Chapter IV

Shakespeare: The Greatest Influence Before World War II

The popularity of Shakespeare

It has been noted in the foregoing chapter that English education, which includes the study of English literature, played a great role in the Indian Renaissance of the nineteenth century. Although it is not possible to say categorically what part Shakespeare's works played in this great reawakening, it has to be admitted that Shakespeare was widely read by Indian students who were the real actors in this great drama of national upsurge. With the establishment of the Universities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, Shakespeare's works formed an important part in the English syllabi of Indian schools and colleges, and thus the Indian student had to study Shakespeare, no matter whether he liked him or not.

It was not unnatural that Shakespeare was at first difficult and even terrifying to most of the Indian students. Even many English scholars find his antique speech dull and boring. "And when we do open a Shakespeare play", says T. R. Smith, "what rant we often find ourselves reading, what doggerel and dull jokes, what tedious reading." ¹ But constant touch with the works of the greatest dramatist in the world gradually

¹. On Reading Shakespeare, London, p. 5. Quoted by Mavadhara Mansimha in Kalidasa and Shakespeare, p. 16
made him so familiar with the younger generation of educated Indians that they soon came to love him, even idolize him. It is well known how D.L. Richardson, the famous teacher of Shakespearean drama at Hindu College, thrilled his students with joy and wonder with his excellent teaching of the dramas. According to Sibanath Sastri, Richardson's unique teaching of Shakespeare made his students not only crave for the dramatist but also made them think that there was no other poet like Shakespeare and no other literature like English. It is needless to say that the Indian college student of the nineteenth century was deeply moved by the romantic ideals of Shakespeare, which influenced their mental make-up to a great extent. Bengali drama, which is a product of Western influence, owes a great deal to Shakespeare, who left an unmistakable impact on such playwrights as Girishchandra, Dwijendralal and Rabindranath.²

The few Assamese students studying at Calcutta during the last decades of the nineteenth century were among those to be captivated by the grandeur of Shakespearean drama. Bezbaroa informs us that at Presidency College, English literature, including Shakespeare, was taught by Charles Tawney, whom none else could equal in the teaching of Shakespearean drama.⁴ Bezbaroa was charmed so much by Shakespeare while at college

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2. Bānglā Nātaker Itihās, p. 30
3. ibid., pp. 31-33. Girishchandra said, "The great poet Shakespeare is my ideal. I am following in his footsteps" (p. 32).
4. Mor Jivan Sowaran, Granthāvalī I, p. 60
that he resolved to compose plays in Assamese on the Shakespearean model. Like Girishchandra, Bezbaroa also admitted that he hoped to get the blessings of Shakespeare by following in his foot-steps. Some of the Assamese students studying at Calcutta must have got the opportunity of witnessing English plays, particularly Shakespeare's plays, being performed by Bengali students and professionals. As Sukumar Sen observes, some of the higher educational institutions held regular amateur performances of Shakespearean plays; and there is no doubt that students from Assam studying in those institutions were fortunate enough to see at least some of them. Bezbaroa himself informs us that he used to frequent the Calcutta theatres, particularly the Star, where he enjoyed the comic acting of one "Mr Chaturii." Shakespearean plays were enacted by the students of Cotton College also. G.C. Bardalai reminisces how "Principal Sudmersen himself coached us for The Merchant of Venice." He further tells us that Mr Sudmersen, who did not miss a single rehearsal, trained them so well that "the audience that included all the English residents of the town (Gauhati) appreciated the show." All this shows how Shakespearean was gaining popularity among the younger generation of Assam having Western education. And being

5. ibid., p. 54
6. Preface to ChakradhvaJasimha, Granthavali, II, p. 1003
7. H.B.L., p. 192
8. Mor Jivan Sowarap, Granthavali, I, pp. 59-60
9. 'My Cotton College days', Jubilee, p. 84
encouraged by their Bengali compatriots, Assamese writers started translating to and adapting Shakespearean dramas in Assamese, while most writers of original plays in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth, began to follow Shakespearean technique and style.

Translations and adaptations

The popularity of Shakespeare among the educated readers and audience of Calcutta in the initial stages of the development of Bengali drama and stage inspired many of the writers of Bengal to translate and adapt Shakespearean plays in Bengali. Some of the important translations and adaptations were those of *Cymbeline* by Satyendranath Tagore, *The Comedy of Errors* by Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, *Macbeth* by Haralal Ray and *The Tempest* by Hemchandra Bandopadhyaya. But the translations and adaptations of Shakespeare were never so popular as those from Sanskrit. According to Sukumar Sen, "The works based on English originals were altogether futile productions; none of them were ever staged; nor were they accepted as good reading matter", although "later adaptations of some plays of Shakespeare were distinct improvements on the earlier attempts and so they were staged with success in private and public theatres in the middle and late seventies of the century."

