Bengali and Oriya are three separate languages originated from the common source of *Magadhi Prakrit*. So, these three brothers are like the three children of a common mother.

Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and other Bengali linguists subsequently conceded it. The celebrated Vice-

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Chancellor of Calcutta University, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, established a separate department of Assamese in his University and himself came to Guwahati to find out and later appoint the first competent professor for the Assamese language.

During the period of *Jonaki*, a section of educated Bengali people nurtured chauvinistic ambitions which resulted in the conflict between the Assamese and the Bengali— but it was only a peripheral thing.

The pioneers of the *Jonaki* Age were greatly inspired by the European literature as well as the rationalist and materialist philosophy developed in Europe after the French Revolution. Simultaneously, they were influenced by the new trends and movements of the contemporary Bengali literature. Their centre of activity was Calcutta and these people, particularly Lakshminath, came into close contacts with many great geniuses of Bengali literature and culture. It is not an isolated phenomenon that Lakshminath Bezbaroa, who hailed from a conservative family of Assam, formed marital relationship with the famous Tagore family. The Brahmin community of Assam and Bengal nurtured a deep-seated hatred towards the newly emerged sect of *Brahma Samaj* – the Tagore family being a pioneer of this sect. Secondly, it was an unprecedented thing at that time that a marriage was taking place between an Assamese and a Bengali family. Without considering the question of caste and religion, Lakshminath married a bride from a Bengali *Brahma* family against the wishes of his father. This reflects the mentality of Lakshminath and also reflects the spirit of the *Jonaki* Age. The great Tagore family had ushered in a Renaissance in the fields of Indian painting, Indian journalism, Indian science

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and Indian literature and, therefore, the nuptial tie between a girl from this family and a genius from Assam was not an ordinary matrimonial affair – I see it as a golden confluence of two different cultures. During those days, under the shadow of the British rule, the conflict over the question of language between the Assamese and the Bengali was not the only reality—the assimilation of cultures taking place alongside was also an important development. But the Assamese critics have mostly ignored this particular aspect.

Dr. Satyendra Nath Sarma, a great scholar of Assamese literature and Professor of Gauhati University has written about the writings of the *Jonaki* Age in his book *Asomiya Sahityor Itibrityo* (A History of Assamese Literature) in this way : "During those days, the entire Bengal was swept by a new tidal waves of writings and there were novelists like Bankimchandra, Ramesh Chandra, poets like Hemchandra Banerjee, Madhusudan Dutta, Nabin Chandra Sen, Biharilal, the prose-writers like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bhudev Mukherjee etc. Our Assamese writers, along with the reading of English literature, also went through in detail the writings of the great Bengali writers, and, in the model of those writings, they began to write Assamese books. There is no doubt that the Assamese writers were influenced by the English Romantic literature, but the model which provided that spirit to Assamese literature was the contemporary Bengali literature of those days."

Thus, it can be observed that the Bengali Renaissance movement and the Assamese Renaissance movement went hand in hand during the *Jonaki* Age exactly like the previous *Arunoday* Age.

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At the same time, we must take into account the richness of Assamese folk literatures, historical literatures and the Vaishnavite literatures belonging to the period of Sankardeva, and his predecessors and successors. This great legacy also came handy for the Assamese language in its struggle against extinction and for its reinstatement. Bezbaroa's life and literary works best reflect the intensity of that struggle. That struggle was the struggle for the protection of a nationality. But it was not negative, this struggle was a pursuit of self-establishment and self expansion. There was stimulation in it for creating new literature, new diction. It seems that Bezbaroa took up the pen to arouse the nationality consciousness, to discover the spirit of Assamese nationality. To fulfill this great mission, he penned drama, prose-pieces, poetry and finally he made him Kripabar Barua, the unrivalled master in irony, satire and ridicule. In his preface to the play *Chakradhwaj Simha*, he wrote : "The main objective of writing this book is to spread the past glorious saga of Assam among the present day Assamese people- not to earn literary reputation by writing a play."

He did not write anything craving the good reputation of a writer - he wrote in order to arouse the nationality consciousness among the Assamese people through Assamese language and literature.

(Translated excerpts from the original Assamese article.)

An Outline of Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Life

Dr. Maheswar Neog*

Once upon a time a brahman Vaishnava from ancient Kanyakubja travelled all the way to Asama, the kingdom of the Ahoms in North-eastern India. He was no other than Kalibar, who was a profound scholar in the Vedas and in Ayurveda. His learning created a sensation when he made his appearance in the capital of Svargadeva Jayadhvasimha (1648-63), who hastened to appoint the brahman to the office of Bejbaruva (anglicised as Bezbaroa) or Chief Royal Physician and to make him munificent land grants. Kalibar's descendants continued to enjoy that high position in a happy succession.

Towards the end of Ahom rule in Assam, in the year 1813 was born Dinanath, son of the Chief physician of the monarch, Chandrakantasimha (1810-18) at Jorhat, the last capital of independent Assam. As Dinanath grew up to be a bright young man, there came the "breaking of nations". The Ahom state for some time (1819-24) occupied by the Burmese, passed surreptitiously into the hands of the British in 1826. Purandarasimha, who was king for a brief spell (1818-19) was dethroned, but was recognised as Raja of the eastern part of the

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country against the payment of an annual tribute of Rs. 50,000. Dinanath met Purandara at Gauhati at this juncture and got the appointment as Bezbaroa, and he was also put in charge of Civil Sheresta. When soon the East India company finally took over the land in 1837 from Purandara, Dinanath was made, first, Civil Mahafez and, then, Civil Sherestadar. In 1861 he became Munsiff and Deputy collector at Nowgong, moved to Barpeta in 1864, then to Tezpur in 1867, then to North Lakhimpur, and still then to Gauhati. In 1871 the designation of Munsiff was changed to Extra Assistant; and it was from this office that Dinanath Bezbaroa retired in 1873 to settle down in his original home town of Sibsagar. In 1895 as he saw his own end fast approaching, he made his way to the Vaishnava temple at Kamalabari on the Majuli island of the Brahmaputra, where he passed away peacefully surrounded by his *guru* and monks of the college.

It was the full-moon evening of Lakshmi-purnima of 1864, all bright and beautiful. The large merchandise boats carrying Dinanath Bezbaroa, his family and attendants up the Brahmaputra from Nowgong to Barpeta, were moored against a sand-bank in a small place, Ahatguri. The small sons of Bezbaroa were frolicking on the sand washed by the clear autumnal moonlight, where their joy was raised to a rollicking point by the first cry of a tiny little brother, for Bezbaroa's second wife (he like the Dangariyas or dignitaries of old having two wives), Thaneswari, gave birth to a beautiful baby, to be named Lakshminath because he came into the world on the day of Lakshmi-purnima.

Lakshminath had an altogether wonderful childhood at

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Barpeta, so famous as the place of the great activities of the Assamese saint-poets, Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva, and for the famous Vaishnava temples set up there by these two and other saints; at Tezpur, legendarily held to be the capital of Banasura and the home of the first ever Indian artist, Chitrlekha, a superbly beautiful town with undulating landscape wherever you cast your eyes and with specimens of ancient sculpture and architecture lying scattered here and there; and at North Lakhimpur with its sweet sylvan grandeur. At Tezpur the Bezbaroa family was joined by an old relative of theirs, Grandpa Ravi. The young Lakshminath listened with rapt attention to the grandma's tales told by this grandpa as of such folk-tales (sadhu-katha) he was a veritable haversack never to be emptied. This certainty made a very deep impress on the child, who grew up in later years to give us two fine collections of tales, calling them Grandma's Tales (1912) and Grandpa's and Grandson (1913). Let us also remember here that Lakshminath became the father of the Assamese short story under modern influences. At Lakhimpur he took great delight in paying constant visits to a maker of clay icons, who made Lakshminath believe that the pigments he used came from the evening clouds, and who presented him with a clay-made whistle. His another regular haunt was the house of a goldsmith, who led him to imagine that the chiselled features of his little daughter was a piece of handiwork of the smithy. All these childhood experiences helped to fashion the mind of Lakshminath in an artistic frame. At Lakhimpur he had his *vidyarambha*, but the primer he had to struggle with was in Bengali, for Assamese was yet to be recognised as a language at all by the British administration.

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Dinanath Bezbaroa set up an English school at the place for the benefit of his own sons and other local children. Another influence came powerfully to work on Lakshminath— that of Vaishnavism and its literature. His father was a devout Vaishnava and used constantly to receive monks from the Kamalabari-sattra (Sattra is a math or temple or monastery as in this particular case) as guests, who performed music and traditional dramas in a grand way. The whole bhakti literature of Sankaradeva and others and the rich culture it all stood for became the atmosphere of the house, Lakshminath was born to it.

This Vaishnava atmosphere thickened when Dinanath Bezbaroa retired from Government service and made his permanent residence at Sibsagar. Now reading in the local High English School, Lakshminath passed his time more on the day-long prayer services or outdoors than in the school plus on the reading desk at home. The precocious youth sometimes stole away from his playmates to pore over ancient folios of bhakti texts. It is no wonder, therefore, that he became the most zealous and effective exponent of the Sankaradeva movement in his time. True, that he took more time than usual in taking his Entrance Examination with success, which he did in 1886 and secured a Government scholarship for further education.

Dinanath Bezbaroa had the good number of thirteen sons and six daughters. Among Lakshminath's brothers are Golapchandra, who had his medical education in the U.K., worked as a Civil Surgeon in South America for sometime and then returned to be Medical Officer of the Calcutta Corporation; Govindachandra, was a renowned educationist, and Brajanath, a Kaviraja of great repute and a public figure too.

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Lakshminath came to Calcutta and read in Ripon, City and General Assembly (now, Scottish Church) Colleges, where, however, he did not have a brilliant career. He passed the First Arts Examination in 1888 and had his B. A. in 1890. All this was very much colourless, but what was colourful is the fact that the youngman's mind was opened to two very potent influences : one, the Romantic literature of England's early nineteenth century and, second, the literary world of Calcutta, which was pulsating under that influence and became a nest of singing birds and a busy home of prattling story-tellers and strutting playwrights. Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats and Byron, Michael Madhusudan, Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, Dwijendralal and Rabindranath created constant throbs in the mind of the youth. The new trends of Nationalist Consciousness also had its effect on him so that when the Commissioner and Chief Commissioner of Assam twice offered him a civilian's job, he did twice refuse. Much inspired by the galaxy of brilliant British and Indian advocates of the Calcutta High Court, he developed the ambition of becoming a great lawyer. He joined the Law Classes at Ripon College and attended postgraduate classes in English at Presidency College. The High Court became a place of his daily pilgrimage. But Lakshminath's big dream was shattered when he could not get the pass in the B. L. Examination on account of the University's raising the pass marks that year after the examination, and found himself landed in an abortive litigation against the authorities!

Thwarted in his efforts to become an advocate, Lakshminath had to think of some other avenue than Government job so easy for him to have. He had already

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contracted an intimate friendship with the businessman, Bholanath Borooah, who had made some beginnings of a great concern dealing with timber, coal, etc. He joined Borooah's organisation with a cordiality but without any terms being settled between them. This gave Bezbaroa a good source of income, but it also meant a restlessness with moving from place to place, from person to person.

But Bezbaroa's intellectual life was much more significant than the commercial part of it. Already in 1818 he with his compatriots in Calcutta established an Assamese Language Improvement Society, *Asamiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, and early next year started a literary journal, *Jonaki*, with his friend, Chandrakumar Agarwala, as editor and manager. The Society had its plan and programme of bringing about a renaissance of Assamese life and letters, and that was put to practice in the journal. This enterprise of these youngsters worked wonders, and there was a literary movement, which ushered in an epoch with a very much conscious purpose.

Then about the emotional and private life of Bezbaroa. His friendship with two youngmen of the Jorasanko Thakur-badi, Sudhindranath and Kshitindranath, introduced him to the illustrious Tagore family. This ultimately led to Lakshminath's marriage in 1891 with Prajnasundari, the second among the eight beautiful daughters of Hemendranath Tagore (1844-84), Maharshi Debendranath's third son and Rabindranath's elder brother, who gave the poet a good grounding in Bengali in spite of the overzealous atmosphere of English education at the *Thakur-badi* in particular and in Calcutta in general. A calculated attempt was made by the

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Tagores to convert the hero of the *Jonaki* movement into a Bengali, but that only made Lakshminath a staunch Assamese, trying to vindicate the individuality of his language against onslaughts of the misconception that it was a patois of Bengali in a series of essays in Assamese and Bengali. The Tagores forshook all hope!

As the first fruit of their marriage a tiny little thing, Surabhi, came into the life of the Bezbaroas, only to go away and leave a deep scar on it after five years. Lakshminath names one of the collections of his short stories (1909) after her. He did not have a son, but took much pride in his three living daughters. Aruna (born in 1900) had a brilliant student career up to her M. A. and acquired great attainment in Indian and Western music. She married the brilliant Satyavrata Mukerjea, who rose to be Dewan of the Gaekwad of Baroda and, later Chief Minister of Tripura. Ritha Devi, the great Indian danseuse, is Aruna's daughter. Ratna or Ratnavali (born in 1903), the second living daughter of Bezbaroa, is a graduate and married Rohinikumar Baruah of Dibrugarh, an Edinburgh M. A. and tea-planter, and the director and producer of an Assamese film. The third, Dipika (born in 1908) after her taking the M.A. and B.T degrees, embraced, to the great initial shock of her parents, Christianity in 1932 under the influence of the Anglican Diocesans, and became a nun in 1935. Prajnasundari was a very much accomplished lady with a sound general and musical education, and a devout wife and mother. She is the author of *Amish o Niramish Ahar*, very much of a well-known classic in the subject in Bengali and *Randha-badh*a in Assamese. Bezbaroa and his daughters had histrionic talents too. When once

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Rabindranath Tagore produced his *Valmikipratibha* at Calcutta, Bezbaroa played the role of the First Robber, his daughters, Aruna and Ratna acted in other roles. Later on Bezbaroa produced this play at Sambalpur with the help of his wife and daughters.

Bezbaroa became a great force in Assamese language and literature. He made his first mark through a farce, *Litikai*, a rich extravaganza of boisterous laughter, a piece of consummate art, published in the *Jonaki* (1889-90). His later works, *Kripabar Baruwar Kakatar Topola* (essays in a lighter vein but with a purpose, 1904), *Padum Kuwari* (an attempt at a novel, 1905), *Kripabar Baruwar Obhatani*, and *Surabhi* (1909) marked him out as a powerful writer particularly in prose and a dominating personality in literature. His non-posthumous publications mostly belong to the years between 1909 and 1915. These were farces (3 more of them, 1913), collection of short stories, writings on the life and literature of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva (*Sankaradeva* 1911, *Srisankaradeva aru Srimadhavadeva*, 1914), three historical dramas (1915) and other writings. An essay, 'Anglo-Indian', written by Bezbaroa appeared in 1908 in a local periodical *Usha*, and this caused the ire of the Government, who prohibited publication of the journal. The editor, much dismayed, apologised and declared the withdrawal of the writing. This came as a shock to Bezbaroa, and in 1909 he started a new monthly journal, *Bahi*, which became a pronounced centre of literary activities in Assam. He remained its editor till 1932, thus steering the course of Assamese literature for a considerable period. His mature writings lie scattered on the pages of this journal, and a real assessment of him has hitherto

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remained impossible in the absence of a collection of them. Among these are his discourses, in the form of 'editorials' and under such captions as *Krishna-katha* and *Tattva-katha*, on the Vaishnava faith and philosophy. They constitute his masterpieces, giving the best in him in point of thought content, form and literary style, even though his humorous writings may have attracted a much larger audience. Some of his philosophical passages mark a high level of intellectual and spiritual attainment.

In 1933 Bezbaroa was invited by the Maharaja of Baroda to deliver lectures on aspects of Vaishnavism. It was a rare honour, for such an invitation was extended earlier only to such personalities as Rabindranath Tagore, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Sir C. V. Raman and Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar. Bezbaroa came and spoke in two lectures on the history of Vaishnavism in India and the *rasa-lila* of Krishna. These two lectures are included in the publication, the *Religion of Love und Devotion* (1968), which I have edited for *Asam Sahitya Sabha*. About the first lecture, a leading critic, Dr. Banikanta Kakati, remarked "It is so beautiful and penetrating in its simplicity. Everything comes from the intuitions of the soul like the simple and deeply significant writings in the Bible." Later, he delivered another lecture, *The Cowherd of Vrindavana*, to the Gujarat Division of All India Oratorial Association.

The business of Bholanath Borooah and Bezbaroa thrived phenomenally within a few years and almost touched Calcutta's sky. The tie between these two partners became all the tighter and smoother. But before long there appeared a rift in the lute, which threatened to make the music mute. The business relations between Borooah and Bezbaroa (who had gone so far as to put

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his name as L N. B. Borooah to identify himself with his professional brother) became strained the more and more till at last they snapped in 1911. It speaks well of both that their friendship continued till Borooah's death in 1924. Bezbaroa tried to build up his own timber business with nearly no success and laid his hand on this small source of income and that with no better results. At times things became so miserable that he had to meet his daily requirements by selling stocks of old newspaper. He was thus compelled by circumstances to take an employment under an European business concern, Bird & Co., in 1916. He had to work very very hard particularly in the forests of Orissa and Assam. In 1917 he made his headquarters at Sambalpur in Orissa, where he bought out a house for his family. In 1927 he was ordered to take charge of the Company's work in Assam, but that meant untold strain particularly because of extreme humidity in the Assam forests. He, therefore, left Bird & Co. in February 1928 and left Assam finally for Sambalpur, where at the age of sixty-four he started timber business on his own. What tremendous energy had to be exerted to carry on this lonely and heavy burden in addition to his literary activities and other worldly preoccupations till the end of his life which came a decade later. It is hard imagining how prolific a writer he was all the time and how he ran the *Bahi*, published from Calcutta (1909-1920), then from Dibrugarh (1920-21) and then from Gauhati (1921-32).

Bezbaroa was invited to preside over the first Assam Students' Conference in 1916. It was the first literary and cultural organisation of Assam. He was honoured by Asam Sahitya Sabha (established in 1917) as the president of its sixth session held in

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1924, and the Sabha also presented him with an address of honour, the first one in its history, in 1931. Some enterprising Assamese students at Calcutta formed a *Bezbaroa Samiti* in the style of Shakespeare Society, etc. When he came for a tour in Assam in 1930 he was given rousing ovations everywhere in recognition of his services, and crowds came from all directions to have his *darshana*. When in August 1937 he came, with some serious illness, to stay with his daughter at Dibrugarh, the prayer of his people rose in chorus to Heaven that he might be saved his valuable life. In fact, he recovered from the illness (duodenal ulcer) for some time and prepared to go back to Sambalpur. But Heaven shaped this part of his life otherwise. Bezbaroa passed away on 26 March 1938 and was consigned to the fire on the sand bank of the Brahmaputra at Dibrugarh.

Bezbaroa enjoyed a unique position among literary men of Assam. He has been called Sahityarathi, the great C.-in-C. of the Literary Army, or Sahitya-samrat, the uncrowned king of literature. Almost all litterateurs looked upon him as their master, and considered him as a sort of guiding star. Whenever people had doubts about some point in literature or language, culture or religion, they waited anxiously to see what Bezbaroa had to say on it. As his son-in-law, Mukerjea, has so precisely said "It is given to few of us to find, like you have done, oneself as the most honoured living name in one's literature." *

** This short sketch was written and meant as a preface to Asam Sahitya Sabha's Bezbaroa album, Chitrlekha (1968), edited by Dr. Maheswar Neog*

Bezbaroa's Satire

Dr. Prafulladutta Goswami *

(Translated from Assamese
by Indrajyoti Raychoudhury**)

(1)

It is observed that many educated Bengalis of the nineteenth century perhaps felt shy of speaking in Bengali, their own mother tongue; they considered only English as the gentlemanly language. Gandhiji waged a war against this inferiority complex of the Indian periodicals, or to speak differently, against the all engrossing influence of the English education and the English language in his papers *Harijan* and *Young India*. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya also severely satirized this weakness of the educated Bengali people.

The lackadaisical attitude that the educated Assamese people showed to our Assamese language pained the pioneers of the *Jonaki* era. In his autobiography Lakshminath Bezbaroa has written thus about the efforts of *Jonaki* in this respect: "The curious assumption of some Assamese people having English education got a jerk after the publication of *Jonaki*". In the preface to *Jonaki*, such self-styled gentlemen are thus targeted: "There are some people who do not assess deeply the very

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essentiality of our Assamese language and disparage it. Dear readers of *Jonaki* should try to realise how so many Assamese papers have had untimely death only due to the negligence of such people."

During the invasion of the *Maans* (the Burmese people), the Assamese people were about to lose their national entity; a sense of disharmony was felt due to the cessation of the unifying chord with which the royal administration had kept the diverse ethnic groups together. In the nineteenth century a group of enterprising Assamese youths realised that the solution to the economic and political crisis of the Assamese people lied in establishing a unique national identity of the people. And to that end, they tried to unify and arouse the Assamese people through mother tongue. As a part of this mission *Jonaki* and *Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (ABUSS) made their appearance. The vision of the ABUSS is stated thus: "□ the purpose of this organisation is to find out ways and means to foster the nascent mother tongue, to enable it to elevate so that it can compete with other rich languages and can bring pride to the people, and to raise it from the present ailing condition to a strong, healthy, sturdy state."

The above quotation gives an impression that these enterprising youths were concerned only with the development of the language, and nothing else. But to clarify such apprehension we may further read: "Those who consider the Assamese language an entity not worth the salt, raises doubts over the possible number of books to have been written. Following such apprehension...". It indicates that the distinct identity of Assamese language is a matter of prestige, a matter

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of national honour. Then again we find, "As different limbs of our body like the head, legs, hands are integral part of it and it is incomplete without them, in the same way, various books written since long past by our ancestors are the essential limbs for the body of our society, literature and religion. In the absence of them these three bodies will become handicapped or crippled. The gamut of the old books are the very evidence of the origin, growth and development of these three parts of the body."

So it appears crystal clear that the very basis for society, religion and literature is nothing other than language. No kind of development of a nation is imaginable without the development of the vernacular. Economy and politics have not been distinctly mentioned here but can easily be implied. So the primary objective of the ABUSS and *Jonaki* was to develop the Assamese language.

(2)

Language for Bezbaroa was not simply a tool for creating literature but also a whip to spur to make the Assamese people alert. Bezbaroa maintained till his end that principle of considering language as the foundation of society, religion and literature. In his presidential speech in the session of *Asom Sahitya Sabha* in 1924 he recalled the objectives put forward by ABUSS: "□today we have inherited the Assamese language, Assamese literature and a pure Assamese society and great religion." But just after that he switched over to a different vein in the portion under the heading "The Present Age". There we find the proof of how Bezbaroa used language as a weapon: "Then came the British and Assam became free from fear. But at the same time

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the Assamese language and literature faced a new threat from a newly emerged saviour-like police under which they saw stars. The clerks under the English King were Bengali people. They blew in the master's mind that Bengali was the actual language of Assam and hence it should be established as the official language. He attacked the Assamese compatriots with the same ruthlessness with which he attacked the Bengalis. The only difference was that somewhere his humour has taken the form of sarcasm. The character of 'Kripabar' was born in the second issue of *Jonaki*. The readers are aware of the frolics of Kripabar in the essays— *Kakotar Topola* and *Bhabar Bur Burani*.

In the above mentioned speech, Bezbaroa also dwelled upon the utility of satire. He has pointed towards the way Milton depicts the lewd court and Sankardev delineates the atheists in his *Pashanda Mardan*. Bezbaroa had a clear concept on the role of satire in correcting the defects of a race. In an editorial note in *Bahi* (Vol. IV, No. 7) he observed : "In the literature of every nation, starting from Aristophanes till today, satire or sarcasm (of course, not shrill shout) has a place of importance. There is no reason why satire cannot claim to have the same place in the Assamese literature. Of course the Assamese satirical character Kripabar may still be in a very humble position, but that does not mean that our literature cannot expect in posterity many more characters of the rank of them created by masters like Addison, Swift etc. For any literature and society to be free from its shortcomings, earnest debate is a strong instrument. But insincere or spurious ones are like hydra-headed monster. The more you decapitate it the more head it will grow—'though vanquished will argue still'. In such a backdrop satire is the best

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option. And it has always enjoyed a significant place in the literature of all the nations."

Another pertinent question may be like— what determines the validity of a debate— the logic or the expertise of the debator? Bezbaroa was no less a debator. A Japanese proverb goes like this— 'If you win you are the royal soldier, if you lose you are a rebel.' That implies if you win the war you have become the ruler, if you lose you will be treated as a rebel. Bezbaroa had *Bahi* on his side, and at the same time he was a debator with dexterity. So he became the royal soldier. Though all this needs in-depth research, it can safely be said that Bezbaroa's objective was to bring in discipline to the Assamese people and thus to create a conducive atmosphere for the proliferation of the Assamese literature. Moreover he wanted to expose those upstarts, so-called educated Assamese people whose hallmark was narrow-mindedness. If this be Bezbaroa's aim and objective, there is no reason to oppose him in the greater interest of the nation.

Some examples of Bezbaroa's satire are relevant in this context. In his contemporary milieu, Assamese standard language was a problematic concept. There was contention among styles like that of Vaishnavite scriptures of the Middle Age (mainly of lower Assam, sub linguistic style of the biographies, historical style of Sivsagar, Missionary style (mainly of Sivsagar). Books, periodicals and newspapers were also published in Sivasagarian style. The enthusiastic youths of the *Jonaki* era took this style as the model and made efforts to establish it. It happens in every nation. Due to certain reasons a particular language gets the status of national or state language. Then it becomes easy to establish it. Bezbaroa, along with many others of the *Jonaki* era accepted

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it as the standard language. But this begot a fierce battle of words in certain circles. The following paraphrase of his humorous poem *Kripabar Baruar Samarani* records this battle:

We are three brothers, sons of a blacksmith,
Got educated and now big bosses are we.
Let's make a new Assamese by dissecting its body
And run a business of its flesh. (*Bahi*, 4.1)

In the third edition of the same year, there appeared a cartoon depicting Mr. Makara (Spider) Barbarua weaving a cobweb of standard language. Though it is difficult to guess who the target of such sarcasm was, but it is clear that it was not conspiratorial.

(3)

Most of Bezbaroa's satire and sarcasm appeared via his created character of Kripabar Barua. Benudhar Sarma observes thus: "It is well known that Barbaruah was a fictional character by Bezbaroa. There was a peculiar boy in the hostel where Bezbaroa stayed; and nothing of his gestures and postures, food habits, dress code matched with that of the dwellers. There was a thin bunch of long hair on his back head, and he very often wore a 'babu-cap'. On his evening strolls, never he took any companion, spoke only English inside the hostel. Though, as usual, he took meals in the mess, late in the evening, he was noticed to take snacks and alcohol in Great Eastern Hotel or Bristol Hotel. He inherited his jealous nature from his father. Someone hung a portrait caricaturing him on his door and labeled with a variation of the first letter of his name. After some guesswork he confirmed it as the creation of none other

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than Bezbaroa." (*Arghyawali*). Though nothing has been said by Bezbaroa of the origin of the character of Kripabar, there is little doubt that the above character was his source. His sonnet titled 'Kripabar Barua' can be remembered in this context.

There are various types of satire. The plain and simple description of any act of social evil can also be termed satire, for example, *Pashanda Mardan* by Srimanta Sankardev. Sometimes there are elements of wit in the source of satire, for example, the character of the Doctor in Chaucer's Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* written in the 14th century.

And yet he was but esy of dispense,
He kepte that he won in pestilence.
For gold in phisik is a cordial,
Therefore he lovede gold in special.

The Doctor had a special fondness for gold; so he asks, "is not gold required for preparing medicine also?" In the same way, Swift in the 18th century hit on the pettiness of the human society through the dwarfish Lilliputians, while at the same moment provided entertainment. Sometimes, satire tends to ridicule, as, for example, what Bezbaroa observes about the undue debate on the position of Sankardev and Damodardev: "Sanakardev, Damodardev and Madhavdev, all three are great saints. Those who quarrel among themselves to establish anyone of them as the most superior are microbes. These dwarfs do not understand" (*Bahi*, 4.10)

For satire to be successful, it requires wit and intelligence, and the capacity for innovation. It is difficult to attribute these qualities to Bezbaroa's satire. His wit is noticed in the above mentioned speech on the Bengali language that he delivered in

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the *Sahitya Sabha* session. But how much of innovativeness do we find except in the character of Kripabar? A little bit is traced in the short story *Milararamar Atmajibani* (The Autobiography of Milaram). It is strange that Bezbaroa found it disquieting whenever he noticed any rustic or lower rank youth climbing the ladder of social hierarchy. What was the reason of his grudge against the characters like *Molok Guin Guin* or *Langoluchandra*? Bezbaroa, the lucky young boy from the aristocrat background, who had the good fortune of pursuing higher education in Calcutta, could not overcome his snobbery. That he did not have confidence upon the intellect and the taste of the people around him is evident in his interpretation of humour published in *Bahi* (Vol. VIII, No. 7)

Big 'Humour'

Every thing has a big version and a small version, humour too has every reason to be in those categories. Those who are not aware of the meaning of humour can be told that it is a taste for laughter. Any pundit of Assamese linguistics will trace the origin of this word to the Assamese expression-"hahi ou mora". Following are some examples which illustrate the big kinds of humour.

- 1) The *gaon burha* (the village chieftain) was walking with his wooden slipper yesterday and fell on the ground, ha ha ha (loud laughter).
- 2) Birahpatia said, "Well, Bhodo, you must be the son of that bloody one! (hi hi hi).
- 3) The rustic folk Birahpatia learnt Bengali and asked his wife in that language "Is the lunch ready?" His wife made a face and rebuked him for his nonsense. Birahpatia

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is a high positioned officer,— a gaon burha, so he took his wife's reaction seriously and decided to lodge complaint against this with the authorities!

4) The tail of my dog is cut, only a little bit is left. The dog was wagging the tail near me yesterday. I was amused to ponder, what would happen to it if someone cuts away that little bit of the remaining portion. The answer is expected from those who are devoted to dogs.

5) Yesterday the village chieftain had a tiffin of *gure-pithaguri* (flour mixed with molasse) hi hi hi. (loud laughter)

How can we assess this illustrative theoretical discussion on satire? It has traces of satire. It has cast aspersion on the lack of sense of humour of the Assamese people, at least till the third paragraph. The fourth one is impartial, but the fifth one is redundant. But all these are nothing beyond sarcasm. This essay is followed by a cartoon where Padmanath Gohain Barua was attacked. Bezbaroa wrote an essay titled *Anandaram Baruar Jibon-Charit* (Biography of Anandaram Barua), where he has created a confusion. No question would have been raised if he had attacked the inability of the Assamese people to glorify the great souls. But the essay is started in such a way that it gives an inkling as if it was targetted to criticize Anandaram Barua himself. Moreover, it becomes difficult in places to assess whether the author intends to create laughter or something else. Of course in some places in the biography he has given proof of his innovative wit. As for examples, where he has narrated the episode of Anandaram Barua searching for prospective bride in the late years of his life.

(4)

It is not clear why Bezbaroa provided so much of space to sarcasm in his writings, maybe he assessed that the inexperienced and naive readers of his times could digest only those things. *Bahi* did not prove to be financially beneficial to Bezbaroa, at times the subscribers did not even send their subscription fees. This situation also became the subject matter of his satire (*Juguli Kabyar Foujadari Gochar- Bahi*, 8.8) In the editorial of the first issue of the ninth year, he has thus commented on the publication of *Bahi*- "My dear readers, please understand well that we are not publishing on commercial basis! It is sufficient to say that the meager amount that returns to us is not enough even to clear the dirt from the eyes. The half of our subscribers keep themselves busy in finding ways out on how to avoid the payment of the subscription fees."

Kripabar does not ridicule always, sometimes he also authors travelogues (letters of Bezbaroa, No.4, *Bahi*, 8.9). Bezbaroa's editorials are generally controlled in tone, and the humour that is created there is really praiseworthy. Sarcasm and satire depend mostly on its proper expression for their effect. There are many pithy sayings in English in the form of jokes through which human characters and follies beautifully come out. Some examples of such jokes may be cited here -

1) An old lady is accosted by the border security guards while crossing the border with a bottle under her armpit. The guards asked her,- "What's there inside the bottle, old lady? Her answer,-" It's nothing but sacred water of pilgrimage." The guards opened the bottle and found alcohol in it. When the old lady was charged again, she

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replied,--"The miracle of pilgrimage, o son, it is the miracle of pilgrimage!"

2) A wicked collector of antique objects decided to sell all his collections and asked his friend,--"How much shall I get from these?" The friend replied-- "I am not sure, I guess it will be about three years."

3) Lady: Have you found it profitable to tend this cow?

Gentleman: Yes, the cow gives eight litres of milk every day.

Lady: How much do you sell from that?

Gentleman: About twelve litres.

All the pieces are not that much brief. For the proper expression of satire, the size of a piece has to be long. Again, satire becomes long lasting only if it deals with the follies and foibles of characters, as for example, *Gulliver's Travels* of Swift and *The Animal Farm* of Orwell. Bezbaroa of course has not created stories of such stature. Mahi Borah, Jagadishchandra Medhi and 'Popiyatora' have shown better expertise in this field than Bezbaroa. His *Amar Sangsar* (Our Family) is a satirical story. Here, Damborudhar is a young man educated in a college at Calcutta. In the very first meeting, he greets his twelve year old bride in a mixed Anglo-Assamese language and the poor girl is so frightened at that that she flies to her mother-in-law. This much is the basis of Bezbaroa's satire in the story. But it lacks the required quality of control. Satire is more appealing and successful when its target is public, rather than individual, as, for example, Bezbaroa's *Arzi* where he deals with the menace of *Kani*, a narcotic drug of opium. Only due to lack of control, sharpness in many of Bezbaroa's essays and stories has been

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blunted. I conceive, Bezbaroa chose satire only to attract the readers' attention. His only praiseworthy satirical work is *Kakatar Topola*, in which only two or three pieces like *Mor Janma Rahasya* and *Asomiya Jati Dangar Jati* are the creations of permanent value. In the essay-*Bisoy and Bisoya* (Position and Officer), he has displayed his casteism. Here, he has played with the change in the surnames of persons. But the issue of surname is not a source of ridicule, but of curiosity. In the history of England, we find the discussion about the royal dynasty with the surname of Stuart. However, Stuart and Steward are originally the same words meaning the chief of the servants. In this context *Bhomkorola* by Bezbaroa can also be remembered.

It is easy to attribute a title like "the master of humour", but it is difficult to claim that Bezbaroa had a high level of expertise in gentlemanly humour. Of course he brought humour to the notice of the people of his country. Later, Banikanta Kakati also followed him in creating satire under the guise of the pseudonym Bhabananda Pathak. When we turn our focus to Bezbaroa's work on Damodardev's religion and special dialectics, we understand his greatness in his study, knowledge and simple style of prose. Such writings are free from his typical egoism and narrowness of thought. Here he shows his effort on exposition and interpretation. In this particular subject, he was second to none during those days. Similarly, his autobiography is also an excellent composition. The racy and light humorous style of this book is something that should be imitated by others. In this book, there are satirical elements at different places, which are moderate in nature but equally enjoyable.

The Idea of Modernity and Bezbaroa

Nalinidhar Bhattacharyya*

(Translated from Assamese
by Shivajit Dutta**)

(Nalinidhar Bhattacharyya's "The Idea of Modernity and Bezbaroa" is a long critical essay consisting of three distinct parts sub-titled as "Bezbaruah: His Age," "Bezbaroa and the Idea of Modernity" and "Conclusion." Here we have translated the last two parts leaving out the first one. Hope, this won't trouble the reader to get at the main ideas and arguments of Bhattacharyya. The original Assamese text has been taken from "Nalinidhar Bhattacharyyar Srestha Sahitya Samalochana", edited by Dr Birendra Narayan Sarma and published by Publication Board, Assam. -Translator)

We are people of the East. It's easy for the inhabitants of the East to be modern. Numerous people here are engaged in search of the means of living. Here people are distressed, in pain, at the juncture of life and death. That's why people here should not turn into decrepit. To become insensate like abstract men signifies the lack of historical knowledge. Troubles will be

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more if our vision becomes self-absorbed. The narcissism of the current Western art and literature is the namesake of modernity. Under the grip of disappointment and sense of emptiness in art and literature, much is artificial and lifeless. The people of the East can't have such negative attitude. In truth, modernity lies in the temperament of challenge and resistance. Poet Garoslav Serfert, recipient of Nobel Prize in 1984, said, "If an ordinary person is silent it may be tactical manoeuvre, if a writer is silent he is lying." These words of the poet are true. If a writer remains silent even on seeing injustice, then that act of his becomes as guilty as lying itself. This freedom must be given to a writer. But, this freedom is not exclusively personal; it's connected with the whole political or social ambience. The writer of the East needs such freedom. He must speak for the people. His aim must be resistance and emancipation for all. Such is the nature and disposition of a true intellectual.

There is no denying the fact that we are faced with a crisis. Is it possible to co-exist with it? All ardours for the welfare of the masses clash somewhere and get shattered. Chasing back the clue to this crisis we will arrive at no other than the British rule and exploitation in whose contact our social and economic progress did not happen and though a pulsation was felt in literature and culture, it was also becoming estranged from the masses. In the absence of proper remedies even after the Independence, the crisis continued. The Second World War aggravated this crisis. Disorder, horror, grinding poverty, bigotry, lack of education, philistinism— these became big problems of our country. To the advanced countries of the West our country is a site for experiments on various things. They have deceived

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us through trade relationships. Providing out-worn machines and implements they have obstructed our progress. Multi-national organizations also have increased the complicity.

