Chapter III

BACKGROUND OF ASSAMESE SOCIETY AND CULTURE

There is a famous English proverb which says that 'Rome was not built in a day'. Similarly the culture of a particular society can never evolve in a single day. It takes hundreds and hundreds of years for any culture to establish itself. However it is very difficult to pin-point the exact date as to when a particular culture evolved. In English the word 'culture' has been derived from the Latin word 'Cultura'(root word being 'cult'). Understanding culture is trying to understand people. When delving into the historical evolution of Assamese culture it is essential to remember that the rich culture of Assam is composed of different stages and it is also a mixture of many diverse elements.

Culture is about people. In the words of Malinowski, "culture is a total system of life and includes all the mental, social and physical means which make life run its course". In order to gain knowledge of Assamese culture it is imperative to first delve into the history of how Assam became home to a large population of various ethnic groups. Assam has developed a composite culture resulting out of the assimilation and amalgamation of the cultures of the diverse ethnic groups inhabiting the state.

During the pre-historic age, the earlier occupants of the hills of Assam were the Negritos. The next racial elements to migrate to Assam were the Australoids. According to certain historians it was as early as 3000 BC that different racial elements first migrated to Assam. In the age of the Ramayana
and the Mahabharata Assam was known as Kamrupa with Pragjyotispur as its capital. It is said in the Mahabharata that Bhagadatt, the then king of Pragjyotispur took active part in the battle of Kurushetra. The Indian epic Mahabharata was believed to have been written before the coming of Christ. In fact it was several thousands of years before the reign of the famous king Bhagadatt that different racial group first entered Assam. According to local tradition the earliest rulers of Assam belonged to the Danava Dynasty, the first of the kings being King Mihiranga Danava. Some eminent rulers of the land before the advent of the Ahoms were King Narakasura, King Bhagadatta, King Bhaskaravarman etc.

One of the chief reasons for the migration of different racial elements into Assam from different parts of the world was perhaps trade and commerce. Thousands of years prior to the coming of Christ there existed an international path through Assam. This state which is often referred to as the Sangri-la of North-Eastern India is replete with scenic beauty. From time immemorial Assam consisted of fertile plains suitable for harvesting and gifted by nature with vast flora and fauna, hills, plains and evergreen forests. Assam was famous for 'gold' and 'lac' which was available in abundance. It was because of these two valuable materials that Assam became the hub of commercial activity.

Assam is unique because it happens to be the melting pot of different ethnic, religious and linguistic communities. The result can be seen in the creation of a great Assamese culture. A peep into the history of Assam reveals
that this state has seen the intermixing of three racial elements, the Australoids, the Mongoloids and the Caucasoids. However there is a perfect blending of culture and heritage of the various ethnic groups in spite of their having disparate socio-cultural heritages and speaking different languages. Thus Assam has been blessed with a truly composite culture.

Assam lies at the center of land route from eastern Kamboj to western Kashgar and from northern China to southern Ceylon. In fact Assam especially the Brahmaputra valley served as a kind of linking road between India and Southeast Asia. Different groups entered Assam from different directions. From the western direction came the Caucasian people and the Mongoloid people from the North and the East. Waves of migration brought the Austro-Asiatics, Mongoloids, Negritos, Dravidians, Alpines, Indo-Mongoloids, Tibeto-Burmese and Aryans into Assam. The unique fusion of all these groups gave rise to a new composite culture which is now known as Assamese.

Geographically Assam can be divided into three areas, the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley and the hilly area formed by Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar hill. The Brahmaputra Valley again can be divided into three zones, namely, Upper, Middle and Lower.3

The earliest inhabitants of Assam were probably of Austric stock. They were termed as "proto-Australoid". They were so called because it is believed that they migrated from the Australian and some other islands of the Pacific ocean to the Asiatic mainland. The Khasis and the Jaintias happen to
be the descendants of the proto-Australoids of Ancient Assam. The proto-Australoids were also referred to as pre-Dravidians and Veddids.

The Mongoloids who migrated to Assam is said to have originally come from eastern Eurasia from where they migrated to different parts of Asia. The Mongoloid population presently classified as "Scheduled Tribes" by the Constitution of India include the Bodios, Kacharis, Deoris, Rabhas, Sonowal Kacharis, Tiwas, Mising, Karbis, Dimasas, Mechis, Garos etc. One very significant wave of Mongoloid migration brought the Ahoms to Assam. The Ahoms came from Upper Burma by crossing the Patkai ranges in the early part of the 13th century. They are a member of the Thai or Shan group. Later the Ahoms were followed by some other Shan groups like Khamti, Tai Phake, Aiton, Turung, Khamyang etc.

