CHAPTER II

ROMANTICISM IN ASSAMESE POETRY

Evolution is only a natural process that each culture has to undergo. With the progress of civilization, each language undergoes more and more elaboration and expansion in its contents. To know one language which serves as the medium of a literature, it is necessary to acquire a thorough knowledge of its history and development. Literature is a reflection of the society or the nation it represents, and Assamese literature is no exception to this. It has also been experiencing its own development simultaneously with the society, and has attained, in the course of about a thousand years, the mature stage of the present. However, the course of its development was not uninterrupted. One gap in its development that concerns us here is that of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Assamese language seems to have acquired its typical nuances and the potency to create genuine literature during the fourteenth century through the writings of the poets of its earliest phase like Hem Saraswati, Rudra Kandali, Harivar Bipra, Kabiratna Saraswati and Madhav Kandali. The time-span of these poets, though open to controversy, seems to extend from the end of the thirteenth century throughout the fourteenth century. This literature attained its high watermark of excellence in the hands of
the Vaishnav poets of the subsequent century led by Shankardev and Madhavdev.

This early period of Assamese literature was followed by the upsurge of Vaishnav literature with the appearance of the two great poets namely, Shankardev (1449-1569) and Madhavdev (1489-1596) with a hitherto unknown reformative and creative zeal. With his Ankiya nats (one-act plays), the Bargits (the devotional songs) and the verse adaptations of the Bhagavat and the Mahabharat, Shankardev brought about the pan-Indian Vaishnavite movement in this corner of the country raising Assamese literature, at the same time, to the status of a great literature. This literature was enriched further by Madhavdev, the spiritual heir and true follower of Shankardev. His Namphosa, a treatise of philosophical verses, Bhakti-Ratnavali, a versification of Vishnupuri Sanyasi's devotional treatise with the same title, Rajasuya Yajna, a poetical rendering of the Mahabharat episode of the Rajasuya sacrifice of the Pandavs, the Ankiya nats and the Bargits are invaluable contributions to Assamese literature. Other prominent Vaishnav poets of this period are Ram Saraswati, Ananta Kandali, Shridhar Kandali, Ratnakar Kandali, Kansari Kavi and Sarbabhaum Bhattacharya. Shankardev's literature aimed at bringing unity to the society by overcoming the racial difference.
The literature of the subsequent phase, viz. that during 1650-1826 may be called the post-Vaishnav literature which included the literature of the Ahom reign. Though the same Vaishnavite trend may be said to have continued through the period of Shankardev to the fag-end of the Ahom reign, there were much deviations during the later period. Under the auspices of the Ahom kings, against the Vaishnavite literature which was always religious, a new kind of prose literature, which was quite secular in nature, emerged, and the most important of this was the historical writings or the chronicle literature. Yet, with most of the writers, the same underlying creed continued. A feeling of weariness pervaded the literary atmosphere following the time of Shankardev, Madhavdev, Ram Saraswati, Ananta Kandali and a few other prominent Vaishnav poets. The language of the Vaishnav period had a conventional form with many words borrowed from outside the region. But in this period literature, in the form of history, brought about a language with its root in its own soil.

The declining years of the Ahom reign tell a tale of struggle and strife. Civil discontent and feud as well as external invasions brought with them an atmosphere of chaos. Ultimately Assam came under the direct control of the British from 24 February 1826, according to the Yandabo pact. The devastations that the Burmese invasions had caused had a long felt impact over Assam. Literature too suffered.
The pervading air was blowing contrary to all creative impulses. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there was no creative literature during the first thirty years of the nineteenth century. These years constitute the darkest epoch in Assamese literary history.

"Through some thoughtless mistake, both in (a)(sic) knowledge of the realities and in state-craft", the new British government of Assam began to use Bengali as the official language in place of Assamese. Bengali replaced Assamese in schools and courts. It proved to be a blow in the course of Assamese literature that had attained the grandeur of being able to convey the pan-Indian Vaishnav cult.

Then in 1836 the American Baptist Missionaries set foot on Assam with an evangelical purpose. They found it difficult to approach the people through Bengali, it being newly introduced, if not quite unfamiliar. The conscientious Assamese of the time led by the Christian Missionaries who came first to write in the language of the region as prevalent then, felt the need for reinstatement of Assamese in the place of Bengali.

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Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's was the first voice of protest amongst the Assamese people to be raised against the introduction of Bengali. The Christian Missionaries had, from their very presence in Assam, begun to use Assamese as the medium of instruction. Nathan Brown, the first member of the Missionaries, started a school at Sadia in which students were instructed through the medium of Assamese. He also prepared textbooks for his school. His Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language was published from Sibsagar Mission Press in 1848. The first Grammar in Assamese was Mr. W. Robinson's A Grammar of the Assamese Language. Other remarkable linguistic works by the Missionaries are Mrs. Cutter's Vocabulary, Mr. W. Robinson's Dictionary in Assamese and English and Miles Bronson's A Dictionary, Assamese and English published in 1867.

However, at the end of more than thirty years of protest raised unitedly by the native Assamese intellectuals and the Missionaries, restoration of Assamese was at last possible in 1873. With the linguistic study, the Missionaries engaged considerable attention to the growth and development of literature as well; and as a result of this, Assam experienced a new literary upsurge. The most prominent of the personalities that forwarded utmost help to the Missionaries in their endeavour to revive the language was again Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Nidhi Levi Farwell was another local talent who had forwarded considerable help to
the Missionaries in this effort.

Not being able to keep its link with the preceding literature which was mostly religious and moral, the resurgent Assamese literature, which was generally secular, cannot be said to have formed a natural link in progress. It was rather a product of new thoughts and feelings, very often alien to the old religious tradition. Having lost its moorings which was peculiar to Indian culture as a whole, it was more in link with Western secular humanist thoughts and ideas, particularly with those of England.