The people of the East must take a challenging attitude against such real indulgence because human personality here is faced with obstructions. Day by day deterioration increases. If people of the East and also of India can find out the fundamental causes of retardation they will understand themselves and the problems of preserving culture. Artists and litterateurs also must take an attitude of spirited resistance in place of the cult of sheer fragmented individuality. The duty of our artists is to establish connections between the contradictions of reality and the essence of the individual. The responsibility of the culture of the East is to envisage reconstruction in order to remove the pangs of realization of the perilous distress. Such sense of obligation is the source of true modernity. The meaning of modernity is a new value which synthesizes human mind with human history, individual ego with social ego.

The word "modernity" is ambiguous. There is a tendency in human society to label anything new as "modern". Many want to call anything as modern which did not exist before but now exists. But should we call it modern if it is the cause of crisis? Only detached and scientific analysis of the signs that emerge from the new events can yield clues to the qualitative modes of modernity beyond its temporal measure. In order to make the ideas of modernity clear it is necessary to analyze the tradition-related ideas also. Our enduring habits and customs are dominant in preserving the relations of the individual to our religion, family and other individuals. On the other hand,

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education or culture can give birth to new values. There are differences between customary behavior and value-born behavior. The customary behavior does not help in the assessment of modernity, but value-born behavior can lead us to find out the signs of modernity. Sometimes it is seen that old customs and modern values remain a mixed bag. What is tradition? That which remains intact in spite of the material changes of the society can be termed as tradition. In this regard, if the individual is self-aware instead of being self-complacent, this awareness will provide opportunities to realize which object in which field remains unaltered and what crisis it generates, and also inspire him to be active about it. Without awareness, signs of progress cannot be distinguished from signs of crisis. Mental changes should take place along with material changes, but this change is not possible for all, due to various reasons. In consequence, the feeling of crisis is not intense and thus progress also delays. That is why co-existence of different customs and values can be seen in the same society at the same time. When socio-economic and cultural factors give rise to novelty in the society, then conscious men, through comparison and analysis of old customs and new values, determine whether that novelty is progress or crisis. Such awareness in the field of art uplifts the standard of art and makes it more humane. What English poet Shelley said while declaring Prometheus' emancipation is humane and, therefore, inspiring:

Sow seed, but let no tyrant reap
Find wealth, let no impostor heap
Weave robes, let not the idle wear
Forge arms, in your defence to bear.

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Here we find the poet's sense of crisis and the connotation of progress. It is, as it were, a challenge against the capitalistic exploitation.

Our country is underdeveloped and in misfortune for various reasons. It is not comparable to the West. We know how the Renaissance in Italy caused upheaval in the whole of Europe, and, as its consequence, how in the context of capitalism's preparatory stage the ideal of individual liberation brought about mental changes. But the high tide of the first stage diminished into an ebb. The humanization of culture at the time of the high tide was seized by notions of economic achievements. Consequently, the values of adherence to life got spoiled. The artists entered the ivory tower. Bertrand Russell wrote:

"In the eighteenth century it was one of the marks of a 'gentleman' to take a discriminating pleasure in literature, pictures, and music. We nowadays may disagree with his taste, but it was at least genuine. The rich man of the present day tends to be of quite a different type. He never reads. If he is creating a picture gallery with a view to enhancing his fame, he relies upon experts to choose his pictures; the pleasure that he derives from them is not the pleasure of looking at them, but the pleasure of preventing other rich men from having them."

Russell calls it the philosophy of competition. Men get in on competition only for economic successes. The cause behind it is degenerated capitalism. A Russian writer comments on capitalism like this: "It is, first and foremost, responsible for the conception of the absolute supremacy of money over all other existential values. This involves distortion of man's humanist nature— the cardinal sin of capital."

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Owing to the distortions of human nature the writers of the West lost their genuine connections with social life. Shrunken in intense aversion they greeted loneliness, memory-induced affliction, and melancholy. Gradually it became an aspect of the modern mind. Previously such alienation was unknown to art. Gradually the artist, instead of facing reality, turned his back to reality and constrained himself in the shackles of narrow luxuriating. Are such conditions of the West necessary for the East also? Artists here must take different roles. Our country is also infected by the philosophy of competition. Nevertheless, India is not America. There was a tendency in our country to make literature universal. Now everything, it seems, gets confined in the chambers of the universities. Shankari literature was universally understood. It cannot be claimed that common people lack artistic sense. Various folk-songs, handicrafts and cottage industries of ours are its evidences. People's intelligence is almost inert now, thanks to the social system. Presently, there is no beauty, no joy in the life of the immense majority of people of this country. Poverty of both mind and money is rampant everywhere. The aim of art is to make the sense of beauty universal and practical. To do this the artist of the East cannot delink them from the society. He must create simple, beautiful and seriously purposed art which can awaken the dormant sensibilities. What is required for the process of artistic creation is a deep sense of crisis, an aesthetic and a mental effort to give form to the truth of life and the world in the context of the conflict with reality. Keats said: "knowledge enormous makes a god of me." Drinking the nectar of knowledge, that is, unveiling the golden vessel of truth, the artist himself can create

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and make others human. Keats seemed to realize this.

Capitalism, the cause behind individual liberty, nationalism and globalism, lost that liberal outlook because of its essential defects— exploitation and greed of power. All human values got destroyed. Bezbaruah was fortunate that he had not seen capitalism's dying-but-not-dead condition. In his time the degeneration of capitalism began in Europe, it reached the stage of imperialism. The English traders invested money in the colonies: cheap labour and raw material were the foundation of trade. Subsequent to the English appropriation of the state machinery, cultural clash, that is, the clash between Western and Eastern cultures began. Due to this conflict and synthesis the middle class was pulled towards the Western knowledge, science and culture. But in reality this inquisition of knowledge on the Western dais cannot be termed as a complete Renaissance. The commoners of India remained deprived of its touch. Thus it's better to call it a cultural conflict and its consequences. Performing his ablution in the wave of the Bengal Renaissance, Bezbaruah welcomed the Western culture and values and began to practise modern literature with his own unique talents.

The wave of the Bengal Renaissance entered Assam before Bezbaruah. Amidst the Assamese middle-class of that period— from Jajnaram Kharghariya Phukan to Anandaram-Gunabhiram-Hemchandra and also to the *Arunodai* — this conflict between the two cultures was felt. Attempts were made to widen the ambit of knowledge by organizing meetings, deliberations etc in places like Guwahati, Nagaon, Sivasagar. Newspapers like *Samachar Darpan* published from Kolkata gave rise to tremors in the middle-class mind. Anandaram Dhekiyal

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Phukan, the first man to wake up at the stroke of Western liberalism, encouraged Assamese people to make progress by "practicing trade and commerce" and by acquiring education. Gunabhiram voiced in favour of widow-marriage. Hemchandra Baruah learnt English secretly, published newspaper, and laid the foundation of the Assamese language by writing dictionary and grammar. They, of course, did not raise any question on the British rule. Only Moniram Dewan opposed the English. He caught a glimpse of the material changes, yet his sympathy was for the by-gone feudal age; he did not welcome the new.

Many perceive that the modern age was originated in our country with the beginning of printing press. This idea is not entirely wrong, but here merely the temporal dimension of modernity is expressed. The news-magazine, *Arunodai*, did set up the foundation of the modern Assamese language. It demonstrates that prose is the main vehicle of modern outlook. But, can printing press or composition of prose be pronounced as signs of modernity? We think, it can't. We may call somebody modern if he possesses the qualities of objectivism, scientific outlook, humanism, globalism, honesty, rationalism etc. Did the impact of the European modernity make us, that is, the people of the East, possessors of these qualities? We neglected the class of crops-yielding commoners of our country and did not bring them to the periphery of that impact. Ideas of the feudal age continued among them. Mutual contacts did not occur owing to inconvenient communication. Methods of production continued to be hoary. Consequently, common people remained in darkness. It's difficult to say that significant changes have taken place in Assam today. Of course, application

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of science and technology has been somewhat increased, but even these are employed in the interest of the rich class. Nevertheless, common people have become capable of thinking that science can improve the conditions of the basic necessities of living, though they are not aware of their duties. Due to the absence of a science-culture they have not been able to possess the said qualities. Same is true in case of a number of middle-class people also. Everyone today is aiming at economic success rather than humanitarianism. Here lies the need of political far-sight, but politics in our country is blind with the vision of vested interest.

Such conditions were noticed in Bezbaroa's time also. Not to speak about the common people, even the middle-class can't be said to have been modern in the real sense of the term. *Arunodai*, centre on which the middle-class culture took shape, also had both positive and negative aspects. One must gratefully remember the contributions made by the missionaries, but there is no denying the fact that implicit in these tasks were the two purposes: the spread of Christianity and realization of the imperialist interest. At the surface, the political interest could not be perceived. Though belching the stigmas of Hinduism they called the Assamese people superstitious, yet by describing the glory of Christianity they paved the way for new prejudices. The role of religion in the middle ages can't be disregarded. The modern age is complex, diverse injustices gain currency here. This injustice is like the thousand-headed demon, religion lacks the power to subdue it. Coming into contact with the West we got printing press, railways, ship, aeroplane, and industrial workshop. These infrastructural objects served more

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the interests of the ruling power than those of the native people. Though modern in appearance, yet in them lay hidden political or economic interests. The root of the missionaries' dislike for Maniram Dewan's opposition to the British was the effort to maintain the status quo. This, of course, we realize only today. The contemporaries could not see the role of the missionaries. They perceived that a subjugated country could not have any politics. Consequent to this, the Assamese sojourner in Kolkata, considering cultural creativity to be the main thing, laid the modern foundation of literature. Nationalist sense became the main source of this practice. This initiation of sense of nationalism was a pan-Indian phenomenon and this new feeling was ushered in by the introduction of capitalism. In the form of colonial rule and exploitation, capitalism in its structure, included the thoughts and perceptions of the feudal age. In this stage of history (the stage under capitalism of constituting market and applying capital in industry) the pan-Indian effort to organize market paved the way for entering into the age of capitalism crossing over the age of feudalism. As a result of this, contemporary avante-guard intellectuals stood in favour of pan-Indian unity, religious amity, rapid development of the productive forces, and organization of the country's internal market. Ram Mohan is such an example. It can be said that in words and manners of Ram Mohan, part of the characteristics of modernist thought was reflected. Same was echoed in the demeanor of our Dhekiyal Phukan also. With the policy of regional discrimination, pan-Indian unity has still been impeded and still the flower-gardens of Dhekiyal Phukan's imagination has not been realized, rather the trees and leaves of the forest

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have withered away. This discrimination contributes to the obstruction in the way of the progress of people's life-practice and also to the decrepitude of people's mentality. Of course, after the Second World War when the virulence of smuggling increased to a certain degree, the ghost of the greed for money appeared and it brought about rapid deterioration of values. In times of Bezbaroa humanistic values were honoured at least to some extent. Respect to the elders, regard for women, helping neighbours, avoiding futile strifes, contempt for unsocial behavior— these were accepted by many as practices worth maintaining. In those times many aimed at high ideals. The society adored not the usurers or rich men but those who were engaged in spread of education or service to the country or who were self-abnegating leaders or workers. In face-to-face encounter the rich may be flattered but cordial respect was not extended to them, it was extended to poor teachers, patriotic workers or the rebels with a noble cause. The weak characters generally respected the strong characters. Such sense of inferiority was in vogue then. Bezbaroa did not see the dark shadow of the Second World War. Had he seen, his mind which was attached to the society would have expressed itself in a new mode. Creative literature in Bengal was produced only after Ram Mohan. In the first leg, literature was confined to the writings about social reformation. Creative literature got its shape in the hands of Michael- Bankim-Rabindranath. Rabindranath is the best among them. On the one hand, patriotism and on the other, globalism, got introduced in his writings. He spoke in favour of human-religion though in abstract ways. He linked sense of beauty with the sense of well-being. He was aware of the incompleteness

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around him. He did not disregard the glory of man. Crossing over the limitations of his personal landlord position he became able to adore the wholeness of the truth of life. He said:

"On all sides all the time I see
Thousand signs of this deformity of unfulfilled potency
Still never laughed at
The glory of eternal man."

Partition of Bengal, freedom movement, travels in Russia, the second world war— these events shaped his creations and inner spirit. The panic of the Second World War raised questions in the mind of Rabindranath, who adhered to the bourgeois liberal ideals. Stunned at the inhumanity of man, he invoked all to fight against this:

"Female vipers all around blow their poisonous breath,
A vain farce will be to utter the delicate message of Peace—
Therefore before parting
I keep on rallying
Those who get prepared from house to house
For fighting with demons."

We may term this role of Rabindranath as modern. Of course, the temperament of resistance required for the artist of the East has not been fully expressed here. Nevertheless, such effort of Rabindranath to save himself from his mental crisis is indicative of modernity.

As Tolstoy turned into a merciless critic of capitalism even after saying 'resist not evil' and depicted vivid pictures of the crisis of his motherland, in similar ways Rabindranath also awakened people through his creations about the evil consequences of the colonial exploitations. Rabindranath

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primarily was a person of that class which could not even dream of an India without the British and lived with the opportunities provided by the colonial rule and exploitation, but he stood outside going away from himself and his class, and realized the limitations of his position. In India the pressure of the reactionary forces is much. Here it's difficult to fight for the dignity of humanity. Rabindranath undertook to do this work. This may not be clear if he is observed in isolation, but we will be able to arrive at that conclusion if we analyze his creative mind as a whole. The idea of human well-being revealed in his literature is an expression of modern humanity. Rabindranath became vexed at his landed estate and with a widened heart made efforts to restore culture at its rightful place of dignity. Still he could not become universally present. Had the life and intellect of common people developed, Rabindranath would have been understood by all without having been confined within the rooms of the universities in isolation as it happens today.

Another characteristic of modernity is the ability of the artist to comprehend the correct significance of the contemporary times and to grasp the reality. That's why the artist requires profound knowledge of the reality. The distinct mode of what we intend to term as modernity can be seen in the writings of post-Rabindranath Russian writer Gorky and German poet-playwright Brecht. In order to understand the complexities of the modern life the writers and artists of the East must have complete knowledge of social history. Then only they will be able to be conscious of the distinctive quality of the East. Such consciousness will intensify the mental conflicts and the sense of crisis, and inspire to ponder over the

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ways to overcome them. Art will be the aesthetic expression of such collective thoughts. We notice the expression of such thoughts in the writings of Gorky. Presently, the talent of artists and litterateurs in our country is like a bet in a success-centric game. This success is measured by awards. Subsequent to receiving awards the lamp of creativity in the writer flickers. It does not mean that awards are unnecessary, but if, in attaining success in the form of awards, the jockey's win-or-defeat-oriented attitude gets revealed, and if one, regarding that to be the peak of talent, disregards the writer who has not got the award, as not worth comparison with him, then he without award, like the defeated jockey in horse-race, becomes dejected and does not get inspired to write. So, the critic should have the power of original judgement and insight. The writer also should have such power of original judgement. Life should be beautiful, but currently it gets emaciated in our country and the charm disappears from every aspect of life. The main concern of our writers should be how to bring back this beauty. Bezbaroa did not see the main crisis, that is, all aspects of inhumanity. The sagacity of Rabindranath could grasp the causes of the crisis but it can't be said that he had clear ideas about getting over it. The quest of change took the aesthetic form in the writings of Gorky and Brecht. The universally understood characteristic which has been existing in the art and literature of the East since earlier times, can be seen in their writings also. In Gorky's writings problems of man (Humanology) is the main theme. A deep compassion for the oppressed, and contempt for the oppressor—that was Gorky's philosophy of life. We know about his novel "Mother", Brecht made a drama out of this novel. It was from

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Gorky that Brecht got his inspiration. The role of art should be different in a society where man kills man, deceives and oppresses man, and spoils the beauty of life under the urge of livelihood. Brecht discusses this in his book "Dialogue". He defines art in this way:

"Art is that special skill which renews human life and which enables people to acquire special feelings, thoughts and capabilities. Such feelings, thoughts or capabilities are not inspired by the new forms of reality. It's to be noted that the artist engenders such thoughts or feelings through his observation of reality and immersing it in his experience"

According to Brecht, the implication of the artist's skill is his historical knowledge, perception of contradiction and attitude to change the reality. Realization of crisis at heart and an anxiety for progress is the essence of art. In order to take his new responsibilities art must abandon its old forms. Art should take new responsibilities in order that emotions and feelings may widen their way of exercising influence on reality.

We mentioned Rabindranath, Gorky or Brecht only to talk about the implications of modern ideas or modernity. In particular, my aim is to raise the question of modern values in art. Bezbaroa did not think like Brecht or Gorky. Even Rabindranath himself did not. But, certainly they would have welcomed the profundity of perception latent in Brecht's definition. Bezbaruah's clown 'Bhumuk' suggested such perception. In his address in the *Asom Sahitya Sabha*, he mentioned the gloomy living conditions of the common people. The following words are the proof that he was concerned about the misery of the common people:

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"If the lower limbs of the body of the society lack in energy and if the development and growth are not equal to those of the upper ones, it brings forth only harms, not benefits."

The true characteristics of modern intellectuals are: correct perception of the problems of life and protest against injustice. It can be said that Bezbaroa partly took both these responsibilities. We must always remember the limitations of his contemporary milieu. He is not solely responsible for the lapses we find in him as a modern intellectual; his time is also responsible for it. In Assam of those days, present ambience of science-culture was not developed. Now-a-days, at least more means for satisfying the intellectual urge are available. In Bezbaroa's time even they were not there. Still, what he had done within those limits may be pathfinders for us. They probably err who mean to say that there is nothing in his literature; he was only a cultural helmsman. My idea is that Bezbaroa will remain immortal in Assamese literature by dint of his spirited imagination alone expressed in his creation of the hilly abode of Gadapani-Dalimi in his play *Jaymoti*. That hilly abode is nothing but an alternative to the afflicted life. There is a social dimension of Jaymoti's sorrows and torments and that also is the reverberation of the wailing of our greater social life. The source of Bezbaroa's respect for the folk-culture of Assam is the common people with whom he had deep familiarity in his boyhood. His notion of unity did not exclude the common people. He wished for their true well-being. That the destiny of art is determined by people's unity and well-being had been shown by him in an indirect way. True, creation of greater art had not been possible for him, but his view of life well-fed by

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his thoughts of unity and well-being brightens up the aesthetic aspects of his best writings. In his thought and perception there was not only the map of Assam, he displayed an interest to establish Assamese people among the world community by destroying their inertia. True, he bathed in the water of the West, but he utilized much of our tradition in creating a wholesome sense of nationalism.

Bezbaroa's language was the language of common people. Even the source of that language was his deep links with the soil and people of the country. Though he did not clearly see the wounds that could obstruct the progress of the country, yet his sensitive mind conjectured them and with a protesting attitude he wished to remedy them. Thus it can be perceived that the ideas of modernity were like seeds in the writings of Bezbaroa. Those notions were remarkably expressed in the life and works of the succeeding writers: Jyotiprasad and Bishnu Rabha. Both drew inspirations from Bezbaroa. Jyotiprasad praised Bezbaroa unhesitatingly and Rabha paid his sincere homage to Bezbaroa drawing a beautiful painting of him in the journal *Bahi* in the time of Madhab Bezbaroa.

Why did Bezbaroa draw the names of Shankardeva, Lachit and Jaymoti from our history to make "the new eyes of our new soul" lustrous? These three personalities are connected with significant events of history. He thought that such tradition might be useful in bringing back mental strength of the Assamese nation. For him, Shankardev was a cultured honest man and an organizer of nation, Lachit was the symbol of heroism and Jaymoti of victory over self. True, he was an interpreter of Vaishnavite theology, but did not regard religion as an

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instrument for organizing nation. He could not take it to heart that unity requires material changes, but certainly realized that a new kind of spirituality was needed. In that sense he talked about Hindu-Muslim unity. Instead of scientific analysis of tradition, he rather insisted on acquiring the virtues of the glaring historical figures. Though the religion of Shankardeva was expectant of asceticism or the other world, yet it had a social foundation. If we stand on that foundation we'll see that the Vaishnavite religion in Assam had a human dimension. This human dimension is the root of this thread of unity of the nation. Bezbaroa indirectly pointed out that to us. Lachit's sword is as if the messenger of death for those who rob the nation's freedom. Jaymoti's story is the tragic story of "sweet honey turned bitter." Further, in her story, we also find the glimpse of victory over self. One aspect of her character is the sincere honesty of giving herself out for a noble cause freeing her from all avarice and desire. If the expedition for true victory does not acquire the strength of self-victory, the world will turn into ashes. As the artificial satellites are going to make the earth an electronic village, so its unregulated use won't move back from bringing forth even disaster to our familiar earth. The effort to construct graves is certainly not modernity. The meaning of modernity is to raise life to the peak of beauty with the removal of the terrifying gloom of the sorrowful night. This had not been clear in Bezbaroa's time. Still, the idea of true modernity was latent in his hopeful utterance "let the withered branch sprout."

Dhekiyal Phukan's dream of the flower garden has still not been fulfilled. This flower garden indicates the advancement

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of capitalism. That advancement is retarded in our country. Had it had its full development, social change would surely have taken place. The Indian capitalists lack patriotism. In order to expand their socio-economic dominance they are working with the support of foreign capital. Under the multi-national organizations the progress of Indian capitalism will continue to be slow and feudal thoughts and ideas will also continue to persist. Wealthy persons capable of setting up independent industries in Assam neither existed in Bezbaroa's time nor exist today. Even if someone has enterprising temperament, it's nipped in the bud in the hands of some vicious cycle of vested interest. Bezbaroa, under the pressure of, on the one hand, feudalism, and on the other, capitalism, sought liberation from feudalism and wished for the advancement of capitalism. In this juncture, though his sympathy went for capitalism, yet he did not refrain from opposing some of its characteristics. His limitation was that he did not grasp well the nature of colonial exploitation. Nevertheless, he satirized its faults revealed to a cursory glance. Without being clear about the main contradictions he sensed its inconveniences. His "Anglo-Indian" article, his statement against the oppression of the tea-garden labourers, the dream of the advancement of the Shudras in the society, notion of healthy nationalism, sympathy for common people, evaluating attitude towards tradition, his contempt towards the propensity of blind imitation of the West in forgetful of the native qualities- in the face of these virtues if we obstinately keep sticking to his objectionable deeds like building polite relationship with the British or his praise of Mussolini, then it will be an error on our part. For he could not

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perceive the dangerous nature of both in the context of his contemporary times. Rabindranath, too, committed this error, but later he realized the nature of that bankrupt civilization. Had Bezbaroa continued to live, he, seeing this destruction, would have begun to think anew. And because of such a possibility he is venerable to us.

India's freedom he eagerly desired. Though he did not take part in politics (It is said that once he went to some Congress conference as a representative), yet he fearlessly offered his opinions about contemporary politics. Gandhi's movements, Congress conferences, communal partition, Khilafat movement—discussions about these issues can be found in his writings. He also passed comments against terrorism. He brought in his book the *bomwala* (bombers) in a humourous way. He kept off parochialism practised in the name of narrow interest, small nationality and religion, and said that if our people could avoid narrowness then Mother India would rise with her full glory as Laxmi emerged from the sea. Unity among us, particularly among the different ethnic groups of Assam, is required for even material changes. Right at that time Bezbaroa put forth suggestions to cross over the narrow circle. Such viewpoint in the context of that time must be termed as progressive.

He raised some social and moral questions. Naturally those were not revolutionary but reformative. The moderate quality of his view is the bestowal of his time; his class position itself did not let him be prepared for extreme ways. Nevertheless, giving up the middle-class mentality of that time, he obtained information about people's happiness and misery, and came in touch with the soil. That is Bezbaroa's best contribution.

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The middle-class today is irresponsible, confused and selfish. Due to the state's inhuman economic policies a portion of the middle-class turns into affluent and appropriates all sorts of modern opportunities. The gap between countryside and city has widened. In cities also distance between the rich and the poor increases. In Bezbaroa's time people were poor in money but not of mind. Bezbaroa himself was its example. If someone subscribed for *Bahi*— a journal edited by Bezbaroa, he, together with it, would send a free copy of a book written by him as a gift to that person. He always kept in mind the fact of want and insufficiencies of our people. Therefore, he presented a book. This can also be termed a kind of sacrifice. In spite of coming of an aristocratic family, he mixed with common people in a friendly manner. Probably there were distances; still the man was kind-hearted to a great extent. Bezbaroa was such a kind-hearted man. Self-consciousness and a man-loving heart were the two supporting beams of his character. He said:

'Wide is this earth, it'll suffice for you too
No need to push and shove,
Let good befall you, let good befall me
Call your brother "brother".'

The thought of the wide world alone will free us from narrow self-conceit. Life becomes beautiful only after getting rid of such self-conceit. Bezbaroa taught us just this. To keep Sankardeva in the midst of intricate theories, debates and observation of rituals, is as much illogical as to confine Bezbaroa inside the class-rooms of the universities. We won't be able to keep Bezbaroa alive until the common people know and recognize him. The government, the intellectuals, the writers, the artists — all should ponder over how to do this.

Bezbaroa's Literary Works

A Judgement

Prof. Upendra Nath Sarma*

(Translated from Assamese
by Arunima Bhattacharya**)

Bezbaroa is undoubtedly a bright star of the Romantic era of Indian literature. It would have been clear if his literary creations had got translated at the time of his centenary celebrations and it would have been possible to assess him in the greater Indian context. Among the modern Assamese writers, Bezbaroa is second to none. He is not only a short story writer nor just a humorist, he has made remarkable contribution to each aspect of literature, in which he tried his hand. He has made contributions of higher order in every sphere of literature— poetry, drama, novel, essay, humorous essay, biography, memoir, autobiography. If we do not assess the whole work of Bezbaroa together, it is hard to do justice to this extra-ordinary writer.

For all his valuable literary creations he found a solid basis in his extra-ordinary command on Indian religious literature and secular and modern Western literature of post-medieval period. He had a hearty connection with the traditions of the East and the West, which remains the main source of his

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indescribable works. The new tune which was ringing in Assamese literature with the influence of Western literature, that tune was most clear in Bezbaroa's writing, because no Assamese litterateur was able to absorb spontaneously the variegated material of English literature— yet, in the quality of originality, Bezbaroa was second to none. The all new materials and organic usage got integrated in Bezbaroa's imaginary 'crucible'. The admixture of deep emotion and humour found in Bezbaroa 's historical drama is inherited from Shakespeare. But in his play *Chakradhwaj Simha*, the character of 'Gajpuria', created in the model of Falstaff, is totally Assamese by his dress and manners.

The assimilation of nineteenth century secular thinking with the deep middle aged religious sensibility gained from Sankara-Madhava looks dissimilar. This feeling of assimilation found in Bezbaroa's literary creation is synonymous with Rabindranath's spiritual unification. Both Rabindranath and Bezbaroa are Indian writers from all aspects. Though Bezbaroa started writing in the last part of 19th century, his position can not be determined among the Western writers of that century. Because, there was no trace of Industrial Revolution in Assam at that time, and the cultural revolution in centers like Kolkata created due to the distant influence of that Revolution could hardly have any impact on the public life. Bankimchandra was at the background of Rabindranath. But there was no modern Assamese writer at the background of Bezbaroa. His only model was the precious books of Sankara-Madhava and the matchless folk literature.

As Atul Hazarika has said, the life of Lakshminath was ferpered with religious ideas of Sri Krishna, Sankara-Madhava.

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For the common people, he is till today– the unique commentator on religious theories of "love and devotion." His essays regarding love for Lord Krishna (in the words of Holiram Deka) give the feeling of listening to the heavenly music. Even an 'agnostic' will find these deep, simple and rhythmic essays interesting to read.

Sankardev aru Madhavdev is the best biography in Assamese literature. It can be certainly said that if the book gets translated into English or in other Indian languages, it would be popular in our country and abroad. Here Bezbaroa found materials commensurate with his talent. His father Dinanath Bezbaroa's presence in regular act of praise of Guru Sankaradev in his *namghara* was perhaps responsible for the conversational tone observed in these writings. Bezbaroa reflected on the contributions of Sankara-Madhava with a modern cultured mentality. He has written the book taking his base from the incomparable oral biographies of the *gurus*. When he brought before the reader the great religion of equality among all creatures propounded by Sankara-Madhava, he also got interested in other Indian religious texts. This interest is the incomparable basis of reading the books of Vaishnavite and other religious saints even today. This book cannot be said to be devoid of humour. But, there is no other kind of humour excepting the circumstantial humour manifested in the pure and simple narratives of disciples. Everything is absorbed in the sentiment of piety.

In reality, Bezbaroa is a deeply compassionate writer. In 1903, Bezbaroa wrote a small book entitled *Kamot Krititta Lovibor Sanket* only to straighten the otherwise bent backbone of self-oblivious Assamese community. This type of book is

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rare in Assamese literature. If he would have the lust for fame as the best prose writer, he could have enlarged this small range of fifty indicators (*sanket*) and earned the epithet of "Bacon of Assam". These indicators of his book are result of Bezbaroa 's direct experience :

"Anger is temporary madness. In this mad condition man does such work which, after anger disappears, he becomes shy and repentant of that. So never forget to control anger."

"Ill thinking is like the rust. If once it gets place in mind, it slowly eats it. Your mind may be hard and resolute, but the upheaval of ill thinking will soften it a bit and in a way it will be swayed."

Readers may recall, Bacon also said : "Men fear death, as children fear to go in the dark."

"There is no vice that doth so cover a man with shame as to be found false and perfidious."

"Studies serve for delight, for ornament and ability."

From the angle of title and limited span, these writings can be compared with Lamb's popular fallacies.

The best works like the autobiographical articles accommodated in *Mor Jibon Sowaron* compiled by Madhav Bezbaroa after the demise of Bezbaroa are rare in the gamut of Indian literature. The play of smile and tears manifested in these writings is like the glow of April's rain in sunshine. In these essays, there is sweet sparklings of humour. But this humour is controlled, in the language of Denham, full of humour, but not overflowing. Thus, in these essays his humour has reached the pinnacle. Bezbaroa's adolescent memoirs are more beautiful than the famous memoirs of Rabindranath. From the artistic

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speciality and expanded form, his childhood and adolescent memoirs can be compared to Dickens' similar kind of memoirs added in his autobiographical novels. This rare work of him is bathed in crystal clear stream of humour. The pictures depicted here are clear and the result of minute observations. The description of travelling to Kashmir with Bholanath Barua is like a small travelogue. The wonderful poetic description as given below in these series of essays :

"The spotless Brahmaputra appeared in my mind like a broad *Cheleng* cloth made of crystal thread with two sparkling borders of clean white sand."

Bezbaroa's incomparable sensibility becomes one with the efficacy of expression.

Bezbaroa is crowned with the epithet of *Rasaraj* because of his superb success in respect of humour. There is such an appeal in his humour which can hardly be found in other writers of Indian or foreign literatures. It can be certainly said that Bezbaroa will be in the first or second row among the India's best humorists. This sense of success is hard to assess only depending on Kripabar Barua's *Kakatar Topola* and other writings. If we want to assess the success of his humorous writings through the works of Kripabar Barua's character, then from those writings the valuable and rational write-ups should be compiled in one combination. Because of uncertainty of inspiration, in many of his writings, the excesses of humour can be seen. These writings are not among his best writings. In his controlled humorous writings he has laughed like Rabelais. These are his good examples of humorous essays. The tone of Bezbaroa's humour is new in Indian literature. This reflects his

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extra ordinary personality. Bezbaroa is given the prime importance for his creation of the surrogate, Kripabar Barua. But this assessment is not right.

Bezbaroa's humour is intellectual. Though at places, satiric humour is used, in Bezbaroa's best humorous writings an inexpressible sympathetic feeling can be observed. His humour has reached its perfection in his thought-provoking essays, life writings or autobiography and short stories. In *Mor Jiban Sowaran* this humour has reached its zenith. The style of writing of this book is clear like the sunshine sparkling in the golden sand of the river *Luit*.

Bezbaroa is the best essayist in the Assamese language. His style of writing has reached a well-built structure in some of his editorials in *Bahi* and other essays. Bezbaroa has established his greatness as a writer in those writings where resourceful and inspirational themes are present. In this type of articles his humour has worked like a subterranean stream. In some places, Bezbaroa has expressed deep anger at the inconsiderate nature of Assamese people and in other places he has used ironic duel to smash his rivals. In this respect, his 'polemical' writings can be said to be relatively of high order. In those writings the presence of systematic judgement or logic can be seen. In these thoughtful essays, humorous writings and short stories, intellectual humour is prominent.

As a writer of humorous essays, Bezbaroa is compared with Lamb. In his writings, it is hard to find the mixture of 'humour' and 'pathos' as found in Lamb. Both the writers are somewhat whimsical and both of them depend upon the rules and regulations of their predecessors. In the romantic writings

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of Bezbaroa, there is less space for sentimentality. His writings resemble the English satirists of the eighteenth century and the intellectual humour of the creator of Falstaff. In Bezbaroa's best and regulated writings, the stamp of his absurd observation is present. As a whole, Bezbaroa's philosophy of life is healthy and positive. The presence of romantic nostalgia is little in his writings.

The basis of this type of writing is acute central problem—and those are still admirable. The pure humour expressed in his writings gives us pleasure even today. But those uninspirational writings written in shallow feeling to amuse the readers of *Bahi* can not represent his great talent. Of course, without any important theme or central thought, Bezbaroa's *Hah-churi mokardoma* is interesting to read. *Aswarohan Parba* written in imitation of Diken's *Pickwick* is also specially worth mentioning. In these writings Bezbaroa has shown incomparable power of invention. Most of them are 'bubbles of thinking', but the works of Bezbaroa become mechanical and tedious because of the fallacy of superfluity.

Bezbaroa is not only the first story writer in Assamese literature, but also perhaps the best story writer. Bezbaroa's best literary works are his short stories published under different collections. From the angle of definition and style of writing, many of his stories are not free from limitations. In many stories of Bezbaroa there is the clear influence of folktales. It was not possible for him to ignore the richness of Assamese folktales as the only ideal of secular stories in Assamese language while pursuing for the Assamese literary heritage. Russian folktales are said to be the cultivated background of Russian stories.

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Assamese fictional literature has the background of folktales. Bezbaroa's unique style of telling a tale makes the epithet, *Grimm of Assam*, given to him, successful. It is not impossible that this style has enriched the narrative of his short stories. Bezbaroa's most important and most popular story collection is *Sadhukathar Kuki*. Stories like *Mula Khoa Burha* included in this collection are not stories but tales and Bezbaroa knew that thing very well. In addition to that, as the first story teller of Assamese literature, he may have some doubts about the form of short stories. This is true that if we look at the point of view of form, each story in this collection is not perfect. Bezbaroa himself will not consider all his stories published in his different collections as proper short stories. Many writings published in these collections, may not be good short stories, but undoubtedly good humorous writings.

Short stories do not have any fixed line, just as geometry doesn't have any royal line. In the time of Bezbaroa, short story was a wonderfully new art form in World literature. At that time it was gradually evolving. This evolution is still continuing. As Sir Philip Sydney told about Chaucer, we can also say that in those misty days Bezbaroa's eyes could reach to such a long distance that is wonderful to think. From the angle of form, his stories are representative of several traits of contemporary story-writing. In Bezbaroa's story collections, some allegories are included. These allegories can be compared to E. M. Forster's story *Celestial Omnibus*. *Lobh*, *Mor Soite Monair Danda* etc. are this type of writings. Some of Bezbaroa's allegorical stories are based on dreams. As a student of English literature he might have been familiar with the dream-allegories of Chaucer. May

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be those were the inspirational source of his allegorical writings. In the story *Lobh* the self-repentance of a young boy who kills a *Sol* fish and makes its little one helpless, has been expressed through a dream. The narrator and story have become one in this allegory. The technique of this type of stories is praiseworthy.

Social consciousness is the background in most of his short stories. This kind of essay or humorous writings are full of resources. In some society-conscious stories, the space is mostly covered with speech-like quotes. In this type of stories, several characters look like the "mouthpiece of the writer". But in these short stories, Bezbaroa has not taken the refuge of garrulousness. Bezbaroa presents the speech-like quotes with a dramatic technique. This can be realized by looking at the technique of the development of the plot in the lecture-based story *Lombodar Deka*. He is excommunicated when he returns to village after a long journey in search of job because he ate food cooked by lower caste people to save his life. The narrator of the story, having no other way, goes to the house of the village head Raghunath Chirastadar, where he is busy in a game of chess with the chess-addicted Haridev Nobis. They can not respond unless the game is over. The move of their game is more important than the issue of the unfortunate Lombodar Deka. The narrator expresses his deep sorrow and his views on the callous behavior of society and their vanity in castesim before the educated youth Mormeswar. After a considerable time the game ends and the case of Lombodar is brought before the 'Chirastadar' and he gives this decision on the fate of Lombodar : "Nothing can be done. According to Hindu religion he has

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forfeited his caste and there is no way out." The parallel presentation of the game of chess and the issue of Lombodar Deka beautifully expresses the indifferent attitude of society towards the helpless people.

Distressed humanity and, in contrary to that, the folly and indifference of the society— this is the central theme of many of Bezbaroa's stories. It is true that most of this type of stories are lecture-based. But the social criticism in these stories has upgraded Bezbaroa from the state of a flawless writer to the state of a major writer. The presentation of these stories, though not always story-like, has never become non-artistic. In the story, *Nistarinidevi ba Fatemabibi* we have the touching expression of how superstition and vanity of caste dry up mercy and care in the hearts of people. *Dharmadhaj Faichalanobis* is an important story in this respect. Krishna Chandra escapes from the prison of *Maan* (Burmese people) but he becomes excommunicated because he has eaten at the place of *Maan*. But his son Jaychandra stuck to the Hindu religion inspite of the ill-treatment of the society. Jaychandra's son Nomalchandra received bitter scolding from Dharmadhaj Foisalanobis because he defiled the water of the pond before his house by drinking a cupped palm of water form it. Jaychandra came to know everything from his son and leaving aside the false attraction for the Hindu religion, and got converted to Islam with his family. In the language of Bezbaroa, "the rigid piece of string that tied him to Hinduism so far suddenly snapped today."

