

Modern Assamese Theatre (1857-1900): Roots and Legacy

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Abstract

Western proscenium theatre was introduced in port-cities like Calcutta and Bombay by British colonial administration to entertain the Europeans living in the subcontinent. With the passage of time it played a crucial role in the formation of a hybrid theatre culture in Bengal. Assamese students studying in various educational institutions of Calcutta were remarkably impressed by this new theatre form. They were initiated to proscenium theatre through productions based on the plays Shakespeare, Moliere, Sheridan in universities and colleges. Except the English plays which dominated academic institutions initially Bengali adaptations of European classics also formed part of the repertoire.

Keywords : Adaptation; Neo-Sanskritic; Prastabana; Sutradhara

The initiation of Western proscenium theatre in Assam is substantially premised on what the theatre historian, Pona Mahanta, observes as:

“The popularity of Shakespeare among the educated readers and audience of Calcutta in the initial stages of the development of Bengali drama and stage inspired many of the writers of Bengal to translate and adapt Shakespearean plays in Bengali...These Bengali translations, and adaptations, in any case must have inspired some of the Assamese students studying at Calcutta to make similar attempts in their own language...” (61).

One of the earliest products of this inspiration is a play titled *Bhramaranga*, an adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* which was performed in Kolkata on the evening of 25th August 1888 by the members of Asomiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhani Sabha. The Sabha, a cultural organization dedicated to the development of Assamese language and literature was based in Kolkata. *Bhramaranga* had a phenomenal impact on the development of modern Assamese theatre and it was accepted as a model for performance of Western drama in the region. Variety of styles, skilled acting, melodramatic dialogue, swift change of scenery were the primarily constituents of its appeal amongst the native spectators. All of a sudden

there was an increased demand for such productions in the region as a result of which a series of theatre halls came up in numerous urban centres, district headquarters and smaller towns staging performances of Assamese plays in Western style.

The influence of Bengali theatre on the emerging trend of modern Assamese plays can be broadly classified in three categories – (a) the Shakespearian translations/ adaptations by Bengali playwrights which provided a model for Assamese theatre enthusiasts, (b) translation/adaptation of Bengali plays into Assamese, and (c) Assamese original plays with distinct impressions of Bengali drama. The earliest Bengali adaptations of Shakespeare like Harachandra Ghosh's *Bhanumati Chittabilas* (1853) and *Charumukhi Chittahara* (1863) had a palpable impact on Assamese transliterations/ adaptations of Shakespeare. Padmadhar Chaliha's *Amar Lila* (adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*), Durgeswar Sarma's *Chandravali* (based on *As You Like It*), Nabinchandra Bordoloi's *Visad Kahini* (adaptation of *King Lear*), Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Ashru Tirtha* (based on *King Lear*) and *Banji Konwar* (based on *The Merchant of Venice*) are amongst the finest examples of Shakespeare adaptation in Assamese. Such plays indigenized characters and place names for inducing familiarity amongst native spectators. This practice was already well established in the commercial theatre apparatus of Calcutta. Assamese playwrights concentrated their attention on evolving an appropriate linguistic style to absorb the richness of Elizabethan proscenium theatre.

Another significant variety of the colonial Bengali theatre was the neo-Sanskritic plays, which mixed elements of classical Sanskrit plays with Elizabethan stage conventions. Taracharan Sikdar's *Bhadrarjun* (1852), G.C. Gupta's *Kirtibilas* (1852), Ramnarayan Tarkaratna's *Ratnabali* (1858), and Madhusudan Dutt's *Sharmistha* (1859) are amongst the finest examples of this fusion. Structure of these plays was different from regular Sanskrit drama, still the use of elements like *prastabana*, *nandi*, and *sutradhara* etc were close to Sanskrit theatrical aesthetics. These plays heralded a new tradition in Bangali playwriting and gradually it penetrated into Assamese drama as well. Laxminath Bezbaroa's *Debjani* (1911), Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Narakasur* (1930), *Kurukshetra* (1936) and *Sri Ramachandra* (1937) are the chief examples of this variety in Assamese. According to Pona Mahanta,

“the early [Assamese] dramatists were influenced by European or Shakespearian technique and style, all of them were not able to free themselves from the influence of Sanskrit drama or the indigenous *ankiya nats*. This is true of *Ram-Navami*, where the environmental setting of some of

the scenes remind one of a Sanskrit drama, while Rudraram Bardalai's *Bangal Bangalini* contains eight acts like a Sanskrit Nataka" (68).