The glimpses of a new literature were to be seen in the pages of Orunodoi, the mouthpiece of the Christian Missionaries and the first Assamese Journal, published from the Missionary Press at Sibsagar in 1846 under the editorship of Rev. Nathan Brown. The pioneers in this enterprise were Rev. Nathan Brown and Rev. O.T. Cutter.

Both the Missionaries and the few enlightened native Assamese youths began to contribute to Orunodoi on various subjects. Literary translations from different languages, the past history of the province, numismatics, ethnology, problems of social evils and their solutions—all found place in the pages of Orunodoi along with the religious topics. Thus a new form of language began to emerge, and in this, a new literature.
Assam is unique in its distinctive heritage of a tradition of prose-writing right from the medieval Ahom reign. It had attained its grandeur in the sixteenth century itself through the works of Vaikunthanath 'Bhattadev' and Gopalcharan Dvij. Another variety of prose developed during the rules of the Ahom kings in the form of historical writings. That influenced even the writers of the Vaishnav tradition to write out some of their biographies in prose, like the famous *Katha-Gurucharit*. And then, under the influence of Western thought and education, developed the modern Assamese prose. "Modern life required a modern medium of expression, and a down to earth prose developed through the baptist journal".2

But in spite of keeping very close to the everyday language of the common people, the new Assamese prose, developed during the British rule, showed a tendency to imbibe the qualities of English rhythm and syntax. This initial stage of the modern Assamese literature is also the period of the liberation of the language. The language that was shaped by the Christian writers of Orunodoi, though simple and unadorned was still a little removed from the familiar style of the contemporary language. It was Hemchandra Barua who made the utmost effort to give it the local colour of sound and form. His *Asamiya Vyakaran* (1895)

provided the language with the authenticity it needed. His Anglo-Assamese Dictionary, Hetnkosh (1900) is the superb monument of his talent that gave the current Assamese language its present form. Modern Assamese language owes to Hemchandra Barua as much as its literature does to Lakshminath Bezbaroa. The former contributed to Assamese literature in the way Johnson had done to English in the eighteenth century.

The enthusiasm that the publication of Orunodoi had aroused, made the way to the growth of the periodicals and journals like Assam Bilasini (1871-83), Assam News (1882-85), an Anglo-Assamese journal edited by Hemchandra Barua, Assam Bandhu (1885-86), edited by Gunabhiram Barua, the spiritual heir of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Mau (1886-87), edited by Harinarayan Bora, Asam Tara (1888-90), edited by Shridhar Barua and Larabandhu (1888), edited by Karunabhiram Barua.

This period was, in fact, the period of transition. Though vibrant with the possibility of quite a new form of literature, poets like Raghudev Goswami, Lalit Goswami, Suryakhari Daivajna and Visweswar Vaidyadhip still carried the Vaishnav tenet into this period. The second phase of this literature had a standardized language at hand which began to derive its contents from Anglo-Bengali sources instead of doing so directly from English.
Calcutta being the nearest centre of higher education, the Assamese youths of this period had to have their college education there. Assam, which comprised then the entire North-Eastern region of to-day, still lacked a seat of higher learning. The zeal of the Bengal Renaissance spread around fast. The Assamese youths studying at Calcutta felt like Alexander Selkirk; and their feeling of nostalgia generated a longing and love for their homeland. Being in the midst of the Renascent literary wave in Bengal, they felt the necessity for a similar literature in their own language.

Now, to assess the nature of the literature that these young enthusiasts brought into being, we must study it against a far wider background than the mere circumstances that had prevailed in Assam in which these zealous Assamese youths produced their literature. Assamese literature of this period is rather the product of the Indian Renaissance and the corresponding enlightenment that had worked on the cultural spheres of India during the early part of the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century is one of the most significant periods in the cultural as well as political history of India. Modern Indian culture does indeed owe its origin to this period. India experienced such unprecedented events, and underwent such changes that in no other century
before, the country had acquired such a change within such a short span.

With the expansion of British colonialism, the scope for commerce as well as education had increased. A class of Indians came out to cope with the changed situation; and ultimately they found themselves forming a class – the Western educated middle class – a class which was earlier non-existent. Solely dependent on their profession attained through their English education, they had their new values formed under the influence of Western literature and culture. The new Western educated intellectuals that came out of this set-up gave us ultimately a literature that drew its inspiration from the West. The establishment of Hindu College in 1817 at Calcutta and the Western education prescribed there opened a new horizon for the Indian intellectuals.

It was Louis Henry Vivian Derozio who had introduced the Romantic ideals of Scott, Wordsworth, Byron and other Romantics to the youths in Bengal. He taught in Hindu College from 1826 to 1931; and during the short span of these five years, he succeeded greatly in infusing the essence of the Western Romanticism and the Renaissance into the young Bengalis. The importance of secular humanism in the ideals of Renaissance may well be said to be a gift of Derozio.
Now, the newly emerged middle class tried earnestly to set up a new standard for themselves. In doing so, they looked for the new learning provided in Western education.

It is true, in different periods India had achieved glorious height both in military and spiritual power. But a long period preceding the nineteenth century experienced such inanity that all the brilliance of the past was almost lost in oblivion. With the introduction of Western education by the British, appreciation of the knowledge of science and industry, and the power of organization heralded the intellectual emancipation of India from a moribund state. But however enlightened the exponents of Renaissance might feel with the new learning, the structure of the Indian spiritual tradition was too strongly based to be missed even by those drunk in the sweetest spirit of Western culture. Thus, spiritual consciousness rather added to their intellectual curiosity vitalizing their creative faculty on both the spheres. They had their influences far reaching in the society. The new learning liberalized the values of the traditional society.