Seuti is a heart-rending story written on the basis of age old repression of women in Indian society and superstition. Seuti is married at the age of nine and she has to leave her Father-

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in-law's house before she has any idea of what marriage is, because the groom's family suddenly discovered that the groom has a family relation to the bride. When she grew up, she went to her in-law's house to remain as a maid-servant of her husband. Though her husband re-married, she remained there bearing all the ill-treatment with patience. When her husband got attracted to her beauty, the elder sister of her husband killed her by poisoning. At the conclusion of the story, the irony is worth mentioning : "When this incident was over, many of the neighbours and religious, knowledgeable persons talked sitting by the side of their hearths, in reality the girl was not a family relative."

Bezbaroa has a genuine interest in the narrowness, crookedness, vanity of caste and hypocrisy of society. For this reason, most of Bezbaroa's stories are satirical. In these stories the light is thrown on prejudice, caste division etc. of Assamese and the Indian society. This point of view was indispensable at the time of Bezbaroa. The story of conversion of a family ill-treated by the vanity of caste in *Dharmadhaj Foichalanobis* is really heart-rending. In many stories of Bezbaroa like *Nistaridevi ba Fatemabibi*, *Laliti Kakoti*, *Seuti*, the condition of the repressed women and their grief is expressed unforgettably. In the stories like *Laliti Kakoti* there is the indication of women revolt. In this era of the expansion of education, the atrocities against women is going on in full swing. From that point of view, we can not deny the contemporaneity of Bezbaroa's stories.

The appeal of Bezbaroa's stories is not limited to the articulation of external clash between the character and the social circumstances. Bezbaroa's mind is open to the profundity of

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human psyche. From that point of view, *Jalkuwari* is an unforgettable piece of story. A girl talks with the river *Rupahi* and she throws a reed in a whirlpool of the river. Her happiness knows no bounds by looking at the sight of the reed disappearing in the whirlpool. Her irresistible attraction to the river poses as a bar to the relationship with her would-be groom. By brooding over this, she can not sleep at night and goes to the bank of the river with a bunch of reeds and wants to light her mind by playing the old game of reeds. At that time her would-be husband blind-folds her by his hands from the back. Her love for nature succumbs to the love for her husband and she throws all the reeds in the whirlpool for the last time and becomes a caged bird.

Girl (laughing) : "In this whirlpool one girl has just died by drowning. I am a Myna (bird), put me in the cage, take me away."

The natural description that fits in this type of story is pleasing, poetic and functional. The language of the story is symbolic or metaphoric. The description of the river *Rupahi* is short but perfect and proper and deserves appreciation :

"*Rupahi* is a small river. Its very deep water gets shallow in winter. Then the water appears like a crystal clear water flowing from somewhere. During summer, the water is muddy. In the months of *Aahin-Kati*, *Rupahi* is silent, slim and shy. That whirlpool is then best suited to be called *Rupahi's* mouth rather than whirlpool."

The example of metaphorically non-linear pace can be found in the stories of many writers including Forster. Bezbaroa's *Mor Soite Manair Danda* is such a story. In the narrator's

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description of his realization when he faced the wish hidden in his subconscious mind, the influence of the metaphysical essay of Addison can not be overlooked here.

The main factor of his short stories is the incomparable characters drawn in the light of his unique experiences. We can be sure about the veracity of those characters. Bezbaroa has achieved greatest success in creating those characters, which has been taken from this unique experience of travelling in various places. Bezbaroa is never frustrated while searching for a plot. He illuminates a special situation with the characters created from the day-today life with his extra-ordinary power of observation. We can not remember anyone portraying simple and true characters like Bhodori and Sishuram without any exaggeration. Though the plot of the story is limited, it is flawless. In these stories, situation and character are one. He has wonderfully immortalized the pleasures and pains, smiles and tears, happiness and sorrows of simple Assamese rural people. But the form of society has changed very much. To record in the words of Atul Hazarika who realised the nature of Bezbaroa's literary works :

"For this reason, with the change of society, some of Bezbaroa's characters would be hard to recognize, their situation will also look strange. But in that situation I don't think that the stories will be less valuable or its literary attraction will end. A living society is bound to change, but it is not so, that with the death of a particular society, its best literature will also die." (*Bezbaroa Granthawali*, Vol.1, Page-6).

Bezbaroa is unbeatable in his description of the unique expressions of simple people. The affection and compassion for

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simple, common people is deep-rooted in Bezbaroa. Among the stories of this kind *Bhoira* is specially worth-mentioning. The parallel presentation of Bezbaroa's character is incomparable in Indian literature. The theme of the story is simple. It can be compared with Lambian essays. In *Bhoira* and in Lamb's *Captain Jackson*— both the heroes are comparably life-like. In these stories Bezbaroa has concretised the creativity of Lamb-like humorous-writings. It is worth mentioning that *Captain Jackson* is the representative of the middle class under the clusters of poverty : "Wine there was none, but the sense of wine was there."

On the other hand, *Bhoira* is representative of the very simple life of a gardener— servant class. The valuable legacy in comparison of Bezbaroa's most successful stories and essays is his compassion for the life of common people.

The expertise that Bezbaroa has shown in his portrayal of grotesque characters like Aamuka Pandit in the story *Dhowakhowa*, Bhempuria Mouzambar, the family of Dimbadhar Barua, the munsiff and his employers are rare in Assamese literature. The characters are based on minute observations. In the story *Firingotir pora Khandabdah*, the portrayal of the life of Assamese bureaucrats in the first half of British reign, is without any irrelevant description. In his art of characterisation, he is the follower of Shakespeare's art in his characterization of comic characters. After all, the story represents Bezbaroa's mature style. Dimbadhar Barua, the munsiff (subordinate judicial officer), found the curry less salty, while taking his meal and told something to his wife. His wife suddenly enraged and Barua decided to give her a thrashing. When his son tried to stop him by clasping his feet, he accidentally

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fell down and his one tooth broke and lips pierced. When he went to office, he found relief by scolding his petition writer Tuwai because he greeted him while he was wearing boots. He imposed a fine of five rupees on Ram Golam, the record keeper, for a simple fault and imposed a fine of one month salary on the Pesker. In addition to that he suspended Forsing, the constable. The lawyer Bidya also has to pay fine on the simple fault of disobeying the court. Peskar returned home sorrowfully and gave a blow on the head of his man-servant for a slight fault and, "When the wife of the Peskar said in favour of the servant, the Peskar tried to teach her a new lesson by beating her with the *dhenki-thora* and the cunning wife saved herself by running into the midst of banana-trees and thus also saved the honour of moral studies."

After suspension, the constable entered a wine-shop and picked a quarrel. Tuwai, the petition writer, wrote an unanimous letter to the judge by accusing him of taking bribe. Ram Golam, the record keeper beats his wife recalling a fault done by her three years back. The lawyer Bidyadhar, sent a message to his father-in-law to arrange the puberty-marriage of his daughter within a week. As a result his ties with his in-laws house snapped permanently.

The readers of *The Cloak* by Gogol and short stories of Dostoyevsky will not be suspicious of the innovations of the story although there lies a vast difference between Assam laying in the juncture of darkness and light and the nineteenth century Russian society. The mimetic characters of the story are convincing and praiseworthy. The sense of realism also deserves approbation.

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Bezbaroa's *Chor* is a worth-mentioning story focused on social landscapes. Lokeswar Baruah breaks the promise made to his wife Indumati at the death-bed of not marrying second time and he marries again even before the lapse of three-month's time after the demise of Indumati, and, "The young-aged wife spreads immediately the roots of her influence over the aged husband Lokeswar Barua as the seedling of a fig tree spreads the net-like roots over an old pucca house."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Barua has started an affair with a man. The man asks her to mix poison in water in a pot, handing her a poisonous thing and she has done that. Pashupati, the disreputed son of Chakradhar Phukan, hailing from Sivasagar, was hiding under the bed to commit theft that night. The mischief of Mrs. Barua has transformed his mind and he kept waiting for the whole night to prevent him from drinking that poisoned water. As a result, he was beaten up after having caught in the morning. He promised not to commit theft in future. The writer has resorted to a sort of naturalism to expose the picture of anarchy occurred in the house of big guns, like Chakradhar Phukan. As if the mischief of Mrs. Barua had placed Pushupati before an 'Existent'. The change of the thief Pashupati brings in our mind the profound faith of Bezbaroa on humanity.

No Assamese writer has written poignantly about the inner-most details of non-Aryan tribal life. Few Indian writers have depicted immortality of the lively characters like Ratan Munda and Jumuri in the story *Ratan Munda* and Lasimia in the story *Sivaprasad*. The writer shares his compassion with Lasimia, a girl from *Kol* community after being deceived by Sivaprasad in the words. "The fresh creeper was getting weaker

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day by day at the uncaring attitude and rude behaviour of the husband.... Very few works are there which the husband can not get it done by the wife."

Bezbaroa's female characters from *Kol* community has completed the rows of scores of other women characters sketched by him. Bezbaroa has heart-felt sympathy towards women. He has observed and depicted them in different shapes and in different circumstances. Indumati, who cares for husband even at her death-bed, Malati who sacrifices her own life to save her parents from danger, Seuti who embraces a disgraceful life idealizing the lives of Hindu women, Jayanti who takes arms to save the distressed husband and becomes insane after the job done, Tilika the suffering of the child widow at the bloom of her youth, Bhodori speaking lies for the first time to acquit her husband who assaults her severely- these are unforgettable characters.

Most of the best stories of Bezbaroa centre around the common people- examples include- *Bhodori*, *Bapiiram*, *Nakou* etc. Bhodori is perhaps Bezbaroa's most perfect story. The circumstances, characters, statments, narratives and total atmosphere are realistic. Therefore, it has become possible to write this noble story very economically without any exaggeration. It is natural on the part of hungry Shishuram to get furious after having seen the scenes with an empty stomach. No writer can 'improve' the description of this scene. The act of Bhodori's engagement in repartee, an aspect quite contrary to her characteristic behaviour as she is tolerant like that of the Mother Earth is also a circumstantial demand. After all, each line reveals "Passion spins the plot" - Bezbaroa has written the

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story in a way as if he is an eye witness.

A heart-rending picture of the greatness of human mind and determination is depicted in the story like *Bapiram*, as if Bezbaroa was conscious about the negative dimensions of the contemporary life. Although Bhempuria Mouzadar becomes a sycophant of a Sahib, Bapiram, the servant, is such a man who can promise to defend. This kind of presentation of rebellious characters has promoted Bezbaroa to a writet of high class. Tilika, the daughter of Sidhai Khataniar is a child-widow. She has no parents. Uncle Bhudhar serves a high ranking officer maintaining accounts as 'Barmahari' in 'Dighaliting Tea Garden' and manages the household affairs also. Tilika is at the threshold of youth and her beauty has illuminated all her features. After hearing about her, the great Sahib Scott has ordered Bhudhar to give Tilika to him in exchange of promotion and money. Bhudhar tried to tell lies skillfully in apprehension of being ousted from his caste. But "Timid Bhudhar being not able to stand in front of the infallible weapons like, at first-fear, at last greed, sycophancy and threat- agrees to hand over Tilika, the daughter of 'Punyatanu' Sidhai Khataniar to Scott Sahib."

Having known it, Bapiram can not desist him from his determination even after entreating him (Bhudhar) and criticizing him, rather the Sahib beats him (Bapiram) up after knowing his opposition. Bapiram disappears and he offers him to be seized in the police station after cudgeling the Sahib while returning from the garden. Sahib returns to London with crippled condition and after realising his mistake Bhudhar comes back home after tendering resignation. On returning from jail having served a three year term, Bhudhar embraces Bapiram

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and says, "*Bapiramkai*, you are nobler than my eldest brother."

The resoluteness of the motivations of the characters are noticeable. The moot point behind the self-sacrifice of Baipram is his unbound love and affection towards Tilika whom he brought up from childhood. To him, 'Tilika aideu' deserves exceeding love and respect even more, than his own biological son Dukhiram of Chaokhat. Bhudhar is not a bad person by nature. How much a man can be relegated to due to fear, greed and jealousy is sketched in the character of Bhudhar. When Bhudhar's defence ceases at the threat of the Sahib, he draws self satisfaction by giving in some arguments favouring his action of handing over Tilika to the Sahib in a soliloquy which unveils a complex character in him. Sense of sin, ambition, pride, greed, jealousy and self deception— all have merged in the soliloquy. The self-sacrifice of the people like Bapiram was of utmost necessity to bring people back from this tainted path. The change of mind brought to Bhudhar by Bapiram's greatness – Man is not made for defeat'.

It is not correct to take a patronizing attitude towards Bezbaroa. The Industrial Revolution was going on in full swing towards the end of the 19th century in Europe that witnessed the re-discovery of short story and its utmost improvement. The degeneration of the Western Civilization serves as the colossal background for the short story writer like Maupassant. At the time when Bezbaroa wrote, there was not even middle class society in Assam. For the long time there were no salaried people barring the few bureaucrats and their subordinates. The seeds of Industrial thought were also not sown. Mr. Handique stressed on building of the industrial infrastructure for the improvement

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of Assamese literature. The kind of improvement in popular psyche, our folk-life, necessary for writing a good piece of short story tuning with Western style was almost impossible. It is difficult to write a short story which will fascinate the middle class readers particularly in absence of complexities involving middle class. The best short stories of Bezbaroa are written in rural landscape concerning the lives of simple people. The present learned society inclined to urban life style, can not be expected to remain content with these short stories. According to Somerset Maugham, a piece of writing can not remain life-like more than ten years even if it is of the best quality. After that it becomes a material of research for scholars. Bezbaroa had the credit of depicting a total picture of contemporary rural life single-handedly. Bezbaroa has been able to occupy a much higher position as an Indian writer even if he could not reach the stage of Chekhov, Maupassant or Premchand and Rabindranath.

Bezbaroa, the Playwright

Prof. Sailen Bharali*

Lakshminath Bezbaroa was the central figure of a new literary movement in Assamese literature that was launched through *Jonaki*, an epoch-making journal published from Calcutta in 1889. The journal inaugurated the modern movement in Assamese literature. As a result, new branches of modern literature flowed to Assamese. A band of young writers under the leadership of Bezbaroa came forward to write with a mission to enrich Assamese language and literature. Bezbaroa himself tried his hand in all the branches and was successful more or less in all of them. He was the pioneer in the fields of short story and literary criticism. He still remains unrivalled in the field of humorous and satirical writings for which he has been rightly given the epithet, *Rasaraj*. Kripabar Barbarua, the outstanding satiric character is a unique creation of Bezbaroa. Although Bezbaroa was not quite at home in poetry, he wrote a few lyrics which are fascinating and which brought new mode of expression in Assamese poetry. His autobiography is not only an important document of his time but also a masterpiece of Assamese prose.

Bezbaroa made substantial contribution to Assamese drama at a time when there was acute shortage of original Assamese plays. His literary career began with a farce, *Litikai*,

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which was published in the very first issue of *Jonaki*. The play is based on an Assamese folk-tale. The story, in brief, is like this : There are seven brothers who are talking about the difficulties they are facing after the death of their parents. A mosquito then bites the eldest brother. They try to kill the mosquito, but it escapes. They decide to go to a deep jungle to kill all the mosquitoes with sticks in their hands. In the jungle they try to beat the mosquitoes, but in their attempt to do so, they only beat one another. While returning from the jungle, they come across a field full of white sand which they mistake for a big pool of water and starts swimming to cross over. After this, each of them counts themselves and finds one less as none of them counts himself. Just then, a Brahman comes and helps them in finding out the total number of brothers. In return, the seven brothers agree to be servants in the house of the Brahman, but instead of helping him they create more and more problems. The misery of the Brahman reaches the climax when one day they carry heavy boundles of harvested paddy and ask the Brahman's old mother where to keep them. The old woman gets angry and tells them to keep them on her head if they cannot find a place. They do so and the old woman dies. The Brahman who was trying so long to get rid of the fools now decides to take revenge on them. He makes a plot to kill them but succeeds in killing only six. He makes another plot to kill the surviving servant and with this purpose sends him to the Brahman's brother-in-law's house. The foolish servant who, in the meantime, had enough experience to sense some conspiracy, cleverly marries the Brahman's sister-in-law and returns happily with his wife.

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After *Litikai*, no attempt was made by Bezbaroa to write plays for long 24 years. In 1913 he published three more farces, *Nomal*, *Pachani*, and *Chikarpati Nikarpati*, the stories of which were also drawn from folk-tales. All the four farcical plays have certain similarities.

There is no well-knit plot in any of them. All of them are full of ludicrous, improbable and incorherent incidents and situations, exaggerated peculiarities of the characters and humorous dialogues. It appears that Bezbaroa's main purpose behind writing these plays was to provide entertainment, although the reformative zeal of Bezbaroa has worked here and there in each play. However light-hearted he might be, Bezbaroa could never forget that he was coming out to fight against darkness of the Assamese society. Therefore, the desire to bring about all-round development of the Assamese people was in his mind even when he was writing the farces.

In 1915 Bezbaroa wrote three historical plays, *Jaymati Kuwari*, *Chakradhvaja Simha* and *Belimar*, all based on the history of the Ahom rule. *Jaymati Kuwari* deals with the tragic story of princess Jaymati who was tortured to death by Loraraja at the instigation of his prime minister for not revealing the whereabouts of her husband and *Chakradhvaja Singha* deals with the Ahom-Mughal conflict during the reign of king Chakradhvaja Singha. The conflict ended in the battle of Saraighat where the Ahom army under the leadership of Lachit Borphukan defeated the Mughals. *Belimar* centres round the repeated Barmese invasions that led to the occupation of Assam by the British and the consequent loss of Assam's independence. In all the three plays, Bezbaroa has been faithful to history and

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has not deviated from history at all so far as the main plot and the principal characters are concerned. He has, however, taken absolute liberty in the development of sub-plots and episodes and also in the portrayal of minor characters. The character, Dalimi in *Jaymati Kuwari* is an instance. The creative power of Bezbaroa worked fully in the portrayal of this character. Dalimi, a Naga girl has been delineated by Bezbaroa as a child of nature in a poetic atmosphere. She, with all her simplicity, innocence and tenderness, is like Wordsworth's Lucy, brought up by nature in her lap and ignorant of the cruelties of human society.

Bezbaroa was fascinated by reading and witnessing Shakespeare's plays while he was a college student. Before writing his plays, Bezbaroa tried to translate Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into Assamese although he did not complete it. The influence, however, persisted in him and his plays demonstrate considerable influence of Shakespeare. The influence is traceable not only on the structure of the plays but also on some of the characters, the most important of them being Gajpuria in *Chakradhvaja Simha* and Bhumuk Bahua in *Belimar*. Gajpuria has been modelled on Shakespeare's Falstaff and Bhumuk Bahua on Shakespeare's Fool. But Bezbaroa's acquaintance with the Assamese society was so intimate that these characters with unmistakable Assamese colour look entirely like his original creations. Here lies the greatness of Bezbaroa.

After the three serious historical plays, Bezbaroa wrote another farcical play, *Gadadhar Raja*, which was published in 1918. This play, however, differs from his earlier farces in the sense that it has only one scene and there is no incoherent incident or situation in it. Therefore, the play has been regarded by the

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critics as the forerunner of modern one-act play. Bezbaroa himself labelled it as a "drawing roomplay". Bezbaroa contributed greatly to the development of Assamese drama at a time when the modern Assamese drama, was at its infancy. His plays are good as literary pieces. But they are hardly performed on the stage, mainly because they are too long and there are a large number of characters in each of the three historical plays. Bezbaroa possibly was not aware of these limitations at the time of writing the plays.

How I Rediscovered Lakshminath Bezbaroa

Homen Borgohain*

(Translated from Assamese
by Dr. Birinchi Kumar Das**)

(1)

It was the year 1953. I was then a student of the fourth year at Cotton College. Till then, the Karmabir Nabin Chandra Bordoloi Library, a famous library of Guwahati, had been known by its old name Curzon Hall. It became my habit to go to the Curzon Hall Library almost every day in the afternoon to read books and magazines. Accordingly one day, while I went to the Curzon Hall, I saw that a meeting was going on in the yard of the Hall. There assembled exactly that number of people, which that small yard could accommodate. One speaker was delivering a lecture; I could hear his voice from a distance. When I came nearer, I found that the speaker was Maheswar Neog.

I decided to listen to the lecture of Maheswar Neog by shunning the desire to read books in the Library that day. Standing on one side of the road, I started listening to the lecture. Till then, I had not been able to comprehend the purpose of the meeting. But after listening to the lecture for some minutes,

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I understood that the subject of the lecture was Lakshminath Bezbaroa. That means, it was a meeting to reminisce Bezbaroa.

With close attention I went on listening to the speech of Maheswar Neog. It is not necessary to tell anything newly about the scholarship of Maheswar Neog. As a speaker too, he could easily win over the minds of his audience. I got spell-bound by his lecture. But the moment he declared in his speech that 'it is the Bezbaroa Era that is still continuing in Assamese literature' - my mind suddenly rose in revolt. I did not have any objection to accept Bezbaroa as *Sahitya-Samrat* (Monarch of literature), *Sahitya-Rathi* (charioteer of literature), *Rasaraaj* (master of humour) etc.; But I found it difficult to accept the claim that the Bezbaroa era continued to flow in Assamese literature even at a time when, after an era heralded by magazines like *Jayanti* and *Pashowa* in the decade of the forties, we entered the era of Ramdhenu in the fifties. I returned to my hostel with an agitated mind.

About four years elapsed after that. But one day I felt that the perturbation in my mind had still not disappeared. There was only one way to pacify it, that was, sharing it with others by expressing it somehow. Ventilating all the agitation of my mind, one day I wrote an article- *Na-porhuoir Drishtit Bezbaroa* (Bezbaroa in the eyes of the new reader). At that time, I was a regular contributor to the Assamese journal *Ramdhenu* edited by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. I sent this article to *Ramdhenu* for publication. Usually my writings were published in *Ramdhenu* as soon as they were received. But this time the editor seemed to be very much hesitant to publish this article. Till then, Bezbaroa had been worshipped almost like a god. For

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the first time I made an attempt to evaluate him as a human by relegating him to the level of a human. Probably the editor was in two minds pondering about how the contemporary Assamese people would react to this iconoclastic and anti-idolatrous attitude of mine. But finally triumphing over his hesitation and conflicts in mind, the editor published the article and immediately after its publication, it came under strong attacks, proving the apprehension of the editor to be true. In the mean time, I joined the Government service as a Sub-Deputy Collector. Strongly criticising my article, Kamaleswar Chaliha wrote an article which got published in *Asom Bani* (a reputed Assamese weekly) titled *Mati Hakimor Jorip* (land survey of Sub-Deputy Collector). The debate continued in several issues of *Asom Bani*.

That controversial article of mine has already been included in my collection of essays, *Swarga Aru Narak*. But many of you might not have read that article. That is why, in a bid to make my today's speech comprehensible to you, I should briefly tell you the gist of that article. In my article, I unhesitatingly accepted Bezbaroa as an epoch-making writer of Assamese literature. I also admitted that his contribution towards giving Assamese literature the present shape was extraordinary. But I wanted to say that Bezbaroa only catered to the need of the Age, he could not raise himself above the Age. For that reason, I was reluctant to agree with Maheswar Neog's view that even in 1953 the Age of Bezbaroa was continuing. In the beginning of my article I wrote,- "The Age of Bezbaroa is not over yet- to say this is to mean that till now there has not been an end to feudal attitude, indiscriminate and blind fascination for the past and narrow nationalism in Assamese literature. This means that

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Assamese literature has remained stagnant in a dead stream; the great experiences that have created tumult in the world politics in the last twenty years, the Second World War, the end of colonialism in Asia-Africa, various new nationalist expressions, and the most modern scientific inferences that have newly moulded human thoughts- none of these has been able to touch Assamese literature'.

I finished my article with this conclusion that Bezbaroa was an important writer, but not a great writer. Stephen Spender in an article on Shelley classified the writers into two categories - great writer and important writer. Following that classification, I wrote about Bezbaroa that he was undoubtedly an important writer, probably more important than I assumed, but he was not a great writer.

Setting aside my article on Bezbaroa I wrote in 1955, at this point, I would like to come back to 1994. Of course, I will again go back to 1955.

Chandraprasad Saikia, the editor of *Goriyoshi* (a reputed Assamese literary journal), once interviewed me. This interview was published in the March 1994 issue of *Goriyoshi*. In that interview, one question that the editor asked me was,- 'If you are put to exile today and are allowed to take only five books with you, which will be those five books?'

The five books that I mentioned while answering this question were- (1) *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, (2) *An Anthology of the World's Best Poems* compiled by Edwin Markham, (3) A thriller novel by John Le Carre or Graham Greene, (4) Two volumes of the complete works of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, and (5) the dictionary *Hem Kosh*. I also explained

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elaborately the reasons why from amongst so many books only these five books figured in my selection list. In today's discussion, apart from the complete works of Bezbaroa, the other four books are irrelevant. But it is necessary to quote here, what I said about the complete works of Bezbaroa in that interview— because that will be the main foundation of my today's discussion.

In that interview I said about the complete works of Bezbaroa— "My fourth choice is both the volumes of the complete works of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. We cannot realise the value of a thing as long as it is available to us. Only when we stop getting it or lose it we feel its absence strongly. In my solitary exile I would eagerly like to relish the taste of my mother-tongue, the life-stories of my own people and the legacy left behind by my ancestors. Which other book can give me this more than the complete works of Bezbaroa ?"

If one compares what I said about the literary creations of Bezbaroa in 1955 with my views on the same expressed in 1994, one will notice some apparent disagreements or inconsistencies. But there is nothing unnatural about it. In this context, I remember one incident associated with Bengali poet and critic Buddhadeb Basu. In an essay written at his youth, Buddhadeb Basu had attacked in strong words the famous poet of the Bengali epic *Meghnad Badh*, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, and declared that the poem did not have much literary value. But at his mature age, he voluntarily admitted that his assessment, made at his young age, was wrong; and after in-depth study he has now realized that *Meghnad Badh* is a great poetic work in Bengali literature.

Of course, my matter is slightly different from that of

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Buddhadeb Basu. Even today I don't think that the way I assessed Bezbaroa at my young age was wrong. Before going to other issues, I want to make this point clearer.

One major point in my article on Bezbaroa written in 1955 was that in the contemporary Assamese literature, Bezbaroa is no longer a living force. The main reason for this is— the historical necessity of the ideal, under the inspiration of which Bezbaroa took to writing, has come to an end.

At that time I was reproached as the idol-destroying *Kalapahar* for saying those things about Bezbaroa, because none had said such things about Bezbaroa before me. But after one decade from my saying so, that is, in 1968, Jajneswar Sarma said in an article written on the occasion of the birth centenary of Bezbaroa, —'Despite the huge popularity of Bezbaroa, the second editions of some of his books have been published only a few days ago, and some books entered into the grave of oblivion. The affection that Assamese readers felt towards the writings of Bezbaroa at first sight has in a way withered away.'

I had said that, in the present-day Assamese literature Bezbaroa is not a living force. Jajneswar Sarma said the same thing in his own language that the affection of Assamese readers for Bezbaroa's writings felt at first sight has somewhat withered away.

Even that Maheswar Neog, who in 1955 had declared that the Age of Bezbaroa was still continuing in Assamese literature, and strongly reacting to which declaration I had written my article in 1955, said in an article written in 1968 on the occasion of the birth centenary of Bezbaroa,— 'That is why, I have named the half century period from 1889 to 1940 as the

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age of Bezbaroa. But in the last few years of these five decades there was a gradual decline in the influence of Bezbaroa, and his death in 1938 seemed to have signalled a change in Assamese literature.'

Thus, after having declared in 1955 the continuity of the Bezbaroa Age, the same Maheswar Neog, unambiguously declared in 1968 that the Bezbaroa Age came to an end along with his death.

I want to cite another example to show that my assessment of Bezbaroa at my young age was not much wrong. In 1955 I wrote, - 'Bezbaroa interpreted the problems of the Assamese society by dissociating them from their social and historical backdrop. He did not have the insight to look into the depth of the main problems.'

In 1968 Jajneswar Sarma wrote, - 'Bezbaroa merely cast his eyes on the contemporary society superficially; he seldom looked into the depth of human mind.'

Many examples of similar kind can be cited. But I don't think there is any more necessity of it.

Although till now, I am claiming that my evaluation of Bezbaroa at my immature young age was not much wrong, now I want to clarify that my evaluation of Bezbaroa was also not entirely correct. I did not lay as much emphasis on Bezbaroa's positive aspects as I laid on his negative aspects. Of course, it had reasons. The first and main reason was that I did not pen the article in a bid to give a complete judgement or assessment of Bezbaroa's literary works. I wrote the article to refute this claim of Maheswar Neog that the 'Era of Bezbaroa was still going on in Assamese literature'. To establish that the 'Era of

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Bezbaroa' was not continuing till that time, I naturally had to expose the negative sides of Bezbaroa's literary works. The strong urge in me to prove the discontinuity of the Bezbaroa Age came mainly from two sources. One of them was the eagerness to express what I felt to be true. The second one was psychological, which I am explaining in a moment.

The book that I borrowed for the first time in my life from the library of Dhakuwakhona Govt. M.E. School was *Kakadeuta Aru Nati Lora* by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. I was only seven years old then. The second book that I borrowed from the same library was again by Bezbaroa– *Burhi Air Sadhu*. I am now falling short of words to narrate how these two books helped in growing wings in the imagination of a seven-year old child in me and introduced myself with the wonderful inhabitants of a world of mystery. The reminiscence of the blissful and ecstatic experiences of reading *Kakadeuta Aru Nati Lora* and *Burhi Air Sadhu* is still green in my mind– like the reminiscence of the first love. Somewhere else, I wrote that the library in my childhood school, Dhakuwakhona Govt. M. E. School, housed all the select Assamese books available at that time. So, it goes without saying that the library was in possession of all the books by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the monarch of Assamese literature. Except for the serious theory-based books of Bezbaroa, I had read up all his books comprising folk-tales, short stories, plays and humorous essays etc. before I left the M. E. School. Apart from this, in the annual prize distribution ceremony of the school, various parts from *Kripabar Baruar Topola* were read out and I myself, was a leading performer in the school. All these elaborations means that during the time of

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my birth and growing-up the literature of Bezbaroa was the main source of instruction and delight for all those Assamese people who loved literature, and since the time my eyes of knowledge opened I have developed a deep love for Bezbaroa's literature.

Bezbaroa had left this world before my childhood ended. In the decade of the forties, I gradually approached towards adolescence and youth. In the beginning of the forties, there was a sudden dramatic change in the life-style, the world and the values that Bezbaroa had introduced to us in the thirties. Change is the inherent nature of life. Nothing can remain unchanged. But when the change is slow or steady people also get the time and scope to adapt to that change. People cannot distinctly feel the stroke of change. But the moment the Second World War started in 1939, the whole world underwent a big and sudden change. This change and the subsequent dramatic events agitated the entire decade of the forties. In the preface of *Asomiya Galpa Sangkalan* Part II, which I compiled and edited on behalf of Assam Publication Board, I wrote while describing the decade of the forties,- 'The whole decade of the forties was agitated and resounded with occurrences of such epoch-making events that it is not easy to find out another decade that can be compared with it in the history of modern India.□. Cyril Connolly termed the decade of forties in English and European literature as 'Frustrated Forties'. But in case of Assamese and Indian literature it can be termed as 'the decade of hope'. If the possibility of the fall of imperialism and the thickening crisis in capitalism created an atmosphere of hopelessness and mental fatigue in the West, the same two events unveiled the new

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possibilities of life before the Indian writers. □.The big events that happened one after another throughout the entire decade gave a strong jerk to the consciousness of writers and thinkers. On one hand, the unprecedented social and economic crisis caused by the World War resulted in the loss of spiritual shelter for people, on the other hand the mass-revolution of the 1942 and the call of war given by Subhash Bose also aroused the masses with new idealism. On one hand, the colonialist foreign rulers, with their utmost indifference towards the lives of the ruled, cruelly caused the deaths of lakhs of people by creating artificially the Bengal-famine of 1943, and thus brought about absolute disillusionment to the minds of the Indians; on the other hand the armed uprisings against feudalism and colonialism that grew in different parts of the country and the naval-revolt in Bombay gave birth to new optimism and struggling spirit in the minds of people. On one hand, when the decade was coming to an end, new hopes and joys appeared in the minds of people as the dream of independence was about to be fulfilled; on the other hand the bloody communal clashes that took place in 1946 and 1947, the partition and the processions of lakhs of refugees immediately after the independence made people beset with new panic, new questions and new agony of disillusionment. As a whole, if not exactly with the same grave and sonorous language that Charles Dickens used to describe the contemporary France in the preface of his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, it can be said about the decade of forties in the Indian history too that this decade was a decade of darkness and light; of bloody deaths and bloodier births; of extreme brutality of men and glorious rise of humanity; of

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anguished disillusionment and shining birth of new hope.'

There was no way to reach our ear the voice of Bezbaroa piercing through the cacophony of those diverse noises and events of the forties. Those who arrived at their adolescence and youth in that decade faced a new challenge in life, with which Bezbaroa and the people of his age did not have any familiarity. The answer to the various new questions that rose in the minds of the new generation was not there in the literature of Bezbaroa. That is why, they had to keep their ears open with a hope to listen to some voices coming from the long distance, from some other directions. Then they started reading Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Karl Jung, William Butler Yeats, Thomas Sterns Elliot, Stephen Spender, Christopher Caudwell— in a nutshell, the new youth of the new generation then did not have the time to look at Bezbaroa. To speak in one sentence Bezbaroa became almost irrelevant.

Against exactly this backdrop I declared in 1955 that Bezbaroa was no longer a living force in Assamese literature; his era had come to an end.

I once mentioned above that I had also felt a psychological urge to repudiate Bezbaroa's hegemony in Assamese literature. It is quite easy to understand the reason behind it. In 1951 we the young writers started a modernist movement in Assamese literature under the leadership of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. After the Romantic age initiated by the *Jonaki* age in 1889, the modernist movement started with the onset of *Ramdhenu* age in 1951 was the most significant and creative literary movement in the Assamese literary history of the last hundred years. In 1955, at a time when this movement was at its peak, if someone

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said that the Bezbaroa age was still dominant in Assamese literature, the simple meaning of this would be either he completely rejected the existence of our movement, or he did not want to give any importance to it. At that time, we were determined to usher in a new age to Assamese literature. We were not ready to agree with the claim that the old age was still going on and we could not do anything new. That is why, I felt compelled to clamour loudly that the Bezbaroa age had elapsed much before. Of course, now I don't disagree with this that probably my shouting was louder than necessary.

(2)

I, who in 1955, declared the end of the Bezbaroa age and claimed that Bezbaroa was not a writer surpassing his age, said with utmost cordiality in 1994 that if I were to name five books as my companions in deserted exile, one of them would be the complete works of Bezbaroa. I would take with me the complete works of Shakespeare, and along with it, I would also carry the complete works of Bezbaroa. Certainly this does not mean that Bezbaroa was as great a writer as Shakespeare, or both could be placed in the same rank. Let alone placing both of them in the same rank, to tell the truth Bezbaroa's name cannot even be taken in same breath along with the name of Shakespeare, who was the best playwright and poet of all ages. But, at the same time it is also true that Shakespeare could not fulfil the particular necessities of an Assamese people which Lakshminath Bezbaroa, being one of the best writers in the Assamese language, could. Rabindranath Tagore is not a genius of equal rank with Shakespeare. Except for the Bengalis or the Indians, in no country

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in the world, people will utter the name of Rabindranath in the same breath with the name of Shakespeare. But, while the Bengalis can live without Shakespeare for their whole life, they cannot do so even for a moment without Rabindranath, because the way the Bengali diction and idioms of Rabindranath reflect the dreams, reminiscences, desires and experiences of the Bengali people, the words of any other language can not do it, even the words of the best writer of the world can not do it, if he is a foreigner.

The fifth of the five books I chose as my companion in solitary exile was the dictionary *Hem Kosh*. Explaining the reasons why I chose *Hem Kosh* I wrote, -- 'The reason why I want to take *Hem Kosh* as a companion in my life of lonely exile is the same as the reason why I want to take the complete works of Bezbaroa. The words in the dictionary are not merely words; in them is stored the essence of life of my ancestors.' Each word in a language, besides denoting a particular meaning or a particular point, spreads in the mind of a listener numerous reminiscences, histories and suggestiveness concerning the word. Except for the people who speak the language, others cannot respond in any way to the specific appeal of that word. Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote in his nine essays that the way a stream makes the pebbles lying on the river bed smooth or gives new shapes to them, similarly people from generation to generation make the words of their languages smooth or give them new shapes by constant use. Because of this, the words of a language inherit the historical reminiscences of the people who speak the language and various suggestiveness and connotations beyond their meanings, which only these people can understand.

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Lakshminath Bezbaroa himself spoke this about language,— 'Language is a self-expression and autobiography of the national life of a nation from its roots. The footprints of all the people, illiterate or educated, civilized or savage, wise or fool within a nation remain unaffected in the language of that nation.'

Owing to all these reasons, the way the writings of Lakshminath Bezbaroa or any other great Assamese writers like him can fulfil to certain specific needs of the Assamese hearts and minds, other writers, who may be thousand times more talented than them, cannot do so.

In my youth, I neglected Bezbaroa a bit, and no longer felt the need of him in our lives. With the going away of my youthful over-enthusiasm, a good sense appeared in my mind. Not merely as a reader who loves literature, but also as a writer I felt that a writer cannot live the life of a parasite like a creeper by climbing on another tree and by eating nought. To be a writer in the true sense of the term, he has to spread his roots in the tradition of his own land and own people and derive sustenance from it. From the moment this good sense was born in my mind, I started studying the best literary works of my own language. It goes without saying that in the list of writers that I prepared for this purpose, Lakshminath Bezbaroa figured on the top of the list.