The Mongoloids of India are referred to as Indo-Mongoloids. The Indo-Mongoloids of Assam speak different languages of Sino-Indian language group. The Sino-Indian language group has two main branches - The Tibeto-Burman and Siamese-Chinese. The Tibeto-Burman branch is further subdivided into Assam-Burma and North Assam divisions. The Bodos, Rabhas, Tiwas, Mechis, Dimasas etc are said to belong to the Assam-Burma division and the Misingis are said to belong to the North-Assam group. Linguistically, the Ahoms, Tai Phakes, Khamyangs, etc belong to the Thais, which happens to be a sub-division of the Siamese-Chinese branch.

The original homeland of the Tibeto-Burman group happened to be in
the upper courses of the Yangtse Kiang and the Huang Ho in north-west China. Later they migrated to the region of north-east Myanmar. Therein they broke up into two groups. One group moved as far south as south-east Asia. Some however traversed west and settled into north-east India. The second group moved west along the Himalayan foothills and arrived in Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal. From there some moved southward and entered Assam via the north-eastern passes. They settled down in different regions of Assam and are believed to be the ancestors of the tribes of Assam like the Bodos, Kacharis, Rabhas, Tiwas, Dimasas etc.

The Bodo or Kachari tribe of Assam is scattered throughout the state. These people were earlier known as Bodo Kachari, but now they are called only Bodo. R.M.Nath has stated that this country was known as Bod(homeland). Initially the inhabitants of this country were known as Boddo-Ficha or Boddo-cha(Ficha-cha-children) and later known as the Boddo or Bodo. The Bodos, are a major constituent of the Assamese population and at present they are mainly concentrated in the Kokrajhar district, the North belt of the undivided district of Kamrup, and Darrang. The Bodos are basically agrarian. They are also experts in bamboo and cane craft.

The Dimasa Kacharis are mainly concentrated in the North Cachar Hill district. They speak 'Dimasa-Kachari', a language that uses Bengali script. The Sonowal Kacharis inhabit Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Sibsagar and Jorhat districts. It is believed that they were entrusted the task of collecting
gold particles by sifting the sands of the Subansiri by the Ahom rulers. "It is said they used to make gold (son) ornaments etc., during the reign of the Ahom kings and were known as Sonowal."\(^5\)

The Tiwas are actually Mongoloid Asiatics. Linguistically and socially they belong to the Bodo group. The Tiwas are also known as Lalungs and chiefly inhabit the districts of Nagaon and Morigaon. Tiwas are also to be found in some areas of Karbi Anglong district, the south-east part of Kamrup and the eastern part of North Lakhimpur. There is also a section known as Hill Tiwas or Hill Lalungs.

The Deoris according to Sipra Sen are "one of the four divisions of the Chutiyas namely Hindu Chutiya, Ahom Chutiya, Borahi and Deori."\(^6\) Originally the Deoris were to be found on the banks of the Subansiri river of Arunachal Pradesh. At present this small ethnic group is to be found in the districts of Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, Sivasagar and Jorhat. The Deoris are subdivided into Dibangia, Borgonya and Tengapani. The Deoris are Mongoloid people and are known to be brave, tradition loving and cultured people with deep agricultural roots. Generally they live in joint families and believe in peace and harmony.

The Karbis are the largest ST (Hills) community of Assam. The Karbis originally belonged to Western China and entered Assam from Central Asia through migration. The non-Karbis call them Mikirs but in their own dialect they call themselves Arleng (the Man). Linguistically the Karbis belong to the
Tibeto-Burman group and racially to the Mongoloid group. They chiefly inhabit
the district of Karbi Anglong (formerly called the Mikir Hills district). Some
of them also occupy the adjoining areas in the North Cachar Hills. They live in
small villages that have one village head and are divided into three subdivisions
of Ronghong, Chindong and Amri.

The Mech are believed to be a branch of the Kachari family. They are
mainly concentrated in the Mechpara area of south Salmara in the Dhuburi
district, the Khowang area of Dibrugarh district and the Parakhowa area of
the Karbi Anglong district. With a rapidly changing culture they prefer
introducing themselves as Kachari. In fact the Mech of Dibrugarh district
have switched over to Assamese as their mother tongue.

The Rabhas are a plains tribe. They are scattered in the undivided
districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. B.M. Das states that the Rabhas
have several sub-divisions, the main three being the Pati, Rangdani and the
Maitori. The Pati Rabhas speak the Kamrupi dialect of Assamese whereas
the Rangdani speak a language known as Rangdani Rabha.