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10. These plays are discussed in detail in Chap. V.
11. Ajitkumar Ghosh, *Bāngle Nātaker Itihās*, p. 31
12. *H.B.L.*, p. 31
These Bengali translations and adaptations, in any case, must have inspired some of the Assamese students studying at Calcutta to make similar attempts in their own language; and in 1888 four of them, Ratnadhar Barua, Gunjanan Barua, Ghanashyam Barua and Ramakanta Barkakati came out with an adaptation in Assamese of *The Comedy of Errors*, entitled *Bhrama-raṅga*. It has to be mentioned that modern drama in Assamese based on Western model had appeared nearly three decades earlier with Gunabhiram Barua's *Rām-Navami* (1857), a tragedy, and Hemchandra Barua's farce, *Kāniyār Kirtan* (1861), but they were not directly influenced by Shakespeare. And it is only with the publication of *Bhrama-raṅga* that the direct influence of Shakespeare on Assamese drama began. In the absence of reliable records it is difficult to say if *Bhrama-raṅga* was popular on the stage. Atulchandra Nazaria in his *Manchalekhā* tells us that it was performed once at Calcutta by the Assamese students there under the auspices of the Assamese Language Improvement Society. It is very likely that, like the earlier Bengali translations and adaptations of Shakespeare, *Bhrama-raṅga* could not be as popular on the stage on account of the inherent difficulties in placing such a story in a distinctly different cultural background; but that it encouraged other writers to translate and adapt more and more of Shakespeare is evident from the number of such plays published during the half century following its publication. No Shakespearean play has been found to be

13. *Sāhityar ābhās*, p. 2
14. p. 168
translated to or adapted in Assamese prior to Bhrama-raṅga, and it is only after this that adaptations or translations of As You Like It, Macbeth, Cymbeline, Troilus and Cressida, The Merchant of Venice, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet appeared in successive years. Besides these, there were other translations and adaptations of Shakespearean plays, some of which were successfully staged more than once, but they have not yet seen the light of day.16

Shakespeare and the historical play in Assamese

Like the historical play in Bengali, Assamese historical play is also a product of western influence. Not that this type of play is absolutely new in Indian literature. A.R. Keith mentions three Sanskrit "historical" dramas, although of "small value", namely, the Lalitavigrha-rāja-nāṭaka by Somādeva, the Pratāparudra Kalyāṇa by Vidyanatha and the Hammira-mada-mardana by Jayasimha Suri.17 But this cannot be said that these plays have anything to do with the growth of the historical play in Assamese. The Assamese historical play is of distinctly recent origin, which, in all probability, began with Padmanath Gohain Barua's Jaymatī, published in 1900.18 This was successively

15. Sāhityarāhās, n. 2
16. ibid., p. 3
17. S.D., pp. 248-251
18. A.N.S., p. 185

Since we do not have records of any other such plays during the nineteenth century, this is considered to be the first historical play in Assamese (A.N.S., p. 185).
followed by other plays of Gohain Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa and many others.

An examination of the historical plays written and published during the period between Jaymati and the Second World War will reveal that the playwrights were, more or less, influenced by the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, particularly Shakespeare. It is true that much of this influence in the initial stages came through Bengali, but it is not correct to say that all our dramatists borrowed their “Elizabethan technique” through Bengali playwrights. Leading writers of historical plays like Padmanath Gohain Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Nakulchandra Bhuyan and others were all university educated persons. It has been already noted how Bezbaroa, who studied in a number of Calcutta colleges, drank deep in English literature including Shakespeare, whose plays he liked so much that it became almost an obsession with him to write plays in Assamese on the Shakespearean model. It would, therefore, be unjust to hold that Bezbaroa was influenced by Shakespeare through Bengali alone, although it is not meant to say that his reading of Bengali drama was any the less. He himself admits in his autobiography that the reading of Shakespeare’s plays, some of which were his text books at college, spurred him to immediate work resulting in his unfinished plays, Hemchandra and Dinar Sapon,

19. See Chap. VII
20. Sāhityar Ābhās, p. 24
21. Mor Jivan Sovaran, Granthāvalī, I, pp. 53-54; also see the section 'The Impact of Individuals' in Chap. III
written in imitation of *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, respectively.\(^{22}\)

Thus both Gohain Barua and Bezbaroa got their cue for historical dramas from Shakespeare. The earlier history plays in English were like moral interludes\(^{23}\) in which most of the characters were abstractions, history being used as a means to a didactic end; but Shakespeare, on the other hand, "treats his material as a dramatist, not as a moralist or a mere chronicler of events ..."\(^{24}\) This can be said about the history plays in Assamese, particularly those of Gohain Barua, Bezbaroa and others following these two masters. Gohain Barua wrote four plays based on a few dramatic events in Assam's history, namely, Jaymatī, Gadādhara, Sādhana, and Lāchit Barphukan, of which the first three are primarily in blank verse interspersed with prose used mainly by the low characters after the manner of Shakespeare. It is only in Lāchit Barphukan that he uses prose as the medium, and this he does probably to give a more realistic touch\(^{25}\) to the play which is about perhaps the most honoured hero in the history of Assam. Bezbaroa, who had made his debut as a playwright with a farcical piece in 1889, nearly twenty years earlier than his history plays, Chakradhvajāsīma, Belimār, and Jaymatī, is certainly more faithful to Shakespeare.