I have written one article each on several Assamese writers. They include Hemchandra Barua, Satyanath Bora, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Jatindranath Duwara, Lakshmidhar Sarma, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Benudhar Sarma, Bishnuprasad Rabha etc. Only on Lakshminath Bezbaroa I have written three articles till now. I have even written a poem on

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him. By writing three articles and one poem only on him I have admitted with a feeling of reverence that the place of Lakshminath Bezbaroa is distinguished and unequalled in the history of Assamese literature.

Before I tell you which writings of Bezbaroa or which characteristic features of his writings have specially attracted and influenced me I want to speak very briefly about his place in the history of Assamese literature. Of course, there is nothing new to tell about it. In the last fifty years other critics have not found anything new to add to the estimation of the literature of Bezbaroa that Dr. Banikanta Kakati did during Bezbaroa's life-time. But on the occasion of Bezbaroa's death anniversary we want to express our respect to him by recalling those old things newly.

According to Dr. Banikanta Kakati, there are three major elements in Bezbaroa's writings— the ever vigilant love for homeland, wonderful writing style and genuine humour. With these three elements, Bezbaroa's talent proliferated in all the branches of modern literature.

The scholar, Tirthanath Sarma, listed three major things that Bezbaroa had done for the sake of the Assamese nationality and literature.

1. By digging out the seeds and roots of the feeling 'I am inferior' from the Assamese minds, Lakshminath Bezbaroa strengthened them with the realization 'What I am' and thus, removed the patina from their national consciousness to make it shine bright again.

2. Bezbaroa inspired the Assamese adolescents and youths for literary activities. At the same time, as soon as he saw the unrestrained movement of the Assamese language and literature,

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he strongly held the reins in his hand and did not let it go astray.
3. The most important thing is that he opened the floodgates of Assamese society and culture, which is like the Manasarovar of Assamese literature, so that its hidden essence could flow in the entire world.

According to distinguished literary critic Jajneswar Sarma, 'Most of Bezbaroa's writings will not have permanent value; but Bezbaroa will remain respectful in the history of literature as a transitional figure between the old and the new. □□I feel that his fame is more for his untiring struggle to establish the Assamese language and literature and for the influence of his remarkable personality, than for his literary works.'

By pointing out a major characteristic of Bezbaroa, Dr. Maheswar Neog said, -- 'The literary personality of Bezbaroa bestowed unity on the modern Assamese literature, and with his beautiful writings he gave Assamese literature a pattern.' Secondly, 'He was the bridge or a connecting link between two golden ages.'

All the critics cited above have laid more emphasis on Bezbaroa's works for self-establishment of Assamese nation and Assamese language-literature than on what he did himself as a writer. In their case it was very natural and logical, because all of them felt Bezbaroa's direct influence during their adolescence and youth; moreover, the memory of the battle of *Saraighat* that was fought under the leadership of Bezbaroa for protection of independent existence and dignity of the Assamese language-literature was also fresh in their minds. But when I wrote that piece on Bezbaroa in 1955, the fierce battle that Bezbaroa had fought for protecting the dignity of the Assamese language-

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literature became a distant memory for me; my main purpose turned out to evaluate how much successful Bezbaroa was as a writer. Therefore, I assessed Bezbaroa's literary works thus: 'He tried his hand in some branches of literature not prompted by any great artistic inspiration, but by the desire to meet the demands of the contemporary Assamese literary environment. So, some of his writings have to be judged with this yardstick. His chief glorious deed as a writer was to awaken a scientific curiosity among his contemporary people about the literature of the middle ages of Assam, particularly the spiritual thoughts and religious movements of that time. He was a pioneer in this respect. His second major act of glory was the clearing of the ground for writing short story of modern type. In this matter, he also occasionally showed the imprints of the creative talent. The brightest identity of Bezbaroa among the common readers was as a satirical writer. As a satirist, he offered remarkable contributions towards the creation of a wide readership and at the same time, towards giving a complete shape to a necessary branch of literature.'

Many years after I had written these things about Bezbaroa in my youth, when I started reading the writings of Bezbaroa systematically at a comparatively mature age, I discovered that Bezbaroa's achievements were not limited to just the three things I have mentioned above. In fact, the biggest glory of Bezbaroa lie in his language. Dr. Banikanta Kakati spoke it many years ago in an excellent essay titled *Bezbaroa* written during Bezbaroa's life time. My failure to discover this truth at the appropriate time is an example of my diletantishness, snobbery and lack of depth as a critic. Dr. Kakati wrote,- 'The second big gift of

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Bezbaroa is his language. National literature cannot be created without a national language. In the present Assamese literature the real literary style is rarely found in anywhere else except in the writings of Bezbaroa. He uses unadulterated, homely Assamese words, but when used in the right place to embody the right thoughts what a sweet resonance, what an expressive power, what a sound it reveals, and this is exemplified by *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, *Kakadeuta Aru Nati Lora*. Even a trivial matter, when wears the robe of Bezbaroa's language, looks fascinating.'

Before elaborating more on it, I feel the need of a clarification. I have said that the biggest achievement of Bezbaroa rests on his language. On the other hand, Dr. Kakati said that Bezbaroa's second big gift was his language. So, as per Dr. Kakati what was the first big gift of Bezbaroa? That was Bezbaroa's ever-vigilant love for his native land. I admit that Bezbaroa's love for his native land is worth remembering for ever; prompted by that patriotic fervour he dedicated his life to the cause of the Assamese language and literature. But I think that the only yardstick for assessment of a writer's literary works should be his literary talent. His literary works must not be estimated with any other yardstick. In this context, I remember a view expressed by Bengali poet and critic Buddhadeb Basu. Buddhadeb Basu was not ready to accord Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, the most popular writer of Bengal, a higher place as a writer. When some critics whose views did not match with those of Buddhadeb Basu, profusely praised Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Pather Dabi* for its revelation of strong patriotism. Buddhadeb Basu remarked that a writer's patriotism cannot be the yardstick for the scrutiny of his literary merits and

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demerits. In this matter, I totally agree with Buddhadeb Basu.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Bezbaroa's biggest literary achievement was his language, his unique literary style and writing method. The main reason why the complete works of Bezbaroa found place among the five select books I would take as a companion in my imaginary deserted exile is the attraction for his language. The worshippers of literature preceding Bezbaroa, headed by Hemchandra Barua, through the compilation of dictionary and grammar, gave the Assamese language a modern, coherent structure; their time and energy were exhausted in building the physique of the language. It was Lakshminath Bezbaroa who first gave life or soul to that physique. With diverse experiments he made the Assamese language a suitable tool for modern literary creations by making it well-shaped and increasing its expressive power. Earnest Hemingway said that modern American literature was born out of the womb of Mark Twains's *Huckleberry Finn*. Jajneswar Sarma said that the entire modern Assamese poetry was born out of the womb of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. Similarly, it can also be said probably that the whole modern Assamese literature was born out of the womb of diverse literary works of Bezbaroa. Of course, it must be added to this that the literature of Bezbaroa has worked like a bridge between the modern age and the great tradition of the Assamese society and civilization. On one hand he introduced the present day Assamese to the great legacy of the past, on the other hand, he built a strong foundation for modern Assamese literature. Thus, with the golden thread of his enlightened historical sense, he strung the past and the present, and at the same time, left behind, in the consciousness of the

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Assamese people, the possibility of a bright future. Bezbaroa performed with his unequalled skill the task, which no other Assamese has done. That is why, in the history of Assamese literature Bezbaroa's place is unique and second to none.

We the Assamese have worshipped Bezbaroa placing him in the throne of the emperor of literature. But if some non-Assamese lovers of literature asks us which is the best example of Bezbaroa's creative talent, or tells us to name one particular book, which can give him the taste of Bezbaroa's literature, what will be our reply to him? To speak in one line, there is no reply to this question. Bezbaroa is not famous or great for one particular book; he is famous and great for his whole literary works, which have initiated a new age in Assamese literature.

In this respect, Bezbaroa can be compared to Dr. Samuel Johnson. In the history of English literature, the mid-decades of the eighteenth century are called the age of Dr. Johnson. But he was not the best writer of that age. Discussing this point, an English historian wrote, -- 'It is curious rather than obvious that we should at this day refer so naturally to the mid-eighteenth Century period of our literature as the Age of Johnson. For Dr. Johnson cannot, except in a special sense, or without explanation, be called the greatest literary man of his time. He had none of Burke's splendors of genius, none of Goldsmith's excellent lightness of touch and legal tender of humour; he was inferior to Gibbon in learning or in staying in power; Sheridan's rapier wit and easy invention were quite beyond him; his poetry can not be compared with Gray's nor was his prose half so English and transparent as Wesley's. Even Boswell, his biographer, has recently outstripped him. Yet such

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were his personality and influence that we involuntarily give his name to this period.' –the gist of this is that Dr. Johnson was not the best writer of the age known by Dr. Johnson's name; all his contemporary writers such as Burke, Goldsmith, Gibbon, Sheridan, Gray, Wesley etc. were much more talented than him. But his personality and influence was so extraordinary that we involuntarily termed that age of English literature as the Age of Dr. Johnson.

The same thing is applicable to Lakshminath Bezbaroa too. In one of his famous articles Dr. Maheswar Neog rightly questioned, -- 'Bezbaroa's writings cannot be wholly fixed in any particular genre of literature. Is he a playwright? No. Is he a poet? No. Is he a story-writer? No. Is he a novelist? No. Is he an essayist? No.'

In the same way as the sages in the *Upanishads* had tried to search for the true form of God by saying 'neti neti' - that is 'not this, not this', Dr. Neog too, by saying 'this not, this not', tried to find out the true nature of Bezbaroa. Finally, he came to this realization, -- 'Bezbaroa is all these, and something more.'

By saying that Bezbaroa was 'something more', what Neog tried to hint at, was, what the English historian clearly identified in case of Dr. Johnson as 'His personality and influence'. Like talent, personality is also an undefinable and mysterious thing. Every man is a person, but every person does not have a personality. A person's personality is built up with many minute things and qualities. As the mystery of the beauty of a rose cannot be unravelled by dissecting it in the laboratory of a botanist, similarly the key to a person's personality cannot be found out by analyzing his nature and character. Bezbaroa

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had such a personality. None else could have developed a similar personality equal to his stature in the history of modern Assamese literature. In this respect too he is unique and second to none. Similarly, no other Assamese writer has till date been able to create a colourful literary character like Kripabar Barua, which was Bezbaroa's alter ego.

Even today we feel the personality of Dr. Johnson, because James Boswell, in his extraordinary biography, has preserved for the eternity the personality of Dr. Johnson in its vibrant form. But nobody has done so in case of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. As a result, we do not feel the presence of his personality with that intensity by which Bezbaroa's contemporaries did. The posterity will feel it with even less intensity. The appeal of most of his writings is not timeless. Consequently, there is a possibility that his literary popularity and influence will decline further. Everyone accepts the universally recognised great poet Milton as a great poet; but today, nobody, save the serious students of literature, reads his poetry. Once the most popular and influential writer of the entire Europe was Sir Walter Scott. But how many people read his novels today? But I think that though the influence of Bezbaroa will gradually decline for natural reasons, the Assamese seekers of literary flavour will not stop reading his books- because the entire works of Bezbaroa, which has connected the past heritage with the present endeavour, is a chief component in the greatest literary and cultural legacy of the Assamese nation.

(A lecture given at the India Club of Digboi in 1995 on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Lakshminath Bezbaroa)

Bezbaroa's Novel

Dr. Hemanta Kumar Sarma*

(Translated from Assamese
by Rajlakshmi Dutta**)

Lakshminath Bezbaroa is well known among his readers as a humourist and a short story writer. Yet his contribution to Assamese literature in the genres of plays, poetry, novels and prose works on various subjects has immensely enriched Assamese literature. In the true sense of the term, Bezbaroa was neither fully a poet, nor a dramatist, nor was he a novelist, still when one reads *Kadamkali* one finds Bezbaroa, the poet in Bezbaroa, the humourist; *Jaymati* and *Chakradhvaj Simha* unveil the traces of Bezbaroa, the dramatist; in the same way, *Padum Kuwari* gives a cursory glimpse of Bezbaroa, the novelist.

Padum Kuwari is the solitary novel by Bezbaroa and it was composed at his young age. The novel was published in the year 1905. *Kamini Kanta*, the first novel to be published in Assamese language, came out in the year 1877, under the aegis of the American Baptist Missionaries at Sivasagar. It was followed by *Sudharmar Upakhyān* by Padmavati Devi Phukanoni, *Lahori* and *Bhanumati* by Gohain Baruah, *Kusum*

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Kumari by Hareswar Sarma Baruah and *Miri Jiyari* and *Manomati* by 'the king of novels' Rajanikanta Bardoloi. If one sees from the perspective of quality and elements of the novel, then *Kamini Kanta and Sudharmar Upakhyan* cannot be called novels with true structure. So it could be said that, before the coming of Bezbaroa's *Padum Kuwari*, there were only five novels in total in the Assamese language, i.e. Assamese novel was in its nascent stage at that moment. Therefore, it could be easily accepted that by writing the novel *Padum Kuwari*, Bezbaroa has made a special and timely contribution.

Padum Kuwari is a historical novel. The novel is written at the backdrop of Donduwa Revolution in North Kamrup in the later part of the eighteenth century. The main plot and chief characters of the novel are based on historical people and incidents. An attempt is made to relate the characters to historical events, but still imagined events are amalgamated with the main story by inculcating a few minor ahistorical characters. It is not so that fictionalised characters or incidents mar the beauty of a historical novel, rather authentic characterisation helps in highlighting the story and the character. The chief aim of a historical novel is to paint the characters well and reflect upon its aesthetic pleasure; and not to write history. So, the novelist does not focus much on the historical truth. Rabindranath Tagore's view in this context is very relevant- "Shall I read history or *Ivanhoe*? Its answer is quite simple. Read both. History for truth, *Ivanhoe* for pleasure."

Perhaps because of that, Bezbaroa, in order to accord a

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literary status to his novel, has fused together fiction and history in the novel *Padum Kuwari*. It is found that Bezbaroa's *Padum Kuwari* serves as a source text to Rajani Kanta Bordoloi's novel *Donduwadroh* and Daiba Talukdar's play *Haradatta*. However, from the perspective of creation of characters and presentation of incidents, there lie some differences among them. Though characters of Phul and Korma-Kurmi are fictitious, yet, Bezbaroa's such excellent creations are absent in *Donduwadroh* and *Haradatta*.

The plot of the novel *Padum Kuwari* has two dimensions. One is Haradatta's struggle to save his motherland from the hands of Ahom King which leads to a campaign against Kalia Bhomora, the Borphukan of Guwahati and its tragic consequences; and the other being the love affair of Haradatta's young daughter *Padum Kuwari* and Surya Kumar, the adopted son of Haradatta; obstacles to this affair; Borphukan provides shelter to Surya Kumar and Borphukan's daughter Phul Aaideu's ardent love for Surya Kumar, and the final outcome of all in the forms of death, suicide and sacrifice of life in the name of love. The incidents in the novel are at times unnatural, while the descriptions unnecessary, leading to diminishing of its literary value. Thus, though there is a description of Haradatta-Veeradatta's deeds of bravery, self-sacrifice, love story of the main characters, yet they lack lucidity. The main shortcoming of the novel is that both the male and the female protagonists fail to play any important role towards the development of the plot of the novel and it is only through the historical incidents that

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there is progress and development in the characters of the hero and the heroine. The protagonists fail to stand against the outer conflict by creating events. Consequently, the story as well as the characterization of the protagonists lacks vividness. Apart from those, there are some other 'technical defects'. It seems that the characters focus more on narratives than on action. For example, the conspiracy against the Ahom king by Haradatta and the Prince of Koch Kingdom can be pointed out. Haradatta contrives so many plans to save the kingdom from the Ahom king including his strategically promised marriage of his brother with the Koch prince and in return receives help and cooperation, Veerdatta and Raghu pretends to exhibit solid war skill but the moment he gets informed by an emissary about the invasion of Borphukan and his soldiers to attack him then he deserts all his fanciful plans and escapes to the hills of Bhutan to save himself first. Even Padum's suitor lover also flees. The novelist could have debarred the escape of Haradatta-Veeradatta, and could have engaged them in a war with them, then their heroism would have been exhibited in their character. But, as the novelist did not do it, there appears a discrepancy between their words and deeds. As a result, the weakness of the characters is revealed. In that way, it betrays the ignorance on the part of Surya Kumar, the adopted son of Haradatta in the act of his taking shelter in Borphukn's custody without knowing the enmity between them. There are some more such minor defects in the novel.

The early part of the novel moves effortlessly while the later part seems to move at a rapid pace, and the novel suddenly

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comes to an end with a tragic note. Conclusions are also hurried and quite unnatural. Had he desired, the novelist could have avoided the suicide of Padum after her meeting with Surya Kumar following the death of Haradatta and Veerdatta; but the main purpose of the novelist was to show Surya's love for Padum, and Phul's sacred love for Surya -for which he made Padum to commit suicide for failing to fight against the adverse situations. The consequent act of Phul's committing suicide by the grave of Surya Kumar and Podum seems quite unnatural, but again the action throws light on the sanctity of her love. The tragic story of *Padum Kuwari* reminds of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Literature creates lively human beings. Linguistic skills, fabrication of the plot and expression of thoughts are secondary from literary point of view. Creation of character is primary. So is the case with novels. Therefore, even in a historical novel, it is necessary on the part of the novelist to have an aim to develop the characters and interrelationship of the characters to their specific environment, and creation of conflict amongst the characters. In the novel *Padum Kuwari* no conflict is created among the characters. The protagonist Surya Kumar is portrayed in a simple and flat manner. Only his intense love for Padum is depicted. However, his heroism is displayed when he slits the head of 'Kumedan bangal' at one stroke with his sword. Surya Kumar's character lacks mental strength as well as the ability to face adverse situations in life.

The weakness of the character of Surya Kumar is revealed

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when he fails to leave Phul even after knowing the enmity between Hardatta and Borphukan. After all, all the qualities of the protagonist of a novel are not seen in the character of Surya Kumar. And weakness of the 'drama' in the novel mars the beauty of the events in the novel.

The central character of the novel is *Padum Kuwari*, Haradatta's daughter, and the novel gets its title from the name of that character. Although Padum Kuwari is not a historically famous figure, but as stated in Gunabhiram Barua's *Bidroh-Buranji* (history of revolts), the fact that there exists some popular folk songs about her seems to indicate that Padum is a historical character. The protagonist of the novel is indispensable, but her role in the novel is not a leading one. Her characterisation in the novel is weak. From that perspective, the title of the novel can not be called a justifiable one. Padum, as the name suggests, is pure like the flower of Lotus and easily hangs back like the 'Touch-me-Not' (*Lajuki lata*). Having been brought up amidst comfort and luxury, she can hardly bear any pain or grief. After the death of her mother, she almost goes mad, and after the death of her father and uncles, she loses all of her controls in such away that when she meets her suitor-lover Surjya Kumar, she is unable to retrieve her normal state of mind. Rather, leaving her own dearest Surjya in the midst of enemies all around, she commits suicide. This suggests the weakness of her character. However, the subsequent act of suicide by Surjya Kumar makes his character noble.

One of the fascinating but fictional characters in the novel

is Phul Aaideu. Both Padum and Phul Aaideu appear like two different flowers leaning towards the same black bee in the same garden. Both the flowers are aiming for the same— expecting the black bee to fall upon it. But the black bee is looking towards the lotus, i.e. Padum. Phul Aaideu understands the attitude of the humble bee, i.e. Surjya Kumar, yet, she does not undervalue him, rather she feels an affinity with his grief. Her love is presented as pure and self-less, which does not expect any return; its closeness is with disinterested love. However, Padum's love is motivated by self-interest although that kind of love is not something objectionable. There is the desire for consummation in that love, Surjya, loves her, in return, and Padum also reciprocates. The mutual love-affair between young man and woman is a commonplace thing in the history of the world— but the self-less love expecting no return is a strange and rare thing in world history— it is a great ideal, although not normal from the view-point of psychology. The character of Phul is engrossed in her pristine love— for which she lays down her life a bit unnaturally. Besides, the character is adorned with some other virtues. Apart from her skills in the household chores, she is also fearless, energetic and intelligent. The fact that she could make a seasoned politician and cunning person like Kaliabhomora Borphukan dance to her tunes speaks volumes of her acute intelligence. Padum, although equally competent in household chores, lacks the other qualities of Phul.

As per history, Haradatta is known as autocratic; but the novelist has adorned him with qualities like heroism,

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independent state of mind, compassion and filial affection. Another aspect of his personality is his ability to remain composed in difficult situations and to go on working as usual. In the character of Veerdatta and Raghu, the quality of foresightedness is lacking and rudeness is visible. Veerdatta is Veerdatta as his name suggests. The novelist succeeds in providing suitable dialogues to him matching his character.

The character of Koliabhomora is depicted as diplomatic, foresightful, cruel, tyrannical and renegade. Despite his general nature of cruelty, he is very loving towards his daughter. His giving of shelter to Surjya Kumar in the hope that the latter could be used in future as 'Surjatra' (the weapon of sun) to kill Haradatta, and his ability in finding out the hiding place of Haradatta-Veeradatta with the help of Raghu in a fake promise of friendship reflect the astute political dexterity in him. However, when this foresighted man brings Surjya Kumar, a new acquaintance of him, near his own daughter and indirectly advises her to fall in love with him is an aspect of him that lacks justification. He could have kept him away from Phul, if he had willed so. To induce his daughter to do certain impossible things without detail knowledge of those things is a lapse in his character.

If the main characters of the novel are analysed thoroughly- it reveals occasional lapses in characterization. Rather, the minor characters have been presented beautifully. From this perspective, the characterization of the *Bhutia* children Korma - Kurmi, Veerdatta, Raghu etc. is remarkable despite

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their marginal presence. The characters of Korma-Kurmi also contribute something to the denouement of the plot. Both the characters appear as glaring examples of strong bond between friends as well as they help to win the sympathy of readers towards the tragic end.

To a large extent, Bezbaroa is successful in creating a landscape with local colour. He delineates appropriately the common characteristics of the Assamese society along with the social customs, manners and attires. Both Padum Kuwari and Phul Aaideu may be seen as two ideal Assamese girls. Their general nature, discipline and tidiness, systematic way of putting things in their proper place, rearing of pets like the cat and *myna* and the playing of the indigenous children game— all these features present them as essentially Assamese girls. Besides, the novelist creates certain beautiful specific scenes in keeping with the plot of the novel. For examples, the narration of a night full of horrific sensation to indicate Padum Kuwari's deeply saddened state of the mind, the description of the bedroom of the Assamese girl Padum, the dove-episode in the flower garden of Phul Aaideu, the description of the mental state of Padum with all assorting circumstance as after her mother's death and so on.

Another important feature of the novel is that the novel makes some room for humour in this essentially tragic narrative. Bezbaroa's humour in this novel lies in the description of the physical features of certain characters like Veerdatta. However, the inadvertent use of humour occasionally disrupts the tragic flow of the narrative.

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Similarly, in a historical novel, the novelist must possess a full knowledge of the historical and socio-cultural circumstances of the period depicted in the novel— a mere knowledge of main historical facts is not sufficient. In case of *Padum Kuwari*, Bezbaroa's knowledge or presentation of socio-cultural environment of the time does not seem adequate. That is another reasons why the novel is not a perfect one.

In conclusion, it can be said that Bezbaroa was essentially not a novelist. Still he took to writing a novel due to the dearth of works in this genre of Assamese literature. The Assamese language just recovered itself coming out of the clutch of the Bengali language. As far as literary works were concerned, there was only a great void everywhere. Bezbaroa, Gohanin Barua and others made some humble attempts to fill in this large void. They had hardly any time to make a pre-assessment of their capability. The novel reflects the influence of Bezbaroa's wide reading of English and Bengali literatures as well. Bezbaroa penned this novel during the early period of his literary career and he never came back to this genre again. Thus, it seems that the novel was written to fulfill the specific needs of that historical moment, and from that perspective it must be admitted that the novel is a remarkable achievement of Bezbaroa.

(Abridged version of the original article)

Relevance of Bezbaroa

Prof. Dilip Barua*

(Translated from Assamese
by Deba Prasad Mishra **)

Some time ago, I remember having read an article in a discussion on literary ethics and theories though I don't clearly remember the exact time and place. And there was something which stuck to my mind. It is still fresh in my mind. The writer seems to have said that anybody who wants to enter into a discussion on modern literary ethics, he should come out from the shackles of Liberal Humanism which is too old now. Is it really true to say that liberal humanism has become so outdated as to have no links with modern literary thoughts and culture? Or has liberal humanism become so outmoded that it cannot at all grasp the modern thoughts? Almost two years back in a seminar I declared myself to be a liberal humanist and told the gathering that I had, therefore, no difficulty in listening to the talks and discussions with due respect. And I am confident enough to say that Bezbaroa was also an ardent disciple of liberal humanism.

It seems true to say that tolerance is the essence and

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backbone of Liberal Humanism. "I have differences of opinion with you but I will travel to the last point of the earth to acknowledge your right to speech"— perhaps this statement was made by Voltaire at first and, then John Stuart Mill took a special effort to spread this message in the nineteenth century. Likewise, humanism has given mankind a new outlook and a transparent path of ideological life which is above of conservative, religious and racial thoughts. The discovery of the classics of ancient Rome and Greece in the 16th century liberated the Europeans from the singularism of Christianity. Nevertheless, liberal humanism has not disappeared from the realm of human thought even at the present moment. Lakshminath Bezbaroa was consciously and devotedly a votary of Neo-Vaishnavism propounded in Assam by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. But he had no narrow outlook at all. He perfectly understood the difference between the doctrinal and simple minded devotees and vehemently satirised the religious abuse and degradation prevalent in the society of his time. As everyone knows, the humanistic thinking was against all kinds of fundamentalist thoughts and attitudes. And the main tenet of all the religions is the search of God or the Supreme soul on the *paramatmas*. So, Bezbaroa wrote, "what is the reason behind the conflicts and quarrels among the religions?" As it has been pointed out by the scriptures – "Wherever the rivers and rivulets be, they flow by various routes to the sea and ultimately they reach out to the sea or ocean."

If sea is their common destination, why should we bother, which they flow? (*Bezbaroa Granthavali* Vol. II, page 364). Again, in another context, he says – "We see Brahmanism in

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Neo-Vaishnavism and vice-versa. And so far as the essence of all great religions is concerned there is consensus and absolute harmony." (*Bahi*- 4th year, Vol. II). This is also the opinion of the followers of Theosophical Society. Indeed, such a liberal view in the field of religion is quite relevant even in the modern age. It is true to say that we cannot have the real knowledge of the internal history of India's religious scene by reading historical books written by foreign writers. Because many historians unknowingly tend to write the untruth as they prefer to write those things which fall into their angles of vision or they prefer to write things heard from others. Now, people's attention has been focused on the world of actuality or real truth though many things are yet to be done in this matter. ...all these things have been written by Bezbaroa in a newspaper article in 1936 (*Bezbaroa Granthavali*, page 1499). As a matter of fact, we have to surpass such difficulties so far as Assam's history is concerned. Recently, while offering a discussion on a book written on Gopinath Bordoloi, I have said that the truth is very often distorted even when an objective analysis is made on the basis of the local perspectives and the idealistic aspects of the writer. In fact, we have to make a thorough analysis of every bit of information, datum and knowledge which we gather and this is the ideal to follow, but it is difficult to carry out.

The range of Bezbaroa's thought, wisdom and study is really very wide and vast. It is quite amazing how this particular man got so much time for reading and writing. We can easily discern the depth and gravity of his knowledge of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagabat Gita* and *Puranas* on one hand and his extraordinary hold on modern literature and linguistics on

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the other. It is a mistake to think that the prolific writings presented in the mask of Kripabar Barua is simply a fountain of creation of his humour. More importantly, it is the replica of his resourceful and research-oriented thinking process.

It is also important to note that there is actually no place for absolute purity and fixation of meaning in language. In the opinion of some modern linguists, "language is a system of arbitrary signs." Similarly, Bezbaroa has told us that excepting a very small number of onomatopoeic words, most of the words are the creation of the human mind which is somewhat 'whimsical' in his own language. There is no natural connection between the thought and the word. Our forefathers would not have obstructed and protested if somebody among them had said 'tabha' instead of 'bhata' (rice) or 'tana' instead of 'mata' (voice), (*Grathavali* Page 1728-29). The creation of language is unknown to society and its transition, development and prosperity are also quite unknown to it. In fact, all such thoughts relating to language is definitely modern and relevant. Further, Bezbaroa has stressed that language are always evolving and developing and no dictionary can arrest its growth and development. At first, the spoken language came, after that the written form and then came grammar and dictionary.

To bring about the development of Assamese and its nation, its literature and language was the life-long mission and endeavour of Bezbaroa. In a particular context, he wrote, "Throughout my life, I have been trying my best to write and use the Assamese language effectively. "Pundit Tirthanath Sarma, a great scholar of Assam said that any word or spelling written by Bezbaroa could be accepted as valid and effective without

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consulting any grammar and dictionary. Indeed, he was a pioneer and torch-bearer to show us how to use the modern Assamese language. He has left many glaring examples in this regard. As a writer, he is moving to light fun and humour, from rural stories and anecdotes to foreign literary translations, but everywhere he has displayed so much intimacy and intensity that we can derive all resources of learning the Assamese language and literature from the two volumes of his *Granthavali*. There is no doubt that the sense of patriotism is the life-blood of his literary art but he was not blinded by its bounty. A language, a literature of a nation depends on the effort and endeavour of its people. So Bezbaroa wrote – "The ancient scriptures are the milestones of language and so these should be printed and made available to the common people. The Assamese people should purchase books and read them. And the translation of foreign books enriches the mother tongue. (*Granthavali*, Page 1748). The Bengali language can never swallow the Assamese language if the Assamese people, with hard labour and effort, can create a literature of high quality easily readable by the people. We have in our country many book-sellers, but few enlightened publishers . The foreign publishing houses are just like living institutions like those of higher education. The rich people of our country should build up such publishing houses having suitable educated advisers who will evaluate the standard of books to be published." On the whole, self-help is the best patron according to Bezbaroa. He calls upon the Assamese people in the following words – "Being inspired by the mantra of self-help and self-dependence, the Assamese people should gear up unitedly for the development of their language. They should leave aside the

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disintiegrating and quarrelling thoughts. Those wise and intelligent writers who write only to create sensations to satisfy their self-interest can mislead the people to endanger their country." Such ennobling and enlightened thoughts abound in the writings of Bezbaroa. Taking a reference from the – *Kirtana'*, he again writes – "Though a fool, I claim to be a scholar and then I pollute the hearts of man."

Bezbaroa's opinion regarding criticism is also highly significant. To him, criticism is not like censure or condemnation nor is it a kind of cheap accolade or flattery, it is discussion of literature; and the critic should be virtuous, just, impartial, intelligent and a man of judgement. His language should not surpass the bounds of decency and propriety. Every society is bounded by some traditional restrictions and particularly in creation of literature, there are some bounds of propriety, sanctity and rules. "I donot follow any rule or instruction. I donot follow any model. I will go on according to my own way" – anybody who says like this will be able to lead his life safely within his family, but he will not be the man of the people. (*Granthavali*, P-1780-1784). Such words are all relevant in the literature of the world in all times.

(This translation has been done in consultation with Dr. D. K. Mahanta, Retd. HoD, English, Bajali College)

Inconsistencies in Bezbaroa

Prof. Hiren Gohain*

(Translated from Assamese
by Dr. Sultan Ali Ahmed **)

Even after hailing him as a progressive humanist, we feel certain reservations about Bezbaroa. The outward manifestation of his great talent was sometimes overshadowed by the limitations of the time and the class to which he belonged. These inconsistencies are seen in his writings on contemporary issue and of journalistic nature.

During the colonial period, the middle class was fascinated by the British culture and mindset on the one hand, and, similarly, the same middle class sometimes got disillusioned with the injustice meted out by the British as part of their colonial hegemony, and, subsequently were displeased with the British. On the one hand, this middle class felt a sympathy in their hearts towards freedom movement, towards the struggle for the self-rule and self-dignity of the Indian people and, on the other hand, this same middle-class were of the firm opinion that the independence of the country could not be redeemed through meetings, processions, wheeling the *charkha* and observing hunger strikes. The middle class felt that the Indian

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people would be eligible for independence only when they would be able to form an independent personality and self-reliant character like the British.

The British ruling class also popularised the idea that the Indian people were not sufficiently fit for independence. The Indian would have to live under their tutelage for a long time to acquire enterprising nature and sense of responsibility and only then they would be fit for independence and self-rule. Needless to say, the British had never given word that during this long period, the exploitation, repressive policies and divisive plots adopted by the British government would be put on hold. Therefore, the impression created by the British government was an illusionary and self-contradictory concept.

Under this perspective, the opinions expressed by Lakshminath Bezbaroa from time to time on the country's freedom movement may be considered and analysed.

In his article "Bharat Uddhar" (The Rescue of India), he ridicules the various methods of struggle applied in the freedom movement :

"My dear sons, listen to the old word of this old Barbaroa, don't make yourself a laughing stock by these infantile activities, rather, try to be a man, try to learn the ABC of business and industry by sitting at the feet of the English people, try to learn humanity, self-dignity along with education and only then, you should utter these big words..."

He always targetted the dependence of the Assamese people on others in his satirical writings. He wrote :

"The Assamese people like to depend on others and like to swim in the downward current. As long as these people will

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carry on this way, their will be no betterment of their hapless miserable condition." ['Ekhon Mukoli Chithi' -(An Open Letter), included in *Kripabar Baruar Obhotoni*(The Return of Kripabar Barua)]

"Moral, i.e. ethics : If somebody cannot mould himself according to the present situation, then, if possible, he should not be born. And if somehow he is born, he should die instantly; but he should not put the blame on others." (Ibid)

Infuriated with the Assamese young force, he cursed them in one of his poems :

He who wants to read
He who wants to die
Let that hapless die reading
You frolick and enjoy
O Assamese young man!

('Asomiya Dekar Proti Upadesh')

(Advice to Assamese Youth)

After visiting a session of *Asom Sahitya Sabha*, Kripabar (Bezbaroa) is expressing his contentment on the arousal of energy in the hearts of the Assamese people –

"A sense of self-establishment has returned to Assam again through the cultivation of self-energy." ('Sahitya Sabha Darshan', 1935-36)

By the term 'Assamese', he mainly understood and meant the middle class section of the Assamese people. For the lack of enthusiasm and energy among the Assamese people, Bezbaroa never put the blame on the impact of the English rule. However, the experience of his own life made him deeply dissatisfied and indignant towards the English rule and the businessmen settled

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in India. He would not go beyond the limitations of the colonial mindset and found a solution to this self-contradiction in this argument : the British government and ministers and bureaucrats who are in England, they are good people but those who are in India they are bad and oppressive, arrogant and cunning. But both types of the British people were the two sides of the same coin. The good civility of the English gentleman rulers at home was standing upon the edifice of oppression of the Indian people by the same British government.

As an evidence of Bezbaroa's dilemma and contradictions, his article "Anglo-Indian" may be pointed out here which is generally regarded as a proof of Bezbaroa's anti-British attitude and which was first published in the Assamese journal *Usha* (The Dawn) by Padmanath Gohain Barua but later withdrawn in a hurry in fear of the government. Given the degree of irony and the aggressive use of language in the essay, it can be understood that the article emanated as a reaction to some personal experience. The article was published in 1918. The emotion and sentiment expressed in the article do not smack of a sense of freedom and inspiration but a kind of personal outburst and wounded self-pride that has an origin in his class. According to Bezbaroa, the good English people have fallen into a degraded position after coming to India under special circumstances – the symptoms of this degeneration are arrogance, and the downgrading and humiliating behaviour towards the Indian people, He included every one, from the Viceroy to the ordinary businessmen and soldiers in this category. He has compared this with the acquisition of the *Chandala* nature by the Brahmins when they were degraded.

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When he was writing about the vandalism of this section of people, he expresses a kind of class-arrogance which is quite unexpected and rare in him :

"The brilliant young men belonging to the lower and middle class in England very often come to India as civilians through this medium (civil service) in the form of magistrate, judge, and other officials of high or low ranks. The category of lower class people also includes the affluent tailors, shopkeepers, tanners, blacksmiths, and the 'barbers', "the most cunning among mankind, and the washerman as well... These young men coming of such lower class suddenly discover him in India as either the head of a district, or, head of a sub-division where thousands of people keep standing before him in a posture of supplication expecting any order from him.

It is not outside the knowledge of Barbaroa that even in our country, the young boys from very ordinary family sometimes get the posts of Munsheep, Sadaramin, Sub-deputy etc and then they sometimes humiliate the children of some noble family and even some highly respected people and in that way they gratify themselves. If it is so, then there is no surprise in the humiliation meted out to Indians of every hue and cry by the British civilians in each step! ('Anglo-Indian')

But Bezbaroa was not aware of the fact that the British administration had sealed every avenue of opportunities for the Indian people as part of this colonial system. So Bezbaroa failed to diagnose the Assamese disease properly and the remedy that he suggested was useless. His assessment of the British regime was by and large subjective.

In the midst of all these, he occasionally expressed his

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high regards for Mahatma Gandhi. Because, Gandhi always advised to do something with his own examples and not simply lectured on.

"Apart from the road shown by Mahatma, the other roads are like the 'Dhai Ali', 'Dhobar Ali' and 'Cheuni Ali' (examples of roads that reflect the weakness of the Assamese people, hence useless roads - ed). Given the character of the political society today, one can not hope to Reach Rome travelling along the aforesaid roads.) ('Deshodharor Diha') (Tips to save the country)

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"Gandhi is targetting the real objective – not blindly but conscientiously. That's why the whole world is shaken under the weight of this little, dry, feeble Gandhi. But most of our countrymen have mastered only the skill of oratory from their childhood and each of them has become a great one– but they are worthless." (Ibid)

However, the same Bezbaroa expressed his displeasure in 1929 at the dilly-dallying in the Congress activities and lent his support to the protest of the young group :

"The common people, after deep thought, have learnt just one thing – Congress. Congress. The directives from the Congress. It is time to tell them that the order of Congress is useless and outdated... The age of Congress is more than twenty years. Its teeth are either gone or about to go... order from such a Congress!"