The Misings were earlier known as Miris and their settlements are
mainly concentrated in the districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and Jorhat. In
their language Mi is man, shing is white/good. So Mishing stands for good
man. It is believed that in the earlier days they inhabited Arunachal Pradesh
and also had blood relations with the Padam-Minyong. The vast majority of
the Misings have preserved their language but a small section has discarded
the use of their own language and now speaks a dialect of Assamese.
When speaking of Assam it is imperative to mention about the Ahoms. The Ahoms are said to have descended from a group of the 'Mau' tribe of Shans who are known as the Myanmarese in the Upper Irrawady. It was around 1228 AD that they crossed the Patkai range and entered the Brahmaputra valley early in the thirteenth century with a religion, culture and political system of their own. "They found the valley fertile and beautiful and called it Mong-Dun-Shun-Kham (now called Upper Assam) which means a country full of golden gardens, that is, full of golden paddy fields." They made the valley their home-land and gave it an administrative system which lasted for about six hundred years from 1228 AD to 1819 AD till the British conquest of Assam. King Sukapha was the first ruler of the Ahoms and it was under his able leadership that they gradually extended their territories down the riverbanks.

After Sukapha's demise many Ahom kings ruled over Assam, but among them, Suhungmung's reign is counted as one of the most remarkable in their six hundred years of glorious rule. In the year 1671, a fierce battle took place between the Ahoms and the Mughals, known as the 'Battle of Saraighat' led by the vibrant Lachit Borphukan in which the Mughals faced a humiliating defeat. It was the Britishers who finally pulled a curtain over their glorious rule.

The Ahoms have their own language, religion, culture, customs and traditions which give them their own separate identity. The Ahom rulers were
tolerant of all religions-Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and tribal cults. During the period of the Ahoms there was no religious persecution or any religious riots between the different communities of the time. Originally the Ahoms spoke Tibeto-Burman languages but gradually they abandoned their language and adopted Assamese as their own language.

CULTURE OF ASSAM

It has been seen that Assam has biologically composite people and from this has stemmed a composite culture. Three distinctive cultural traits can be observed amongst the people of Assam. They are the Vedic or Hindu culture, the Tibeto-Burman or Tribal culture and the Tai or Ahom culture.

The cultural backdrop of the Assamese people dates back to almost 2000 years when the first cultural assimilation took place with Austrio-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman as the major components. Assam has a large number of tribes and each tribe is unique in its tradition, culture, dress and way of life. Most tribes have their own languages though Assamese is the principal language of the state. Thus the culture of Assam is traditionally a hybrid one. The people of the state of Assam are an intermixture of various racial stocks such as Mongoloid, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan. The Assamese culture is a rich and exotic tapestry of all these races evolved through a long assimilative process.

In Assam, a number of festivals are celebrated by the different races and groups of people present in the state. The rich cultural heritage of Assam
has emerged out of the assimilation of various customs, beliefs, traditions, rituals and customs. Bihu, the major festival of Assam is celebrated thrice a year as Bhogali Bihu, Rangali/Bohag Bihu and Kangali Bihu. Bohag Bihu is observed by the ethnic tribes in their own traditional style. Bihu is celebrated as Baisagu by the Bodos, Baikhu or Khokchi by the Rabhas, Bisu by the Tiwas and Bohagiyo Bihu by the Deoris.

Baisagu is the most colourful festival celebrated by the Bodo Kacharis. It is celebrated as a spring festival and the dance form associated with this festival is the Baisagu dance in which any individual can participate irrespective of age or sex. Similarly the Bohagiyo Bihu of the Deoris is also a spring festival and accompanied by the colourful Deodhani dance.

A host of other festivals like Me-Dam-Me-Phi, Ali-Aye-Ligang, Kherai, Rongker, Hachang, Langkhun are also observed by the ethnic tribes of Assam. The festivals are remarkable for their association with nature and encouraging peace and harmony amongst the different communities.

Ali-Aye-Ligang is an agro-based spring festival of the Mising tribe. The first Wednesday, of the month Gunmur Polo (Feb-Mar) marks the beginning of this festival which lasts for around five days. The prime attraction of this festival is the Gumrag dance in which young boys and girls dance with great passion. Rongker is celebrated as a spring festival at the beginning of the New Year by the Karbis. The Langkhun is celebrated by the Tiwas it is actually a form of worshipping bamboo. Me-Dam-Me-Phi which is celebrated
by the Tai-Ahom community is actually a death rite. In this the Ahom community worships their ancestors and it is held annually on the 31st of January every year.

The numerous festivals celebrated by the different ethno-cultural groups are characterized by a spirit of accommodation and togetherness. These festivals are colourful, passionate, mesmerizing and reflect the true spirit and tradition of the people of Assam.

From ancient times Assam had a predominantly rural base and culture. Even in the days of Bhaskarvarma and other famous rulers there were very few towns in Assam. Almost ninety percent of land area was covered by villages. Moreover eighty percent of the population was dependant on farming and agriculture. Therefore it would not be incorrect to say that Assamese culture had its base in agriculture.