\(^{22}\) ibid., p. 54


\(^{24}\) F.E. Halliday, op.cit., p. 293

\(^{25}\) A.N.S., p. 203
than his immediate predecessor, Gohain Barua.

For the Folio editors Shakespeare's histories were plays dealing with the reigns of English sovereigns of the preceding four hundred years, and "unabashed patriotic fervour was one reason for the popularity of history plays." And this patriotic fervour is also at the root of the origin and popularity of the historical play in Assamese. Since 1826 the land of Assam had been languishing under foreign yoke, the spirit and energy of the people lay dormant and freedom was yet to be in sight in spite of the national awakening then fast growing in the country. But freedom had to be regained at any cost; and these plays fired the Assamese audience with an intense sense of patriotism and nationalism by reminding them of the glory that was once their country. Not only in subject-matter, but in style and technique, too, the influence of Shakespeare on these plays are clearly seen. The division of a play into five acts and an act into scenes, use of blank verse by the high characters and prose by the low, introduction of comic characters and scenes as a relief to tragic intensity, use of the methods of disguises and mistaken identities as well as love intrigues, putting rather long soliloquies in the mouths of heroes—all these are unmistakably echoes of Shakespeare. Whether or not the Assamese playwrights were able to execute the Shakespearean technique with success is a different question.

which will be discussed in proper places,²⁷ but that these plays, especially those of Bezbaroa “flung open the floodgates of Shakespearean influence on Assamese drama”²⁸ cannot be questioned.

Shakespeare and Assamese Tragedy

Ajitkumar Ghose says that the greatest contribution of Shakespeare to Bengali literature is tragedy.²⁹ This can be rightly said of Assamese literature also, in which the first tragic drama came out in the sixth decade of the nineteenth century when Shakespeare, already popular in Bengal, was also getting his hold over the younger writers of Assam. The Assamese tragedian got his cue for tragedy not from Sanskrit literature where it is conspicuously absent, nor from old Assamese where there is no tragedy, although plays and poems having apparently unhappy endings abound in it. The 'Vadha Kāvyas' of medieval Assamese cannot be called tragic poems; they are a sort of allegory³⁰ in which the forces symbolizing evil are destroyed by those symbolizing good. Nor are the ankiyā nāts of Saṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva tragedies where all the fighting

27. See Chap. VII
28. A.S.R., p. 303
29. Bāngle Nātaiker Itihās, pp. 34-35
30. Asamiyā Sāhityar Itivritta, p. 35

Banikanta Kakati compares the 'Vadha Kāvyas' with the medieval European romances (Purani Asamiyā Sāhitya, p. 71).
and deaths lead but to the final beatification. To writers, who are solely concerned with spiritual or other worldly things, the sorrows and sufferings of this temporal world have little or no meaning, and so they can never think of life in terms of tragedy. It is only with the impact of the West that Assamese writers, like their counterparts in other parts of India, began to take interest in real human beings, and this awareness of life and the world around them gave them a tragic vision which none of the pre-British writers of Assam had possessed. The nineteenth century was a period of transition when values were fast changing under the impact of the West, and when the nation was pining for liberty and self-government. In the circumstances, it was natural for the people to suffer from an intense mental conflict, while writers with a deep vision of life found in it material enough for tragic dramas.

Unlike Greek tragedy, the foundation of which is religious, Shakespearean tragedy springs from man and his interplay with man. Shakespeare's concern is with that "wonderful piece of work", man and his personality. As Bradley says, "the centre of the tragedy" in Shakespeare "may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action." The first tragedy in Assamese, Rām-Navami, published in instalments in 1857, is also of such nature. There is nothing like a divine rôle in it, and the

31. H.B. Carlton, Shakespearean Tragedy, Intro., pp. 11-12
32. Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 7
tragedy springs from the actions of the main characters, who suffer because they rebel against established conventions. This is undoubtedly a remarkable break with the age-old dramatic tradition, in which the divine and the religious rather than the human and the secular predominate. In fact, it can be said that the secularisation of Assamese drama began with राम-नवामिर under the impact of the Elizabethan dramatists, particularly Shakespeare, no matter whether the impact came directly from the original or partly through Bengali. Not that Gunabhiram Barua, author of राम-नवामिर, possesses that deep tragic vision which is Shakespeare's, but that he is influenced by the world's greatest dramatist in both theme and technique is evident to anybody familiar with Shakespearean plays, particularly Romeo and Juliet. Gradually, the tragic became a recurrent theme in Assamese drama with Padmanath Gohain Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Nakulchandra Bhuyan and a host of others trying their hand in it with varying degrees of success or failure.