These plays based on Hindu myths and legends lore and legend immediately appealed to Assamese spectators because of their indulgence in religious themes and issues. Laxminath Bezbaroa's *Debjani* is based on the story of Kach and Debjani from *Mahabharata*. But in the delineation of its plot Bezbaroa was more inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's *Bidai-Avishap* (one of Bazbaroa's most favourite narrative poems) than the original story. Again Lambodar Bora's *Shakuntala* can be regarded as a dramatic adaptation of Iswar Chandra Vidyasaga'r *Shakuntala*. The use of 'Prastavana' in Atul Chandra Hazarika's plays is very similar to the Bengali neo-Sanskritic variety but characteristically very different from those used in Classical Sanskrit plays. This Anglo-Orientalist duality characterized a lot of plays written during the first phase modern Assamese theatre which was necessary for its growth.

Influence of Bengal can also be detected on the development of Assamese history plays. The melodramas of Girish Ghosh, Dwijendralal Roy and Khirodprasad Vidyabinod, who specialized in the art of history plays, were amongst the earliest accessible models of this type. Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Jaymati* (1900), *Gadadhar* (1907) and *Lachit Barphukan* (1915) are amongst the earliest history plays in Assamese. Like his Bengali predecessors Gohain Barua used the glorious history of the country as a means for validating the socio-political issues of his time. In Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1947) there is a distinct impression of Girish Ghosh's eponymous play (published in 1907). Incidentally, some of these history plays appeared during the Partition of Bengal Presidency of which Assam was a part. There were frequent protests against this conspiracy in Assam. Theatrical representations of the lives of legendary heros of like Rana Pratap, Chattrapati Shivaji, Lachit Barphukan accentuated the spirit of resistance against the colonial government. History plays of Atul Chandra Hazarika and Padmanath Gohain Barua lent vital contribution to the process of 'construction' of an alternative history of the region.

Way back in 1837, John M'Cosh a serving British East India Company officer stationed in Northeast presented a detailed account on the backward nature of the Assamese society in which practices of caste prejudice, polygamy and child marriage were very common. The higher echelons of Assamese society were distinctly more orthodox. M'Cosh observes,

"Education is still at a very low ebb throughout Assam and that little is confined entirely to the male sex. Learning

was thought too dangerous a power to be intrusted [sic] to females: and no man would marry a girl if she could read and write" (26).

The nature and the extent of caste prejudice in contemporary Assamese society can also be confirmed from an account of Pandit Shibnath Shastri, eminent litterateur and scholar of nineteenth century Bengal who visited Assam in 1981 with his friend Ramkumar Vidyaratna in order to propagate 'Brahmo' faith amongst the natives. Shibnath Shastri describes an incident in Nagaon to inform his readers with the social customs of Assamese people:

"We were very thirsty...Soon we spied the Government inspection bungalow on a little mound close to us. We went there and asked the Assamese servant there for water. He had a little glass which he refused to lend us. He did not agree to pour water on our hands lest the pitcher should get touched by us. Mr. Ganguly (one of Shastri's companions) went in search of some big leaves to make cup-shaped thing. While he was away I began to preach to this man. I said the same God has created both you and me. In His eyes we are brothers. We are dying from thirst and you have the water, yet you cannot give it to us in the time of dire need. Are you not ashamed that you refuse to give us the water He has given freely to all? Perhaps my reproaches touched his heart; he gave me his glass to drink from" (Roy 165; my translation).

Twenty years after the publication of M' Cosh's report on the social habits and customs of the Assamese, Gunabhiram Barua's play (1834-1894) *Ram Navami Natak* was published in segments on the pages of *Orunudo*, a missionary journal in 1956 (the first complete edition was published later in 1870). It is the earliest play in Assamese language which has a profoundly reformative message at its core. Probably it was the passage of the widow-remarriage act of 1856 by the colonial government which ignited the creative urge in Barua to write a play on this issue. Barua began the task of writing this play during the course of a week-long passage from Calcutta to Nagaon. Gunabhiram's great interest in ideas of emancipation and empowerment of women was partially ignited by his readings from Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the iconic non-conformist Bengali litterateur of nineteenth century. Swarnalata Barua, Gunabhiram's daughter once spotted a copy of Michael's *Birangana Kabya* in a book shop. She quickly bought it and gifted it to her father...