In other places of India the Austrio-Asiatic people had influenced the Dravids. But in Assam the Austrio-Asiatic people came under the influence of the Tibeto-Burmese, the Alpine and the Aryans. Assam, however remained predominantly a land of Tibeto-Burmese. All these groups mainly settled next to the river banks. Slowly a culture grew amongst the Assamese people which was greatly influenced by the culture of the Tibeto-Burmese and the Bodos. Before the coming of the matriarchal Tibeto-Burmese society the Deodhanis were the official priests. With the spread of the religion of the Aryans the Deodhanis had to step out from the premises of the temple. Eri and Muga-Pat cultivation was their primary profession.
Around 1000 BC the Aryans came to Assam. They were mainly agriculturists. They brought with them the process of weaving using cotton thread and it may be said that prior to the 1st and 2nd century BC a mixed culture was starting to take shape.

The historical or ancient age of Assam came into being from around the 1st and 2nd century BC. In this age the influence of the Tibeto-Burmese gained momentum. The Tibeto-Burmese had a very rich culture. Unable to adjust to the superior Tibeto-Burmese culture the Austrio-Asiatic people shifted to the hilly regions.

Bhaskaravarman's Nidhanpur copper slate and the copper slates of later rulers proved that they initiated the practice of primarily animal and at times even human sacrifice. The 'Tameshwari Mandir' of the Tibeto-Burmese and the 'Kamakhya Mandir' of the Austrio-Asiatic then full-fledgedly converted into Hindu place of worship. Apart from religion they also laid stress on different forms of art. They were also great patrons of literary works, which included hymns and 'Saijya-Geet', Bodo Chanti Das's 'Sri Krishna Kirtan' Ramai Pandit's ' Hunya-Puran' etc belonged to this particular age.

Another characteristic of this age was that in the temples different musical instruments came to be used and the song and dance tradition came into being. In this age a rich cultural base was first established in Assam.

In the 11th and 12th centuries AD due to the decline of the power of
the main ruling parties, smaller groups became powerful and established their own individual states. The central characteristic of this age was that books like 'Prahlad-Charit', 'Ramayana', and 'Mahabharata' were translated into Assamese from various languages. Valmiki’s 'Ramayana' was translated by Madhab Kandali, Hem Saraswati's 'Prahlad-Charit' and Rudra Kandali's 'Satyaki Pravesh' were other important translations of this age.

Another important characteristic of this age is the migration of the Mongoloids into Assam. They ruled Assam for six hundred years and left an indelible mark in the history of Assam. Assamese people are basically liberal and one outstanding example of this is the 'assamisation' of the Ahoms. The Shan prince Sukapha who was the founder of the Ahom kingdom established a strong foothold in Assam in the period between 1215 AD and 1228 AD. The Ahom rulers intermixed and intermarried and created a new blood which could be termed as Assamese. From the 13th century onwards Assam was besieged by several attacks by the Mughals. This brought in the influence of Islamic culture into Assam.

About a quarter of the Assamese population is Muslim. The Muslim population of Assam is broadly divided into three groups, the Syad, Garia (Sheikh) and Maria. According to B.M.Das the Muslims first came into Assam in the early part of the thirteenth century when Muhammed bin Bakhtiyar Khilji, a muslim general of Qutubuddin led a Turkish army to this region. Later in the seventeenth century a Muslim saint Hazarat Shah Milan but popularly
known as Azan Fakir came to Assam. He was a Syad and promoted a stabilized Islam in Assam. The Syads claim to occupy the highest social status followed by the Sheikhs and then by the Marias.

Azan Fakir entered Assam around 1635-36 during the reign of the Ahom king Pratap Singha. He earned the name Azan Fakir because he used to give the call for Namaz (prayers). At that time Vaishnavism had become popular due to the efforts of Mahapurusha Sankardeva. Azan Fakir realized that Vaishnavism too believed in oneness of God and this in turn led him to write religious songs which became famous as Jikirs. Through his Jikirs Azan fakir made a plea to all peace-loving people to maintain brotherhood and a sense of equality, leaving aside pride and prejudice. The Azan Peer Dargah stands a silent witness to the fact that religion can never be a hindrance to the cultural heritage of Assam. A special feature of the Assamese society is that the Assamese Hindus and the Assamese Muslims have maintained a cordial relationship between them throughout the ages.

The base of Assamese culture lies in Hindu religion and the Vedic civilization. A majority of the Assamese is the Vaishnavas (A sect of Hinduism). The Vaishnavas do not believe in idol worshipping and perform Namkirtana where the glory of Lord Vishnu is recited.