The influence of Shakespeare on Assamese drama is seen in another aspect also—in the introduction into Assamese of what may be called the "revenge" play. In this type of tragedy Shakespeare had his forerunner in Kyd, who, in his turn was

33. A.C. Bradley observes, "The Elizabethan drama was almost wholly secular; and while Shakespeare was writing he practically confined his view to the world of non-theological observation and thought, so that he represents it substantially in one and the same way whether the period of the story is pre-Christian or Christian" (op. cit., p. 17).

34. For a detailed discussion of this play see Chap. IX
influenced by Seneca, but the Assamese playwrights who set their hand to writing this sort of drama did not have such native traditions before them. In Sanskrit drama, scenes of death and destruction are strictly prohibited, while a traditional Assamese play, although it often abounds in scenes of fighting and death, is completely free of such horrible intrigues and machinations as are found in an Elizabethan revenge play. In plays like Nilāmbar, Kamatā-kuwari, Rāmuni-konwar, Badan Barphukan and Naga-kowar many of the stock characteristics of Elizabethan revenge tragedy, particularly Shakespeare's Othello, Hamlet and Macbeth, are found. Revenge is the chief motif in all these plays where there are what Eleanor Prosser calls both "hero-revengers" and "villain-revengers."\(^{35}\) Naga-kowar, for example, is built on a series of revenge motives. Kāchitarā, minister of the defeated Wachāri king, joins the Pāthān invaders only to take revenge on the Āhoms, Chulklenmung avenges himself on his own father, the Āhom king Suhungmung whom he gets killed by Renukā, who thus avenger's her father's death upon the murderer; Chulklenmung also intrigues to kill Kanseng or the Naga-Kowar whom he considers a rival in love for Renukā in disguise as a palace maid. In fact, this play is as tumultuous a revenge play as any written in English during the Elizabethan Age with love, treachery, disguises, murders and all kinds of horrors found in a play of this type. True that Shakespeare uses most of the

\(^{35}\) Hamlet and Revenge, 1967, p. 39
stock ingredients of the Elizabethan revenge play, but his deep vision and penetrating insight have exalted his plays like Hamlet or Othello to great tragedies, whereas the Assamese playwright in most cases fails to reveal a depth of vision.

An important feature of Shakespearean tragedy is that it is, to quote A.C. Bradley again, "concerned always with persons of 'high degree' often with kings or princes; if not with leaders in the state like Coriolanus, Brutus, Antony, at the least, as in Romeo and Juliet, with members of great houses, whose quarrels are of public moment." True that the first Assamese tragedy, Rām-Navamī, is not of this kind as both its hero and heroine, Rām and Navamī, come of ordinary families with ordinary human aspirations as well as weaknesses; but it is difficult not to find resemblances between these two and Romeo and Juliet. Yet it had to be admitted that Rām-Navamī is a social play and that it is not so much in theme and characterisation as in style and technique that Gunabhiram Barua, author of the play, follows Shakespeare. But tragedy with persons of "high degree" or as Aristotle says, with "persons better than the average man", was soon to follow, and we first get it in Padmanath Gohain Barua's Jaymati in which the heroine is one of the most illustrious princesses in the history of Assam. Other tragedies of this type are Gohain Barua's Sādhanī, Bezbaroa's Jaymati, Belimār and Nakul Bhuyan's

36. A.N.S., p. 238
37. Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 4
Badan Barphukan, and it will be seen that Shakespeare's influence is found in all these plays. 38

Shakespearean Technique in Assamese Drama

Assamese dramas written before the Western influence simply continues the tradition of the medieval ankiya nāts, and so have no acts or scenes. Sanskrit dramas have 'aṅkas' or acts but no scenes. Modern Assamese drama, on the other hand, are divided into acts and scenes exactly like a Shakespearean drama. This undoubtedly a result of Shakespearean influence, for during the latter half of the nineteenth century no dramatist was read and imitated as much as was Shakespeare. Even in Rām-Nāvami Nāṭak, the first Assamese drama to be written on the Western model, the influence of Shakespearean technique is clearly seen. Like a Shakespearean play, it has five acts, each being divided into scenes. 39 Even Kānîyār Kirtan, a little farcical play published in 1861, is divided into four acts, though not five, each having separate scenes. Like Gunabhiram, Hemchandra Sarua, author of Kānîyār Kirtan, was from an aristocratic family of Assam, educated in Calcutta, and as such, it was but natural that in technique as well as in theme they were influenced by European, particularly Shakespearean drama, although it has to be admitted that much of this influence came through