“That evening, much like earlier days, Gunabhiram was seen passionately reading poetry. Reciting Madhusudhan’s verse in a full-throated manner, he explained to his daughter the significance of women’s liberation. Swarna was simply enraptured and a surge of self-confidence swept over her” (Mishra 265).

Of the pioneering Assamese litterateurs on whom the impact of the Bengal Renaissance and reformation was most visible Gunabhiram Barua is undoubtedly the most prominent one. Powerful portrayal of female characters in *Birangana Kabya* and other contemporary Bengali literary classics played a significant role in shaping his creative genius. He was also among the first Assamese who accepted Brahmo faith and contributed richly to its growth in this region. His decision to marry a Brahmin widow called Bishnupriya Devi stirred up a great controversy within the conservative section of Assamese society. During his youth Gunabhiram witnessed Vidyasagar’s resistance against the conservative Brahminical hegemony in Bengal and he tried to popularize the same spirit amongst Assamese people. He was deeply immersed in the ideas of socio-cultural transformation advocated by eminent reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and others.

Incidentally, *Ram-Navami Natak* appeared on stage within one year of the publication of Woomesh Chandra Mitra’s *Vidhava Vivaha Natak* (1856). As the title suggests, the plot of Mitra’s play is premised on widow remarriage. Certain Assamese theatre historians suggest that *Ram-Navami Natak* was inspired by Mitra’s play. Pona Mahanta argues that though Gunabhiram might have been aware about the existence of Mitra’s *Vidhava Vivaha Natak* still he had enough conviction on its relevance for contemporary Assamese society. Because of the absence of Mitra’s play in print a detailed analysis of textual similarities is not possible here. However, there are certain influence of commercial theatre apparatus of Calcutta on Barua’s dramatic style and technique. Like his predecessors in Bengali theatre, in *Ram-Navami Natak* Barua simultaneously borrows from the conventions of neo-Sanskritic as well as the Elizabethan theatre. The most obvious Sanskrit influence undoubtedly remain in Barua’s use of terms and phrases like ‘iti niskranta’, ‘iti prasthanā’ to indicate ‘exit’ and ‘departure’ of characters from stage. Several critics have also detected inspirations drawn from Kalidasa’s *Avignān Shakuntalam* on *Ram-Navami*, primarily in the way Barua portrays the scenes of romantic encounter between the protagonists. In fact, Basanta Kumar Bhattacharya detects traces of not only Sanskrit drama but also ankiya plays in *Ram-Navami* (Bhattacharya 76). However, Barua has certainly modeled his play on Elizabethan tragedies. The act-wise division

of its plot, a subplot and most importantly the subject of the play appears much ahead of its time. His use of local dialects as well as words and phrases from Sanskrit and Bengali in order to please a group of spectators who have been traditionally nurtured on a semi-classical theatrical tradition is quite remarkable. Gunabhiram Barua opened the doors of a completely new kind of performative tradition for the region – the Western theatre.

Hemchandra Barua's (1835-96) *Kaniyar Kirtan* (1861) is the first published play in Assamese. Unlike Gunabhiram and others, Hemchandra completed his formal education in Assam and as a result of this there is very little influence of Bengali culture and literature on his personality and his art. At an advanced stage of his life he came in contact with the missionaries and started learning English. Although by the time Barua was writing his play, Bengali has been promoted as the official language of India by the colonial government, still there were a section of missionaries and colonial administrators who continued to help the growth of Assamese language and literature. Barua graciously acknowledges the generosity shown by A.C. Campbell, Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, who took the responsibility of publishing the first reprint of the play in 1868, in the preface:

“the author, owing to certain unavoidable circumstances had not been able to accomplish his object, and almost abandoned the idea of doing so, when Mr. A. C. Campbell..., one of those generous hearted English gentleman, who take a lively interest in the Assamese language and the welfare of the Province, asked him [H.C. Barua] to republish the book offering the book offering to defray the cost of printing” (Barua Preface).