Man now came to be regarded for his own worth, just as he is. Putting man at the centre of the universe instead of God is the Renaissance secular humanistic ideal of Europe which also became the Indian Renaissance ideal. Besides this, recognition of the worth of man in the Indian
or Assamese Renaissance also was possible because of the influence of European positivism. Towards the later part of the nineteenth century the influence of August Comte's (1798-1857) positivism on the young men of Bengal became so intense and extensive that it gave rise to a popular saying that there were more Comtists in Bengal than in France. The strain that the attempt at harmonizing things involved, had accelerated the spirit of action which found its outlet in art and literature as well as in other spheres of man's thought and intellect. Whether with the conservatives or the radicals, the time proved creative.

Though with very different grounds, the new wave in India also began to acquire the characteristics of the European Renaissance. The educated section of people began to view the traditional systems in the light of their newly achieved education based on reason. Ethics and religion, the two branches of thought that seem to be based mostly on dogmatism and obscurism, also began to be treated with a scientific view. On the other hand, the new assessment of things that was necessitated by the social change required the utmost exertion of the mental faculties which resulted in the hitherto unknown capacity of the faculty of imagination. Thus reason and imagination, two seemingly contradictory mental powers, started working in collaboration betraying the symptoms of Romanticism which is a composite of both contradiction and synthesis.
An increasing power of reason and the sense of individual dignity led to more and more curiosity about the external as well as internal surroundings, and the growing feeling of reverence to one's own self led to the love of one's own land and language, or in short, to nationalism. Though India never suffered from a lack of spiritual unity, "before India came under British rule and even during the early part of this rule, Indian people had never thought in terms of one nation."\(^3\) It was by 1857 that almost all the major provinces of India came to be annexed to the British dominion. Soon a sense of foreign domination came to be realized by the Indians as they found themselves politically united under one foreign rule. A new feeling of belonging to one and same country generated in them a vigorous sense of nationalism. Side by side with this new feeling of nationalism, a new sense of regional nationalistic feeling was also generated in the minds of people of various provinces which has now been called regionalism. However, under the leadership of the great all-India statesmen like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, Indian nationalism was always held higher than the regional sentiments all throughout the period of the Indian freedom struggle.

Regional languages and literatures began to thrive with the regional nationalistic sentiments as one of their

driving forces and they were rejuvenated by the study of English and other Western literature. Soon Indian culture began to acquire a new standard through modification. The urgency of reform led to a sense of revolt against any exploitation; and the revolt against the British rule was this revolt in a large scale.

As the centre of Western education, Bengal or Calcutta became the centre also of the nineteenth century Renaissance. It emanated its light all over India. A group of people like Ram Mohan Ray and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar came forward with the message of a new culture as vital and as dynamic as that of the West and yet with its moorings in its own tradition, philosophy and culture. This concept of the new culture manifested itself in some of the characters of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. And such creations of Bankim Chandra had their prototypes in the real society. In later years, the native and the foreign, the traditional and the modern, all became exquisitely harmonized in the unique creations of Rabindranath Tagore. The different forms of literature in English found their way soon and easily into Indian literature; and in the hand of Indian writers with genuine creative urge, they achieved the status of original literature.

Now, the Assamese students in Calcutta, besides being influenced by English literature which they studied in schools and colleges, came into contact with Bengali
writings, and their literary attempts fructified in the form
of Assamese poetry, drama the short story and the novel.
Under the influence of English and Bengali literatures,
Assamese literature of this period began to acquire the
Romantic traits. Among other traits of this period of
Assamese literature, one very conspicuous was that of
patriotism and national consciousness. Lamentation for the
national degradation and call for a new awakening
categorized the writings of such early writers of this
period as Lambodar Bora (1860-92), Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya
(1854-1936), and Bholanath Das (1858-1929). In this
renaissance of Assamese literature, poetry came to be
resurrected through the verses of Ramakanta Choudhury
(1846-89) and Bholanath Das. After the model of Michael
Madhusudan Dutt (1828-1873), both of them first used blank
verse. Balinarayan Bora (1852-1927), Baladev Mahanta
(1850-95), Ramakanta Choudhury and Bholanath Das did not
follow the Vaishnav trend of literature. They were good
versifiers, but could not, either by individual or by
collective effort, bring about a literary movement or a
poetical awakening. However, though they were not certainly
epoch-makers, and whatever their importance may be in the
literature of their time, their contribution was not
certainly small.

Though Assamese came to be reinstated in schools
and offices from 1873 after a long struggle, Bengali had
still a strong hold everywhere in the province. With the enrichment of Assamese literature as the goal before them, the Assamese students at Calcutta formed, in 1888, a committee which they called Asamiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha (Assamese Language Development Society); and the following year in 1889 started their journal, Jonaki, which soon proved to be an epoch-making magazine. It began to serve as the radiating centre of the ideals of the organization, the most enthusiastic members of which were Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), Chandrakumar Agarwala (1867-1937) and Hemchandra Goswami (1872-1928). Other prominent contributors to Jonaki were Padmanath Gohain Barua (1871-1946), Satyanath Bora (1860-1925), and Kanaklal Barua (1872-1940). Chandrakumar Agarwala was the first editor of Jonaki and he was succeeded by Hemchandra Goswami and Lakshminath Bezbaroa respectively. Another associate of these pioneers whose efforts soon established a new age in Assamese literature, the Jonaki Age or the Romantic Age, was Rajanikanta Bardoloi (1869-1939) who, through his novels with those of Scott and Bankim Chandra before him as his models, brought maturity to the newly established form of the Assamese novel.