38. See Chap. VII
39. An act is called an "aṅka", and a scene is called a "darshan".
Bengali.  So possessed is Gohain Barua with the idea of breaking a play into five acts that not to speak of his major historical and mythological dramas, even his smallest farce, Bhut ne Bhram? (Ghosts or Illusions?) is expanded into five acts, although the plot hardly allows scope for such expansion. Bezbaroa, takes pride in admitting that he "follows in the foot-steps of the great poet (Shakespeare)." All his major dramas are in five acts, each consisting of varying number of scenes. Even his farce, Litikā has five acts, although his other farces or light comedies have less. In fact, this method of dividing a play into five acts and an act into scenes after the fashion of Shakespeare, continued, not of course without occasional divergences, up to the third decade of the present century, when new experiments in dramatic technique began. It has to be mentioned in passing that although the early dramatists were influenced by European or Shakespearean technique and style, all of them were not able to free themselves from the influence of Sanskrit drama or the indigenous ankiyā nāṭs. This is true of Rām-Navamī, where the environmental settings of some of the scenes remind one of a Sanskrit drama, while Rudraram Bardalai's Bangāl Bangālanī contains eight acts like a Sanskrit Nāṭaka.

40. Plays like Kirttivilās, Bhadrājūn, Vidhavāvīhā Nāṭak in Bengali had come out a few years earlier. It was very likely that both the Baruas read these plays. In fact, Sukumar Sen observes that "the success of Mitra's play was responsible for the first modern drama (Rām-Navamī Nāṭak) written in Assamese" (H.B.L., pp. 196-197).

41. Preface to Chakradhvajasimha, Granthāvalī, I, p. 1093

42. A.N.S., p. 279

43. "The number of acts (in a Nāṭaka) should be from five to ten". Keith, S.D., p. 345
Characterization

Shakespearean influence is noticed in the delineation of characters also. The beginning of this is seen in Ram-Navami itself, where the characters of the lovers, Ram and Navami, remind one of Romeo and Juliet. Like Romeo and Juliet the tragedy in Ram-Navami springs from misplaced love, and an echo of the conversation between Romeo and Juliet in Act II, sc. ii, is clearly heard in Act II, sc. iv of Ram-Navami. This influence, of course, is superficial; it does not go deeper as the characters of Ram and Navami often smack of didacticism, the playwright's objective being to show the evils of child marriage.

But when we come to Bezbaroa and Gohain Barua, we find that this influence has gone deeper. Regarding some of the characters of his historical play, Chakradhvajasimha, Bezbaroa himself says: "Lastly, I would like to say that the characters of Priyaram, Gajpuria and their companions are conceived after Shakespeare's Prince Henry, Falstaff and their fellows." Whether or not Bezbaroa has been able to imitate Shakespeare successfully, at the same time retaining his originality, is a different question which will be discussed later, but that the characters of Priyaram, Gajpuria, Siddhinath, Japara, Takau, Takaru, and Gajpuriani are largely a result of Shakespeare's influence is owned by the author himself. Bezbaroa also owes a debt to

44. See Chap. IX
45. Preface to Chakradhvajasimha, Granthavalī, I, p. 1003
46. See Chap. VII
Shakespeare for his fascinating characters of Dalimi in Jaymati Kuwari and Pijau in Belimār (The Sun-set), who are undoubtedly influenced by Miranda and Ophelia, respectively.

Dr Maheswar Neog is so impressed by the similarities between Dalimi and Miranda that he calls the former a "younger sister" of the latter. 47 Of the major characters of Gohain Barua's historical plays, Gadādhar, who is the hero both in Jaymati and Gadādhar, seems to bear some affinity to Hamlet whose soliloquies often echo in those of Gadādhar. As Hamlet's procrastinating nature is revealed among others, in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, so also Gadādhar's thoughtful and inactive nature expresses itself in his soliloquies some of which are tediously long and wordy. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that Gohain Barua is simply imitative and fails to transfer this influence into something of his own. Another important play to show a marked influence of Shakespeare is Seuti-Kiran, by Benudhar Rajkhowa, where the story is characterised by love, jealousy and intrigues resulting in murders and suicides. There is no doubt that the play within the play (Act IV, sc. ii) is conceived after the one in Hamlet, while the killing of Seuti by Kiran simply out of jealousy is reminiscent of Othello's smothering of Desdemona. 48 Another important character to be influenced by Shakespeare is Nilāmbar, the hero of a play of the same name, the author of which openly admits the influence of Othello. And if Nilāmbar is influenced