The fifteenth century was the dark phase of Assamese society. During this period art and culture received a severe setback, society was more involved with material pleasure and even religious practices were perverted. Then like a breath of fresh air came Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva.
In fact it is not possible to discuss the culture and people of Assam without referring to Srimanta Sankardeva and his propagation of the Assamese version of neo-Vaishnavism. Mahapurusha Sankardeva can be said to be the pioneer of medieval renaissance in Assam. Sankardeva preached the message of Bhakti that is unmotivated love and devotion to the lord. He was indeed a great socio-religious reformer and also responsible for developing a scientific and progressive outlook amongst the Assamese community. Sankardeva created the institution of the 'Naamghars' and the 'Sattras' which welcomed one and all with open doors irrespective of caste, creed, race and religion. Interestingly the first pillar of the Bordua Namghar was erected by Chandsai, a Muslim devotee to the chanting of 'La illallahu Muhammad ur rasula ulla'.

Sankardeva praised the Sattva guna - "the quality of goodness" - like humility, compliance, restraint, benevolence and non-violence. He had a great role to play in the efflorescence of Assamese literature. He composed the holy book 'Kirtan-ghosa' which contained a large number of religious hymns. In fact the 'Kirtan-ghosa' was his magnum opus, a collection of vernacular renditions of episodes from the Bhagavata highlighting the glory of Lord Krishna. Sankardeva found solace in Krishna, the character around whom the Bhagavata revolved. He felt that absolute surrender to Lord Krishna without any adherence to ritualism was the greatest religion of man. Thus Sankardeva adopted the medium of congregational prayer called 'kirtan' or 'naamprasanga'
which involved chanting of songs along with dramatic performances. Srimanta Sankardeva was responsible for making 'bhakti' an instrument of peace and harmony.

Sankardeva was also instrumental in setting up of the 'sattras'. It was through the 'satras' that he propagated the principle that 'service to God is service to humanity'. These sattras also became centres for the pursuit of art and culture. The sattras performed 'bhaonas' which is a form of theatre meant to arouse devotion using the medium of songs, dances, dialogue and characterization. Sattras also performed 'Bargeets' which were devotional songs having great literary value.

This great figure was also the initiator of the Satriya style of dance which evolved towards the end of the 15th century or early in the 16th century. This graceful dance form was introduced by Sankardeva in his wonderful composition of 'ankiya bhaona', the Vaishnava theatre. Originally this dance form was performed only in the Sattra, the Vaishnava monastery. Satriya is a classical dance form and have been performed in the monasteries for several centuries. However, recently this dance form has emerged from the monastery on to the contemporary scene.

Sankardeva preached social equality and he was responsible for shaping the future of a composite Assamese society and culture. He was a philosopher and believed that all men had a common identity and social standing. It is to his credit that even after 500 years of his demise the religion that he preached
is still widely followed today. As the Late Prof. Dr. Maheshwar Neog has said
"The neo-Vaisnavism inculcated by Sankardeva brought in its train a literary
upheaval and the fine arts like music, dancing and painting also came to have
their place in the life of the people."  

The history of Assam went through various phases of formation and
fragmentation before it took the shape of the modern one. Modern Assam is a
creation of British colonialism. The British entered Assam in 1824. The Burmese
war and the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, brought in the British influence into
the state. With the advent of the British a new age began.

After its annexation to the British empire in 1826 through the treaty of
Yandabo, Assam was made a part of Bengal Presidency (British territories).
This age brought great literary and cultural changes in Assam. When Assam
came under its rule the British faced great difficulty in administration due to
language and cultural barriers. To overcome this crisis the British hired people
from Bengal in order to serve as clerks and 'moharis'. They drilled in the fact
to the British that Assamese was not a language in its own right but only a
branch of Bengali. It was during this period that Assamese language received
a huge set-back and Assamese language was replaced by Bengali language in
schools, colleges and courts. This changeover took place on the grounds that
Assamese was nothing but a dialect of Bengali.

At this point the Christian Missionaries contributed a great deal towards
the development of the Assamese language and literature. The American Baptist
Mission published the 'Dharmapustak Antobhag' i.e. the New Testament in Assamese in the year 1813. The complete Bible, or 'Dharmapustak' inclusive of both the Old Testament and the New Testament was published in Assamese by William Carey in 1833. William Carey was helped in his translation work by Atmaram Sharma.

The Missionaries with great zeal and gusto mastered the local language which in turn would give them easy accessibility to the locals. Their primary aim undoubtedly was the propagation of Christianity. But whatever the aim their initiative paid off with the establishment of the American Baptist Mission Press in Sibsagar in the year 1840.