Advent of Romanticism:

The literature that had developed through Orunodoi may be called the precursor of Romantic ideals in Assamese
literature. The literature that Assam had known until this time, except for the historical writings and some extra-literary treatises, was all religious. It was in the pages of Orunodoi that Assamese literature first gained secular ideas, as it has been already noticed. It was still in the early stage of its modernization. The modern period of Assamese literature began, as Dr. Banikanta Kakati has observed, with the publication of the Bible in Assamese prose translation by the American Baptist Missionaries in 1891. Though Orunodoi basically advocated a religious faith and aimed at its expansion, it began to publish writings on both religious and secular subjects, the secular subjects being aimed at modernizing the Assamese society.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the pioneer of the essay form of literature in Assamese. This type of literature is a gift of English education. His 'Englandar Bibaran' (Description of England) published in Orunodoi in April 1847 was the first literary piece of its kind in Assamese. Patriotism was the basic note of 'Englandar Bibaran'; yet the writer's imagination did not confine itself to the bounds of Assam and the traditional society of his time. Transcending all barriers, it proved itself one of the earliest attempts at searching for new horizons of intellectual and imaginative endeavour. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan can be said to be the first figure of the Renaissance in Assam and also the first among the nineteenth century
humanists in the province. Gunabhiram Barua and Hemcandra Barua carried the new spirit forward.

Orunodoi, all through its time, fought against social evils like addiction to opium and wine. It also campaigned against other corrupt practices rampant in the society of the time. The very first issue of Orunodoi published 'Kanir Bibaran' (Description of Opium), a poem on the evils of opium by an anonymous poet. The June issue of the same year (1847) published another poem on the same subject. Hemchandra Barua's Bahire Rang Chang Bhifare Kowabhaturi (All That Glitters Is Not Gold) and Kaniyar Kiran (Prayer-Songs of Opium Eaters, 1861) are two social satires published in Orunodoi. The former is a narrative in the form of fiction with a strong satirical bent, and the latter, with the same pungency of satire, is the second Assamese play.

Orunodoi was called "A monthly paper devoted to Religion, Science and General Intelligence". Though sectarian propaganda was the aim of Orunodoi, the Missionaries did not rear any aggressive outlook and their "Intelligence" was not contaminated with religion. It brought to the readers various news of the different countries of the world. It also provided geographical information with fine verse descriptions. Thus through an

untiring effort, Orunodoi of the Western Christian Missionaries heralded a new and liberal life to the Assamese people. It had exerted immense influence on Assamese language, literature, and social consciousness.

Orunodoi writers chose the medium of prose to convey their message— which was a modern tendency. Only translations of the psalms were in the form of verse with a few exceptions. Yet modern poetry may also be said to have germinated in the pages of Orunodoi. Mir Majafar Hussain's translation of Gray's Elegy was published in the February issue of 1854 which was close to modern Assamese poetry in its treatment of a secular theme:

Sunirmal ratna bahu dekhite sundar
Andhar Samudra maje gupta kalebar;
Phutanta anek phul nedekho nayane,
Sugandha binasta kare banar pabane.

But it is interesting to note that despite its secular theme, it still echoed the Vaishnav diction and metre of verse.

Assamese poetry had to achieve its grandeur yet. This was accomplished by the poets of the Jonaki group and their contemporaries. No less was done through individual efforts. The zeal of the Jonaki writers brought about a renaissance of the literary consciousness by stimulating the already awakened creative passion. In fact, the conscious
effort of Jonaki inspired a unique literary movement through which Assamese literature directed its course and also acquired its form. In the context of the role of Jonaki in the development of modern Assamese literature, one is reminded of the publication of Lyrical Ballads in England by Wordsworth and Coleridge and its immediate and far-reaching consequences. From 1889, Jonaki began to serve as a bridge linking Western thought to the Assamese.

Assamese literature, like all other modern Indian regional literature, has drawn much of its sap from Western literature, and particularly from English. The revived Assamese literature accepted as its ideals the forms and subjects of English literature — mainly Romantic. The conflicts of the earlier trends began to dissolve. The seed of Romanticism that was sown through Orunodoi now reached its germination under the auspices of the Jonaki group. Novels like Padmanath Gohain Barua's Bhanumati (1891) and Lahari (1892) and Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Padmum Kunwari (1890) are products of this period. With these three novels the real trend of modern Assamese novel may be said to have established. Though the themes of these novels are based on episodes of the Ahom period, the former two may better be regarded as social novels. Bezbaroa's novel seems closer to history in comparison to the other two. Another creation of

this period is Bhramaranga (1888), a translation of Shakespeare’s Comedy of Errors, rendered jointly by Ramakanta Kakati, Ghanashyam Barua, Gunjanan Barua and Ratnadhar Barua. It replaced the old Vaishnav tradition of the One-Act drama with the introduction of the new technical devices of dividing a drama into multiple acts and scenes. Bezbaroa’s farcical play Lifikai (A Boy-attendant) came to be serialized from the very first issue of Jonaki (1889) followed by his Kripabar Barbaruar Kakatar Topola (Papers of Kripabar Barbarua, 1904), a social satire. Bezbaroa’s ‘Kanya’ (A river by this name), the first Assamese short story, was also published in Jonaki in the second year of its publication. Human elements in the short stories soon led to the elimination of the fantasy elements of the folk-tales.

Jonaki showed marvel in the sphere of poetry. Chandrakumar Agarwala’s ‘Bankunwari’ (The Wood-nymph), published in the first issue, imparted to the readers a sense of joy mixed with the feeling of wonder. This poem, with its mysterious beauty of the supernatural world projected through nature, created a deep emotional sensation quite unfamiliar to the readers of Assamese poetry. ‘Bankunwari’ is the first conscious creation of Romantic poetry in our literature. The emergence of love poems, in its modern perspective, also appeared in the pages of Jonaki. The second issue brought to light Hemchandra Goswami’s ‘Kako aru Hiya Nibilaon’ (No More of My Heart to Anybody), a
unique poem, also the first of its kind.