47. Adhunik Assamiya Sāhitya, p. 33
48. A.N.S., p. 280
by Othello, Iago is undoubtedly the model for Nanda, the villain of the play. The major characters of Viplavī Vir (The Revolutionary Hero), a play by Sarvananda Pathak, reveal a marked influence of Shakespeare, and the writer admits that he has taken some of his ideas from Shakespeare's Macbeth and the Assamese play, Nilāmbar. 49

Another important facet of this influence is to be seen in the introduction in modern Assamese drama of characters like the Fool and the clown in Shakespeare. It may be mentioned that this type of humorous character is no stranger in Indian drama inasmuch as the Vidūṣaka, who is of a kind with the Fool in King Lear, is an important character in Sanskrit drama. But the Vidūṣaka is strikingly absent in early Assamese drama, the aṅkiyā nāts, although later writers introduce a sort of comic character, called the 'Bahuwa' (Jester), in order to satisfy the taste of that section of the audience which can be equated with the Elizabethan groundlings. Even in the plays of Saṅkaradeva, as Professor Maheswar Neog points out, "this interesting character, however, seems to be amply replaced by some of the other characters: Vedanidhi in the Rukmini-haraṇa, (The Carrying Away of Rukmini), Nārada in the Parijātā-haraṇa (The carrying away of the Parijata Flower), and even Visvāmitra in the Rāma-vijaya (The victory of Rāma)." 50 This shows that the greatest Assamese playwright of the earlier period is not

49. Preface to Viplavī Vir, p. 1
50. Sāṅkaradeva and His Times, pp. 254-255
oblivious of the lighter side of life, and the comic figure is introduced with the sole purpose of arousing laughter through his antics. But the means adopted by the modern dramatist to give comic relief to the audience by arousing laughter in them is different: it is done not through the antics of a mere jester, but through a group of real men and women—servants, rustics and the like—who through their lack of sophistication, provide food for amusement. This is exactly what Shakespeare does, and there is no doubt that the Assamese playwright has taken his cue from Shakespeare.

Another aspect of Shakespearean influence on modern Assamese dramatists is to be seen in their use of sub-plots, which form almost a common feature in the major five-act plays written during the period under review. In the very first tragedy written on the Western model, Rām-Nāvaṁī, something like a sub-plot is found in the parallel love story of Vaṅgāl and Sonāphuli, servant and maid-servant, respectively, in the heroine's house. Bezbaroa, true to his professed aim of following Shakespeare, almost invariably introduces this technique in his major dramatic works: in the stories of Oresānāth Pijali-Māju Āideo in Belimār, of Gajpurīā-Priyārām Gajpurīānī in Chakradhvajasimha, and of Shadīyākhowā Gohain and Chenehi in Jaymatī. The love-stories of Gandharvanārāyan and Pijali in Padmanāth Gohain Barua's Lāchit Barphukan is also of the nature of a Shakespearean sub-plot. In the Vūlāgāḥbaru of Radhakanta Handique, we find two subsidiary stories of love which the dramatist adds to the main historical plot, apparently in
imitation of Shakespeare. Nakul Chandra Bhuyan, another leading writer of historical plays, also makes successful use of sub-plots in his major dramas, Badan Barphukan, Chandrakantasmha and Vidrohi Maran. In Vidyavati of Sailadhar Raikhowa, a play based on the story of Kalidasa and Vidavati, a subsidiary story of romantic love between Jaymalla and Champavati is presented much in the Shakespearean fashion. In his historical play, Chatrapati Shivaji, Atulchandra Hazarika also introduces an imaginary story of romance that goes parallel with the main story. In fact, the juxtaposition of the comic and the tragic, which is a characteristic of Shakespearean drama, is also a prominent feature in most of the major dramatic works written in Assamese during the period under review. Like Shakespeare, who resorts to characters like grave-diggers, porters and the like to produce the comic effect in a tragedy, the Assamese playwright often makes use of servants, maids and rustics to achieve this objective.  

Shakespearean Style

Shakespeare has his share of influence—and a major share indeed—on the development of modern Assamese dramatic style. The earlier dramas, the ankiyā nāts, were written in a variety of rhyming metres interspersed with prose both in the dialogue and stage-directions, and nothing like blank verse was known to them. It was only after the Western influence that blank verse came to be used in Assamese, first in poetry and