"Fifthly, let us consider about the British soldiers. They are sons of the British rustic huntsmen. Leave alone their earlier life, even after being recruited in the army in Britain, they have to do everything from cleaning the shoes to washing their own soiled clothes... But India is like the mythical *Kalpataru* for

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them – here whatever they want they get it. They get male servants, domestic help, native bearer to clean the shoes, native washerman to wash the clothes... In fine, they get all sorts of pleasure and comfort like a gentlemen when they are in India. So, can it be surprising that they will be here very arrogant and mad with power, and will naturally consider the native people as non-entity." ('Anglo-Indian')

Bezbaroa's (Barbaroa's) assessment of the British 'Sahibs' who settled in India was correct in most cases. But he used certain expressions to establish that fact and these expressions like 'man of upper class', 'ordinary man', 'gentleman', 'tailor', 'shopkeeper', 'hunter' have brought to the fore his own class-prejudice towards these people which had remained dormant in him. This proves that Bezbaroa was also confined within the same limitations found among colonial middleclass gentlemen.

The concluding remark of this article, considered an example of the writer's love for independence, is also very noteworthy :

"What a pity! Barbaroa is sorry for that. Because the British have done a lots of good for India and India is in debt to the English in many ways. That this British people will remain as the owner of India is wished by India always." ('Anglo-India')

In other words, Bezbaroa wanted social equality with the British people but did not want political independence for the country. This position may appear as logical but this desire was meaningless as society and politics are mutually inter-related.

Although Bezbaroa had advocated for democratic equality on many occasions, but it is difficult to conclude that he was a hundred percent supporter of Democracy. Take the question

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of Hindu-Muslim relationship. After visiting the Sahitya Sabha session at Sibsagar, he was deeply impressed by the unity of Hindus and Muslims in Assam. It was crystal clear in the description presented by Kripabar :

"I was immensely pleased to see that the Assamese Hindus understand the value of 'Assam my mother' and the Assamese of other religions also understand the value of 'Assam, my mother and also understand that "the service of this mother is the greatest religion'... In the Sahitya Sabha session, three or four eminent Assamese Muslim gentlemen delivered lectures. The liberal ideas of their speech and the simplicity of their manners had pleased me a lot." ('Sahitya Sabha Darshan') (A visit to Sahitya Sabha)

The writing of history by the colonial historians in a motivated way in order to create division in the society was understood by Bezbaroa and the present day's scientific study of history endorses Bezbaroa's position in this regard.

"Viewing from the angle of foreign writers of Indian History, some Hindus have acquired very mischievous idea about some Muslim Nawab or Badshah and I am saddened by this. For example, Siraj-Ud-Daula, the Nawab of Bengal and Aurangzeb, the emperor of Delhi. However many of them have opened their eyes towards the actual truth now-a-days, but a lot is left to be done." (Buronjir Dauratma, 1858 Saka) (The atrocity of History, 1936)

Again,

"Before I conclude, I would like to mention that nowadays many wise people are talking that if we want to get self-rule, then there must be unity between the Hindus and the Muslims; I also support this view and would like to ask you –

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why don't you get united?– first you get united."

You are talking that it is difficult to be united, because the Muslim brothers want a larger share of power after self rule. But I say, if they want a larger share, why don't you give them?"

"Because, as said by Sir Syed Ahmed, the Hindus and Muslims are the two eyes of the beautiful Bharat Mata. If one is weak, our beautiful mother will only look ugly." [Dharma, Sampdraik Samasya aru Samaj (1853 Saha)] (Religion, Communal Problem and Society 1931)

In the article "Hindu-Mussalman" (Hindu-Muslim) previously published in the journal *Usha*, Bezbaroa, through the mouth of his created character Kripabar, had quoted detail descriptions from the books by foreign (colonial) historians such as Mersden, Elliot and Elphinston regarding the atrocities done upon the Hindus by the Muslim rulers due to their misconception about the religion of Islam. Even then Bezbaroa said that such an utterly outdated opinion will not be believed by most of the Muslims in the present century of civilisation and knowledge.

"Now Barbaroa has heard that the educated Hindus call the Muslims their brothers, and likewise, the educated and wise Muslims see the Hindus as their elder brothers and Barbaroa has heard of this too." (Hindu Musalman, *Usha*)

Similarly, many stories and articles written by Bezbaroa have expressed liberal, progressive and democratic attitude towards women and towards the relationship between man and woman. He vehemently opposed certain social customs and rites created by the patriarchal society – such as deprivation of the girls from education, child marriage or the cruel slavery in

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the name of "Sahuri Khota" (living in the in-laws house) etc. Bezbaroa/Barbaroa wanted to break the fetters put around women and to provide them their due honour, importance and self-respect in the society. His article, 'Shtri-Swadhinata' (The Liberty of Women) published serially in three issues of Assamese journal *Bahi*, records his vehement opposition to child marriage and his strong opposition to keep the widows in subhuman conditions by imposing various restrictions upon them. He makes an ironical comment that, "When the husband of a Hindu wife passes away then the wife becomes a non-entity in this world. With the loss of husband, she also loses her own necessities, comfort and her life itself." ("Shtri-Swadhinata", *Bahi*, 1929). Then he again says, "Therefore, I say that, this women group should "undertake every effort to transform the women folk into real human beings. You, the women folk, you should try to make our your livelihood instead of depending on the male people. You are not weak. No... No... No..., you should think yourself strong." ("Shtri-Swadhinata", *Bahi*, 1929).

But six years from the date of publication of this article Bezbaroa provides another definition of women-emancipation under his pen name Barbaroa where he is less liberal than before. Here he expresses his final views regarding the relationship between man and woman. The title of the article is "Russ Deshat Tini Mah" (Three Months in Russia). Here, Barbaroa, or, for that matter, Bezbaroa seems to be apprehensive regarding the policy of equality between man and woman adopted and executed by the newly established communist government in Soviet Russia. Rather, he rejects the concept of equality outrightly.

"The real point is to make space for women clean and

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hussle-free by removing the injustice and atrocities meted out to them. If the impediments towards advancement of women are withdrawn, it will not necessarily make all the women great scholars like Khona, Leelavati, Gargi, Moitreyi; this dream will never be fulfilled."

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"If you put all the men and women in the same kitchen to prepare the meal; you will not get the necter, but a spoiled broth."

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"The ideas of our society differ from those of Russia or other European countries. It is totally wrong to assume that our country will flow with milk and honey if we simply give up our age-old tradition."

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"Though the duties and responsibilities of men and women are separate - but there is no mutual opposition between the two set of activities, instead there is co-operation. It is simply a "Division of labour".

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"Well, you want to train women like men equally, ok, good; do it; you are going to make women engineers, captains, colonels, soldiers, barristers, lawyers, officials like their male counterparts, ok, do it, by doing that you will simply break our homes, but you can never give peace to either of the two." ("Russ Deshat Tini Mah", Three Months in Russia, *Bahi*, 1935)

Here it is seen that Bezbaroa has back-stepped from the path of social progression. His apprehensions and reservations seem irrelevant in the present context. No doubt that in the

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stagnant colonial society, it was the natural conservatism of the middleclass.

Similarly, on the question of casteism, he accepted the liberal model of Sankardeva but never sought a political solution to the social inequality, because such revolutionary initiative for radical reforms can hardly come from the middleclass in the semi-feudal atmosphere of the colonial era. He has even said that the backwardness and social weakness of the the lower caste people are due to their own sense of inferiority.

"Mahatma Gandhi has fruitlessly taken so much trouble for the *Harijans* (the untouchables). Even today, the *Sanatanies* (the upper caste) are above the *Harijans* and the *Harijans* are above the *Sanatanis*. The *Harijans* are not aware of their own strength and that is why they remain so demoralised. If they can realise that strength, then they will be able to establish their domination over the *Sanatanis* . Therefore, O, the most powerful *Harijans!* Know thyself." ("Atmanang Biddhi", Know Thyself, 1934)

Owing to these lapses in his political consciousness, Bezbaroa thought that the barbarous inhuman Fascism of Hitler and Mussolini of his contemporary world could be a model for India. According to him, if national unity could be achieved through mental inspiration and self-sacrifice, then all the problems would be solved. So he praised Hitler and Mussolini in some of his articles. For example :

"Now the time is for Hitler and Mussolini. Leaving aside all cheap feelings, sentiments, the young Assam has embarked upon the work for the freedom of the country. No trick will work now." ('Bishuddha Makardfhaj', 1936)

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The objectives of the Fascists were to push all the Italian people into one opinion irrespective of religious and other differences and those objectives have been achieved. The meaning of 'Fascism' in Italian language is to 'get bound together'....

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On the day when Italy got united with the idea of one nation, since then, this country is making tremendous advancement in the world, a strong leader is there behind this Fascist party and he is Mussolini. In real sense, he is the *de-facto* ruler of Italy now."

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Probably Barbaroa has understood now the secret of Italy becoming so strong. Will ever the hapless Indian people realise the importance of this success?" ('Jatiya Oikya') (national unity) 1930.

Due to warnings from Romain Rolland, even in those days Rabindranath understood that it was wrong to expect human welfare from Fascism. It establishes an artificial and mechanical national unity in order to repress the working class people and the minority communities and tribes. It destroys the freedom of expression.

Bezbaroa was fortunate that he did not live to see the devastation of the Second World War unleashed by Fascism to decimate the human society. So he did not experience the disillusionment. Be that what it may, although Bezbaroa had some links with the working class people but it did not contribute to the formation of his world-view. His vision for the country and society was shaped by his colonial middleclass outlook. Through these ideas, we become aware of his limitations.

Bezbaroa and the Spirit of the Age

Prof. Nagen Saikia*

The first issuance of the *Jonaki* in 1889 marked the beginning of the romantic movement in Assamese literature. This movement continued for long five decades giving vigour and colour to the literature. All through the period, Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), with a towering personality and with command over all aspects of Assamese literature, old and new, stood as the uncrowned king over the domain of Assamese language and literature. Dimbeswar Neog is of the opinion that Bezbaroa's touch had made the modern Assamese literature quick to life.

Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee calls Bezbaroa the greatest personality in modern Assamese literature and the real builder of it. He rightly remarks that, "There should be a study of Lakshminath in the background of the modern 19th century Renaissance of Indian literature and Indian thought." The romantic movement in Assamese literature brought this spirit of the Renaissance into it, and laid the foundation stone of modern Assamese literature with three distinctive intellectual elements, viz., nationalism, humanism and idealism. The contribution of all the three caused an intellectual awakening in Assam.

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Through the life and works of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the principal characteristics of this awakening found powerful literary expression. Though Bezbaroa was not alone responsible for this awakening in the intellectual and literary life of Assam, yet his personality stands for the whole period of romantic movement in Assamese literature. Therefore, the age of the romantic movement in Assamese literature is also named as the 'Age of Bezbaroa'. It is equally true that as he was a creator of a period, so he himself was also a creation of the period. The study of the early life of Bezbaroa could make it clear that the distinctive qualities and characteristics of his outlook towards the social and cultural life of Assam were built up by the natural, social and cultural life of Assam of the age, and by the religious environment of their family. It is noteworthy that he established himself as the exponent of the religion and philosophy of Sri Sankardev.

Through Bezbaroa, the first modern exponent of Sri Sankardev, the strong desire of the Assamese people to rediscover their rich and colourful heritage of language and culture, found its expression. Therefore, Bezbaroa stood to be the bridge between the old and the new. His idealistic view which he projected in his life and his works, had its origin in the Vaishnavite literature and culture of Assam. The first phase of the modern Assamese literature is governed more or less by this idealistic view.

Bezbaroa's relationship with the famous Tagore family brought him near to the Brahmo religion. The philosophy of the Brahmo religion, excepting its rituals, was identified to a great extent with the philosophy of the religion as preached by

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Sri Sankardev. Therefore, the study of the Brahmo religion, rather made his idealistic view still sharper. In this regard, Bezbaroa's familiarity with the Western philosophers gave him an objective outlook for reasoning.

The impact of the Bengal Renaissance on Bezbaroa and his colleagues is also to be reckoned into consideration. This outlook found a more vigorous expression in the writings of Bezbaroa, specially in his belles-letters, and short stories and in some poems too. His love for Assam and the people of Assam with their rich past and their anaemic present made him a poet-singer of the past and a critic of the present. It was not only Bezbaroa, but the conscious mind of the Assamese people that viewed the faults and foibles of the Assamese society through the eyes of Kripabar Barbaroa. In the growth and development of the character of Kripabar, the Western writers like Jonathan Swift, Cervantes and Addison, as well as Bengali writers like Bankimchandra had also some indirect contributions.

To establish the cause of the Assamese language and thereby the separate identity of the Assamese people, Bezbaroa even wrote in Bengali to refute the arguments of some writers of Bengal for spreading out mischievous viewpoints in this regard.

The trait of deep patriotism acted as the dominating force in Assamese literature and Bezbaroa stood to be the most successful guiding spirit behind this force. His love to his mother country covers the natural life and the pastoral scenes of it and he feels a deep sense of belonging to these. Not only in his serious writings but also in his humorous and satirical writings, his love for the natural and pastoral life of Assam is clearly

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discernible. His language always becomes poetic when he chooses some subjects of this type to write on. His love for the pastoral life found its articulation mainly in his short stories and poems.

Bezbaroa was the first compiler of the Assamese folk-tales and the first writer of literary ballads in Assamese. These folk-tales and ballads are clear evidences of his love for the pastoral life of Assam. Western humanism got blended with Vaishnavite philosophy in Bezbaroa; and this synthesization gave a distinctive direction to the intellectual life of Assam. He was out and out a preacher of Assamese patriotism, but at the same time, he did not lose the sight of broader humanism, and for this, modern Assamese literature cannot be called to carry the spirit of narrow parochialism. Bezbaroa was a prolific writer in Assamese, and he pioneered in some fields of literature, specially in the field of short story belles-letter, farce, parody, literary ballad and literary criticism.

Bezbaroa's claim for greatness lies not only in his creative talent or fine craftsmanship alone, but also in his ability to create an age and govern it with his literary personality. It was in Bezbaroa that the new spirit of the age with its triple qualities of soaring idealism, exhilarating humanism and flaming patriotism found the most powerful literary manifestation. Moreover, it was Bezbaroa who gave the modern Assamese prose its most distinctive and powerful style of expression.

East and West in the Literary World of Bezbaroa

Prof. Bhaben Barua*

(Translated from Assamese
by Dipmani Das**)

The history of the birth and development of the Modern Indian Literatures is primarily a special history provoking curiosity with an admixture of the East and the West and the complete form of this history is well-arrayed in some salient trends. In the past, on some occasions it has been felt that there had been the impact of the West on the Indian mind and vice-versa. Even the scholars have found its mark on the image of Gautam Buddha, the compassionate One, and in the New-Platonism of the West. But these are examples of some isolated points of temporary attachment– not the mark of long assimilating trend.

The history of the continuous trends of this assimilation is the history of Modern Indian Literatures. An intimate introduction to the fact how the Indian minds have assimilated or have been trying to assimilate in different forms the Western civilization evolved on the basis of Graeco-Romano-Christian civilization– is found in these literatures. These literatures which

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can be labelled as Modern Indian Literature as a whole can be called a special kind of mirror whose reflective system is controlled by the kernel process of the admixture of the East and the West prevailing in the reflected world. Michael Madhusudan Dutta's poetry offers an introductory but a significant character of Modern Indian Literature in terms of integration of the language of the East and Free Verse. This literature has come into being on the basis of various forms (of literature) like the sonnets of the West, different rhyme-divisions along with Free Verse, novel, short story etc. Not only the base changed but also that which is based on. The humanistic philosophy arising out of the Renaissance civilization of the West has occupied the space of Indian spirituality. An acutely conscious mentality concerning the realities of human world and the realities of human sorrow surfaced in Indian Literature. A kind of incurable tragic sense— hitherto unseen in Indian minds— is also revealed in the writings like Rabindranath's *Ghare Baire* etc. An individualistic, pure Romantic mentality bereft of the scent of spirituality— free from the influence of religion and society - is taking the space of *moromiya* intimate attachment found in the Vaisnavite verses of the Middle age. A more human oriented, more individualistic, more inward looking than before— a mentality endorsing more the densely mysterious subconscious mind— that means especially the influence of the mentality continuously active in Western literature for the last hundred years— is seen in Indian Literature.

The capital gained by the Indian Literature owing to this admixture of the East and the West doesnot include merely not organic divisions and humanistic and individualistic mentality,

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but, in Indian firmament the various innovative schools of thoughts arisen out of the influence of the West on religious thoughts, national thoughts, social thoughts etc. are also included in it. After all, the proof of the admixture of the East and the West on the mind, psyche and physical decorations of the Modern Indian Languages is clearly evident.

On examination of the evolutionary form of the last one hundred years' Assamese Literature, this fact is found; within this span of hundred years Modern Assamese Literature has attained formal recognition, expansion and momentum in Western style. Like the other Indian Literatures, the Assamese Literature, unfolded on the basis of different divisions seen in Western example like poetry, drama, novel, short story and humorous compositions, carried the signals of a human oriented, individualistic mentality and have drawn vital energy from Indian thought.

We will find that Bezbaroa is situated at the nerve-centre of this one hundred years' literature. Bezbaroa deserves this central significance because the Modern Assamese Literature has earned formal recognition, expansion and its momentum in Bezbaroa's literature. We don't get in Bezbaroa's literature the play of light and shadow of the inner-most province of human mind or a subtle, deep, consciously felt sense of life, what can be found in the poetry of Chandra Kumar Agarwalla, in early poetry of Ambikagiri, Jyoti Prasad's *Karengar Ligiri* and Birinchi Kumar Baruah's novel *Jibanar Batat*. That is why Bezbaroa's centrality primarily is due to the expansion and historical significance of his literature - not for deftness and subtleties. Firstly, Bezbaroa embarks on short story, novel, drama, belles-

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letter— approximately all genres and sets nearly in each and every genre an excellent example or model where on his successors have been relying on for approximately last half a century. Secondly, Modern Assamese Prose has attained a distinct style, artistry and a significant evolution in the hands of Bezbaroa. There can be felt, to some extent generally, the lack of modern kind of artistic flexibility in all kinds of prose— Bhattadeva's Prose, the prose of the historical books of Ahom Kings, Hem Chandra- Gunabhiram and Lambodar's Prose. The Assamese Prose has attained this merit in the hands of Bezbaroa only. This transformed prose has borne nearly seventy five to eighty percent burden of Modern Assamese Literature. Thirdly, Bezbaroa has helped the Modern Assamese Literature in the attainment of an institutional dignity through editorial exercise for the last a few significant decades.

On the one hand, the introductory practice of cultivation in a new plot of land is seen in Bezbaroa literature, the attempts of attributing a new meaning with the national folk mind, heritage to that plot of land on the other hand are also noticeable. How Bezbaroa was intimately introduced with the classical form of Vaishnavite Assamese Culture— a cult of Indian heritage— is well conceived from his diary in the book *Mor Jivan Sowaran*. It can also be deduced from the fact that the biography of Sankar - Madhav in modern pattern is also written by Bezbaroa.

On the other hand, Bezbaroa was intimately related to the other form, quite opposite to this classical form of Assamese culture. On most of the occasions this idea is formed that the wires of Bezbaroa literature are tied secretly in the intimate tune of Assamese Folk culture, folk literature and after all, of Assamese

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folk mind. In this context, he deserves special mention also as the first editor cum distributor of the Assamese stories. Not only that, it was he who incorporated first the best parts of Assamese folk songs in his various dramas and other compositions and drew the attention of those neo-educated people to the poetic beauty of those parts.

Really sometimes the elevated classical tone of Sanskrit Poetic Literature or the tone of citizen friendly elegant English or Tagorian poetry creates in Bezbaroa literature a tone equivalent to the tune in Assamese Culture blown by buffalo horns which arouses a specific sensation in our mind :

Son barania Ketekee dhuniya
Gondhat amol-mol.
Padum buli Pari bandi hal bhomora
Ki bhul! Ki bhul! bhul!

(A beauteous golden coloured *Ketekee* flower blooms spreading its fragrance wherein a black bee is entrapped taking it for a lotus. What a piece of mistake! The romantic connotation is the focus)

These lines carry the tune what is there in Assamese folk literature.

Telat bandi hal Telini Parua
Salat bandi hal Hati
Makara Jalat Krishnai bandi hal
Nupuyay Kalindi Rati.

(A Cockroach gets stuck to oil and an Elephant is trapped in a stable. Likewise Krishna is entrapped to Kalindi, one of the wives of Krishna, as if entrapped in a spider's web and the dawn never comes.)

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But in reality *Son barania Ketekee Dhunia* is an Assamese translation from Kalidasa's Sanskrit poetic literature. If looked at attentively, it can be realised that only the style of the language has not made the lines pure Assamese, the crux of the matter has been webbed in the tune of Assamese folk mind.

Another point in case is the lines given below :

*Sakhi he, ki kam dukhar katha,
Amrit mathote bis upasil
Mitha mou hal tita.
Malatir Saki Khapat Pindhilo
Taro gal pahi sari;
Sonar Sajat Pakhiti rakhilu
Sio guchi gal uri.
Sajat phulil tagar phule-pahi
Sendhiyare ba pai
Koneo nedekhate Koneo nusungate
Sio je lerele jay.*

(Dear friend, what to tell about the tale of sadness— while churning for nectar, poison is found and the sweet honey turns bitter. A wreath of *malati* flower is tied to the hair knot but its petals are fallen and the loving bird kept in the golden cage has flown away. The *tagar* flower blooms in the evening and becomes pale unseen and unsmelt.)

If looked at the lines attentively, it is seen that the expression it carries is not to be found in Assamese folk literature or in Ancient literature. The subtle sense of romantic sorrow being expressed in these lines is something new at that time in Assamese Literature. *Ki Kam Dhukhare Katha* (What to tell about the tale of sadness) is resounded in Assamese Vaishnavite

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literature at best in the manner *Alo mai, ki kahab dukh*; it sans romantic devotion. *Sakhi he* (Hello friend) is not a property of Vaishnavite poetry; in reality these two words denote the devotion found in Vidyapati Chandida's Vaisnav verses. Happiness and Sorrow are two brothers– this expression is recollected time and again with pain and pleasure in Vidyapati's poetry and again also recollected that "nectar becomes poison". But the tune of the fact that a sense of 'transience' is associated with what is beautiful or what is desired– specially reverberates in English Romantic Poetry. Herein only in the poems of Bezbaroa– the tunes of Vaishnavite poetry and English Romantic poetry get mixed up. The severe form of this 'transience' is imagined in Chandra Kumar's poem *Prakriti* motionlessly and roughly. In Bezbaroa's poem that sense of 'transience' is recollected with tender and compassionate feelings. This sense of Romantic sorrow is primarily a gift from Western literature to Indian literature. When Rabindranath is absorbed in great meditations on a person versed in the Vedas or Upanishads, then 'transience' or sense of emptiness does not create intense tremors of sorrow in his poetry, he sings :

*"Je ful na futite jharchhe dhananite
Je nadi marupathe haralo dhara
Jani he jani tao hayni hara."*

(The flower that has fallen on the earth without blooming the river which has lost its stream in the desert, still it is not lost and the poet contends that.) This sense of emptiness does not come from that meditation in Upanishads of the East; because in the East Upanishad is :

"twang vedyang Purushang Veda yatha ma bo

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Mritu : Paribyatha." (Know that person versed in Vedas so that Death can not cause you any sorrow.) After all, the influence of the Western literature is transparent in the thought and feeling expressed in the small poem entitled *Sakhi he ki kam dukhare katha*. But our main point is that the poem is Western in tune can not be discerned so easily. As if there exists in the poem together the tune of the flute of Bengal Vaishnavite poetry as well as the tune of the piano of English poetry; where as both the tunes ring in one musical instrument of Assamese folk psyche in the magical incantations expressed through *Malatir Chaki, Tagar fulpahi, Sandhiyar Ba*.

However, the fact that the worldly form of Assamese national life was how far active in Bezbaroa's subconscious mind can be realised from the above discussion. On the other hand, it is also proven and already mentioned that he was deeply conversant with the classical form of it.

After all, the overall consciousness of both the forms - worldly and classical - were active in his mind; he had been observing these forms from a very short distance since long. On the otherhand, Bezbaroa got the opportunity to know the national life of Assam very extensively in geographical terms while his father had to move by profession across Assam from one place to another with the family. That is to say, his identification with Assamese life was not only extensive but also intensive both in terms of quality and quantity and it was genuine in nature. On the otherhand, he was away from Assam since the onset of youth and he observed the course of life witnessed in childhood and Adolescent days from a distance. Not only a spatial distance but also mental distance to some

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extent, is also a crucial factor in this regard. A new society and a new ideology as an ideal course of life emerged following the direct and extensive influence of the Western civilization on the 19th century socio-cultural life of Bengal. During the childhood and early youth days, Bezbaroa's subconscious mind has accepted Assamese national life in different forms but as soon as the conscious mind started working - that is - since the onset of youth, his conscious mind started perceiving new view-points on the world of impressions already preserved by sub-conscious mind. In Hemchandra's 'Young Bengal' like Radicalism and the reformatory tendencies of Gunabhiram, indoctrinated to Brahma religion, were visible the splashings of the Western wave on Indian social thought and religious thought since the times of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The successor Bezbaroa followed the examples of breaking the frontiers of old society set by these predecessors. All the three personalities acquired the mental distance necessary for judging the old ideology against the new ideology and therefore satire was their forte in their literature. In case of the first two, the reformatory propensity is more at work. Therefore satire is more significantly at work. Hem Chandra, while writing *Bahire Rang Chang Bhitare Kowa Bhatari* and Gunabhiram in *Ram Navami*, used satire as a tool specially on the necessity of a morally bound social ideology. But the satire of Bezbaroa is that of more independent class and very pure in nature. Bezbaroa has utilised the 'rurality' of the old society seen through the urban view point of the new society born out of the influence of the Western civilization as the source of creation of humour on many occasions. The conscious mind of Bezbaroa has accepted many pure, docile and simple

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impressions from the world preserved by the subconscious mind through urban viewpoint and those are soaked in satire and humour and on most occasions, these *Rasa* appears to be that pure and unmixed *Rasa* of literature created by the learned persons propelled by the Western ideologies.

On the otherhand, the possibility of evocation of nostalgia following the positioning at a spatial distance from the intimate world of unconscious mind kept Bezbaroa single mindedly devoted to that world on most occasions. Therefore, a play of light and shadow between the critical eyeing of conscious mind and affectionate observation of unconscious mind is often seen in Bezbaroa literature. The 'worldliness' of the worldly form of the Assamese national life creates at some particular places good pieces of satire to that extent as it is particularly at some places a specimen of aesthetically fascinating picture to that equal extent. Therefore, on most occasions the feelings and emotions of the Western ideology ring in the Assamese folk literature in folk tune.

After all, it can be said that conscious mind primarily contains those ideas formed in Western ideology and the unconscious mind contains a picture of a special local form of Indian East and one should bear in mind this particular admixture if one wants to know about the nature of Bezbaroa literature and Western literature. The taste of the old ideals of the Assamese society was formed in religious and courtly environment. The ideals of that life style perhaps got manifested in the personality of Dinanath Bezbaroa, the father of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. Bezbaroa always recollected that special type with respects and affections whose proof abounds in *Mor*

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Jivan Sowaran. But that ideals of life-style were not in proper conjunction with the spirit of the Age and its economic as well as socio-moral character. Therefore, it necessitated an adjustment of it with the new social system developed upon Western influence.

Bezbaroa is seen embarking on this attempt of adjustment succinctly in his writings. For the first time a song is found in a drama written by Bezbaroa in female voice.

Nilkunjata Sapon - Magon

Bahir Amia Pi

Basantate Barhale Saponar Ragi

Murat hat bulai di

(Having drunk the wonderful tune of *bahi*, the flower is absorbed in dreams— the spring breeze comes and pats over the head.)

That a unique literary attempt being made in accommodating a modern urban taste in Assamese society can be well conceived in this regard. It is also noticeable that Bezbaroa has exhibited the elegantly lyrical tune of Assamese folks songs and the classical tone of *Bargeets* in the voice of the same character. Satire is a characteristic mark in the first phase as the corollary of the contact of the West with Modern Assamese literature; the place of satire in the writings of Hem Chandra, Gunabhiram, Lambodar is central.

But the characteristic mark in the second phase of the contact is aesthetic consciousness. Primarily the characteristic mark of the second phase is exhibited in the writings of the contemporary writers of Bezbaroa. But the characteristic mark of both the phases manifested without any hesitation in the

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writings of Bezbaroa only. His writings offer not only the anti-romantic sketch of 'Jagaro Mandalar Premabhinay' but also an intense Western romantic consciousness :

There is a garden in her face
Where roses and lilies blow
A heavenly paradise is that place
Where in pleasant fruits grow

The above mentioned lines by Ben Johnson were referred to in a chapter of the novel *Padum Kuwari* by Bezbaroa, and in Bezbaroa's writings only it is echoed clearly for the first time focussing on unhesitating Western romantic tune.

Kait nathaka *Rupahi Golap*
Bole Prithivit Nai
Akoke namati *Priyar Dugal*
Thakiba Dharilu Sai
Kot Ase Ene *Apurba Padum*
Rati Dine Thake Phuli.
Chakure di thar *Dekhalu Priyak*
Mukhere eko nubuli

(Priyatoma)

(There are no beautiful roses in the earth without thorns. The poet is bewitched by the beauty of the cheeks and he started staring at her cheeks silently where in he discovers beautiful lilies blooming all the time and talked to her through eyes.)

After all, the two tendencies of Romanticism and satire in Modern Assamese Literature have attained a distinct character and form in Bezbaroa's literature. We must confess that for these reasons the significance of Bezbaroa writings is very important in the context of cultural transformation brought

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about in the Assamese society during the last one hundred years in the modern age and the significance of that writings is primarily discoverable in the transparent and opaque lines of unification of the East and the West. The manifestation of a strong humanistic and introvert philosophy and a tragic consciousness in the drama of *Karengar Ligiri*, in the novel *Jivanar Bata* by Bezbaroa's successors Jyotiprasad and Birinchi Kumar Barua respectively, is the result of such an intimate realization of the worldly and classical form of Assamese culture that a historically conscious audience can not but feel the existence of the image of the predecessor Bezbaroa in the background of these two milestones of Assamese culture.

The manifestation of the relation of the East and the West so far in the modern Assamese literature has attained a unique form in the writings of Bezbaroa.

The Genius of Bezbaroa

Lalit Kumar Barua*

(Translated from Assamese
by Dr. D. K. Mahanta**)

It may be said that in the societies of the dark ages of human history the *Sakti* worship was strongly prevalent. It is easily observable that in those days there was no scope for the development of human personality or sense of individualism; instead there were total indifference, irrationality and inhumanity. On the other hand, it may be noted that the sense of creativity or the creative instinct is the outcome of a kind of liberated life-system which is free from the influence of the *Sakti*-cult. It may also be stated that the quality of highmindedness and creativity was discernible in those classes of people who were aloof from the centralised power of government or who were engaged in agriculture, technical or other creative, and artistic activities. And it seems a historical truth that the religion of Buddhism was flourishing among such classes of people. The intimate relation existing between feudal heritage and the anti-individualistic thoughts is also noteworthy in this context.

As there was a significant recognition of individuality in

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the Neo-Vaishnavism, so there were some human values which were capable of challenging the non-dualistic or monotheistic doctrine in the post-Indian Renaissance. And in this creative period of modern Indian history, it became clear that the human mind became rationalistic, liberal and humanly work-oriented. In fact, a new age of modernism in Indian history started at that time.

It seems safe to say that a stream of Western outlook and consciousness had flown throughout India during this Indian Renaissance of the 19th century and as a result, the spirit of Humanism became the main source of inspiration in the thought and philosophy of some of the greatest Indian thinkers and philosophers of the time. The establishment of the *Brahma-Samaj* by Rammohan Roy was a remarkable event at this time. This Socio-religious organisation which was set up in 1828, had its far-reaching influence on different parts of India which paved the way for many efforts and endeavours to bring about numerous socio-cultural changes. In 1967, Ranade set up *Prarthana Samaj*, a society of prayer, and behind these efforts of religio-social reformation, there actually were a new doctrinal morality and a philosophical outlook.

The essence or fundamental point of *Brahmadharma* was the worship of *Brahman* or one God and it boldly refuted the almost supernatural medieval doctrine relating to human life and the world, and put a strong emphasis on the realistic basis of moral sense and moral behaviour of the people. The religious concerns of Ranade were also deeply and intimately related to the spirit of morality and humanism.

It is also important to remember that through the impact

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of the teachings of *Brahma-Samaj*, Rabindranath Tagore became well-versed in the philosophy of the *Upanishadas*. Indeed, the essence of Tagore's creative impulse seems to have been consisted of a new humanistic outlook on life and the world and of the spiritual communion of human life with the world. And we can easily perceive this kind of new humanistic realisation in the writings of Tagore for the first time in modern Indian literature. In this context, the following statement of Albert Schweitzer seems to be quite relevant :

"Tagore calls it an aberration of oriental thought that though it is occupied with the question of union with God, yet it does not permit man to reach a positive relationship to the world which proceeded from God. He has some hard words for the *Sannyasins* (ascetics) who devote themselves to renunciation of the world." (Albert Schweitzer : *Indian Thought and Its Development*, p.231)

Despite Rabindranath's extraordinary originality and creative thoughts, the good humanitarian aspects emerging from the Western influence could not have its strong roots in our society. Some factors and influences, antagonistic to the Western humanitarianism, became quite active at this juncture. If we think of Bankimchandra and Vivekananda along with Rammohan and Rabindranath, we can perceive the clear differences between two parallel and mutually opposite trends. It is needless to say that there were two different philosophical and mental stand points in these two lines of thinking. On the whole, a kind of striking contrast becomes clearly evident between the Neo-Hinduism of Bankimchandra and the Monotheism of Vivekananda in the final analysis.

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The influence of the reformatory zeal and humanistic aspects of the Indian Renaissance was easily perceptible in the changes that took place in Assamese society and culture at the end of the nineteenth century. The learning of English, improvement in communication, individual perseverance in art, literature and commerce, the pan-Indian consciousness of a social and political culture combined to bring forth many new promises before the Assamese society which was gasping almost in the Middle Ages. Since the publication of the *Arunodai* (1846) to the acceptance of *Brahmadharma* by Gunabhiram Baruah (1869), many events took place which were significant and remarkable. And in the perspective of these changes we see the rise of the *Jonaki* by Chandra Kumar in 1869. In fact, Bezbaroa had to take the historical responsibility of the ages of the *Bahi* and the *Jonaki*. It may be said that Bezbaroa was the most conscious literary man of Assam of his time who observed keenly the new life-style of the Assamese people being nourished by the background of English literature and Westernism and showed a remarkable devotion to the human and philosophical significance of the Vaishnavite culture prevalent in Assam. And this was the special distinguishing mark of Bezbaroa as a great man of Assamese literature.

In 1938, both Bezbaroa and Chandra Kumar died and this clearly indicated the end of the age of "Jonaki" in Assamese literature which lasted for nearly fifty years. However, the Renaissance ideals which were strongly prevalent during half a century since 1839, became gradually blurred which has been a significant factor in the social history of Assam.

In the general sense, of course, the epochmaking changes

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that came over to the history of Europe are not strictly comparable to the historical sensations occurred in India. But in some special perspectives, such a comparison may seem valid and relevant.

Any way, the active influence of the Renaissance on the thoughts of Indian cultural history and on the new creative endeavours cannot be easily ignored. Despite the existence of the feudalism and obstacles of colonialism, this influence was the helpful factor in laying the foundation of a new culture in a rationalistic, thoughtful and human way. The long cherished ideal of Rammohan was to bridge the gap between the East and the West and the social philosophy of Vidyasagar was also a new kind of knowledge instinct with the ideals of the Reformation, the cultural heritage of these trends of the nineteenth century with which Bezbaroa was endowed, was immensely valuable.

One glaring example of Indian Renaissance is Bezbaroa's interpretation and discussion of the religion of Neo-Vaishnavism propounded by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. As a matter of fact, Bezbaroa inherited this intensity of religious sense by his birth. And its full realisation was achieved by life-long perseverance and hard study which offered him a kind of new philosophical confidence. There is no doubt that the doctrines and ideals of Neo-Vaishnavism were convincingly propounded by Bezbaroa. It is needless to say that Bezbaroa's realisation was clear and unmistakable in this regard. As he says :

"The idea that God is the centre of all creations and of the universe has been thrown aside by *Sankhya* and it has placed the whole universe within a radius and a circumference. The

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Vedanta philosophy has blown away the radius telling it to be an illusion and making the centre and the circumference a single entity, that means the Individual Soul and the Supreme Soul have been bound together leading to the *Nirguna Brahman*. There is a close relation between the *Vedanta* and the *Gita*. The *Gita* is *Brahman* oriented and monotheistic. But there is a speciality in the *Brahman* cult and monotheism of the *Gita*. The *Brahman* of the *Gita* is behavioural or having qualities and its monotheism is a special kind of non-dualism. According to the *Gita* God is the centre, Nature is the radius and all the living beings are the circumference. In fact, the whole of the universe has been surrounded by God Himself and this unity has been the lesson of the *Gita* which is similar to that of the *Upanishads*." (*Bezbaroa Granthavali*, Chapter-I, page 399)

It is also noteworthy that the social philosophy of Bezbaroa was rationalistic and humanistic. The comparison of Ranade with Bezbaroa seems to be highly relevant. And this similarity and harmony indicate the far-reaching effect of the nineteenth century Indian Renaissance. It is worthwhile to quote the following statement made by a great scholar on Ranade :

"He drew a parallel between the medieval poet-saints of India and Protestant reformers in Europe, coining the name Hindu Protestantism for his reform efforts. The loving God which he found in these two historical strains could not sanction *Brahmanism*, with its trappings of Sankrit Supremacy, rites and ceremonies, yoga austerities and powers, caste rules and distinctions, animal and human sacrifices, the worship of cruel deities, shakta rites and polytheism." (*Religious Ferment in Modern India*; Hal W. French, Arbind Das; p. 37)

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The main inspiration of Bezbaroa was creative. He gave Assamese language and its literature a new look, endowed it with uniqueness and individuality of its own and combined the thinking process of modern Assamese people with human values. As he wrote :

"Liberation or emancipation is a characteristic feature of a genuine literature. Any literature in which there is no inspiration of freedom, no liberation from bondage of rules and regulations and which cannot be written freely and easily seems to be almost dead. Its inherent talent remains unkindled and undernourished and ultimately it is ignoble. Human life is full of variety and a living literature is characterised by it."