Jonaki performed miracles by publishing within the first year of its publication such epoch-making poems like Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya's 'Paharani' (Oblivion) and Chandrakumar Agarwala's 'Niyar' (Dew-drops). 'Paharani' is a patriotic poem which is a lamentation for the past glory of Assam with a simultaneous feeling of optimism. 'Niyar' had heralded the poetry of sentiment in Assamese poetry. Hemchandra Goswami's 'Priyatamar Chithi' (A Letter from the Beloved), another love poem and the first sonnet in Assamese, was also published in Jonaki in the third year.

The Jonaki period saw a marked difference in the language from that of the Orunodoi era besides the change in the choice of subjects and themes, that demanded a change in form. Influence of Bengali literature of the time may also be assumed to be responsible for the rapid change of the language from that of the Orunodoi era.

Jonaki served Assamese literature for four years only. The ideal of Jonaki was kept alive through the successive efforts of Bijulee (1890-92), edited by Krishnaprasad Dowerah Padmanath Gohain Barua and Benudhar Rajkhowa successively, Usha (1907-16), edited by Padmanath Gohain Barua, Banhi (1909-33), edited by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Alochani (1910-17), edited by Prasanna Kumar Barua.

Though Romanticism in Assamese literature is an import from English literature, there is difference between the two in many respects. The Romantic revival of Europe and of England had completely different grounds from that in Assam. The exact political, social, and psychological grounds that were responsible for the emergence of the Romantic sensibility in Europe were absent in this case. In England, and also in Europe, an aversion to the eighteenth century rationality helped the invocation of the Romantic spirit. Besides this, there was the spirit of freedom and love for common man acquired from the French Revolution and inspired by Rousseau. English Romanticism was genuine though it had borrowed much of its ideas from Germany and France later on. England had reasons, even if she were not shaken by the havoc of the French Revolution, to foster the Romantic ideology. But this ideology had come to Assamese literature as a result of no such reaction.

Yet there can be no denial of the fact that something akin to English Romanticism was at work in
Assamese Romanticism, too. Anything borrowed could never have exerted such profound influence on Assamese literature if a genuine necessity had not been felt. It was; and the Orunodoi era felt the strain just as the transition period before the nineteenth century in England had felt. The political atmosphere changed. The spirit of democracy and a love for man per se began to dominate the literary trend in Assam; and this spirit, though borrowed, was welcome no less than if it were spontaneous and original.

The import of Romantic ideal into Assamese literature followed two channels, Bengali and English literature. During the years that formed the transition from Orunodoi to Jonaki, the impact of English literature was not direct. Bengali was the bridge between the English literature and the Assamese. The prose style, specific use of metre and rhythm in poetry and the model for novels were borrowed from Bengali, that in turn borrowed them from English. Literature of this stage experienced a vast change in form and content from the literature of the Orunodoi epoch. The influence of Bengali accelerated the change of the language that was used in Orunodoi.

It has already been said that most of the writers of the Jonaki era directly experienced what went on in Bengali literature of the time. Their early education also was through the medium of Bengali, though they had it in
Assam. They were well acquainted with the literary works of the great writers of Bengal like Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Hemchandra Banerjee, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Nabinchandra Sen, Biharilal Chakravarty, Rangalal Banerjee, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Bhudev Mukherjee and so on. Hemchandra Banerjee and Nabinchandra Sen in lyric, Michael Madhusudan Dutta in blank verse, Girishchandra and Dwijendralal in drama had reached a glorious height of reputation in Bengali literature of the time and exerted deep influence on the literature of Assam. Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Hemchandra Banerjee had expressed lamentation, in their works, for being under foreign rule. Same expressions reappeared in the poems of Anandachandra Agarwala. Lakshminath Bezbaroa's 'Bin Boragi' (The Minstrel with the Lyre) is a poem of national pride with a healthy sign. Influence of Michael Madhusudan Dutta's Meghnad Badh on Chandradhar Barua's short epic under the same title, is very evident. These fore-runners of Bengali literature had cast much deeper influence on Assamese poetry in comparison to Rabindranath Tagore in a later period.

Thus Bengali literature had served, for a time, as the medium of conveying English Romantic sensibility into Assamese literature. By the turn of the century, the Assamese intellectuals began to acquire more and more direct acquaintance with English literature and, by the time of the emergence of Jonaki, they had begun to derive ideas directly
from the English literary texts.

The fact that the ideal and source of inspiration before the poets of the Jonaki era were the English Romanticists and the prominent literary men of Bengal does not signify that they lacked originality in any sense. Their genuine creative faculty, the intensity and diversity of their experience and their unique style of presentation imparted a sense of self-sufficiency to Assamese poetry. The vindication of Assamese as a medium of very fine feelings and sentiments was achieved through the adoption of Romantic ideals. The later part of the nineteenth century experienced the thrill of creative passion and an enthusiastic craving for a new world owing to the expansion of the range of knowledge in different fields that the increased contact with the Western world had provided.

Thus Assam, moved by the wave of the nineteenth century Indian Renaissance and under changed political and social situations, had produced a literature considerably different from that of the past. A new creative impulse began to pervade the whole intellectual sphere. Getting rid of the religio-ethical restraint of the preceding literature, it became free in thought, form and style. This literature, greatly influenced by English Romanticism, flourished particularly in the form of lyric—lyric being the best medium of expressing personal feelings. Like any
other literature in its initial stage, it was basically poetical. Though not equally, the other branches of literature were also enriched with ideas of this kind. Chandrakumar Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Hemchandra Goswami, Raghunath Choudhary, Hiteswar Barbarua and other poets brought Assamese poetry to a higher order while Padmanath Gohain Barua and Rajanikanta Bardoloi achieved great success in the short story and the novel. In the field of the novel, Rajanikanta Bardoloi contributed to Assamese literature in the same way that Scott had done to English. Anandachandra Agarwala (1874-1940) and Chandradhar Barua (1874-1961) also contributed to poetry and drama. Patriotic poems, sonnets, historical novels, short stories, modern drama, criticism and humorous writings are the gifts of the Romantic period.