51. Sahityar Abhas, p. 24
then in drama. For Shakespeare blank verse was nothing new: the verse of Gorboduc and "Marlowe's mighty line" were already there for him to start with, whereas the Assamese playwright had to look far beyond the boundaries of their native land for this new mode of poetic expression. In Bengal, Michael Madhusudan Datta and Girishchandra Ghosh had already established blank verse as an effective medium of poetry and drama, and it appealed to the Assamese writers so much that they were quick to introduce it in place of the old rhyme. In fact, it is not so much Shakespeare as Michael Madhusudan and Girishchandra who were the immediate source of inspiration for the Assamese writer in his use of blank verse. In the initial stages, our playwrights stuck to the fourteen-syllable line, but gradually they realised the limitation of this line and adopted the type of blank verse already popularized in Bengali by Girishchandra. This type of blank verse, popularly known as the 'Gairish Chanda', was found suitable for all kinds of dramatic expressions as it was but a sort of run-on prose free from the limitations of Madhusudan's line. Although Gohain Barua uses it but sparingly, it is Chandradhar Barua in whose hand this verse attains maturity. His mythological plays, Meghnād-vadh (The Slaying of Meghnād), Tilottamā-sambhav (The Coming into Being of Tilottomā), and Rājarshi are all written in this verse, and even his lighter play, Bhagya-parākshā is partly couched in it. Here is an extract from the last mentioned play:

52. According to Sukumar Sen, by doing away with rhyme and introducing blank verse or 'Amritāksar Chanda', Datta achieved the "emancipation" of the Bengali verse (H.B.T., p. 197).

53. A.N.S., p. 221
Think thou, O Daughter of fortune: 
Has anything as much greatness as money? 
What other strength is needed 
When you have the strength of money? 
There is nothing in the world 
That money cannot do.

(Bhāgya-parikṣa, Epilogue)

Other important playwrights to use blank verse are 
Atul Chandra Hazarika, Mitradev Mahanta, and Radhakanta Handique, 
who have found it a fit medium to express dignified thoughts and 
heightened emotions in their mythological plays. It has to be 
noted that in all these plays, poetic dialogue in blank verse 
is generally used by the high and noble characters, while the 'low' characters talk in ordinary prose of day-to-day use. In 
Sanskrit drama, characters of high status converse in Sanskrit 
and those belonging to lower stations and women speak Prakrit. 
In Elizabethan drama, "the traditional association between the 
comic genre and the prose form is implicit throughout". "Clowns, 
fools, menials and rustics speak prose in the very same scene 
in which their masters speak in iambic verse. Such separation
according to social rank and dramatic mood is frequent in Shakespeare.\textsuperscript{54} Our dramatists' use of prose in a blank verse drama is very close to Shakespeare's inasmuch as they almost always associate it with the comic, which, in their plays often arises from the unsophisticated talks, manners and often pranks of characters like rustics, servants and menials. Chandradhar Barua, for instance, suddenly shifts to prose in order to provide a dose of the humorous through Sarvānanda, a Brāhmin, in his serious mythological play, Meghnād-vadh (Act III, sc.iii).\textsuperscript{55} Besides Chandradhar Barua, Padmanath Gohain Barua in his Sādhanī, Jaymatī, and Gadādhar; Atulchandra Hazarika in most of his mythological plays; Mitradev Mahanta in Vaidehī Viyog, and Radhakanta Handique in his historical play, Mūlāgābharu, use this method of "separation according to social rank and dramatic mood." Sometimes we find, as in Gadādhar, the same character using prose and verse according to moods and situations like Lear in Shakespeare. In fact, this method of alternating between verse and prose according to characters, moods and situations is a characteristic feature in most of the historical and mythological plays as we shall see when we discuss individual works at appropriate places in the chapters that follow.\textsuperscript{56}

Another striking Shakespearean feature in the plays is the use of soliloquies, often appropriately and elegantly, but

\textsuperscript{54} George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy, p. 248

\textsuperscript{55} Chandradhar Baruwa-granthāvalī, pp. 120-122

\textsuperscript{56} See Chaps. VI and VII
at times extravagantly and even superfluously. Shakespeare accepted the soliloquy as he accepted other conventions, and used it as a "direct means of self-revelation" of characters. For him it was a "convenience and a freedom." The Assamese playwrights also use this convention in much the same way, although a few of them, particularly Padmanath Gohain Barua, banks rather too much upon the "convenience" offered by it.

Soliloquies are there in all his major plays, some of which aptly reveal the inner workings of characters, while a few others are rather too long, and could have been profitably dispensed with. Gadā's soliloquy in Act I, sc. ii of Gadādhar is a good instance of self-revelation, and it hardly fails to remind one of Hamlet's soliloquies, particularly the one beginning with "To be or not to be." On the other hand, Dharmadhvaja's soliloquy in Act I, sc. iv of Śādhanī is much too long. It hardly tells us what is going on in the mind of the character except that towards the end there is a vague hint of some "anxiety" brewing in him. Bezbaroa makes effective use of soliloquies as a means of revealing the inner workings of a character, and in this he comes close to Shakespeare. The soliloquies of Gadāpāṇī in Jaymatī-kuwarī are so reminiscent of Hamlet that they seem to be fashioned after those of the prince.