Any mention of the American Baptist Mission Press is synonymous with the name of Reverend Dr Nathan Brown. The American Baptist Missionary Union appointed him as a missionary to Myanmar in 1833. It was at the request of Captain Francis Jenkins, the then Commissioner of Assam that Dr Nathan Brown headed for Assam. This request was made in order to launch the "Shan Mission" aiming to help the British administration to enlighten, refine and educate the warrior tribes of Shan, Khamtis and Singphos. He came to Assam accompanied by Mr. Oliver T. Cutter with a small printing press.

It was in January 1846 that the Mission started 'Orunudoi', the first ever Assamese newspaper. The tag line for the paper was, 'The Orunudoi, monthly paper devoted to religion, science and general intelligence.' The
missionaries realized that religion could not be disseminated among the masses without the use of the regional language.

Brown continued as editor of 'Orunudoi' from January 1846 to 1864. In January 1855, Dr Nathan Brown proceeded to Burma and then Dr Miles Bronson took over as editor of the 'Orunudoi'. Dr Bronson strived to reinstate Assamese language in schools and courts and his efforts bore fruit in 1873 when Assamese became the official language of Assam and also the medium of education. Miles Bronson's efforts paid off with the help extended by the great Assamese Patriot Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59) who persuaded the British government to reintroduce Assamese.

The first issue of 'Orunudoi' contained review of national and international events, an article entitled "Dharamar Katha," subtitled "Religious Intelligence," and also articles on the evil effects of opium and the tombs of the Ahom kings. This periodical helped re-shape the Assamese mind and also served to glorify colonialism as beneficial. This periodical provided a form for early Assamese writers of the nineteenth century and brought into the forefront three key figures of the Assamese literary world, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hem Chandra Baruah and Nidhi Levi Farewell.

When 'Orunudoi' was first published, Bengali was the medium of instruction in all schools of Assam. It was through the 'Orunudoi' and the letters, petitions, and scholarly works that the missionaries sought to establish Assamese as the official language of Assam.
THE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

When the British colonized India they wanted the traditional legal and administrative systems and even the traditional education system to continue. Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of India was of the opinion that "the British power must be an Indian power". But Raja Rammohan Roy who is considered to be the father of modern India opposed this move as he felt that this was an attempt "to keep his country in darkness." 

Raja Rammohan Roy felt that western education was essential in subjects like Mathematics, Chemistry, Anatomy, Natural Philosophy etc. In a letter to Lord Amherst (1773-1857) in the year 1823, Roy opined that English provided Indians with "the key to all knowledge---all the really useful knowledge which the world contains." Thus it was that the combined efforts of Raja Rammohan Roy, the Christian Missionaries and other intellectual Indians that the English language gained popularity amongst the Indians. The British gradually declared in 1829 "that it intended to make English gradually and eventually the language of public business throughout the country."

Lord Macaulay who came to India as a Legislative Member of the Supreme Council in his minute of 1835, also pleaded in favour of English education. Soon English became "the sole means of inter-communication at the all-India level, or the lingua franca, of all persons holding positions of authority or prominence in private and public life".

The seeds of renaissance were sown rather late in Assam, because
Assam came under British dominion only during the 20's and 30's of 19th century. A humble beginning was made in 1831 by Haliram Dhekial Phukan and Juggaram Khargharia Phukan. Haliram supported women's education and wrote the 'Asam Buranji', the first historical work on Assam. His brother Juggaram was a close associate of Rammohan Roy of Bengal. It was he who took the initiative of establishing English schools in Assam.

The birth of what is known today as the 'Assamese' or 'Asomiya' community took place during the later part of the Ahom rule. The Ahoms adopted the Hindu faith and this brought in many tribes into the Hindu fold. Assamese nationalism has its roots in linguistic nationalism. One major factor instrumental in giving a boost to Assamese nationalism was the issue "whether Assamese is a 'language' or a 'dialect'." The reiteration of the polyethnic nature of the Assamese society on the one hand and the rather obsessive quest for a unilingual identity on the other, has been one of the major contradictions which the Assamese middle class has not been able to resolve till date.

From the year 1837 to 1873, Bengali was the language of the courts and government schools of Assam. The language rivalry between the Assamese and the Bengali posed a great threat to Assamese identity and culture. This language rivalry was linked to the struggle for jobs. At the time when the Christian Missionaries encouraged the people of Assam to educate themselves through their mother-tongue there "had also been a persistent demand for
English education among the middle class aspiring for government jobs." 21

The British introduced western education with the objective of making young people fit for junior posts in administration. The Court of Directors of the East India Company had urged the Government of India in the year 1830 "to introduce English as the language of public business in all its departments, and to begin correspondence (in English) with all native princes or persons of rank who are known to understand that language". 22 Even the orthodox Brahmins sent their children to schools "having their hair-cut in English fashion and giving up the time-honoured custom of keeping a pig-tail." 23

In a letter to Lord Amherst (1773-1857) in the year 1823 Raja Rammohan Roy opined that English provided Indians with "the key to all knowledge......all the really useful knowledge which the world contains." 24 Roy's letter was the starting point of the Oriental-Anglicist controversy, the controversy over which educational policy would be suitable for India. The primary reason for the English language's growing popularity was because it opened paths to employment.