It may be acknowledged that Bezbaroa's personality and literary creations are replete with a profound and intense feeling and realisation considered in this perspective, it may be said that his short-stories and other creations written at the last part of his life exemplify a deep rooted and multifarious human sensibility.

The story of Ratan Munda is not simply an ordinary one. The earlier critics seem to have been unable to judge it properly simply because they could not, perhaps, enter into the gravity and intensity of Bezbaroa's thoughts and language and the deeper meaning lying beneath the outward surface.

Sankaradeva's Philosophy and Lakshminath Bezbaroa

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(Translated from Assamese
by Subhash Chandra Das **)

Lakshminath Bezbaroa's books like *Tattva-Kathā*, *Srikrishna Kathā* and *The Religion of Love and Devotion* contain a lucid discussion on *Mahāpurushī dharma* propagated by Sankaradeva and at the backdrop of it, different aspects of *Bhakti* movement of India. However, Bezbaroa's clear opinion on Sankaradeva's philosophy has not been revealed in all the articles. In these theoretical books, Bezbaroa praises Ramanujacharya's *Vishishtādvaita* (Qualified Non-dualistic) philosophy. Bezbaroa, who was well versed in every smallest theory of Sankaradeva's philosophy, understood that his philosophy was influenced by *Advaitavāda* (Non-dualism). His works contain abundant substantiations of it. But for two reasons Bezbaroa made an effort to assert in an indirect manner that Sankaradeva's philosophy of devotion was influenced by *Vishishtādvaitavāda* (Qualified Non-dualism). It should be called an indirect manner because only in one unpublished essay, he called Sankaradeva

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the follower of *Vishishtadvaitavada* (This unpublished essay “Bhakti Marga, the Path of Devotion” was later incorporated in the book *The Religion of Love and Devotion* published by *Asom Sahitya Sabha*). No other essay mentions it. Of the two reasons, the first reason is like this: observing the *Advaita* (Non-dualistic) theories in Sankaradeva’s works, some of the followers of Chaitanyadeva ridiculed his religion as *Madyavada* (Cosmic Illusionism) and *Nirvisheshvada* (Impersonalism). It is not unknown to anyone across the boundary of Assam that Sankaradeva’s religion is the religion of devotion. Though his works contain theories of *Advaita Vedanta* (even the theory of oneness too, that is, the final salvation with complete unification with the Supreme Soul, as in *Prahlad Caritra* and others), his path of accomplishment is not *Advaita*. That means, it is not *Madyavadi Sannyasa* (Illusionistic Renunciation). Sankaradeva’s path of accomplishment is the devotion embodied in *Bhagavata Puranas* which can be accomplished even from within the family life. Therefore, Bezbaroa, in his book *Chaitanyadeva*, criticised one Nimaichand with piercing words for giving a distorted explanation of Sankaradeva’s doctrine.

“The enormous tree of *Vaishnavism* propagated by Shri Sankaradeva has flourished with all its splendour and its influence can be felt in entire Assam from the days of ancient Kamrupa kingdom till today, and it will continue to flourish so long *Vaishnavism* exists in this world. That the religion propagated by Sankaradeva is not *Madyavada* and that this religion is based on the *Nine Bhaktis* (Nine forms of devotion) epitomized in *Srimad Bhagvata*, *Gita* and *Sahasranamodita* can be shown by quoting many verses from the books by the two

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Mahāpurushas. The need of the soul is only complete unification with the Absolute, it is not the core of their books; let the eclectic Nimaichand do his best to prove that.” (*Bezbaroa Granthavali*, Part-I, p. 522)

As a consequence of the distorted explanation of Sankaracharya’s finest philosophy of *Advaitavāda* at the time of the emergence of Chaitanyadeva, some dishonest persons taking advantage of the theory “I’m Brahman” (*Aham Brahmāsmi*), started to indulge in many malicious activities. Because of this Chaitanyadeva got very angry with *Nirvisheshvāda* and *Māyāvāda*. And so, in spite of accepting *sannyāsa* (renunciation of worldly pursuits, fourth stage of life, *śhrama*, according to Hindu philosophy) for himself, he propagated a religion of *madhura bhāva* (sweet mood) which was completely opposite of *Sannyāsa*. Only for this reason, some of the followers of Chaitanyadeva spread that *Mahāpurushi dharma* (the religion propounded by Sankaradeva) was *Māyāvāda* in order to denigrate it in public eyes. In *Chaitanyadeva* Bezbaroa writes,

“At the time of the emergence of Chaitanyadeva, *Māyāvāda*, propagated by Sankaracharya, reached its culmination and its downward trend started. Distorted explanation and misuse of Sankaracharya’s great sayings such as *tat tvam asi* (‘That thou art’), *sarvam khalvidam brahman* (‘All is truly Brahman’), *aham brahmāsmi* (‘I’m Brahman’), *prajñānam brahman* (‘Consciousness is Brahman’), etc. continued with high intensity among the people. Becoming *māyāvādi* by accepting *sannyāsa* and misusing the meaning of Sankaracharya’s finest thoughts, thousands of people indulged

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in corrupt practices in the society and did offensive activities in their own interest in the name of God.” (p. 525)

That means, this was the extent of the downfall of *Māyāvāda* at the time of Chaitanyadeva. In order to defend Sankaradeva’s philosophy of pure devotion against those who, with a superficial view, had condemned it as atheistic *Māyāvāda* in their effort to find blemish in *Mahāpurushi* dharma, Bezbaroa had to write in one or two places that *Vaishnavism* of Assam came close to *Vishishtadvaitavāda*

The second reason is that, in the field of religion Bezbaroa had to involve himself in a fierce debate. This debate was with a journal called *Asam-pradipika* published from Dibrugarh. *Asam-pradipika* raised a question if Sankaradeva’s doctrine of devotion originated from Chaitanyadeva’s doctrine. Therefore, Bezbaroa unitedly with Dr. Banikanta Kakati wrote several articles in *Bahi* where they accused the editor of *Asam-pradipika* of spreading such calumny, and criticised him with piercing words. In this context, when Banikanta Kakati, talking about *dāsyabhāva* (attitude of servitude), opined that Sankaradeva’s ideas were similar to those of Ramanuja, Bezbaroa in one or two places in his articles wrote that Sankaradeva’s doctrine had a similarity with *Vishishtadvaitavāda*. Perhaps, he had to give such an idea under the influence of Banikanta Kakati. I have to say ‘perhaps’ because there are many statements in his writings supporting the theory of *Advaita*. I will try to show them below. We have only a fragmentary account of the works Bezbaroa was engaged in to revive *Vaishnavism* of Assam. When such accounts are taken into consideration, we notice a contradiction in his writings.

Apart from these two reasons, there may be one more

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reason. Let me quote this from an eminent intellectual and a renowned critic of Assamese literature:

“Like Buddha, Mahabir, Kabir, Nanak and other great souls, Sankara mainly tried to salvage the ignorant lower caste population by imparting to them proper education on religion. Sankara laid the big foundation. Madhava completed the building.’ (Kanaklal Barua’s *Mahapurushiya Sampradayar Dharmamat*). From this point of view Bezbaroa tried to understand Sankaradeva’s philosophy too. If there is meaning in administering *deekshā* (initiation into the mode of worshipping a deity) to the so called lower caste people on spiritual exercise, then it will not be proper to think *jagata* (the world) and *jiva* (the individual soul) as unreal. Therefore, Bezbaroa and Kanaklal Barua described Sankaradeva as a follower of *Vishishtādvaitavāda*.” (Dr. Hiren Gohain, *Asamia Jatiya Jivanat Mahapurushiya Parampara*. Part-II, p. 63)

Though Bezbaroa tried to say, for the aforesaid reasons, that Sankaradeva was influenced by *Vishishtādvaitavāda*, yet, noticing the praise of *nirguna* Brahman (the Absolute devoid of the attributes) many a times in Sankaradeva’s writings, he had also to say like this:

“Instead of beating about the bushes, let the followers of Chaitanya tell if *Ishvara* (God) is not called *nirākāra* (having no form), *niranjana* (pure), *nirvishesha* (indeterminate) yet *sākāra* (having form), *saguna* (having attributes) and yet *trigunātita* (beyond the three attributes) in *Vedas*, *Upanishadas* and *Vedānta*? Then why do they slander those as atheist who call *Ishvara nirākāra*?” (*Chaitanyadeva, Granthavali*, p. 546)

What is conspicuous here is that Ramanuja, while totally

disagreeing with the concept of *nirguna* Brahman, firmly stated that the considered subject of the *Upanishadas* was not *nirguna* Brahman but *saguna* Brahman. So it is clear that Bezbaroa does not fully support Ramanuja.

Bezbaroa accepts both the concepts of Brahman, the *nirguna* and the *saguna*. In the articles “Nirguna Krishna” and “Saguna Krishna” from his book *Shrikrishna Katha*, he has put forward a detailed explanation:

“Two states of the ocean. The same ocean is sometimes tranquil and sometimes agitated. Similarly, the same Brahman is sometimes *nirguna* and sometimes *saguna*. The calm, quiet and still state of the boundless ocean bears resemblance to *nirguna* Brahman and from the swelling and upheaval state of it with giant waves, a resemblance to the concept of *saguna* Brahman can be realised.” (*Granthavali*, p. 451)

Bezbaroa gives numerous explanations on the features of *māyā* in the article “Saguna Krishna”. Before the Creation, *nirguna* Brahman was a luminous Soul; for Creation, *nirguna* Brahman in association with *māyā* becomes *saguna* Brahman. According to *Advaita Vedanta*, *nirguna* Brahman becomes *saguna* Brahman by contraction through *māyā*. Bezbaroa writes in “Saguna Krishna”:

“The concept of Brahman which is beyond characterisation, wisdom and quality, is called *nirguna* Brahman or *Parabrahman* (Absolute Brahman). When this *nirvishesh* (indeterminate), *nirvikalpa* (without alternative), *nirupadhi* (without identity) *nirguna Parabrahman* assumes the name of *māyā*, that means, when He shrinks Himself through *māyā*, then He becomes *savishesh* (defined), *savikalpa* (having

alternative), *sopadhi* (having identity). That means, when in the infinite sky of knowledge the Supreme Soul rises and the whole space assumes the form of a circle and the centre reveals in the middle, then Brahman is called *Aparabrahman* or *Maheswar*. As a spider covers itself by weaving a web, similarly the naturally second to none *Parabrahman* covers Himself with the web of *māyā*. But in reality, *Parabrahman* does not enlarge or contract, He appears like this only to the eyes of those who see Him like this.” (*Granthavali*. P. 450)

Sankaracharya says the same thing - though Brahman in association with *māyā* becomes the cause of creation of the universe, *māyā* cannot bring about any change in Brahman, as magic of a magician works on the audience while the magician remains unaffected. The clear sky looks blue, but essentially the sky has no colour. In the same manner, though Brahman is correlated with *māyā*, though *māyā* is the shelter of Brahman, Brahman is indispensably indifferent. Brahman has no growth or diminution. Brahman is unique - a complete entity.

According to *Advaita Vedanta*, *nirākāra*, *nirupādhi* Brahman gets reflected through *māyā* as a finite living being (*jīva*). If a question is raised as to how it is possible, Sankaracharya would say in reply, as the light of the sun or the moon gets reflected on different containers of water, as the red colour of flower gets reflected through transparent crystal, as space is confined to every small earthen water jar, like that. Bezbaroa, in the article “Srikrishna Tattva” from his book *Tattva-Kathā* explains this theory only:

“As light reveals things like a water jar by illuminating them, in the same manner, mental faculty is revealed in the

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form of knowledge through the illumination of it by the divine light of intellect. As crystal becomes red in association with hibiscus, becomes blue in association with a blue flower, yet in reality crystal has no colour; in the same way, the *chit svarupa* Brahman (pure consciousness Brahman) or the Supreme Soul, in association with different mental faculties looks like respective faculties; that means, He looks sad, happy, covetous, licentious. This difference is only for name's sake, not real." (*Granthavali*, p. 369)

In this explanation, Bezbaroa advances *Advaitavada* with full support. That means, unconditioned; *nirakara*, *nirguna* Brahman manifests itself as a conditioned soul (*jiva*). The Supreme Soul is one in essence - many in names.

According to the philosophy of *Advaita*, *nirguna* Brahman is imperceptible to speech-mind. But He is the essence of *Satchidananda*, that is, He is being (*sat svarupa*), pure consciousness (*chaitanya svarupa*) and supreme bliss (*Ananda svarupa*). However, this beingness, consciousness and bliss are not the attributes of Brahman as He is *nirguna*. Sankaracharya says that there exists a difference between attributes and essence. Attributes vary from matter to matter, but essence is inherent. Essence is organically united with matter. For example, fragrance is the attribute of a flower, but sweet taste is the essence of sugar. But Ramanuja explains beingness, consciousness and bliss as attributes or qualities of Brahman, as in his opinion, Brahman is only *saguna*. In several places Sankaradeva calls Krishna pure consciousness, supreme bliss. Bezbaroa in *Srikrishna Katha* elaborately discusses *sat*, *chit* and *Ananda svarupa* of *Satchidananda* Brahman. And at the end he says "What is uniquely *sat*, *chit* and *Ananda svarupa* is the absolute philosophy

of Srikrishna”. (p. 19)

Sankaracharya explains the essential features (*svarupa laksana*) and accidental features (*tatastha laksana*) of *nirguna* Brahman. The essential features of Brahman are - He is *sat*, *chit* and *ananda*. And His accidental features are - He is the creator, sustainer and destroyer. That means, with essential features Brahman is *nirguna* and with accidental features Brahman is *saguna*. In *Indian Philosophy* (Vol. II, p. 539), Dr. Radhakrishnan, in the context of his discussion on Sankara-Vedanta, says, “While Brahman is devoid of attributes, still those of being, consciousness and bliss may be said to be its essential feature (*svarupa laksana*) while those of creatorship etc. are accidental ones (*tatastha laksana*)”. In *Srikrishna Katha*, Bezbaroa discusses these two features (*laksana*) of Brahman. “With which we get the reality of a thing or a matter, is the essential feature of that thing or that matter. That is the accidental feature of a thing or a matter which gives the temporary attributes of that thing or that matter”. (*Granthavali*, p. 452). Here, he further explains that energy (*shakti*) needs a medium for manifestation. Therefore, *nirupadhi Parambrahman*, accepting the name *mūlyā* becomes *saguna* Brahman. Had Bezbaroa been a firm supporter only of Ramanuja’s philosophy, he wouldn’t have brought the theory of *nirupadhi, nirguna* Brahman into his discussion. But he could not help it. Because, in any discussion on the philosophy of Sankaradeva, these two aspects of Brahman supported by *Advaita Vedanta* will invariably crop up. However, Ramanujacharya strongly denies the *nirguna* aspect of Brahman.

In several places of *Srikrishna Katha* and *Tattva-Katha*, Bezbaroa acknowledges the two fine theories of *Advaitavāda*,

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namely, Immanence and Transcendence of Brahman. “As *sarva brahman idang jagata* (Brahman is omnipresent) of Pantheism is true, so as *neti neti* (neither this nor that) Brahman of *Upanashida* too.” (*Tattva-Kathā*, p. 92). In *Srikrishna Kathā* too, he acknowledges both the essences of Brahman, Immanence and Transcendence. “In spite of being immanent, *Maheswar* is transcendent...As a spider covers itself by weaving its web, in the same way, He has covered Himself in the web of the natural world. But He has not been absorbed in the world. As He exists in the world, so He exists outside too. He is immanent, yet transcendent.” (*Granthavali*, p. 456). Sankaracharya calls this theory *Bivartabāda* (theory of illusory existence). That means, though Brahman reveals through the world, yet He transcends the outside world. *Bhāgavata Purāna* contains a clear explanation of it -

Parama bisudha gunahina moi
Jnāna rupa ātmā eka /
Mote āse ito jagata moi punu
Jagata byatireka //

(Sankaradeva, *Dasama Skandha*)

(Pure absolute and devoid of attributes, I’m the consciousness, the appearance, and the soul. The phenomenal world exists in me, yet again I’m absent in this world)

That *nirguna* Brahman cannot be indicated in full certainty has also been elaborately dealt with by Bezbaroa in *Srikrishna Kathā*. In this manner, in his discussion on the philosophy of Sankaradeva, Bezbaroa again and again moves away from Ramanuja and discusses *Vaishnavism* of Assam at the backdrop of *Advaita Vedanta*.

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Another remarkable point here is that in the first essay of the two essays “Bhakti Marga, the Path of Devotion and Love” which are included in Bezbaroa’s Baroda-speech book *The Religion of Love and Devotion*, he asserts Chaitanyadeva, Sankaradeva and other propounders of the religion of devotion as followers of *Vishishtadvaitavada*. Apart from that, in no other essays Bezbaroa has directly called Sankaradeva as a follower of *Vishishtadvaitavada*. Only in some places in his essays he praises Ramanuja’s doctrine. However, the two mentioned essays are not a part of the original Baroda speech. These two were only his unpublished personal notes. After many days since his death, in 1968 Asom Sahitya Sabha published the book *The Religion of Love and Devotion* edited by Dr. Maheswar Neog which incorporated the two personal notes received from Bezbaroa’s daughter Ratna Barua along with the two Baroda speeches (“History of Vaishnavism “ and “Rasa Lila of Sri Krishna”). He has not published these two notes anywhere perhaps because he has a hesitation in his own mind in regard to the opinions expressed here.

In *Tattva-Katha*, Bezbaroa explains a significant stanza from Sankaradeva’s “Vedastuti” as *Vishishtadvaitavadi* (Qualified Non-dualistic).

Tumi Satya Brahma Tomta prakase
Jagata ito asanta /
Jagatae sad Tumio prakase
Antaryami Bhagavanta //

(*Kirtana Ghosh*, “Vedastuti”)

(Thou art the Absolute Truth and this phenomenal world manifests itself in Thee; Thou too ever manifest Thyself as the

omniscient spirit in the endless world)

“Vedastuti” is a chapter in *Bhagavata Purāna* which is influenced by *Advaita Vedānta*. In this chapter, which is translated with the help of Sridhar Swami’s explanations, Sankaradeva is influenced by absolute *Advaitavāda*. Dr. Maheswar Neog discusses it in his Introduction to *Kirtana Ghoshā* and *Nāma Ghoshā*. Bezbaroa says, “Therefore, the world (*jagat*) is not totally an unreal mirage like the horns of hare or the trick of magic. The world is benevolent to us. You have permitted us to live here only to perform specific tasks assigned to us and to serve you to attain salvation”. (*Tattva-Kathā*, p. 83). As a matter of fact, Sankaracharya has given such an explanation in regard to the unreality of the world. According to his opinion, though the world is unreal, it is not as unreal as horns of a hare, sons of a barren woman or a flower from heaven. That means, there is no such thing as horns of hares or sons of a barren woman or a flower from heaven. The world is not unrealistic of that sort. Because so long individual souls (*jīva*) exist in the world, the world is real for them. However, when soul attains *Brahmajñān* (Absolute consciousness), then the world becomes nonexistent for the soul. That means, the world has practical reality, but not spiritual reality. Because the world is not Absolute reality. Only Brahman is the Absolute reality—such is the explanation of Sankaracharya. So it is clear that the stanza from *Kirtana Ghoshā*, which is called *Vishishtadvaitavādi* by Bezbaroa, is actually an absolute *Advaita* stanza.

In one place of *Srikrishna Kathā* (*Granthavali*, p.453), it is seen that Bezbaroa finds fault with Ramanuja. “Sankaracharya makes a mistake in saying that Brahman is only *nirguna* and

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Ramanucharya makes a mistake in saying that Brahman is only *saguna*. The *Shruti* or the *Veda* which are their basis, that *Shruti* in one breath clearly mentions the two aspects of Brahman, the *nirguna* and the *saguna*. When judged, it is seen that here Bezbaroa finds fault with only Ramanuja because Sankaracharya accepts both the aspects of Brahman determined by the *Upanishadas*. Ramanuja does not accept. According to him, Brahman is only *saguna*. In this context, Bezbaroa quotes a significant *Borgeet* by Madhavadeva:

Nahi janma tomra tathapi janma dhar /
Sohi janme jivara janama dura kar //
Sahaje akart karma kar aparjyanta /
Sohi karme jivara karama kar anta //
Tumi prabhu nirguna gunara sim n /
Nirguna hovaya jiva sohi guna g /

(Thou art birthless, yet Thou take birth. That Birth liberates the individual soul from the cycle of birth and death. Thou art a Non-doer, yet keep on doing eternally at ease. Thy work ends the suffering of the soul. O Lord, Thou art nirguna, yet with infinite gunas. The soul becomes nirguna singing Thy glory)

Bezbaroa believes that meditation on both the aspects of Brahman, the *saguna* and the *nirguna* only completes the entity of Brahman, which Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva did. “The *Gita* and the *Bhagavata* reveal these two aspects of *ekam eva dvitiam brahman* (Brahman is one, without a second). And our *Mahapurushas* Sri Sankaradeva and Sri Madhavadeva have propagated only this *saguna-nirguna* Brahman. (*Granthavali*, p. 450)

Homage to Bezbaroa

Prof. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami*

Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864- 1938) is one of the towering personalities of Assamese culture to whom we owe not only a sense of an Assamese past going back to the seventh century and beyond, but also an awareness of tradition capable of fostering values of a future society based on equality and democratic, humane principles. Poet, playwright, short-story writer, novelist, biographer, essayist and editor of periodicals, he became a legend in his lifetime for the indefatigable energy he had brought to bear on the movement for rehabilitation of Assamese language and culture that began in the forties of the 19th century. The early thirties of the last century saw Bezbaroa virtually institutionalized through the Bezbaroa Society, formed in Calcutta in 1930. It was in one of the meetings of the society held in Calcutta University that Banikanta Kakati (1894-1952), Assamese critic and scholar who was also an outstanding alumnus of the University, acknowledged the overall importance of his works for Assamese culture. Referring to Johnson's observations on Addison's style ("Whosoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison"), Kakati suggested that it would not be proper for one to even try to write in Assamese without first familiarizing oneself with the

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genius of Bezbaroa's prose. Bezbaroa's centrality in the movement for Assamese language was also an aspect Kakati took due note of in his presentation. For one thing, it was in the name of a standard language that Bengali came to be introduced as a language of the courts and educational institutions of Assam from 1836, just ten years after the annexation of Assam as a part of the British territory in India. For another, the idea of a patois gaining ground in the colonial discourses from the early fifties of the 19th century, even the Vaishnavism of Sankardeva (1449-1558) came to be considered a distant echo of the religion preached by Chaitanyadeva (1486-1534) of Bengal.

While the first generation of the 19th century Assamese intellectuals, namely, Jaduram Deka Barua (1801-1869), Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan (1802-1832), Juggoram Kharghariya Phukan (1805-1838) and Maniram Dewan (1806-1858) chose to make do away with either Bengali or an Assamese-Bengali hybrid form, the second generation led by the Hindu College-educated, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1829-1859) waged a virtual war on the language policy of the colonial rulers with support received from the Baptist Mission in Assam. The movement for restoration of the language of Assam culminated in 1873 when the colonial rulers could finally persuade themselves to accept the distinctive identity of the language and rehabilitated it by issuing a notification. The separation of Assam from the Bengal presidency a year later effected an altogether new phase of modern Assamese culture now not only free from the yoke of a language imposed on them but also spatially separated from Bengal that considered it as a colonial hinterland. Bezbaroa, who got himself admitted into Ripon College, Calcutta, in 1886, soon emerged as a leader of the group that took it upon itself the task of carrying forward the works

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undertaken earlier by Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1829-1859), Gunabhimm Barua (1834-1894) and Hemchandra Barua (1835-1896), among others. Bezbaroa thus marked the culmination of an era in Assamese culture that saw the language nearly relegated to the margins as a mere patois of Bengali and signalled an altogether new beginning by facilitating an era of reconstruction marked by the formation of *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (1888) and the launching of two important periodicals, namely, *Jonaki* (1889-1895) and *Bahi* (1909-1933).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa's manifold contributions could perhaps be outlined, first, in terms of his efforts at fashioning an idiom brimming with the history of the race. It was the language of Hema Saraswati, Madhav Kandali, Sankardev, Madhavdev, Bhattadev, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and Hemchandra Barua, among others, now recast or redefined - in terms of what may be called a fusion of the linguistic registers of the *charitas*, the *buranjis* and the folk resources of Assam, notably the ballads and tales, peasant poetry of diverse types, riddles, folk-idioms, the *Bangeets* and Bihu songs in particular. This deep mastery of language and style is what is inextricably bound up with a worldview so radically different from that of his immediate predecessors that one is tempted to surmise that it was shaped by his response to the agrarian uprisings of Assam during 1861-1892. His inwardness with the sufferings of the poor during the colonial rule is what resonates throughout, in his belles-letters exercise in particular marked by a kind of surface laughter covering a deep sense of hurt and suffering within. *Takurir Dauratmya* bemoans the fate of the Assamese villages in the wake of the colonial encounter- the self-sufficient economy of the Assamese villages in its death throes, an old

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agrarian society systematically destroyed by forces of colonial exploitation eluding the simple folk that took the British presence in Assam for granted. Bezbaroa's acerbic wit was directed not only against the evils of colonial rule, but also the ideas of inequality, untouchability, caste-distinction and forces inimical to change and progress. Sankardev's quest for a religious ideal, 'pure', (*visuddha dharam*) in its avoidance of the formal trappings of sacerdotalism, the valour and patriotism of Lachit Barphukan and the spirit of sacrifice represented by Sati Jaymati are ideals he upheld throughout his works. A pioneer of Sankardev studies in Assam (he wrote extensively on the lives and works of the Vaishnava saints of Assam, Sankardev and Madhavdev, in particular). Bezbaroa was also instrumental in rehabilitating Lachit Barphukan and Jaymati in mainstream historical discourses for values that he considered foundational to the nation-building process. His play *Jaymati Kuwari* (1915) is one of the important literary exercises in Indian literature that projects the Gandhian ideal of *satyagraha* involving resistance to evil, trial of patience, faith and fortitude and, most importantly, unswerving commitment to truth and ahimsa.

Orpheus like, Bezbaroa sang in different pitches; his voice capable of infinite modulation. And Orpheus-like, he used his power of language to work miracles: to make dry stick sprout leaves pulsating with life. His was an extraordinary life dedicated to the Assamese language whose power and possibilities he revered, stood in awe of, loved, explored and played with. An extraordinary life it was, dedicated to the exploration of the possibilities of a language rich in history and its folk substratum that our long 19th century remained oblivious of.

Bezbaroa's Short Fiction

Prof. Madan Sarma*

Lakshminath Bezbaroa began his foray into the world of fiction with *Seuti*, the first ever Assamese short story. His short stories have been anthologized in *Surabhi* (Fragrance, 1909), *Sadhukathar Kuki* (A Basketful of Tales, 1910), *Jonbiri* (Pendant with a crescent shaped locket, 1913) and *Kehokali*. The fact that *Sadhukathar Kuki* contains both folk tales and short stories makes one surmise that at times Bezbaroa did not maintain the distinction between these two genres. This collection, however, includes a remarkable story *Jalkunwari* (The water nymph). A beautiful girl spends her time frolicking on the bank of the river Rupahi (meaning beautiful). Even as her wedding is fixed with a suitable young man and the time of her departure for her "new home" draws near, she goes on sitting on the bank, singing and sometimes, collecting straws and weeds and dropping them into the river. She watches in fascination as the straws get sucked into the whirlpool. The bridegroom's family gets irritated by her eccentricity and the groom thinks of breaking the engagement. The girl decides to entreat him not to leave her. On a moonlit night, she is drawn irresistibly to the river bank and she begins to drop the straws into the whirlpool as she often used to do. Her betrothed quietly comes from behind and playfully covers her eyes with his hands. She laughs and

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claps three times, saying to him, "Just now a girl got drowned in this river." Then she turns towards him, adding, "I m a mynah, take me home, put me in a cage." What the girl (as well as the narrator) apparently wants to say seems to be that in the tradition-bound patriarchal society, a girl is not free to lose herself in contemplation of nature and to frolic around, enjoying the freedom of girlhood. Once a girl is married off, she forgoes her freedom, turning into a caged bird. However, the girl's laughter indicates that though there is obvious sadness in leaving behind the carefree days of girlhood, there is joy too in beginning a new life with someone.

Patmugi (The Petite One, 1915), an outstanding and surprisingly modern short story, has certain qualities and features not usually found in Assamese short stories of Bezbaroa's time. Male and female sexuality finds restrained expression in the story. Bezbaroa displays rare sensitivity and restraint in showing how at certain moments subconscious sexual desire tends to overpower and influence the moral conduct of even a man steeped in traditional values. The construction of the story is interesting as it has a semblance of self-reflexivity. The author deliberately draws the readers' attention by appending what is purported to be the comment of a 'critic' to the story.

Bezbaroa's experimentation in narrative structure marks another story *Jene Chor Tene Tangon* (Tit for Tat). The story is, in fact, a tale, purportedly a true story, narrated by Katia Momai (Dwarf uncle). While narrating the story of Rudai's beautiful and hardworking wife and describing her suffering at the hands of her husband, the narrator gets so angry that he stops the narration to hurl a barrage of insults at Rudai in absentia. Momai constantly impedes the progress of the narrative, stops for a

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while to chew *tamol* savouring its taste, and then resumes : "Chewing the *tamol* (betel nut and leaf) with lime and sali well and oiling the four wheels of the tale, Momai once more began to pull it along by the rope". In the author's imagination, a tale is a cart on wheels and the narrator pulls it along. In such a story, Bezbaroa utilizes the technique of telling and 'performing' a folk tale that was once prevalent among the rural communities.

Bezbaroa's short stories record his critical responses to certain aspects of the contemporary social life. At times such responses take the form of biting satire or ridicule. He was highly critical of the prevailing religious bigotry (in *Nistarini Devi ba Fatemabibi*), rampant casteism (in *Lambodar Deka, Jatiramar Jat, Bhomkerela, Dharmaddhwaj Phoisalarnbis, Kashibasi*) and patriarchal domination (*Laliti Kakati*).

Some of his stories are based on the debilitating effects of colonialism on the people belonging to the old aristocracy. Tragic decadence of this class marks a story like *Dhowankhowa* (The Hookah). Rameswar the son of *Dangaria* (man of esteem) Gangaram, inherited from his father insolvency, intoxication for smoking tobacco and a *Dhowankhowa* made of silver. Soon he loses the precious dhowankhowa and replaces it with an ordinary hookah. While coming by boat to a *Satra* (Vaishnavite monastery), he raises his hands to show respect to it and inadvertently drops his hookah. In an attempt to retrieve the hookah, he jumps into the water and gets drowned. The hookah is later found stuck in mud and rubbish near the bank. Bezbaroa uses the *Dhowankhowa* as an evocative symbol of decadence, degeneration and despoilation of an entire class.

In Bezbaroa's fictional writing, one can often feel the presence of the authorial self. The use of the omniscient narrator

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is not seen in most of his narratives. Perhaps this has something to do with the strong influence of the oral narrative tradition on him. The authorial intervention or the role of the intrusive narrator in his short stories is, however, qualitatively different from such interventions in folk tales. It seems that he did not consider it essential to hide the fact (from the readers) that a story is basically a construct.

As a writer of fiction, Bezbaroa seems to have been conscious of the issues like the nature of contact and contrast between the real world outside the fictional world and the world constructed in fiction. In a number of fictional writings, for example, in *Gopal aru Gopinath* (Gopal and Gopinath) and *Dadayek Podo aru Bhatizak Bhodo* (Uncle Podo and nephew Bhodo), both collected in *Barbaroar Bulani*, written in his pen name Kripabar Barbaroa, he problematizes the relationship between the world of fiction and the real world. In both the stories, the progress of the narrative is impeded by interruption and/or diversion/ digression.

In some of Bezbaroa's fictional writings one notices a playful mixing of genres. What is today designated as the breaking of genre-boundary is noticeable in his short stories which sometimes take the form of folk tales, sometimes that of a drama or a combination of essay and story. Narrative is often embedded in his satirical writings. His effortless and matter-of-fact experimentations and innovative approach to narrative fiction tend to get overlooked. However, some of his narrative techniques appear to be similar to those identified as postmodern.

Novel of a Kind

Prof. Pradipta Borgohain*

Padum Kuwori claims one's attention due to two striking facts. It's the first historical novel in Assamese, and it is also the first and last novel written by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. However, if one were to apply very rigorous critical criteria, it barely qualifies as a novel, with the decisive aspects of plot and characterization falling short of expectations of seasoned critics and readers. To mention the unfavourable verdict of just one such critic in Bezbaroa's own time, Lambodar Bora flayed the work in a piece entitled "Novel or Suicide?"

However, our purpose is not really to revisit *Padum Kuwori* in a spirit of hostile and over-exacting scholarship, although noting the shortcomings of the work opens up much thinking on the subject of novel-writing in Assam. One must remember that when Lakshminath Bezbaroa wrote the novel, he was a young student in Calcutta. (The work was published in a book form in 1905, but it was composed and published in *Jonaki* in 1890). For many authors, this is an exploratory phase of life nourished by a book-derived, naive, and romantic idealism. Usually it's only in the later part of life that the writer's sensibility ripens and insights deepen. The 'vistavision' of a novelist, surveying large chunks of time and territory with a

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clear-eyed, worldly-wise disenchantment, cannot be expected in the apprentice years.

The 'historical' novel *Padum Kuwori* seems indebted to classical western tragedy and romantic poetry (snatches of love songs and poems adorn chapter-beginnings as epigraphs), but it also draws on local folklore for vivifying its core situation of the love between Surya and Padum and is thus ballad-like in a sense. It can be argued that the 'doomed lovers' theme is an inevitability, given the formal choice of leaning on existing literary conventions, rather than something that emerges from a dramatic process of struggle and strife. Actually the experience of a pair of lovers whose love endures amidst scenes of decay, destruction and mortality is familiar and indeed, age-old. Bezbaroa seeks to enlarge the dimensions of the love-ballad in prose by evoking great loves of the past eternalized in myths, legends and literary works, such as that between Damayanti and Nal, Savitri and Satyavan, Sita and Ram and Romeo and Juliet. The other enlargement comes from the choice of the historical frame. Like other contemporary historical novels such as *Bhanumoti* (1891) and *Lahori* (1892) by Padmanath Gohain Barooah, *Padum Kuwori* is set amidst real historical events and features real personages. Resemblances to *Bhanumoti* are quite marked as both works refer to royal or aristocratic tyranny, feature an orphan youth admitted to household whose daughter the youth would go on to woo, and end in tragedy. A reader has the freedom of marking crucial connections between private and public events which can be seen as being ultimately inextricable, instead of regarding the larger historical events as subordinate, and as mere backcloth to the intense amour between two lovelorn souls. While royal tyranny is quite pivotal

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in *Bhanumoti*, it is Lakshminath Bezbaroa who in his literary career perhaps more tenaciously and memorably pursued the theme of the crucial, coercive ways of the ruling classes which laid waste the lives of ordinary citizens or kept them in a state of tremulous uncertainty. The oppressive practices of Kaliyabhomora Barphukan (reported rather than shown in this novel) remind one of the depredations of the sons of Badan Barphukan in the play *Belimar*. In *Padum Kuwori* it is Kaliyabhomora Barphukan's savage despotism that spurs on Haradatta to embark on the path of rebellion (the Danduwa Droh) which spells doom for the prospects of the lovers.

However, while at one level it is the Barphukan and his men against Haradatta and his ilk, at another subtler level, it's the women— sustainers and worshippers of life— who are unobtrusively pitted against the men seeking to destroy everything in their path for varying reasons. Bezbaroa seems to cleave the world into two zones: one echoing to the tramp or thundering rhetoric of men such as Haradatta, Viradatta and Kaliyabhomora Barphukan, and the other - a hushed and fragrant realm— inhabited by peace-loving, somewhat fragile women (the delicate flower imagery is insistent in the novel). Notably, when the brothers Haradatta and Viradatta discuss a campaign of aggressive strategy which involves marrying off Padum to the prince of Kochbehar to enlist the latter's support against Kaliyabhomora Barphukan and banishing Surya, Padum's alarmed mother intrudes with concerned words about the love between Padum and Surya. However, she is roughly dismissed from the presence of the men.

There are other elements in this early work which would

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be elaborate or receive a more insightful, complex treatment in later plays and short stories. The 'Woman Question' itself would elicit more attention from Bezbaroa in more realistic contexts later in his career. Clearly, he harboured an immense amount of sympathy for women. Even in his autobiography, he rejoices at the fact that the women of Dibrugarh had broken or were trying to break their fetters of gold or iron which a conservative society had imposed on them. In stories such as 'Laokhola', 'Amaloi Napahoriba', 'Bhodori', 'Seuti', 'Malati', and 'Bhomkerela', Bezbaroa gives us vivid portraits of women who are cheated, silenced, bruised, battered, ground down and even robbed of their lives.