As a play, *Kaniyar Kirtan* is rather a very short one where no other character except Kirtikanta has been provided with a real opportunity to develop. So, it is not difficult to understand that his attention is primarily focused on exposing the evils of opium-eating and the harm it causes to society. By the end of eighteenth century a large part of Assam fell under the menacing grip of opium. According to historian Edward Gait, “the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley” were addicted to the use of opium to a degree “unknown anywhere else in India” (Gait 101). In another such report on the abuse of opium Moffat Mills writes, “three fourth of the population” in Assam were “opium eaters” and “man, woman and children alike” used that drug (Gait 57). It is against this backdrop, we need to situate *Kaniyar Kirtan* for a proper appreciation of its literary merit.

The plot of *Kaniyar Kirtan* revolves around a character called Bhadreswar Barua, a revenue collector whose son Kirtikanta is addicted to opium eating. This addiction not only lands him in jail but also instrumentalizes the death of Kirtikanta's wife. The plot line is very simple where the objective is to expose the evils of opium eating. It has been described as a "social play" concerned with "a very serious contemporary problem" (Barua Preface). In the 'preface' to the reprinted edition of the play, Barua describes it, quite ironically, as a "pamphlet" aimed at reformation of opium addicts of Assam:

"[It] was composed with the view of exposing the mischievous effects of opium-eating, which had long been praying upon the very vitals of Assam" (Barua Preface).

Kritikanta, the protagonist substantiates the message of the play in a rare moment of self-realization:

"Kepa-kani bihar ses
Kaniyar nai jnanar les
hai! hai! ki ghor kles,
kaniye khale Assam des" (Barua 36)

Rudram Bordoloi's (1836-1899) *Bongal Bongaloni* (1871) deals with the issue of 'foreign influx' which has been so relevant to Assamese society across centuries. 'Bongal' is a popular nomenclature in Assamese for indicating all kinds of 'foreigners' (Jana 12) who are commonly presumed to be an 'unclean' lot and since they were brought to this region by the British so they were popularly believed to be partakers in the colonial project. Upper class Assamese usually considered the foreigners/Bongals to be 'polluted' and hence 'untouchable'. Gunabhiram Barua, one of the most enlightened minds of nineteenth century Assam whose formative years were spent amongst the foremost literati of Bengal, once described his impression about the migrating 'Bongals' in the following manner,

"towards the East, South and North of our country live the hill tribes like Khamti, Singfou, Noga, Garo, Khasia, Vot, Abor etc. To the West lies Bongal Desh. On the other side of Goalpara lies Hadirachoki or Bongal Hat. We share the same feelings for Bongals, that we hold for these hill tribes. They are foreigners, uncivilized, polluted. Except the people of my country and these hill tribes all other people of this world are Bongal. Bongal means polluted, impure race" (Saikia 95; my translation).

Gunabhiram has identified three significant factors for the large scale influx of migrant workers/Bongals in Assam: (a) availability of fertile land and

cheaper revenue rate; (b) insufficiency of skilled labourers, artisans and employees and most significantly for our present context (c) flexibility in marital-ties. And he insisted that third factor i.e. easy availability of women excited the imagination of foreigners the most:

“The foreigners find it convenient to settle down [in Assam] because of the laxity in our marital customs. Sometimes the natives fail to find a bride and get married even after spending a lot. But foreigners are usually not unsuccessful [in this regard]. The reason behind this is that the income of this section of foreigners is more than any section of our people” (Saikia 135; my translation).

From Gunabhiram’s account we can derive two probable reasons for the influx of migrants in Assam – higher income and availability of women. There was a widespread resentment amongst the natives against migrant workers. Bongals Popular opinion on the influx of migrant ‘bongals’ in contemporary Assamese society was sharply divided. Whereas some people believed that the influx of the foreigners was a proof of the improved state of economy of the province and in order to maintain this economic prosperity import of foreign workers was an imperative, still others were less accommodative. The dominant opinion was that amongst the Bengali migrants who came seeking employment there was a section which belonged to the lowest income group. They resorted to all kinds of abominable activities like theft, cheating, polygamy and extramarital affairs (Sarma 109). An introduction into this complex canvas of ethno-linguistic prejudice is very pertinent for a proper understanding of *Bongal Bongaloni*.