The first English school was established in Guwahati in the year 1835. With the expansion of British rule in India as a whole, knowledge of English became a historic necessity both for administration and increasing commercial intercourse. It has very aptly been pointed out that the "aim of the English to educate the Indians was either to produce caricatures of European characters who would be willing to accept the Gospel of Christ or to get a regular supply
of cheap clerks to serve them in the business organization of the government
of India and subsidiary undertakings of the British subjects."25

The Assamese intelligentsia who were seen working in government
offices initially kept English at a safe distance. Hem Chandra Barua, the writer
of the first authoritative dictionary of Assamese had to learn English from the
Sibsagar missionaries. However slowly the advantages of English education
came to be appreciated and young and ambitious students started going to
Calcutta for higher education.

WESTERN INFLUENCE ON ASSAMESE LITERATURE

Towards the mid-nineteenth century the socio-political life of the people
of Assam came under great stress. One of the major factors was the repeated
Burmese invasions which virtually reduced Assam into a wasteland. This was
gradually followed by the spread of English education and western thought
which affected almost all spheres of life and society.

The spread of western education and ideas brought about radical
changes in the form and content of Assamese literature. "The contact with the
British and liberal education through the medium of the English language
brought about a remarkable social and intellectual awakening which led to the
emergence of a new literary era."26 "Orunudoi" came as a breadth of fresh air
and revitalized the Assamese language "which was almost on the verge of
attrition due to the colonial policy of replacing Assamese with Bengali as a
medium of instruction and language of the court."27 The movement to develop
Assamese literature gained momentum after the establishment of the Assamese Language Development Society in 1883 by the college students.

Western influence made Assamese literature more humanized and gave the language greater tangibility. The novel and the short story developed as a result of the western impact in the nineteenth century. The English language which ushered in western influence also led to the growth of literary criticism. In the age of "Jonaki" the search for an Assamese identity assumed a new form. A new humanistic movement based on new ideas of science, justice and human dignity took root in contemporary poetry. The impact of the west through English in the nineteenth century gave Assamese literature a certain new shape and direction.

The publication of the "Jonaki" ushered in an age when western literary influences became direct and clear. This journal launched the Romantic Movement in Assamese literature. Inspired by English Romanticism, the literature of the age reveals all the features of Western Romanticism.

"Exaltation of imagination, worship of nature, adoration of beauty and expression of personal love, revival of interest in folk literature, recreation of medieval lores and legends, profound love of the motherland, experimentation with new verse forms and use of the language of daily life are some of the distinguishing characteristics of the literature of the period."28

*Jonaki* was first published on February 9, 1889, by Chandrakumar Agarwala. It was the journal of the Asamiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha
(Society for the Development of the Assamese Language). *Jonaki* marked the coming of age of Assamese literature. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phookan, Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua were the three writers who defined Assamese literature in this period. The Romantic Age in Assamese literature was heralded in by Lakshminath Bezbarua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala and Hem Chandra Goswami. During this period satirical and humourous writing, short stories, historical novels and plays, lyrical and narrative poetry, personal essays and literary criticism were written and they all helped enrich Assamese literature.

Hemchandra Barua (1835-96) is called the father of modern Assamese prose. He was a great satirist and in his writings he exposed the vices and evils of contemporary society. His *Bahire Rang Sang Bhitare Kowahhaturi* is a satirical novelette wherein he castigates the evil of social and religious corruption. In 1861 he published *Kaniyar Kirtan* which is also a satirical farce dealing with the evil effects of addiction to opium. He will always be remembered for his epoch-making dictionary *Hemkosh* which was published posthumously in 1900. His satire exposes the shams and hollowness of society and the prevalent social evils of the time.

Gunabhiram Barua's (1837-95) *Ramnavami* was the first drama written on the western model. It was written in 1857 and serialized in Orunodoi, the first Assamese journal. This social play revolved around the theme of widow remarriage and had a tragic end. He also wrote *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukanar Jiwan*
Sarit which was in the lines of a biography and gave ample details about the subject.

Chandra Kumar Agarwala is considered as instrumental in ushering in romanticism into Assamese poetry. He was a true humanist and regarded man as God. This is evident in his poem *Manav Bandana*, wherein he stresses on worship of man because according to him there was no God superior to man. His *BaanKunwari*, appeared in the very first issue of *Jonaki*, where it is seen that supernatural elements were being used in the treatment of a natural theme. His collection of poems *Pratima* and *Bin Boragi* created ripples in Assamese literature.