Another issue taken up in a minor key in *Padum Kuwori* is patriotism. This is confined to two moments when Haradatta refuses to seek the help of the 'foreign' king of Panjab in his campaign against Kaliyabhomora Barphukan and then towards the end when he dies with cry *Janmabhumi* (Motherland) on his lips. In historical works, patriotism is often a vast and dominant subject but here it is perfunctorily treated. Actually for Bezbaroa patriotism goes beyond the declamations of warlords, princes and politicians. It is at the very heart of his literary-enterprise; as Banikanta Kakati points out, "from his humorous essays to the spiritual essays of his last phase, this love of motherland is the unifying factor". In *Padum Kuwori*, such love may seem explicit because of Haradatta's dying utterance, but it is hardly organic or integral to the total vision. In other later works, patriotism may remain out of sight, but we have no doubt that it is there, fuelling Bezbaroa's creative energy.

By choosing the genre of historical fiction, Lakshminath Bezbaroa courted difficulties. Operating with remote time-scale

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often means compromises with creativity, as even the redoubtable Walter Scott found out. However, *Padum Kuwori* was still a milestone in Bezbaroa's career, and remains a landmark event in the history of Assamese literature. The late 19th century was a time of crisis, with the lives of the Assamese poised between two worlds, and the choice of a turbulent historical moment somehow reflects contemporary anxieties about how things are shaping up in such critical, transitional times. However, while the justification for writing historical fiction was reasonably strong, Bezbaroa would be more genuinely novelistic in his short stories and in the incomparable Kripabar Barbaroa chronicles. In these works, an extraordinary range of themes and concerns are played out and include caste and communal prejudices, ambition, lust, greed, justice, the intrepid loyalty of old retainers, the tyranny of colonial rulers, the bootlicking tendencies of the rising classes and their aping of western manners, opium addiction, mockery of romantic love, the plight of persecuted women and much else. An expansive social engagement with many aspects of life, and a deeply comical apprehension of the incongruities and absurdities of existence—features that we have come to expect of the modern novelistic imagination - are visible in these narratives. Yet, these themes and concerns were not churned in a crucible deep and commodious enough for that full-bodied creature called the Novel to emerge from it. We can speculate, as Jogesh Das has done, that it was perhaps Bezbaroa's busy schedule as editor (of magazines such as *Jonaki* and *Bahi*) that was responsible for his not venturing into the spacious arena of novel-writing. Thus, we have to remain content with the somewhat insubstantial historical romance of *Padum Kuwori*, destined to remain one of its kind in the Lakshminath Bezbaroa oeuvre.

Bezbaroa's Autobiography

A Memoir of Self-Oblivion

Prasenjit Choudhury*

(Translated from Assamese
by Dr. Sultan Ali Ahmed **)

(1)

The well-regarded Assamese critic Prof. Nalinidhar Bhattacharyya once made a regretful remark in a speech," The Assamese people have bestowed Bezbaroa with great honour for being a pioneer in modern Assamese literature, but the number of people engaged in scholarly works on him are very few." This regretful remark seems to have some merit in it. The scanty scholarly works on his celebrated autobiography itself justify the regret. There have been considerable studies on the groundbreaking contributions of Bezbaroa towards Assamese language and literature, but, as far as his widely read autobiography is concerned, any systematic or analytical review can hardly be seen. Although it is undoubtedly a very important book by him.

Each page of Bezbaroa's autobiography, *Mor Jivon Sworon* (reminiscing my life), reflects his way of life and his inner world. This highly readable book also has great literary value of its own. The great scholar Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee described

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this autobiography as "one of the finest books in Indian literature."(M. Neog, ed, *Lakshminath Bezbaroa, The Sahityarathi of Assam*, 1972, p.9). Prof. Maheshwar Neog, an accomplished researcher and historian of Assamese literature, described Bezbaroa's autobiography as a 'rich human document' (Ibid, P.265). In keeping with the theme of our present paper, we would like to consider this autobiography as a very important social document. We would like to highlight a particular aspect of this social figure in the backdrop of the then prevalent social circumstances through the analyses of a few issues from his autobiography.

In his memoir, Bezbaroa is not blind to the specific time and space in which he was born and grew up. It appears that he wanted to record the history of a transition in addition to the story of himself and his family. If his autobiography is read from the viewpoint of sociology, it will definitely reveal a great deal of invaluable materials for social history. Among these elements those pertaining to the question of Westernisation of Assamese society are very important. Eminent sociologist, M. N. Srinivas has shown, how, during the British regime, Indian society was passing through an unprecedented phase of change due to the coming of new technology, institutions, knowledge, belief and value systems. (M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1984, Chapter II). We get the indications in various books that the Westernisation had its impact on the otherwise backward state of Assam as well. As it was in other states, in Assam too, the manifestations of Westernisation were multifarious and not without limitations and self-contradictions. It is needless to say that if somebody

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wants to dwell upon at length on this process of Westernisation which had had a far-reaching impact on the social life of Assam, he or she will get numerous significant facts and materials in Bezbaroa's autobiography. The evolution of human society has a link with what is called an autobiography in a modern sense. The society that does not recognize the value of a person or an individual will not have any space for an autobiography or biography of an individual. During the medieval period, individuals were not considered important; but, subsequently, in the next stage of social evolution, during the modern era, individual self occupies centre-stage in human discourses. The psychological inspiration for writing an autobiography might have a link with this social progress, as "autobiography presupposes a culture in which individuality is valued and cultivated." (B Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*, New Delhi, 1989, P 250). It has been traced that the word 'autobiography' first appeared in Germany in 1796. The word came to be used in England for the first time in 1809. (Ibid, PP 248-49). Almost after eighty years, an Assamese genius, Hemchandra Barua, now widely revered as pioneer of modernity in Assamese society, published his tiny life-sketch called *Atma-jivan Charit* in the Assamese journal *Jonaki*. This maiden venture in writing an autobiography can be seen as a partial fall-out of Westernisation, as no inspiration for such things comes unless the individual self gets some importance. Significantly, the word *mor*, which means 'my' in English occurs in the very first sentence of Hemchandra Barua's autobiographical piece. Similarly in Bezbaroa's autobiography too, that word occurs twice in the

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first line. The autobiography penned by Padmanath Gohain Barua, another pioneer of Assamese literature also begins with the same word. Mention of another important thing will not be out of place here; both the titles of the autobiographies by Bezbaroa and Gohain Barua contain the word, *mor* (my).

The social life of Assam, after it went under the British administration, witnessed various changes, largely due to the influence and activities of the external forces. These changes had touched each and every sphere of life-ranging from food habits and dress habits to social customs and human values. But it is not true that the entire people had forsaken the old way of life. Leave alone the rural masses, even most of the urban people stuck to their earlier way of life. In fact, the process of Westernisation had affected only a handful of English educated urban populace, many of them wanted a kind of adaptation with the new development and the new cultural environment. Apart from Westernisation, another process contributed to this social changes of those days. I have called this process 'Bengalisation' in another book (See: Prasenjit Choudhury, *Unoish Satika, Somaj aru Sahitya*, Ghy, 2001, PP: 14-25). Now it has come to our knowledge that a section of Assamese society was influenced by all the new thoughts and new ideas that created an upheaval in Kolkata during those days, such as Bengali culture, language, literature, manners, and life-styles etc. We get a picture of self-oblivion or self-negation in Bezbaroa's autobiography¹. This self-oblivion occurred largely due to Bengalisation: "□..during those days, the younger section was afflicted with a 'disease' which made them think that all Bengalis were superior to the Assamese and they preferred Bengali fashion

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and everything Bengali." (P19). Most probably Bezbaroa himself was not fully immune to this disease. His autobiography tells how he took a Bengali name called "Sri Rangalal Chattopadhyay" and wrote some love poems in Bengali which he failed to get published in Bengali periodicals (P 52). The comment made by Prof. Navakanta Barua is specially noteworthy here: "Probably, he secretly wanted to become a writer in Bengali". (*Lakshminath Bezbaroa*, Ghy. 1981, P 12). The basis of this comment is purely guesswork. If even it is an assumption, yet it reflects that among the serious scholars on Bezbaroa there are some people who could think that it was possible for Bezbaroa to dream of becoming a writer in Bengali under the influence of Bengalisation².

Ramkumar Bidyaratna, a preacher of the *Brahman* sect from Bengal and a sympathizer with the cause of the working class, paid visits to Assam on several occasions during the nineteenth century. In his book entitled *Udasin Satyashrabar Assam Bhraman* (Tour of Assam by the Indifferent Listeners of Truth), he has recorded his valuable information and observations about Assam and its people. At one place he has told us these things about the '*kayasthyas*' (An upper caste community among the Hindus) of Assam: "Earlier these people did not have the custom of child-marriage at all; but some of them are trying to earn *punnyo* (bonus for pious deeds) by arranging the marriage of their ten year old daughters. This was due to the imitations of the Bengalis." (Kanailal Chattopadhyaya, ed., *Assame Cha-kuli Andolan o Ramkumar Bidyaratna*, Kolkata, 1989, P 83). Similar materials for social history can also be traced in Bezbaroa's autobiography too. Although

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Bidyaratna was an outsider, yet, with the help of his deep insight, he could discern certain ominous developments in Assamese society and also identify their sources. Bezbaroa indicated, from the inside, some different sorts of changes on the basis of his experiences and observations. He has written about the marriageable age of Assamese male people in his autobiography in these words: "As far as we know, during the earlier days among the Assamese people, there was no such practice as getting married at a lower age. A boy should attain the age of thirty or thirty-five and he should be capable of earning, only then attempts were made for his marriage. But it is a pity that the old healthy practice has now declined, may be due to the waves coming from Bengal or due to changes in the conditions of Assamese nobility, and, even, the most abominable practice of early marriage with the taking of dowry from the in-laws has crept into Assamese society of late. Like the disturbance of Bengali saris in the Assamese households this is also a kind of semi-apparitional disturbance. O mother Assam! Could not you prevent this disturbance? Of course you can. This disturbance has crept in due to your temporary self-oblivion."(P-5)³

Bengalisation brought some modern ideas and modes of life-style to Assam. But at the same time it brought some conservative beliefs and manners to the Assamese society⁴. In the above cited passage, Bezbaroa comes down heavily on this second aspect of Bengalisation. However it is a matter of debate if the use of *saris* by a section of women in the urban area is anything like disturbance. Because the disturbance caused by *saris* as stated by Bezbaroa was an example of 'Sartorial Bengalisation'; it was voluntary imitation. Can it be called a

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disturbance in the true sense of the word? On the other hand, the propensity of blindly imitating or aping the Bengalis seems to have been rightly diagnosed as a disease by Bezbaroa. For, as the source of many a disease lies with man so does the source of blind imitation also lie in human mind, here, the feeling of inferiority seen in the imitators. In the long passage cited above, the last word is 'self-oblivion' which is a very significant word. No doubt the word has a value judgement here. In other words, the word cannot be called a neutral one in its usage here. This is in fact a critical observation on the undesired socio-cultural changes. In his autobiography, there are several examples of such critical observations where the tone of self-condemnation can be clearly heard. However, such examples are not confined only in the critique of Bengalisation. Bezbaroa assumes a self-critical mode while narrating the changes that had occurred in his life and thought due to the influence of Westernisation, and, looked back on those changes as examples of self-oblivion. Needless to say that, if those examples were seen just as the isolated episodes in the life of an individual, then the latent social significance of Bezbaroa's autobiography could never be appreciated properly. The episodes relating to his self-oblivion indicate, to a certain extent, the changes occurred in the social life and in the mindset of the English educated advanced section within the Assamese middle class. If viewed from this perspective, Bezbaroa's autobiography may be called a genuine social document. In the examples of self-oblivion given by the author, his objectivity comes to the fore. To a great extent, he has been able to adopt a dispassionate approach in his scrutiny of the past. It is well known that in British-ruled India, the ruling class tried to

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dominate over the native society not merely politically but also culturally by asserting their supposedly cultural superiority:' It (colonialism) is also about cultural or symbolic power—the way it created the hierarchy of civilization, and privileged the modern West as the superior civilization." (A. Pathak, *Indian Modernity : Contradiction, Paradoxes and Possibilities*, New Delhi, 1998, P43). Under such circumstances, for many people, western culture and civilization became a model for imitation.⁵ Naturally, the style and manners of English gentlemen found favour with the educated section. It can be called the external manifestation of Westernisation. In his autobiography, Bezbaroa mentions very candidly at several places how he fell in the clutches of Westernisation:

- 1) I cultivated the best image of a Sahib in me and my temperament was also like that of a 'Sahib'.(P-55)
- 2) At that time my demeanour as a 'Sahib' was at the upperhand than my own self. (P-70)
- 3) During that period of my life, I was completely afflicted with the 'Sahabi' disease. (P-83)

While writing the autobiography Bezbaroa was not in a position to forgive himself for this cultural self-oblivion. Rather, he castigates him through self-satire, and repents for his deviation. Here it will be appropriate to mention that in a true autobiography, the simultaneous presence of two reference times can be felt— one is the period which is narrated and the other is the time when it is written. That Bezbaroa concluded some external aspects of his own Westernisation as his self-oblivion is a kind of after-thought pertaining to the time when he was writing the autobiography.

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(2)

New administrative and education system introduced by the colonial government in Assam had put the Assamese people, particularly the middle class, in a new multilingual situation. The introduction of Bengali in the courts and schools of Assam contributed to the rise of such a situation. On the other hand, those who went to Kolkata for higher studies, their attachment with multilinguism became closer and almost inevitable. As a result, in the writings of Bezbaroa, there has been occasional but spontaneous intrusion of English words as Bezbaroa had settled in Kolkata first for his studies and then for his business. In the present paper, I have cited two lines from Bezbaroa where he deplors the harmful effects of Bengalisation. Interestingly, both the lines contain English words -" the Assamese people used to think that Bengali *fashion* and *everything Bengali* were superior to those of Assam; and the previous custom of Assamese male people not getting married at a lower age was an *old healthy system*". The linguists call this kind of blending as code-mixing. (Pabitra Sarkar, "buli-mishran, buli-lamphan", *Nandan*, autumn special issue, 2010 P-29). How multilinguism could affect the exchange of ideas has been interestingly presented in the biography of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan written by Gunabhiram Barua. According to this life-sketch, Dhekial Phukan continued to use the non-native languages like English, Bengali, and Hindustani till the final hours of his life. The last instructions that he gave to Gunabhiram about the care of his children were also in Bengali. (Gunabhiram Barua, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanor Jivon Charit*, Ghy, 1971, p 150-51). That the great vanguard of the Assamese people who fought his whole

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life for the restoration of the lost dignity of the Assamese language remained multilingual even at the threshold of his death requires to be investigated seriously for its psychological and sociological sources.

Generally it is assumed that the Indian people turned to English education with pecuniary motives. But the noted social scientist, Andre Beteille, opines that the English education, apart from providing jobs, had also opened a new world. (A. Beteille, *Ideology and Social Change*, New Delhi, 2006, P 67). Regarding the cause for the choice of English education, we can also add another thing: under the British regime, the social psychology of the Indian people put English in a place of reverence and the familiarity with this language was considered prestigious in the society. The linguistic aspect of this social psychology is also seen in Bezbaroa's autobiography. The first child of Bezbaroa and Prajnyasundari, Surabhi, could fascinate one and all with her exceptional charm. But she died at the age of five leaving her parents in deep sorrow. Bezbaroa writes about her English education in this way: "At the age of three or four she could recite from her memory all the pieces from a big volume of English Nursery Rhymes. Besides, she could also recite from her memory some more other English poems." (P- 82). What is remarkable here is Bezbaroa's sense of pride and sense of contentment as revealed here. Bezbaroa wrote this reminiscence of his daughter Surabhi in 1936. It seems that even at that time Bezbaroa took pride in his daughter's ability to memorise and recite English poems fluently. (Here, however, the recalling of his lovely daughter that he had lost untimely might have made him emotional).

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It is no wonder that Bezbaroa felt proud of his daughter for her talent in reciting English poems. Because, during those days, he was entirely engrossed in the Western way of life. Bezbaroa himself has provided evidence of this. His autobiography gives a very candid and remorseful account of how he became a victim of self-oblivion in his bid to imitate the styles and manners of the Sahibs. The description runs like this: when his daughter's illness was not cured, Bezbaroa was taking her daughter Surabhi to Jorasanko by a horse-driven cart, as he had no other options and then, Surabhi, took the seat in front of her father to protect her from the chilling wind. The ailing Surabhi did not hesitate to explain it to her worried father why she took a seat away from his lap. But the interesting thing is that Surabhi did not speak these words to her father either in Assamese or in Bengali. Bezbaroa has written:

"She (Surabhi) told me in the Hindi language, because she did not know any language other than Hindi and a little English. During that period of time, I was totally afflicted with the disease of becoming the full Sahibs and so I derived contentment at teaching Surabhi the Hindustani language by appointing a Hindustani maid servant as her governess."(P- 83)

Since he fell victim to self-oblivion due to the disease of appearing as Sahibs so a dispassionate tone of self-censure is evident here. Still we have doubts regarding one thing: did Surabhi really not know any language other than 'Hindi and a little English'? In the very next chapter of the autobiography, it is seen that Surabhi addressed some Atulkrishna Ghosh as her *Jetha* (an Assamese and Bengali address to a person elder to one's father) and talked to her in Bengali (P- 86). In other words,

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Surabhi sometimes spoke in her mother tongue as well. What may be the reason for the inconsistencies between the two narratives? Bezbaroa wrote his autobiography for the Assamese readers. Probably, that's why, he forgot to mention it in the proper place that his daughter also knew the Bengali language. Perhaps, due to the same reason, he has mentioned certain things with considerable importance. In reality, in any autobiography there are always two tendencies - one is toward self examination or self scrutiny and the other is self construction or self projection. These tendencies are also the inherent weaknesses of all autobiographies. Bezbaroa's autobiography could not overcome these weaknesses.

It would not be irrelevant here to mention one thing. It is known to all that the *Jonaki* magazine had contributed immensely to Assamese language and literature and one of the founders of *Jonaki* was Bezbaroa. The love for the Assamese language so vigorously campaigned by *Jonaki* found its expression in Vol.-II No. 1 of the journal. In the *Atmakotha* (our words), it was declared: "... the Assamese language is our life□ it is a matter of regret that some Assamese people do not realize the necessity of the Assamese language and look down upon it." (*Jonaki*, Nagen Saikia, ed, Jorhat, 2001, P-116). The notable thing is that Bezbaroa was afflicted with the disease of imitating the Sahibs at that point of time when he was whole-heartedly involved with the publication of the essentially Assamese journal *Jonaki* - the person who had appointed a Hindustani governess to teach his daughter that language. Besides, the lecture entitled *Asomiya Bhasa* (the Assamese language) that he delivered in the meeting of *Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (the society

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for the advancement of the Assamese language) was recorded in his diary in the English language.⁶ For example, an entry on 1st January, 1895, runs like this: 'I polished and corrected my article *Asomiya Bhasa*.' (*Bezbaroa Granthavali*, Vol.3, Guwahati, 2005, P-2677).⁷ However his entry in diary on the fifth lecture on *Asomiya Bhasa* was in Assamese. Do these facts suggest a dichotomy between his *Jonaki*-centric public life and western-influenced personal life? The sociologist Srinivas has made a cautious reference to 'cultural schizophrenia' somewhere in his book. (M. N. Srinivas, op cit, P-57). Can we conclude that Bezbaroa had also suffered from cultural schizophrenia due to his long stay in Kolkata, the capital of the British-ruled India? This poser may appear inconvenient but it is not irrelevant. By asserting the self-superiority, the western culture and civilization had all of a sudden made the English educated people of colonized India bi-cultural and under the backdrop of this, it will be appropriate to find out an answer to this inconvenient question.⁸

(3)

We have already mentioned that the colonial ruling class made a continuous effort to establish their cultural superiority over the native people in order to safeguard and legitimize their politico-economic hegemony. However, it added an intellectual dimension to this endeavour which was purely driven by self-interest. The ruling class also made a successful use of modern science to attain this objective. As a result, a sense of neglect grew in the minds of the middle class people; the respect and interest in the pro-science trends of Indian heritage gradually declined. Due to the feeling of inferiority as well as the love for

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the West, a section of English educated Indian people most unwittingly considered Indian heritage deplorable and disposable. Owing to this harmful mindset, how the Ayurvedic system of medication got neglected in India can be seen in Bezbaroa's autobiography itself with examples.

Glancing through the pages of history, we learn that the Indian medical system did not suffer neglect during the early phase of the British rule in India. However, towards the close of the nineteenth century, this attitude changed and the western physicians began to look down upon the native systems. (Poonam Bala, *Imperialism and Medicine in Bengal: A Socio-Historical Perspective*, New Delhi, 1991, P- 52). The colonial state took initiative in this regard: "It (colonial state) not only promoted Western medicine, but also sought to assert and establish its superiority over all the systems." (K. N. Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture and Resistance*, New Delhi, 2001, P-170). We can have a look on Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's life in order to see how this new development had shaped the attitude of the neo-educated section. From his death-bed, Dhekial Phukan gave instructions to Gunabhram that his children be "never given the native medicines." (Gunabhram Barua, op cit P-150). By the term native medicines, Anandaram must have meant all systems of Indian medicines including the Ayurveda.⁹

Bezbaroa's father Dinanath Bezbaroa was a very reputed physician of his time. It can be gathered from the autobiography of Harakanta Barua that Dinanath's honorarium was rupees three during 1881-82. The last Ahom King of Assam, Purandar Simha, took a test of Dinanath's medical knowledge and put him in the position of the royal physician, the oath of office

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was administered in the Kamakhya temple. It was natural for such an accomplished and celebrated physician to expect that his sons would maintain the continuity of the family profession. But he was dismayed by the lack of interest shown by his English educated sons. Lakshminath's father ultimately picked Lakshminath's younger brother as his successor and started to train him in the Ayurveda after getting his name struck off from the students' register of an English school." (P-33). In other words, first he was detached from that education which inculcates western thought and ideas and then the training to continue the family tradition was imparted to him. But his father's wish remained unfulfilled as, "God took away Lakshman at an early age thwarting the hopes of his father."(P-33).

Bezbaroa narrates his attitude of neglect and indifference towards the native medicine system in a sense of regret. How the blind love for the West prepared the ground for self-oblivion can be seen in the following words:

"The chief occupation of the Bezbaroa dynasty was the practice of Ayurvedic medicines and our father left no stone unturned to make his sons expert in this field but he failed and got frustrated over this. He particularly pinned his hopes on me. I thought to myself at that time---the real knowledge is the knowledge of English books and if you want to learn medical science you should learn the western allopathic system. The discipline of the native medicine is no discipline at all. Our father was royal physician. I had the opportunity to learn the Ayurvedic science from him but I ignored it.. under the illusion of English civilization."(P-33).

Bezbaroa frankly narrates in his autobiography the suicidal

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illusion that gripped his Age in a genuinely sincere manner and this has opened the lock of his repenting and remorseful heart. In fact, he gives an explanation regarding this self-oblivion from a new angle---he puts the blame on the glittering illusion created by English civilization. While analyzing the characteristic features of autobiography, the scholars opine: "□(It is) a history of a life recollected, interpreted and reflected upon from the calm vantage point of the present."(B Parekh, op cit P 249). It is needless to say that in his autobiography, Bezbaroa also reflects upon the past from the calm vantage point of the present. In the article 'Kripabar Baruar Rajniti' (the politics of Kripabar Barua), Prof. Satyendra Nath Sarma opines that Bezbaroa's faith upon the English regime gradually declined with the passage of time. (*Lakshminath Bezbaroa*, op cit, P-233). The evolution of his political belief must have altered his attitude and mindset, subsequently, getting stimulated by the nationality consciousness, he felt an urge to interpret certain episodes of his life from a new perspective. It can be surmised, under this inspiration and from the calm vantage point of the present, he could mercilessly expose his own past illusions with an open mind.

In this context, it can be mentioned that, during the first decade of the twentieth century and under the inspiration of nationalist sentiment, Ayurvedic revivalist movement had started in various parts of India. (Poonam Bala,op cit,PP 88-90)¹⁰. It is quite possible that Bezbaroa was indirectly influenced by this movement. On the basis of this guesswork, we can raise a question here. Bezbaroa, during the last phase of his life might have suffered from the compunction of his conscience for

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neglecting the order of his famous physician father when he was young. With reference to the native medicine system, did he seek some solace from his sense of guilt by deploring him in his autobiography?

Bezbaroa spent a considerable part of his life in Kolkata, the capital of British India. During the nineteenth century it was not merely a large populous city; it was the second largest city within the entire British Empire, after London. It was the animated epicentre of administration, business, and education. As per its own rules of social change, the early manifestations of Westernisation were widely seen in Kolkata because 'No city or region in India absorbed the impact of western contact at a faster pace than Calcutta, '(N. R. Ray, Calcutta, 1986, P-86). Due to this attachment with Western civilization and culture, various changes had come upon the external and internal lives of man. The changes were both positive and negative. In the world of idea, going beyond humanism and liberalism, the educated section was even influenced by the atheist doctrine albeit in a very limited way. There is evidence in Bezbaroa's autobiography in regard to this: "Ok, God created the world, but who created God?— finding that no one could answer this question, I concluded that let God be there where He is and we do not need Him and began to roam freely taking offence with Him." (P- 54). However, he did not cling to this irreligious view for long. An article entitled 'Purani Bharatat Juktibad' (rationalism in ancient India) written much later, Bezbaroa opines that, due to the influence of English education, superstition is gone, but scepticism or complete non-belief has crept into our society. This is also a negative development, undoubtedly.

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(*Bezbaroa Granthavali*, Vol.3 op cit P-1971).

The imitative external trends of Westernisation, through latest fashion in dress, exciting entertainment, non-conventional food/drink habits etc., had greatly attracted a section of English educated people. Due to this trend, drinking foreign wine became very popular with the newly educated. Of course, there were some exceptions. Bezbaroa writes about Ganga Govinda Phukan that, 'his lifestyle and habits were like those of the Europeans but he was not addicted to wine.' It is often seen that drinking of wine is widely prevalent among the Europeans. He was outside the offence of drinking (*Paan-dosh*), considered chief offence by the Hindus." (P-26). However Bezbaroa turned his back to this Brahmanical tradition and seemed to have given indulgence to this chief offence. His diary made an entry of an episode in 1905: In the banquet arranged in honour of Henry Cotton in the Town Hall of Kolkata, 'champaign made me drowsy towards the close.' (*Bezbaroa Granthavali*, Vol. 3 op cit P-2798). From his diary another thing can be guessed; most probably he kept in reserve whisky and soda at home. (ibid, P-2801). His daughter Ratna Barua writes in her memoir that: "It was evening. (in Kolkata). 'Bez' (Bezbaroa) and 'Maziew' (Chandra Kumar Agarwalla), the two friends, drinking a peg of whisky, sat for literary gossip." (*Lakshminath Bezbaroa*, op cit , P-251).

There is no doubt that the modern habit of drinking is a consequence of Westernisation. However, in Bezbaroa's autobiography, this particular aspect of the new way of life did not get reflected. This is not unnatural, because, in an autobiography certain things are given less importance or not

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mentioned at all. We can cite an example from the life of Debendra Nath Tagore, the grandfather-in-law of Bezbaroa. It has been mentioned in Rajnarayan Basu's autobiography that Debendra Nath had the habit of having some drinks with his meals. However, after his father's death, he gave up the habit,' he never took drinks except when advised by doctors during illness.' (Rajnarayan Basu, *Atmcharit*, Kolkata, 1982, P-36). The point to be noted here is that nothing has been mentioned regarding this in Debendranath's autobiography in which priority was given to spiritual thought, except this short sentence: "Till now I was engrossed in luxury and amusement." (Debendranath Tagore, *Atmajibani*, Kolkata, 1962, P-3). The interesting thing is that, like Debendranath, who took drinks during illness after giving it up as habit as mentioned by Rajnarayan Basu , Bezbaroa also mentions about the taking of wine during illness in his autobiography. He apprises us how, in 1906, during his tour of Kashmir, he took quinine mixing it with brandy when he felt somewhat feverish. In this context his well-thought-out and cautious comment runs like this: "This is called *Oushodharthe Sura Panong* (drinking of wine as medicines). Those who stick to the scriptures can see how I followed the scriptures even while away from home". (*Bezbaroa Granthavali*, Vol. 3, op cit, P 2337). Citing the Sanskrit *slokas* (hymns), Bezbaroa probably wanted to justify the acceptability of taking wine when in distress. Reference to 'those who stick to the scriptures (*shastras*) is also significant-he did not forget to take a dig at the conservative section of the society while penning the autobiography at a mature stage of life. It can be assumed that there is an endeavour to keep his own image intact in the

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passage concerning the drinking of wine. We have already shown at the appropriate place that there is an attempt of self-construction in all autobiographies.¹¹

During those days, one Kinaram Satriya wrote a long poem called *Kolikotar Sukhyati* (the good fame of Kolkata) in which he refers to many previously unseen scenes as 'wonderful funny things'. The poem was published in *Arunoday* (the Assamese news magazine) in March, 1859, in the concluding part of the poem, the poet was all praise for the great city of Kolkata:

*Kolkata nagar jon dekha nai,
Mritikar kolchite lukai
Jei jon dekhi ase Kolkata bhuban
Choku dwara korilek amrit bhojan*

(Maheshwar Neog, ed, *Arunoday*, 1983, P 541)

[He who has not visited Kolkata is keeping him in earthen pitcher; he who has paid the visit to the world of Kolkata tasted the nectar through his eyes]

However, the reality is that Kolkata, apart from providing all sorts of amusement and entertainment, also provided the drink of poison. The wonderful funny things mentioned by Kinaram did not comprise the harmless forms of entertainments only. It had its ugly side as well. In his autobiography, Bezbaroa refers to this ugly side without any inhibition:

"Today I lost rupees ninety in the horse race in Kolkata.¹² I swear not to do so again. While imitating others, particularly Europe, we, the poor Indians are ruining ourselves. While attempting to imitate the footsteps of a swan, the sparrow even forgets its own steps and keeps hopping on." (P 233)¹³.

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The mental firmness and moral consciousness necessary for self-correction is evident in Bezbaroa's autobiography. Apart from this admirable aspect of his personality, his way of referring to the poor Indians also implies his consciousness of nationalism. There is no difficulty in understanding that Bezbaroa had no sympathy towards the mindset or manners of those who forget their own self in their bid to imitate blindly the European model and who forget their own footsteps.

(4)

We have clearly stated earlier: 'self-oblivion' is not a neutral term. In fact, this is clearly a term of critique on society. But the significant thing is that this critique arises out of a particular worldview and hence its character is generally relative. In other words, what is an instance of concern from a conservative perspective may be an admirable evidence of progress from the viewpoint of the pro-changers. This can be illustrated with an example: for the followers and beneficiaries of *Brahmanism*, the slackening of the binding of caste- system is a symptom of forgetting the famous *Barnashrama* System(the system of four castes and four stages of life) of the Hindus- such looseness indicates the arrival of the ominous *Kolliyuga*. On the other hand, from the perspective of people with democratic consciousness- the symptom of such *Kolliyuga* is the symbol of the arrival of Enlightenment era, the pre-condition for social change. Now the question is: what do those examples suggest, the examples taken from Bezbaroa's autobiography as instances of his Westernisation? What image of Bezbaroa do they project? There is no doubt that, emboldened by the nationalist consciousness, he retrieves certain examples of his forgetfulness

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and makes a review of them. And that is why he did not hesitate at all to condemn his disease of appearing like a 'Sahib' and his blind imitation of Western ideas and manners.

However, this aspect of his worldview only partially reveals his ideology or philosophy. It will be wrong to conclude that he denounced all important influences of Western thought under the urge of national consciousness. There are some other anti-traditional episodes recorded in his autobiography which are not cited as examples of self-oblivion. In the beginning pages of his autobiography, Bezbaroa informs us how the whole family atmosphere was full of misgivings when his elder brothers Gobinda and Golap were preparing to go to Kolkata for higher studies. "My elder brothers would lose their caste if they went to Kolkata for their studies and would take meals prepared by the Bengali cooks"— this apprehension loomed large over the whole family. At last an Assamese Brahmin was sent as cook to Kolkata as a solution to that problem. [p 11]. But the two sons of Dinanath began to relish the meals prepared by the 'foreign' cooks at Kolkata. The Brahmin cook came back after a year. [p11-12] Bezbaroa recounts the aggrieved reaction of his father in his own style: "On seeing the disastrous intelligence in his sons, our poor father realized the tremendous power of the *Kolikal* and, feeling deeply hurt, began to chant the name of God" [P-12]. It can be easily surmised that, the 'poor' Dinanath Bezbaroa considered it an act of self-forgetfulness when his two sons did not follow his instructions. But Lakshminath does not present it as case of self-forgetfulness. He notices the tremendous force of times behind the gradual acceptance of such incidents. But this concept of time of Bezbaroa has nothing

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to do with the *Kolijuga* as referred to in Hindu scriptures.

In his autobiography, there are examples where Bezbaroa himself shows his lack of interest in customs and traditions. His pious father put many valuable words of advice in his ears when he was preparing to go to Kolkata for higher studies and made him jot down those words in a note-book. However, Bezbaroa did not or could not feel any interest in following those pieces of advice. He mentions it in the autobiography with a sense of regret that much of the advice put down in that book is lying like a corpse as it were a dead letter in the postal department's dead letter office. [p43]. The more significant evidence of ignoring his father's advice can be found in respect of Bezbaroa's marriage. Without informing his parents, he decides to marry the grand daughter of Debendranath Tagore, a leader of the *Brahma* sect, a religious group different from the orthodox Hinduism. In the write-up, *Bezbaroa Manuhjon* [Bezbaroa, the man], Nilamoni Phukan remarks that "it was quite unimaginable during those days', even the small kids of orthodox families required to be purified for eating *Rasagolla* [sweets] from the sweet-shops owned by the Bengalis."¹⁴ [Parag Chaliha, ed. *Lakshminath Bezbaroa Shatabarshiki Smritigrantha*, Dibrugarh, 1970,p 28]. The uncommon marriage of Bezbaroa had created a sensation in the conservative society of those days. Bezbaroa sums up the mental condition of his parents briefly in these few words: □ "they were deeply hurt by what I had done." [P-68]. But the significant thing is that the autobiography does not provide any evidence of his repentance for what he had done violating the parental regulations. [He was very regretful for ignoring the native medical system. We have cited

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the evidence of it at the appropriate place].

Dinanath Bezbaroa did not want to send his son Lakshminath to Kolkata. He thought that he had already alienated his two sons after sending them to Kolkata ; so, Lakshminath should remain in Assam and sit for LLB examinations. However, the strong desire of the son to go to Kolkata prevailed, and he was allowed to go to Kolkata. He began his life in Kolkata first staying at Bengali Brahmin's home at Kalighat.¹⁵ Unravelling the mystery of this arrangement of his stay made at a Bengali Brahmin's home, Bezbaroa writes: "The meaning of such arrangement was- lest I do not kill in me the child incarnated as my caste by staying in the mess for the Assamese students "(P 43). The attitude of Bezbaroa was reflected in his style of expression : Bezbaroa ridiculed and ignored the code of conduct created to preserve the purity of the uppercaste on the basis of the idea of the sacred and the profane . It is needless to mention that after coming into contact with the socio- cultural atmosphere of Kolkata which happened to be the centre of English education and the social reform movement, Bezbaroa could muster the courage to denounce some old faiths and customs . In the present context, the most important thing for our discussion is- there is no evidence in his autobiography of self-repentance for adhering to a comparatively liberal attitude on the question of caste.¹⁶

The present paper began with the regretful comment of an eminent critic, Nalinidhar Bhattacharyya. We would like to wind up the review by referring to the view of the same eminent person. Bhattacharyya had used a very insightful and significant word on Bezbaroa's nature of assimilating diverse influences

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coming from every side during his stay in Kolkata for many years: "Bezbaroa, in Kolkata, compared to his other friends from Assam, could imbibe in him the new liberal spirit more profusely and so he could not follow the ancient customs unquestioningly. [Bhattacharyya, op cit, P15].¹⁷ No doubt that, largely under the inspiration of this liberal spirit, Bezbaroa arrived at an important decision. The path of progress will get blocked and society will remain trapped in the prison of the past, if the ancient customs are carried out without raising any question about their rationality.¹⁸ But we do not want to opine that he could identify all the hurdles of social progress and vigorously tried to uproot them at least in those cases where he could identify them.¹⁹ Of course it can be said without any doubt that he has not described certain cases of breaking the old barrier of customs as the instances of cultural degeneration resulting in self-forgetfulness. On the other hand, motivated by the spirit of nationalism, Bezbaroa had no qualms in calling certain imitative manners as cultural self-forgetfulness. The complex inter-relationship between the two positions could well be the subject-matter of another paper like the present one. We have no intention to go into that right now— we can simply conclude, in keeping with the subject-matter of the present paper: Bezbaroa's autobiography adequately reveals the manifestations of the inspiration from liberal ideas and the encouragement from national consciousness. These dual positions of Bezbaroa are the reflections of the West-inspired liberal ideas of the nineteenth century and the nationalism-inspired cultural self-consciousness of the twentieth century.²⁰

Endnotes:

1. The forgetfulness due to Westernisation at the early stage was seen in a limited way. Initially, under the influence of it, a Westernised sub-culture began to develop among the advanced section of the middle class in Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai. (Y Singh, *Modrnisation of Indian Tradition*, Jaipur, 1988, p 88)
2. This trend is also referred to by Hemchandra Barua in his autobiography: "Everyone took playful Bengali women as companions." (Jatindra Nath Goswami,ed.,op cit, p 455)
3. It should be kept in mind that Bezbaroa mentions only about Assamese male people. In the medieval Assamese society , the Brahmin and the Kayastha girls were given off in marriage at the pre-puberty age.(S Rajguru, *Medieval Assamese Society:1228-1826*, Nagaon, 1988, p191-92).
4. Ramkumar Bidyaratna, the *Brahma* preacher who came from Bengal seems to have found a similarity of the disease with the conservative trends of Bengalisation: he describes the Bengali custom of viewing widow re-marriage as invalid as an infectious disease. He even gives an indirect call to the Assamese people to protect them from this disease. (Kanailal Chattopadhyay, ed., op cit, p 85). It appears that he exaggerates the negative sides of the Bengalisation to condemn the orthodox Bengali society.(ibid,p 83). However , the research findings do not support him here.(see end-note 2). Most probably, the popularity of child-marriage went up due to Bengalisation.