The objective of the play is to “enlighten the audience” and “make them aware” about the menace of entrapment of native women by foreign migrants (Mahanta 193). Tavuli, the protagonist of the play is a woman past the prime of her life and who is now living a life of relative peace with Puwaram, a native simpleton. She has taken many men in life, one of which was Rammohan Poddar, a migrant worker (a bongal). Though her marriage with Rammohan was consummated under the provision of ‘civil marriage’ after a while he escapes with all her valuables leaving her in utter distress. Rammohan returns a few years after and requests her to trust in him once again but she rejects his offer. At the end of the play Rammohan dies a tragic death being infected by pox. There is no one even to perform his last rights so his corpse is dragged out of his hut and drowned in the river Kalang. The portrayal of the last few days in the life of Rammohan Poddar in *Bongal Bongaloni* is a stark reminder of the complexity of migrant situation in Assam during nineteenth century.

In *Notes on the Marriage Systems of the People of Assam* (1870), Hemchandra Barua has points out certain deficiencies prevalent in the marital systems of lower strata of Assamese society which made it vulnerable for exploitation by outsiders,

“Many people take the girls home unmarried immediately after the performance of the ceremony of puberty...In fact the lower classes of Assamese do not care much about a formal marriage, so long as they obtain a woman for life. But as a man, he co-habits with a woman to whom he is not legally married, is considered ceremoniously unclean, many of those who take woman as wives in this manner eventually get married to them, sometimes many years afterwards, and perhaps the woman have given birth to several children. Many others again pass their whole lives without being married to their so-called wives” (Goswami 397).

Unlike *Kaniyar Kirtan*, *Bongal Bongaloni* is a considerably longer play, the plot of which is divided in eight acts. The use of the character of a ‘sutradhara’, who appears at the end of every act to comment on the characters of Tavuli and Rammohan, and the division of plot in the play is similar to Sanskrit plays. After *Bongal Bongaloni* for nearly a decade very few plays were written in Assamese except Padmanath Gohain Barua’s *Gaonbudha* (1890). Towards the very end of the century appeared Durgaprasad Mazinder Barua’s *Mahari* (1893) and Benudhar Rajkhowa’s *Seuti-Kiron* (1894). The first few decades of twentieth century would be dominated by a series of plays based on mythological themes like Purnakanta Sharma’s *Harishchandra Upakhyan* (1893), Benudhar Rajkhowa’s *Durjyadhanar Urubhanga* (1903), Chandradhar Barua’s *Meghnad Vadh* (1904), *Tilottama Sambhav* (1929) and *Rajarshi* (1937), Durgeswar Sarma’s *Partha Parajay* (1909) and *Bali Vadh* (1912), Ambikagiri Roychaudhuri’s *Jayadrath Vadh* (1912), Atul Chandra Hazarika’s *Beula* (1923) etc. By the end of nineteenth century it was quite apparent that the age of reformative plays was coming to end and these were replaced by mythological and humour plays.

Plays which dominated the first phase of modern Bengali theatre like Ram Narayan Tarkaratna’s *Kulin Kula Sarbaswa* (1854), Dakshinaranjan Chattopadhyay’s *Cha-kar Darpan* (1857), Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nildarpan* (1860), and *Sadhabar Ekadashi* (1897) were essentially premised on a reformative agenda. Ironically, Assamese plays of that time were also equally concerned with reformative agenda. Whether it is Gunabhiram Barua’s *Ram-Navami* the objective of which is to criticize the practice of child marriage

and abuse of women, especially widows or Hemchandra Barua's *Kaniyar Kirtan* which is concerned with the evils effects of opium-eating, drama have been used primarily as a medium for transmitting moral messages. Rudram Bordoloi's *Bongal Bongaloni* is also not an exception in this regard. When Gunabhiram shows serious concern on child marriage, Rudram exposes the lacunae prevalent in the marriage systems of Assamese society, especially amongst the people of its lower order. These playwrights used drama as a medium for commentary on social disorders. In fact a few critics have opined that neither Gunabhiram's nor Hemchandra's plays were written with an eye on performance rather their objective was to expose the superstitions, ignorance, hypocrisy and other abominable practices of Assamese society (Bhattacharjya 9). However, Maheswar Neog, prominent cultural critic of Assam reiterates the efficacy of this "modern theatre movement in Assam" by emphasizing on its contribution towards the transformation of social consciousness in the region (Neog 141). The confluence of Bengali and Assamese theatre from mid-nineteenth century was not entirely coincidental in nature. It was quintessentially drenched by the spirit of enlightenment brought about by the Bengal Renaissance which invigorated the value systems in Assamese society. In the end we can say that out of this confluence a new theatre was born, a hybrid theatre with a modern spirit.

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