Hem Chandra Goswami was a historian, poet, teacher, and also a linguist. His compilation *Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki* is considered to be a monumental work. His collection of poems titled *Phular Chaki* stands out due to its simplicity and amply bears forth all the qualities of romantic poetry.

Lakshminath Bezbarua is considered to be the doyen of Assamese literature. He was the leading figure of the Romantic Movement of Assamese literature. He was a prolific writer and he has to his credit a number of lyrics, nature poems, ballads and patriotic songs. He was influenced by Vaishnava culture and in his poetry there is a reflection of classical Vaishnava poetry. Lakshminath Bezbarua is considered to be the father of Assamese short-story. His short-stories are an exposition of social evils like pride, vanity and superstition. A pioneer in the field of the Assamese short-story, Bezbarua was
equally at home with the folk tale and the modern story. Lakshminath Bezbarua
is regarded as the high-priest of Assamese prose and to this day he holds his
sway over Assamese literature. His Kripabor Baruah’s Kakotor Topola
(Kripabor Barua's Bundle of Papers, 1904: originally serialized in Jonaki)
established his reputation. Among his original short-story collections are
Surabhi (1909), Sadhu Kathar Kuki (1912) and Jonbiri (1913).

Lakshminath was inspired by English literature. Bezbarua also lent a
touch of simplicity to the Romantic tradition through poems like Basanta
(spring) and Bin Boragi.

Western literary influence brought about radical changes in Assamese
literature and modern drama also took a huge leap forward in terms of form
and content. Earlier there had been the flourishing of the 'ankiya-nat'. However
now drama came to be divided into acts and scenes and different types of
comedy and tragedy was introduced.

Shakespeare proved to be a great influence on young writers and
following in his footsteps there is the introduction of a ghost and the concept
of a play within a play in Benudhar Rajkhowa's Seuti Kiran. The influence of
Shakespeare permeated different aspects of Assamese literature. Apart from
drama, the Shakespearean influence was also felt on Assamese novels and
poetry. The division of plays into acts and scenes is a direct borrowing from
Shakespeare. Ramnavami is divided into eight scenes.

It was through the efforts of four young Assamese men who studied
in Calcutta College that the first fulls scale translation of Shakespeare came into effect. These young men were Ratnadhar Barua, Gunanjan Barua, Ghanashyam Barua and Ramakanta Borkakoti. They produced *Bhramranga* which is a translation of Shakespeare's 'The Comedy of Errors'. Again Durgeswar Sarma modeled his plays *Chandravati* and *Padmavati* on Shakespeare's 'As you like It' and 'Cymbellne'.

In the sphere of the novel echoes of 'Romeo and Juliet' are found in Rajani Kanto Bordoloi's Manomati. Lakshminath Bezbarua's *Padumkunwari* is also modeled on 'Romeo and Juliet'. In the Jonaki era Lakshminath Bezbarua and Padmanath Gohain Barua were influenced not only by the form and technique of Shakespeare's plays but also by his method of characterization. Gajpuria and Priyaram of Bezbarua's play *Chakradhwaj Sinha* were modeled after Falstaff.

The typical Shakespearean trait of presenting women in the guise of men has found their counterparts in Assamese drama. Examples of such characters are to be seen in Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Lachit Borphukan*, Sailadhar Rajkhawa's *Pratapsinha* and also in Gohain Barua's novel *Bhanumati*.

Shakespeare's influence has left an indelible imprint on Assamese poetry in the form of sonnets. Hem Chandra Goswami was the first sonneteer in Assamese literature. His love sonnet *Priyatamar Sithi* is the first of its kind
in Assamese and also considered to be one of the finest additions to the literature of the time.

The impact of romanticism was felt in the sphere of poetry also. Poetry gained a new vitality and vigour. "The new poetry sang of freedom from political dependence, social injustice, religious bigotry and of the dignity of the individual. Nature with all her beauty and mystery revealed herself through the poets' vision."²⁹

It was Ramakanta Choudhury (1846-89) and Bholanath Das (1858-1929) who experimented with blank verse in epic poetry. Ramakanta Choudhury used this new verse form in his epic poem Abhimanyu Badh and Bholanath Das perfected the form in his poem Sitaharan Kavya. Bholanath Das is also said to be the forerunner of lyric poetry which flourished in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The influence of Jonaki era's Romanticism was far-reaching and is still felt today. The western impact gave birth to two new forms-the novel and the short-story. With the publication of Jonaki literary criticism also came into being.

**Reference**


2. Ibid, p. 6.


5. Ibid, p.151.