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5. This kind of model is called 'positive reference group' by the social scientists.(J H Abraham, *Sociology*, London,1973, p 117).
6. The use of two languages is also seen in Bezbaroa's diary. Example: he starts the writing of diary in Assam in April,1895, as soon as he starts his journey from Kolkata to Sibsagar. After ten days his language again shifts to English. Again the language of diary in 1901/1902 is Assamese. But the use of English is again seen since 1903.
7. Jatindra Nath Goswami quotes the sentence in Assamese concerning *Asomiya Bhasa* from Bezbaroa's diary in one of his books. But the diary's language is English here. [Jatindra Nath Goswami, *Jagoron Aru Jonak*, Jorhat, 1989, P-10]. The writer does not inform his readers that the quoted sentence is a translation from the English original.
8. I can recall to have seen Ratna Barua, daughter of Bezbaroa from a close distance. In her manner of speaking the Assamese language, the Bengali/Sahabi influence was remarkable.
9. Anandaram did not have faith in the healing system based on incantations, amulets etc. popular among the common people. It can be gathered from report submitted to Mills. It must be mentioned here that , in his report, he pointed out that the public did not go for Hindu[Ayurvedic] medicine system :".even the Hindu system of medicine, brought to some degree of perfection by the ancient Hindus, is little made use of by the people at large."(M Neog, *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan: Plea for Assam and Assamese*, Jorhat,1977, P-89). Although the

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report does not contain any critique of Ayurveda science, Anandaram recommends to the government to set up medical schools for teaching European medical sciences (ibid). Probably for such a role, Anandaram has been called "the first individual in Assam to have supported whole-heartedly the introduction of Western medical system." (*Prakash*, March,2013,p 73).

10. Interesting thing is that Gandhi was not enthusiastic to the revival of the Ayurveda system: "Unlike some Indian nationalists, he found no inspiration in Ayurveda and traditional healing arts of India, developing, instead, his own eclectic ideas and practices." (D Arnald, *Colonising the Body-State Media and Epidemic Diseases in Nineteenth Century India*, New Delhi, 1993,p 286)
11. Mention may be made of a matter not referred to in his autobiography. Bezbaroa has written that after their marriage both the bride and the groom went together to meet formally Debendranath Tagore for his blessings and the saintly Debendranath, gifting him a golden pen, said: "From this pen of you excellent writing will flow"; and offering a flower of rose to Prajnyasundari, he said, "Your name and fame will spread to all sides like the fragrance of this flower."(Jatindra Nath Goswami, op cit, p 66-67). Debendranath must have given his grand daughter a piece of ornament as well. It is learnt from the Account Books of Tagore family that a bracelet worth Rs 135 for Prajnyasundari and a golden pen worth Rs 50 for her husband were purchased. (Prashanta Chakrabarty, *Raag-Biraag*, Guwahati,2013,p155). An important piece of

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information is recorded in Bezbaroa's diary on 18 September, 1896:"From today, the monthly allowance coming from Projnya's mother has stopped." (Jatindra Nath Goswami, op cit. p 2725). There is no reference of it in his autobiography.

12. A piece of information is found in the interesting and informative account of Assam written by Oscar Flex who worked in the tea-estate of Assam almost hundred fifty years back: " All Upper Assam Tea-estate Horse-race" was held in Jorhat in the 1860s. (Oscar Flex, *ASOM 1864: Bharator Chah Khetiyokor Jivan Aru Asomor Kola-Sanskritir Biboroni, Trans*, Selim M Ali, Guwahati, 2012, p 61). The German citizen Flex never had the full support to the British rule, so this remark of him is noteworthy: "That famous but equally notorious horse race is being practised in India now." (ibid' 62)
13. Although the idea of horse race came from the West, but there was no dearth of instances of gambling in India. In the autobiography of Haribilash Agarwala, we see: "(in Kolkata) bringing notes worth Rs 4200 from Khemani's firm, I played gamble with a gambler known as Harichandra Ray and lost the whole amount." (Haribilash Agarwala, *Atmajivani* (autobiography), Guwahati, 1967, p 49). However,unlike Bezbaroa, he does not report of any pricks in his conscience. Noteworthy, in Agarwala's autobiography, his inner life has no importance.
14. A conclusion may be arrived at from this: as per the rules of the orthodox society, one must not eat from the *shudras* (lower caste) as well as from the Bengalis not to lose the

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caste. So an Assamese cook from the higher caste was sent to Kolkata and the problem was solved. (when Bezbaroa went to Kolkata for his studies, it was arranged for his stay in the house of a Bengali Brahmin.)

15. It was not possible to preserve the purity of caste by following the out-dated customs in the new urban ambience of Kolkata. Because there "The taboos regarding food pollution could not be enforced rigidly" (S N Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Myth and History*, Calcutta, 1977, p 33). This environment must have easily enthused the two elder brothers of Bezbaroa.
16. Regarding the generation gap in the family of Dinanath Bezbaroa, we have made an attempt of analysis in the article entitled 'Nabya Shiksha Bonam Pitrai Shasan'. (Prasenjit Choudhury, *Atit Anusandhan*, Nalbari, 1990, p 47-69).
17. The opinion of a noted critic and intellectual is important here: "...Bezbaroa could become liberal and tolerant on the question of caste as he lived away from his own society in the relatively open environment, along with the *Brahmas*, in Kolkata." (Hiren Gohain, *Manavatar Sondhanot*, Guwahati, 2001, p 126).
18. One non-liberal aspect also exists in Bezbaroa's thought. Noted writer Dilip Dutta openly remarks that Bezbaroa always tried to downgrade the Mongoloid people in a mischievous way." (Dilip Dutta, *Neelar Surabhi Bhangi*, Guwahati, 1983, p 108). It can be supposed that some mental habits, shaped in a specific cultural environment, reach up to a very deeper level of consciousness.

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19. The critic Shashi Sarma indicates that Bezbaroa's modernity was not free from certain serious limitations: "it is matter of regret that he has not been able to show any example of looking afresh the old world on the basis of scientific thought and consciousness." (Shashi Sarma, *Navajagoronor Potobhumit Lakshminath Bezbaroa : Eti Abolokon*, Guwahati, 2004, P-32)
20. At one place in his autobiography Bezbaroa mentions the name of Vidyasagar in deep respect as he came forward to undo the sufferings of the widows of the Hindu society who were generally kept under strict and cruel regulations. (p 30). This sympathy for the reform is also an expression of liberal ideas.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Jyotiprasad Agarwala Two Rivers, One Confluence

Dr. Paramananda Majumdar*

(Translated from Assamese
by Dr. Sultan Ali Ahmed **)

Both Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Jyotiprasad Agarwala are recognised as two icons of Assamese nationality and social life. The Assamese people like to recall Bezbaroa as a founder-figure of Assamese language and literature, and, Jyotiprasad as the greatest genius in Assamese cultural life. Both were the products of two different circumstances. There was an age gap of nearly forty years between them. Lakshminath was born in the mid-nineteenth century, in 1864, while Jyotiprasad came to this world in the first decade of twentieth century, in 1903. This gap of almost forty years also entails a huge gap in the political and cultural milieu of their times. Lakshminath had to take his primary education in Bengali as the then British government had imposed Bengali as the official language and medium of education in Assam from 1837 to 1873 for nearly half a century. The Christian missionaries tried to reassert the identity of Assamese as a separate language through the

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publication of first Assamese news magazine *Arunodoi*. Thanks to the tireless effort put in by the missionaries in combination with the similar effort made by great personalities like Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua, and finally the British government reinstated Assamese as the official language in Assam. However, the language itself was not in a strong position at that time. The British government continued with Bengali medium for a long time citing the dearth of suitable text books in the Assamese language. The temporary arrangement of Bengali medium was retained till the first decade of the twentieth century. Thus it fell upon a group of young Assamese students and scholars to meet the challenge of laying the foundation of modern Assamese language and literature. During this time, the publication of two magazines, *Assam Bondhu* in 1885 and *Mou* in 1886 had already consolidated the position of Assamese to a certain extent, and prepared the ground for the creation of literary works in that language. However, extensive publicity and proliferation of Assamese language and literature were not possible till then. Both *Assam Bondhu* and *Mou* had a very brief life-span. Therefore, a group of Assamese students who actually went to Calcutta (now Kolkata) for higher education took the great initiative of expanding and widening the base of Assamese language and literature. One very prominent boy from this group was Lakshminath Bezbaroa. He was assisted by Hemchandra Goswami, Chandrakumar Agarwala and others. Chandrakumar happens to be the uncle of Jyotiprasad. They formed a literary circle called *Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (Society for the Advancement of the Assamese Language) in Kolkata in 1888.

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The very next year the literary magazine, *Jonaki*, was launched as the mouthpiece of the society. The broad objectives of the Society and its organ were to improve and develop the Assamese language and literature. They expected cooperation and help from the British government. Their ideas and actions sometimes reflected their loyalty to the British government. None of them wanted the independence of the country at that moment and all of them chose to keep away from the freedom movement which was gradually picking up its momentum. But their role in laying the foundation of Assamese nationality was commendable. Particularly, the role of Lakshminath was unparalleled in consolidating the base of Assamese nationality by making the Assamese people familiar with their legacy— although he never took part in the freedom movement actively. He made an all out effort to uplift the Assamese nationality to a position of honour and practice. The Assamese language seems to have got a new lease of life thanks to him. He derived pleasure at the prosperity of the Assamese language— but not from a narrow perspective at all. His nuanced use of the Assamese language reflects its richness. He was out and out a modernist. So he possessed the foresight to cross-examine the legacy of the past against the backdrop of the future— which made possible for him to recognize a genius and artiste like Jyotiprasad and accept him whole-heartedly. The Romantic spirit of the *Jonaki* Age continued to flow through the veins of Jyotiprasad. The imprint of the narrative style of the *Jonaki* Age can be found in his literary works. But the Age of Jyotiprasad was also the Age of the climax of the freedom movement. Jyotiprasad himself was an indefatigable leader of the freedom movement. He

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saw no contradiction between his two pursuits– one for artistic creations and the other for country's freedom. Both were directed towards the same goal– the liberation of man. Throughout his life Jyotiprasad reaffirmed this truth time and again.

After returning from Europe, Jyotiprasad jumped into freedom movement which landed him in jail. It was while in jail that he mooted the idea of putting into practice his knowledge of film-making acquired in Germany. He chose the theme of his first film from a rich legacy of the Assamese people and society. The vivid and appealing story of *Jaymoti Kuwari* (The Ahom queen who sacrificed his life for the country) was selected by him. Bezbaroa had written a play on the life of this glorious figure from Assam history. Jyotiprasad had much regard for the literary genius of Lakshminath. Jyotiprasad had made a critical review of Lakshminath's literary achievement (we will come to that later on). Before that it will be quite appropriate to recall how Jyotiprasad was inspired by Lakshminath in every step of the making of the film and how Lakshminath remained concerned with the film even after completion of its making. This episode reveals the connecting bond between two great geniuses of modern times.

This particular episode began with the writing of a letter by Jyotiprasad to Lakshminath seeking the latter's permission to make a film on his play. Bezbaroa granted the permission very delightfully in a brief letter which reflects his great affection and admiration for Jyotiprasad. The letter is cited below:

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Sambalur
22.06.1933

My dear Jyotiprasad 'bopa',*

I am in receipt of your letter. I have no objections to whatever plans you have in mind regarding my play *Jaymoti Kuwari*. I have a lot of faith on you. Besides, it is needless to tell you that, in Assam, the Agarwala family commands highest honour and love from me. I hope that you have now fully recovered from your illness. My love and blessing for you, as ever.

Yours etc.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa

Jyotiprasad prepared the script of the film *Jaymoti* during his incarceration and Bezbaroa gave a very positive and enthusiastic response to the letter written by that prisoner which again reflects Bezbaroa's liberal nature. Both Bezbaroa and Lakshminath were moved by the same quest for a legacy when they set their eyes on the historical character of *Jaymoti* -one for his play and the other for his film. They stepped into this path of legacy with the same objective, to arouse the nationality consciousness and create a future roadmap. Getting released from prison in 1934, Jyotiprasad quickly started his work on the film. The first Assamese movie *Jaymoti* was produced in a makeshift studio set up in Bholaguri Tea Garden. Even before the completion of its making, he had to face tragedy in family life. His father Paramananda and mother Kiranmoyi, both of them zealously patronized the film-making effort, suddenly left for their heavenly abode. However, their sudden demise did not create any financial problem in the making of the film as

* An Assamese affectionate address to somebody who is like a son.

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Jyotiprasad always used to enjoy the blessings of his parents profusely. However, the real problem was to find out a female actor for which he suffered a great deal. On 10 March, 1935, the film was released in the Raunak Cinema Hall in Calcutta, now known as Kolkata. The release was inaugurated by none other than Lakshminath Bezbaroa himself. An excerpt from Bezbaroa's inaugural speech is given below:

"Today is a very auspicious day. This day is a day of pride for Assam. The film *Jaymoti* has become a reality thanks to the untiring effort, patience and financial burden put in by Sriman Jyoti Bopa. He is an artiste in the true sense of the word. *Jaymoti* is a glittering mirror of the young Assam. I hope that this necessary institution of film-making gets firmly established in Assam as it has happened in some other states of India. I hope that, through this film, the backward state of Assam will spread its nationality consciousness and sense of self-esteem throughout the country. I have noted it that Jyoti Bopa has left no stone unturned to instill an indigenous Assamese flavour in the film in its settings, techniques and lyrics. It is of my immense pleasure that the character of Dalimi, my brainchild, has appeared in the film exactly the same way as I conceived her."

Bezbaroa appreciated the film *Jaymoti* not because that the script was based on his text. Rather he saw in *Jaymoti* the manifestation of Assamese indigenous characteristics— in the settings, dialogues, lyrics etc.— he also felt the expression of nationality in the film. He had reasons to feel happy when he saw his Dalimi in the silver screen. In the original play, she was just an imaginary character— an image from the mind. Even the critics hail it as a wonderful innovation. In his inaugural speech

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Bezbaroa could not restrain his emotion when he said-

"In my play, most of the characters are historical. But the Dalimi of my dream has become the Dalimi of reality in the film version of the play. I had visualized her in my mind as a daughter of nature, simple, restless and jolly. In the film I saw the eleven year lass in flesh and blood, flying like a butterfly□if I could meet that girl playing the role of Dalimi I would place my hand upon her head and shower on her all my blessings□"

Jyotiprasad also spoke on the same occasion, it is only because of the good-will of the people that he had been able to release the film for the public braving heavy odds, trials and tribulations. He also hoped that the public would give the film a warm applause. But this earnest appeal went in vain. Some adverse reviews of the film began to pour in.

The first negative review of the film appeared in the Assamese magazine *Awahan*, Vol.VI, No 7. It came from Umesh Chandra Barua. The review was so sarcastic that the editor of the magazine, Dinanath Sarma, was a little bit embarrassed to have published it. So he added a foot-note to the article: "Despite the drawbacks of the film, it should win favour and sympathy from all of Assamese people." He also made it clear that he had published the review to honour the freedom of expression.

However, in one part of his article, Umesh Chandra Barua opined :

"Our belief is that the film speaks very poorly of the film-maker's knowledge on the art of film-making. It appears like a rudderless ship floating aimlessly and succeeds in retaining the interest of the audience till the end only due to the perennial appeal of the legendary story of Jaymoti. Otherwise, the film

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itself has no rhythm, no colour, no charm□."

Another reviewer of the same vein was the celebrated Assamese novelist Rajanikanta Bordoloi. In reference to the article of Umesh Chandra Barua, he wrote an article entitled *Buronjit Apolap* (distortions of history) which appeared in the subsequent issue of *Awahan*. Objecting to the basic story of the film, he wrote, "if Jyotiprasad had based his film on the history written by Harakanta Sadaramin, then the film would have been the best one. But it was made on the basis of a legend."

Bezbaroa could not remain silent on seeing the first Assamese film being vituperated so rudely. He decided to stand firmly behind Jyotiprasad by proving the historicity of his version of Jaymoti narrative. Jyotiprasad had kept him informed of this controversy concerning his film. Bezbaroa wrote a letter to Jyotiprasad on 23.07.1935 to encourage him. This letter was a prompt reply to Jyotiprasad's letter and it was written on the same day on which Bezbaroa received it. His reply runs like this---"Jyoti Bopa, on receipt of your letter today, I've sent a long article to *Asomiya* today itself. On reading it, you will understand everything. "It is totally wrong to accept the veracity of the history written by Harakanta. His narrative of Jaymoti is based on either total ignorance or incomplete knowledge. All these I have explained in my write-up." He added three more sentences to embolden Jyotiprasad- "you carry on your work fearlessly. I'm ready to enter into any controversy. Don't get disheartened by undue criticism."

Bezbaroa took the controversy over *Jaymoti* very seriously. After a gap of ten days he wrote another letter to Jyotiprasad expressing displeasure over the non-publishing of his review

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article in the aforesaid newspaper. Excerpts from that letter :

Sambalpur

4.8.35

Jyoti Bopa,

The newspaper *Asom* is patronized by the Ahoms and the all-knowing Brahmins. So I did not send my rejoinder regarding *Jaymoti* to that paper, instead, sent it to yours' paper, *Asomiya*. But that paper also has not published it yet. I sent the matter through registered post. First in *Asom* and then in *Awahan*, Srijut Rajani Bordoloi wrote the same thing on the basis of a useless history book and in that way he has damaged your business prospects—but the papers are not publishing the rejoinder. Yours' paper is also not publishing my rejoinder—probably fearing an Ahom backlash. Whatever I wrote I took history as my basis. Of course I did not target anyone. You please procure my article and read it and then send it back to me; if possible, I will try to get it published in *Awahan*.

Remain assured, that, the present story of 'Jaymoti' is the true account of it. The 'Jaymoti' of Harakanta's history is no 'Jaymoti' at all. That Jaymoti is stripped of her glory. An ordinary woman. If Jaymoti's story were a fraud then such a fraud would not survive for so many years. Harakanta wrote it on the basis of incomplete knowledge. If Harakanta is true, then 'Jaysagar', 'Jaydoul'are all fraud..

I'm fine. Are you ok? How is the film running? May God help it in its going good.

With love

Sri Lakshminath Bezbaroa

Written in his typical style, this letter also exposes the real

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nature of the intellectual world of Assam of those days– the newspapers were unwilling to publish even Bezbaroa's article written in protest against the negative review of the film *Jaymoti*. Even the newspaper *Asomiya*, run by Jyotiprasad's family, did not come forward. Nobody was willing to confront the questions raised by Bezbaroa, even the readers were kept in dark.

But Bezbaroa's rejoinder was published in the *Dainik Batori* edited by *Bagmibor* (the great orator) Koka Nilmani Phukan (this article was later reprinted by Benudhar Sarma in his *Tokora Bahor Kuta* in *Amar Pratinidhi*). This article has also been included in the *Parishista* (Appendix) of the new edition of *Jyotiprasad Rachanavali* (Collected works of Jyotiprasad Agarwala). The article assumes significance for several reasons. Firstly, it reflects the bitter criticism on the film *Jaymoti*, by sending reply to those adverse comments, Bezbaroa got himself entangled in it. Secondly, the article not only records admiration for Jyotiprasad's sincerity, but also expresses respectful sympathy for his patriotism, nationalism and imprisonment. Thirdly, it brings to the fore the sharp intellectual consciousness of Bezbaroa. Excerpts may be given here from the article:

"Number one: the film *Jaymoti* is the first Assamese enterprise. And who has taken that initiative? A young boy from a reputed family of Assam who has already sacrificed all his personal interests and dedicated himself to the cause of the nation; the young fellow who, along with monetary strength, also possesses a great zeal in him to do noble work. He also possesses the power of knowledge, I mean, he has vast experience in learning, and from his tour of Europe, he acquired vast knowledge in art, music etc. Even after returning from abroad,

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he embraced a life of imprisonment, along with other patriots, for the larger interest of the country. Like some other young boys of super-rich family, he could have led a life of comfort and luxury□ but he did not do that□. instead he came out to make the first Assamese film spending thousands of rupees and doing untiring hard labour.

Number two: but a section of people from amongst us have begun to clamour, in full gusto, that the film is faulty, defective and bad. Of course we need criticism to correct us in future. One such review in a news paper made me happy too. But the review done by other critics are not review at all, they are total rejection of the film.

Number three: every poet, every artiste can colour the character of Jaymoti with their own imaginative beauty and they can show it to others. If the viewers and the readers are happy with it then it is a success□ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote a play called *Chandrasekhar*. In that play, there is a character called Mir Qasim. He was the Nawab of Bengal; and he fought against the English and was defeated in the battle of Udaynala. These historical references are there in the play; but, because of the presence of these facts, should we conclude that all other things in the play are true? ...that's why Bankimbabu wrote in the preface to one of his plays that, "a novel is a novel, that is not history." Many people seem to forget this simple truth.

Number four: my chief interest is to watch the first Assamese film made in Assam by an Assamese. I am not deriving pleasure out of the fact that my play *Jaymoti* has been made into a film. Instead of *Jaymoti*, if *Manomoti* or *Karengor Ligiri* were made into a film, I would have been equally or even more happy."

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Lastly, let us take up the prose-piece written by Jyotiprasad entitled *Bezbaruar Sahitya Pratibha* (The Literary Genius of Bezbaroa). As a mark of deep respect for Bezbaroa, Jyotiprasad assesses the literary position of Bezbaroa with a sense of gratitude. It was serialized in *Bahi* after Bezbaroa's death. Here Bezbaroa has been given a place next to Sankardeva as the great leader (*Kandari*) of Assamese society. In Jyotiprasad's view, "Bezbaroa was born at a transitional period in the life of a nation. The state of Assam and its people were at a critical point of life and death due to the suppression and oppression meted out to them after the loss of Assam's independence. It was indeed a critical moment in the history of Assam as the Assamese people lost their long glorious spell of independence along with honour, dignity, wealth, and prosperity; they had to take shelter in the caves and mountains in panic, and they had to protect their own literature and culture from the aggression of alien civilization, alien culture, alien literature; they had to protect those things when the condition of the Assamese people had already weakened under the fear of foreign conquerors and their cohorts; it was indeed a critical phase in the history of Assam." According to Jyotiprasad, Lakshminath was a product of this critical juncture of history who helped the Assamese people to come from darkness to light.

The first thing that Jyotiprasad mentions is the great historical role that Bezbaroa played in spreading the message of Sankardeva in the hearts of Assamese people. In his words, "By discussing the literatures of Sankardeva, Bezbaroa adds glory to Assamese literature by bringing into light the hidden treasure of ancient Assamese literature which inspires the Assamese people

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to inculcate a sense of deep respect towards ancient literature. Before him, Haribilash Agarwala had printed out the manuscripts of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Bezbaroa makes Assamese people realize their importance." Jyotiprasad also wrote in the same article: "That Sankardeva was at the centre of Assamese nation, that the Assamese society had remained united thanks to the multi-faceted genius of Sankardeva, that Sankardeva was the real architect of Assamese society, culture, literature and religion, that the influence of this great personality is still governing the lives of Assamese people by running through their veins, was clearly understood and established by Lakshminath."

Jyotiprasad also gives Bezbaroa an epithet, "the national playwright". According to him, the play on the princess Jaymoti by Bezbaroa is an invaluable asset in the mansion of Assamese literature. The character of Dalimi is a wonderful creation of Bezbaroa in this play, he comments. In his view Dalimi can be placed in the same row with the famous characters of world literature. "That Naga girl of pure simplicity appears to have come down from the Naga hills and dips into the lake in Bezbaroa's imagination, takes a new form and keeps on frolicking in the great writer's play due to the great love and affection that he keeps for her."

Bezbaroa brought a new current into Assamese music through his play *Shonit Kuwari*. During those days Hindusthani music was dominant in Assam. Jyotiprasad composed music on the basis of Assamese folk-songs such as *Biya naam*, *Bihu naam*, *Ai naam* etc. For doing this, he was laughed at by many. But the trend in music set by him later prevailed in the sphere

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of Assamese music. However, in the article mentioned above, Jyotiprasad attributes the credit to Bezbaroa. Because it was Bezbaroa who set the examples of using folk-songs in his plays. After completing his play, *Shonit Kuwari*, when he heard the songs from Bezbaroa's play, he was caught in surprise. But Bezbaroa's plays were usually not performed on stage. It was difficult to stage Bezbaroa's play, that was the prevalent view. In the above mentioned article, there is elaborate discussion on Bezbaroa's plays. Jyotiprasad sought to understand Bezbaroa's world of imagination through the character of Dalimi created by him– an in-depth analysis of this is done in that article.

On the other hand, after the release of the record of *Jaymoti*, Bezbaroa wrote a letter of appreciation to Jyotiprasad. In that letter he pointed out that the recorded version of *Jaymoti* made a departure from the trend of Bengali music and genuine Assamese music and lyrics came to the fore. Bezbaroa commented, "I am proud of your achievement. "According to him, in the recorded version of *Jaymoti*, everything is crystal clear and the idiom is also natural Assamese. This was not a mean achievement.

Lakshminath and Jyotiprasad– the connection between these two stalwarts and their mutual respect and love towards each other is a great intellectual legacy of Assam. On the occasion of Bezbaroa's 150th birth anniversary, we have reminisced over that glorious legacy.

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5. The letters written by Bezbaroa to Jyotiprasad have been preserved in *Jyotibharati*.

Oppressed Women in the Short Stories of Tagore and Bezbaroa

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(Translated from Bengali
by Abul Hussain Khan**)

From the time of the creation of human society till today, the women in Indian society have been the target of oppression, humiliation and depravation in the three distinct phases of their life in some form or the other. The first stage is their parents' home where they do not get equal treatment and security like their male counterpart. The second phase is the most crucial and tragic phase in which they have to accommodate themselves in their husbands' homes where many of them are ill-treated, tortured and exploited not only by their husbands, but also mostly by their in-laws, such as mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, sisters-in-law etc. In the final phase of their lives, they are unfortunately treated as something unimportant and burdensome even by their own children and other family members. As such, most of the women are ill-fated to live in complete insecurity and sufferings which destroy their dreams to live as decent and civilised human beings. As such, they have

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become the target of oppression, torture and humiliation down the ages.

We can notice the issue of oppressed women in the corpus of short stories of Rabindranath, the father of Indian short story. Similarly, we find a host of oppressed women in the domain of Lakshminath Bezbaroa's stories. Even when they lived in different places and time, we notice the issue of oppressed women in a similar way in the short stories of the two famous writers. I have tried to highlight in this article within the limited range of my studies and knowledge how the two writers have delineated the issue of oppressed women in their stories.

Rabindranath has given a vivid picture of oppressed woman in his famous story *Dena-Pauna* (Marriage deal) published in 1898. Through this story Tagore has exposed the evils of 'dowry system' in the contemporary Bengali society. In this context, regarding the relevance of the story, the famous critic Sukumar Sen has remarked, "This is the first instance in literature which has focussed the complete heartlessness and cruel treatment in modern civilised family". In the story, Nirupama, the heroine along with her father Ramsundar has been subjected to inhuman treatment and torture by the members of her husband's family when her father failed to pay the promised 'dowry'. She has been subjected to constant humiliation and abusive words. She bears silently the humiliation and ill-words about her parents and many occasions, she sheds tears in her close-door room. She has no rights in their house, as if she had become the bride of their house through deception. Consequent upon this torture, her father wants to sell their house and clear the 'marriage-deal'. Nirupama protests this strongly for which

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her father-in-law's home turns to be the death-bed for her. They begin to increase their torture in various ways and she has to accept her tragic end in the form of death. Tagore has shown very poignantly how Nirupama becomes a tragic and pitiable image of suppressed woman that represents the Indian society.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa, who has been called the father of short story in Assamese literature, has given a fair portraiture of suppressed women in many stories written on the background of traditional Assamese society. In his story *Bhodori* we find the image of oppressed woman in the character of Bhadari who has been subjected to torture and ill-words by her husband Shisuram. Even when she is humiliated and tortured, she does not protest and bears this silently. Shisuram is a farmer and when after finishing his work in the field returns home, orders her rudely to bring his food. On every occasion, he treats her most cruelly when she delays to comply with his orders. He assaults her not only with slap or kick but even by burned wood-stick or by 'dhenki's thora'. Bhadari bears all these silently placing her back like the Mother Earth and does not protest. On one occasion, she could not make her husband's food ready owing to scarcity of fuel. Shisuram becomes very angry at this and stabs her with the fish-cutting *bothi* (a kind of kitchen knife used to chop fishes) and the injury was fatal. She is smeared with blood, falls on the ground and begins to groan helplessly. After three days medical treatment she regained her consciousness but becomes curious to see her husband as she has been very loyal and devoted wife. As she does not protest and revolt against her husband she has been the target of oppression. Bhadari has been delineated as the classic example of oppression in Assamese society.

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Throughout the whole nineteenth and half of the twentieth century inter-caste marriage was looked down upon and condemnable. Both Rabindranath and Lakshminath were quite aware of the damages and unhappiness in social life owing to the strict rigours and rigid customs. In Rabindranath's story *Tyag* (Sacrifice) Hemanta belonging to Brahmin family marries Kuhsum but when the in-laws of the husband's family learn that she belongs to 'Kayastha' family besides being a 'child-widow', they begin to humiliate and torture her to that extent that she was compelled to leave her husband's home. On the other hand, in Bezbaroa's story *Seuti*, the writer shows how Seuti the protagonist has to leave her husband's house because marriage was a 'ban' among the relatives howsoever distant they may be. It was revealed that Seuti had some distant relation with her husband's family and therefore she had to leave their house. Of course, her father sued a litigation in the court which compelled her husband to bring her back to their house. But she was neglected and was given a shelter in the 'dhenkishal'. Ultimately she was poisoned by her mother-in-law and was killed. This is another living example of oppression of women in Assamese society on the backdrop of rigid custom and conventional practice.

In the stories of both Tagore and Bezbaroa, there are ample evidences where women are subjected to physical and mental torture. Rabindranath's stories like 'Hoimanti', 'Shanti', etc. women have been subjected to humiliation, depravation and oppression on different grounds. In Bezbaroa's stories like *Bhumkerula*, *Malati*, *Kashibashi* abound with the tragic and pitiable pictures of oppressed and depraved women.

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It is noticeable in this context that the oppressed women in Tagore's stories do not bear these tortures silently and they, in most cases protest and revolt against such tortures and injustices. Again, in certain cases, the writer has revolted against such injustice and oppression by delineating a situation or character arousing indirectly thereby scruple of conscience. On the other hand, the oppressed women in Bezbaroa's stories have not the courage to protest and protect as they have been brought up and taught the lesson of becoming traditional image of tolerance and sacrifice which is the basis of ideal picture of Indian womanhood not influenced by the Western ideology of woman rights and independence.

Secondly, Bezbaroa was more concerned to give a well-knit structure or plot of improving some 'tales' or 'legends' to the form of short stories for which he has not presented the image of fully independent and courageous women. Thirdly, the age-old customs and conventions stood as a barrier to the influence of Renaissance and woman-freedom at that time and so Bezbaroa did not like to raise a strong voice against woman-exploitation by evolving exaggeration of social truth and ideology.

While the oppressed women in Tagore's stories surrender to their misfortune and admit their suffering as something predestined, it rouses a sense of catharsis in reader's mind who in their turn shares the sufferings of those helpless beings. Again, when they protest and revolt against their injustice and oppression, the reader's mind is filled with heroic exaltation and elevation. On the other hand, the unfortunate and oppressed women in Bezbaroa's stories have learnt to tolerate and forbear

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their suffering without protest. Despite this, Bezbaroa has beautifully portrayed the pictures of suffering women which have saturated the readers with sympathy and appreciation. Both Rabindranath and Lakshminath have won the readers' heart by delineating the image of helpless and oppressed women in Indian society. Almost every one of the oppressed women is the picture of loving and caring example of ideal womanhood. In fine, it is hoped that the immortal creations including the image of oppressed women of the two powerful writers of two neighbouring states will always enthuse and enchant the readers' heart with sympathy and veneration throughout the ages.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa and the Scientific Temperament

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(Translated from Assamese
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Lakshminath Bezbaroa was not only a prominent literary figure of Assamese language, literature and culture, but a great modern thinker and intellectual. Being the pioneer of Assamese literature, he laid the foundation of Assamese nationality and sowed the seeds of modern thought on the soil of Assamese society. It is quite relevant to make an assessment of his contribution in this regard.

There is a popular misconception that 'Literature' and 'Science' operate at two different levels— and sometimes it appears to be true. Although it seems that a writer's point of view differs from a scientist's point of view - but in case of some eminent writers, this rule does not apply. Hemchandra Barua and Lakshminath Bezbaroa were two such great writers.

In this era of globalisation and rat-race competition, all guardians want to make their wards careerist and professionally successful right from their very childhood days when they should find pleasure in chasing after the butterflies. According

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to the experts in psychology, the deep roots of the various maladies afflicting our society lie in our way of making our children mechanical right from the beginning. It is a wonder that Bezbaroa's short story *Mukti* (Liberation) published in the magazine *Bahi* many years back reflects the same perceptions held by the psychologists. The short story *Mukti* narrates the story of Sukumar who is a lively, nature-loving small kid but somewhat dull in his studies. His elder brother Devakumar imposed strong discipline on him which eventually caused his premature death. This is a very tragic and touching story that reflects how the guardians want to mould their wards according to their own wishes and in that way deprive them from the joys of golden childhood. This short story is a critique of the mechanical education system which robs the children of their childhood.

Similarly, modern medical sciences have realised the importance of 'laugh-therapy'. Man can cure him from many a disease through hearty laughter. Now in many parts of the world 'Laughing Clubs' have been formed. In this connection we can recall the essay *Hahi* (The Laughter) written by Lakshminath Bezbaroa many years back in which he prescribed laughter as a panacea for all diseases and made a clarion call to one and all, young and old, to indulge in laughter always and everywhere. In this essay, he also castigates the Assamese society for forcefully suppressing their natural flow of laughter just to give a serious look to their personality, and comes down heavily on the mindset that created an impression that the laughing people are frivolous people. His strong advocacy of laughter can be seen as a broader aspect of scientific attitude to human life.

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Bezbaroa's interest in science and scientific temperament is also reflected in his article 'Radium' published in the very first issue of *Bahi* immediately after the discovery of this element.

The social scientists and the psychologists are of the view that if the children are given to imbibe certain qualities like kindness, affection, patriotism, love for nature from their very childhood, then growth of certain social maladies in future can be prevented. Probably, from such a perspective, Bezbaroa realised the importance of folk-tales and compiled two collection of folk-tales *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (Grandma's Tales) and *Kokadeuta aru Nati Lora* (The Grandpa and the Grandson), Bezbaroa considered it as a great instrument to impress upon the young tender mind of the children. He realised that the human sensitivity of fellow-feelings must be cultivated in the children at a tender age. In the tales compiled by Bezbaroa, it is observed that attempts have been made to arouse in children the fine feelings of kindness, sympathy, grief, sorrow, laugh, joy and love for the animals. In a fast changing society, where the stories with good moral lessons were gradually disappearing, Bezbaroa made an attempt to revive those stories in his collection of folk-tales.

Through some of his created characters, Bezbaroa has vehemently condemned the superstitious beliefs and practices prevailing in society. During those days, the Assamese society was deeply immersed in various superstitions and blind faiths and they got fully reflected in his short story *Nistarini Devi ba Fetema Bibi* (Nistarani Devi or Fatima Bibi). It has been shown in the story that Nistarini, for eating pudding at a Muslim's

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home, was accused of compromising with her religion, and was compelled to leave her home as the village people would not approve of it. When her father passed away she was not allowed to return and help the widowed mother in fear of social ostracisation. Being fed up with such rigid social rules and superstitions, Nistarini says, "Our country is ruining due to this casteism and communalism. In the name of caste and community, we hate each other, and in the name of religions like Hindu and Muslim, we abhor each other and that is taking our country to hell."

Similarly, another short-story *Erabari* depicts the sorrows of a woman who is a victim of superstitions. The central woman character of this story loses her husband at a young age and takes refuge in the arms of a Bhogadatta, a young man, and in due course of time, she becomes pregnant which is considered a great scandal by the society. The woman had to bear the brunt for her supposed 'sinful' deed— but Bhogadatta, who is equally complicit in this sinful act, is totally spared by the society and goes scot-free. The final catastrophe for this hapless woman was suicide for her ultimate peace. Such cruel rule of the society has come under criticism from Bezbarua in these words :

"How hard the human world is! How cruel a human heart is! How horrible the judgement of man is! It has no room for kindness, sympathy, consideration or humanity. But man claims that he is superior to animals!"

That Bezbaroa is a social reformer is reflected in his short story *Arji* (an Appeal). It can be called a short story against opium-eating. This story assumes significance today in the backdrop of vigorous anti-tobacco campaigns conducted by the

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government as well as the doctors and people of health department. Even anti-tobacco law is being enacted and implemented. Bezbaroa had realised that opium is a poison for the health of the people and he tries to arouse the consciousness of Assamese people towards its negative impact through the short story *Arji*. His another anti-casteism and anti-superstitious story is *Jatiramor Jat* (The Caste of Jatiram). Bezbaroa's views are reflected in the outburst of the narrator of the story against casteism : "The rules of caste of today's society are the creation of man, not of God and that is true and even after consulting all the scriptures you can not disprove it."

Through his various writings, Bezbaroa came down heavily on the various wrong practices and superstitions prevailing in the then Assamese society and encouraged the people to adopt a scientific outlook of life. He wanted a comprehensive reform of the society on the basis of modern scientific perspective. He will be remembered as a pioneer in modern rationalist thinking in the Assamese society.