However, rather paradoxically, along with the endeavour to imbibe the Romantic ideal to its fullest in different branches of literature, some Assamese writers of this time evinced a simultaneous interest in the satirical and critical English writings of the eighteenth century like those of Swift and Addison. As a result Assamese writings of this period advanced much in the field of satire and criticism too in the Classical vein as well. Taking the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens's humorous character 'Pickwick' as the model, Bezbaroa sketched the character of 'Kripabar Barua' assigning to him the jokes, satires, wit
and humour of the Assamese society. In satire, Bezbaroa seemed almost to have the monopoly.

Interest in folk literature is a nationalistic interest which went with the Romantic revival in Europe. So was the case in India. In Assam also a class of literature under the influence of the Assamese folktales, came into being through the effort of Lakshminath Bezbaroa who had collected many Assamese folktales. The political aspect of the new sensibility of this time had a vital role in the revival of the national spirit. The consciousness of being under foreign rule urged them to assert their own identity, "... the people of a country roused by nationalism make their efforts to distinguish their manners and customs, religious and social institutions, and culture and civilization." Hence a hitherto unknown interest in folk-life and also in antiquity inspired a deep reverence for their so long neglected national heritage.

Within the span of about half a century (1889-1940), Assam experienced unprecedented diversity in almost all the intellectual fields with the expansion of new Western education, political upheaval of the new age, as well as the corresponding social changes. Life now demanded a new outlook, and accordingly literature too, came to serve as the vehicle of the new ideas and realities. As such, to

have an adequate knowledge of this literature, one must try to understand its background.

As has already been said, the English Romantic period had accepted poetry as its central mode of expression. In Assam also, poetry drew the utmost interest and proved itself to be the most suitable channel of expressing the delicate modes of feeling and emotion of the newly emerging educated class. Assamese Romantic poetry is as surged with feelings and emotions as its source English Romantic poetry had been. It became free from the rigidity and restraint of the Vaishnav religious verses and acquired the sweetness of expression peculiar to Romantic poetry.

Ramakanta Choudhury is the pioneer in introducing blank verse into Assamese poetry as against the prevalent Indian conventional forms. As in the case of many subsequent literary epics, the model for his Abhimanyu Badh (1875), the first of its kind in blank verse in Assamese, was Madhusudan Dutt's Meghnad Badh Kavya. Sita-haran and Ravan-badh are two mythological dramas of Ramakanta Choudhury.

The Assamese poets of this period evinced subtle nuances of feelings in their poetic expressions. All Romantic art is based on subjective experiences. A lyric is a poem "presenting a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling". Instead of

narrating or describing the events and characters as in epics or narrative poems, it emphasizes the expression of intense personal feelings. Hence the strong emotions of the individual found its most suitable outlet in the form of lyric. And thus lyric came to be treated as the most important branch of poetry by the Romanticists.

The first appearance of lyric in Assamese poetry can be traced back to Chinta-tarangini (Waves of Thought, 1884) and Kavita-mala (A Garland of Poems) of Bholanath Das, published in two parts, one in 1881 and the other in 1883. The fervent lyrics of these two collections of poems mark him as one of the distinguished poets of the dawn of Romanticism in Assamese. His 'Megh' (The Cloud) in Chinta-tarangini is a nature lyric after Wordsworth. 'Griha Pakhir Pratihar Pakhir Ukti' (The Bird of the Forest's Address to the Pet-bird) in the same collection reminds one of Goethe's ballad on the eagle and the dove. Bholanath Das's bird also suffers from Romantic discontent. Like all other Renaissance poets, this poet was also inspired by patriotism and national pride. 'Bharatar Prati Prashna' (Questions to Bharata) in Chinta-tarangini expresses his lamentation for the sad plight of his motherland along with the appreciation of her unique beauty. 'Asambasi' (The Inhabitants of Assam) in the same collection, is a poem of national consciousness with a call to the people of his own land to awake and work for their country's development. This
same collection, again, contains another beautiful lyric of pre-Jonaki period, 'Kiyano Najage Amar Man' (Why Do Our Minds Not Awaken?).

Though, like other poets of the time, Bholanath Das also was drawn to the treatment of nature in the new vein, nature in his poetry was not treated as that superb entity of Wordsworth which can mould and direct human thoughts. It remains, in his poetry, the useful and successful, yet passive background of the operation of the mental activities. His 'Swarga Darshan' (Sight of Heaven) in Chinta-tarangini shows that he was familiar with both the manifestations of nature—serene and destructive. But with neither of these modes does he seem to feel any spiritual affinity. He was highly imaginative, but his imagination lacked the adequate assistance of equally heightened emotion. To him belongs the credit of writing the second Assamese epic in blank verse, Sita-haran Kavya (1888), based on the Ramayan story. In this epic Michael Madhusudan Dutt's influence is conspicuous. Yet: a comparative study of Madhusudan Dutt's Meghnad Badh Kavya and Bholanath Das's Sita-haran Kavya shows that the latter was nothing less than a product of a talented poetic personality. Though "his diction was an uneven mixture of Sanskrit words and compounds, together with mediaeval inflexions of Assamese words, and hence it lacked chastity and felicity", his

8. Birinchi Kumar Barua : History of Assamese Literature (1964), Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi,1978, pp.112-113
place as one of the precursors of Romantic ideals in Assamese cannot be disputed.

Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya is another transitional poet who had started his literary career in the pages of orunodoi and continued his contribution to Assamese literature for a period comprising about sixty years. Considering the long span of his literary career, Hem Barua has remarked, "Bhattacharjya is of the transition, and yet outside it. Judging from his extensive literary life, it is difficult to pin him down to a particular period of literary development." 9

Transition periods can seldom help acquiring compound character. Transition poetry in Assam also betrayed the symptoms of this nature. With the suavity of his poems like in 'Jatiya Gaurav' (National Glory) and the simple and direct manner of 'Paharani' (Oblivion), he introduced into Assamese poetry the subtlety of sensibility and balance characteristic of Romantic poetry; and thus he can distinctively be marked as the "poetic herald" of Romanticism in Assamese poetry. He was, in fact, the chord of harmony between Orunodoi and Jonaki. Chintanal (Burning Thoughts, 1890) and Chintaa-taranga (Waves of Thought, 1933) are his two anthologies of poems.

Patriotism was the life-blood of whatever Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya wrote. The consciousness of the slavery of the people in his motherland and its long continuance resulting in spiritual degeneration of his countrymen was beyond his tolerance and he was all protest in his poems trying to better the condition of his people. The most effectively juxtaposed pictures of his lamentation for the lack of freedom and his craving for removing the state of things are evident in the poems like 'Udagani' (A Word of Cheer), 'Purnimar Ratilo Chai' (On Looking at the Full-Moon Night), 'Eino Asam Nahayne Smasan' (Is Not this Assam a Graveyard?)' and 'Jatiya Gaurav', the first four poems in Chintanal. The note of optimism is more direct and vital in 'Paharani' in the same collection. His imaginative faculty reached its culmination in the poem 'Himalayar Prati Sambodhan' (An Address to the Himalayas) in Chinta-taranga in which he has presented, in the form of a dialogue, a panoramic picture of India's glorious past along with the gloomy present.

In Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya was united the strong inspirations of a patriot, a philosopher, and a social reformer. The recollection of the glorious heritage of India inspired him; and he, most emphatically, longed for its revival. From Chintanal to Chinta-taranga, his poetry shows the progress of a soul from nationalism through liberal patriotism to universalism. While trying to instigate his
forgetful countrymen to rise to their past glory, he also urged them to cope themselves with the best of the Western culture.

Though there was no dearth of strong patriotism in medieval Assamese poetry, nationalism, in the modern sense, is a new thing that had emerged with the political consciousness of the nineteenth century. In spite of the altruistic protestations of Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya it is his poetry that had first acquired the pervasiveness and intensity of national consciousness in Assamese. Also, notwithstanding all his optimistic dream as in the poem 'Paharani':

Janmiba sidina shatek Mazzini
Tucsha pari thaka shilar para!
Shata Garibaldi janam labhiba
Kariba pohar Bharat dhara.

(The day will come when hundreds of great souls like Mazzini and Garibaldi will be born and will enlighten the now darkened India)

the overall impression that his reminiscence of the past glory of his country gives is one of sadness rather than of joy\textsuperscript{10}, which is also evident in his same and mostly read poem:

Paharani hera! tomar ananta
Garbhat thoa ni ei Bharatak,
Andhar sindhur at al tal at,
Peloani jen sabe paharok.
'Paharani'

(Oh, Oblivion, let India be immersed in the unfathomable depth of the dark ocean and be thrown into your endless abyss so that all can forget her with all her shameful degradation).

Be that as it may, he had brought about a remarkable change in the poetic diction of his time.

Besides the lyric form, the Assamese poets adopted the narrative ballad and satirical verse forms too as the medium of expression. Just as in English Romantic literature, folk-tales and folk-songs awakened a keen interest and came to be adopted with a new appeal. Hence the popularity of artificial ballads in the Jonaki age. After the love poems of the English Romantic poets, our poets also composed unique love lyrics with variegated feelings and sentiments.

Love of nature is one of the salient features of English Romanticism which came as an influence of Rousseau as it has been already stated. As in Wordsworthian poetry, in Assamese poetry also, nature gradually came to be regarded as the most influential entity. The new awakening had sharpened the faculty of the poets for relishing the joy
derived from the beauty of external nature. The serenity of nature against the tumult of the new world appealed to them. They began to feel the throbbing animation behind the seemingly inanimate objects of nature and thus personification of them abounds in their poems. They also began to cherish the idea of comparing these beautiful objects of nature with their human beloved in the true Romantic spirit. Nature came to be drawn as their constant companion and unfailing guide in their effort to realize the mystic experience of achieving the Infinite through the Finite.

Treatment of nature in Assamese literature is not, of course, a new thing. Shankardev also described the beauty of nature with great skill. But in his case, it was to provide the setting for the divine sport (Lila) of the Divine Spirit; and in doing so, spirituality was generally assigned to nature. The same is true of Indian literature as a whole. Ancient writers like Kalidas were adept in the description of nature; but here also, nature never came out as the all-pervading healing entity as viewed by the English Romantic poets. In the new form of poems, nature began to be treated as the source of poetic rapture inspired by a deep attachment between nature and the poet. Romantic outlook lent an artistic vision to the commonplace. The most insignificant objects and incidents so far neglected by
ancient literature began to attract the poets' attention and they began to derive heavenly inspiration from them.

Growth of urban civilization, Industrial Revolution, inequity of economical conditions and Classicism forced the English poets into the bosom of nature as it happened in Rousseau's *Emile*. But Romanticism in Assam or in India was not a social phenomenon as in Europe. It remained more or less a literary phenomenon and hence these conditions were not present in this case. Yet being born and brought up in the midst of beautiful nature, the Assamese poets of the early twentieth century felt a familiar tone in the nature-worship of the English poets. They had just to respond to the appeal of the scenic grandeur of their own land.

Another characteristic of this period was the interest in country life and primitive life with an unprecedented glorification of the individual. This too derived its inspiration from Rousseau. The poets felt that the urban civilization only reflected a gloomy feature for life; and to avoid the same, they looked forward to the simple and natural ways of living. Yet, while English Romanticism reacted against urbanization, most of the poets taking shelter in the quiet of the Lake District, Assamese Romanticism flourished in the midst of the sophisticated atmosphere of the city life in Calcutta, away from the
country life of Assam.

Treatment of love occupied a considerable part in the lyrics of the Romantic literature in Assamese. In most of the love poems, love was treated as something divine and eternal against the transitoriness of the worldly life. It often transcended the sense appeal. Love of two young hearts came to be regarded as only a projection of the Omnipotent Love. The love poems of this time are saturated with descriptions of the beauty of imaginary lady loves, seeing their beauty reflected in the objects of nature. The poets also glorified the moments of separation. As in Shelley's 'To a Skylark', it was a constant longing and not the fulfilment of desire that they craved for. From Bezbaroa's 'Priyatama' (The Beloved) and 'Priyatamar Saundarya' (The Beauty of the Beloved) to 'Papari' (The Petal) of Ganesh Gogoi, the same reverberation can be felt. Love in Ambikagiri Roychoudhury and Nalinibala Devi's poems have, however, been raised from the mundane to a spiritual level thus giving rise to mysticism. Love in its transcendental form can be traced in a few other poet's creations also, but it is not so dominant.

Love of man as he is, is a characteristic feature of Western Romanticism which had found expression in the Assamese poems too. Chandrakumar Agarwala's 'Manav-Bandana' (Glorification of Man) reminds one of the common
leech-gatherer dignified by Wordsworth. Humanism, of course, is not a new thing in Indian Culture. In Assamese Vaishnava literature too, there were many examples of glorification of man as well as other lowly creatures. Shankardev believed in the presence of the same Supreme Being in the souls of even a dog, a fox, and a donkey:

Kukkur shrigal gardabharo atma Ram
Janiya sabake pari kariba pranam.11

(Ram, one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu, dwells in the soul of even a dog, a fox, and a donkey. Knowing this, prostrate yourself in reverence before all).

However, supplication was to be directed towards the Supreme Being in the earthly self as it was. It was religious humanism that the Vaishnava poets believed in. "The metaphysical character of the literature left little room for portrayal of human emotions in the manner in which they were represented in the Sanskrit literature or the literature of the modern times."12 The first sign of secular humanism could be traced, as has already been said, in Orunodoi. It was during the Romantic awakening only that man came to be looked upon as an end in himself with all his greatness as well as his weakness. Man came out with supreme

12. Trailokyanath Goswami: 'Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Assamese Literature in the fourth decade of the twentieth century' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam, ed. Maheswar Neog, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1972, p. 93.
ability. Common people and country life became objects of respect.

Though the Romantic literature in Assam pushed the then existing literary and linguistic form back to obsolescence, paradoxically enough, the new literature began to search the past with that "backward glance" characteristic of Western Romanticism. Its glorification of the past made way for the nationalistic as well as patriotic feelings awakened among the poets. The rhythmical gravity of Chandrakumar Agarwala sounded forth the love of democracy, though not in the same spirit in which Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron expressed their political consciousness. This spirit can be traced in his 'Bin-Baragi' (The Minstrel with the Lyre) and the poems of Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya's Chintanal. The feeling of humiliation for slavery and call for national unity became the themes of Bezbaroa's poems. These feelings were supported and strengthened by the Independence Movement and thus came about the mighty wave of Romantic poetry by the third and fourth decades (1920-40) of the present century. Binandachandra Barua, Dimeswar Neog, Atulchandra Hazarika and Ambikagiri Roychoudhury represented this upheaval.

As has already been noticed, excessive imagination characterizes Romantic poetry. The Romantic poets of Assam were also gifted with heightened imagination. Imagination
being the combination of personal perception and memory images, they experienced objective reality in it. They believed it to be the transformative reflection of reality and thus attached equal importance to factual truth. Even the supernatural and the transcendental found a congenial atmosphere here. Thus lyric, the best medium of conveying highly imaginative contents, came as the fine gift of this new wave. With it came the literary ballad and narrative ballad. The linguistic style became familiar and its appeal direct and elaborate. Feelings charged with imagination needed freedom of expression. Hence the Romantic poets found Western blank verse to be the most suitable medium of their feelings.

The acceptance of the sensual world is a trend borrowed from the West. Apparently, it was no less evident in the writings of Kalidas and some other ancient writers. The difference lies in the way of acceptance. The profanity, common in European literature, was unknown to ancient and medieval Indian literature. Behind every sensual beauty, the Indian writers saw the hand of the Infinite and Eternal Power. Sensual experiences or images were used as symbols ultimately to reach the transcendental and the supernatural. Indian tradition was never secular.

While the source of inspiration for the Assamese Romantic poets was Western poetry, an Indian consciousness
throbbed all through the poetry of this period. In spite of its break with the preceding literature, it could not break off the Indian spiritual tradition. The glorious past, with its superb tradition, appeared bright before their imagination. Indian transcendentalism and spiritualism sounded clear in many poets. In Raghunath Choudhary's devotion to nature, one feels the influence of Kalidas and other ancient Indian poets more than that of Wordsworth. In this sense, Assamese Romantic poetry also may be called a vehicle of self-discovery.

Despite many differences, Western Romantic literature and Assamese Romantic literature are similar in the fact that resort to Romantic ideals for both of them was not a choice but a necessity. Both of these literatures had to face time which forced them to ideas and conceptions that could shelter them.

From Anandaram Dhekial Phukan to Lakshminath Bezbaroa, this period may be called the age of gestation of Romanticism while the period between Jonaki and Awahan is the period of flowering of Romanticism. In spite of its break with the past, it was enthusiastically welcomed by all in Assam.

The same trend continued up to the fourth decade of the present century experiencing expansion now and then but
little change. All through this time, Bezbaroa's great personality reigned supreme and hence the period of 1889-1940 may be called not only the Age of Romanticism but also the Age of Bezbaroa. His death in 1938 was a signal of change for Assamese literature.