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57. Henry, Granville-Barker in A Companion to Shakespeare Studies, ed. Henry, Granville Barker and G.R. Harrison, p. 69

58. Racanāvali, pp. 85-86

59. ibid., pp. 10-12
of Denmark. Much in the same way as Hamlet, Gadāpāṇi in these soliloquies appears to be procrastinating, at the same time expressing a sense of guilt for leaving behind his wife alone to be tortured by a timid but oppressive king. Nādanchandra’s soliloquy in Act IV, sc. ii of Relimār 60 shows how he feels the pricks of conscience after he has got his own country devastated by the Burmese. His "I have deprived so many people of sleep. How can I sleep myself?", is almost an echo of Macbeth’s "I thought I heard a voice cry 'sleep no more: Macbeth does murder sleep.'" Another playwright, who betrays Shakespearean influence in the use of soliloquies, is Nakulchandra Bhuvan. The character of Badan in his historical play, Badan Barphukan, who in certain respects resembles Macbeth, suffers from a type of somnambulism which is not unlike that of Lady Macbeth. This method of expressing an intense sense of fear and guilt after committing a horrible deed of sin or crime is undoubtedly Shakespearean. Like Macbeth seeing the ghost of Banquo at the banquet, Badan sees, or fancies that he sees, the spirit of Pūrṇānanda, his greatest rival in life, while he is trying to sleep. Nor do we fail to hear an echo of Macbeth in the soliloquy that follows where Badan, struggling hard to sleep, says: "No: (you cannot sleep), You have taken sleep away from the eyes of so many people. You can never sleep in peace." 61 This is undoubtedly an echo of Macbeth, or "Macbeth

60. Granthāvalī, II, pp. 1208-1209
61. Badan Barphukan, Act I, sc. x, p. 138
re-echoed through Bezbaroa's Badanchandra. To be brief, the imprint of Shakespearean influence in the use of soliloquies is palpable in many of the other plays, particularly mythological and historical, written during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.

Thus we have seen how Shakespeare has influenced substantially the style and technique of modern Assamese drama, particularly of the pre-Independence period. And what is more, it is not difficult for one to come across even expressions which sound very much Shakespearean. This is found in the very first modern play, Rām-Navamī (1857), where Navamī, the heroine says to her lover:

 nama ki kare ? golāpak jadi golāp nubuli
 palās bolā hai, teo sugandha powā neyābane ?

(III, iv, p. 45)

What does a name do? Will not the rose smell sweet if we call it 'Palas'?

This is almost a repetition of what Juliet says to Romeo:

 What's in a name? That which we call a rose
 By any other name would smell as sweet

( Romeo and Juliet, II, ii, 43-44)

Similarly, Līlā in Sarvananda Pathak's Viplāvī Vīr, a play fashioned admittedly after Macbeth and the Assamese revenge

62. Belimār, Act IV, sc. ii (Granthāvalī, II, pp. 1208-1200)
63. Preface to Viplāvī Vīr
Nilambar, nearly repeats Macbeth in an almost identical situation:

*eī samayate teok hatvā karile tonanik hatvā karā haba : taio ājirpara tonani nājābi*  
*(Viplavi Vir, IV, iii)*

If I murder him now it will be like murdering sleep. (And then) I myself will be able to sleep no more.

True it is that such direct borrowing of statement from Shakespeare is not much as the writers tried to give a palpably new mould to a borrowed idea or thought; but the few instances that we come across are sufficient to show how close Shakespeare was to some of our playwrights. In fact, influence often works so insensibly that it becomes difficult for one to detect its real direction, and the few ostensible points that might present themselves before the eyes may not be enough to gauge its real impact.

But the vogue that Shakespeare had enjoyed since the beginning of modern Assamese drama was gradually declining with fast political and social changes taking place in the country as well as histrionic experiments being made from time to time. The long-drawn struggle for Independence, the partition of the country, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, and the sense of disillusionment that overtook the Indian intellectual after Independence took away whatever was left of the old romantic idealism, and stark reality presented itself in all its
nakedness. Instead of going back to the mythological or historical past, the playwright began to look around as well as within himself, and the result was that dramas started becoming 'social' and 'inward' in place of romantic and mythological or historical. Speaking of Indian drama as a whole, Dr Suresh Awasthi observes that "in the early years of the twentieth century the main influences were Shaw, Ibsen and Chekhov." This is true of modern Assamese drama also, although, to be precise, these influences came to be felt in our drama not earlier than the thirties of the present century. True it is that the state of Assamese drama during the years following Independence is anything but encouraging, yet the changes in style, technique and presentation are easily discernible in quite a few ones written immediately before and after 1947. Besides, in the growth of an art form what matters most is the trend of the changes rather than their immediate realization, and in Assamese drama after 1947, the trend has been towards social criticism and psychological probing.

In structure, the five-act piece with variable number of scenes has nearly disappeared, and its place has been taken by plays of no fixed number of acts or scenes. In style and technique, the influence of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy has become stronger with realistic prose dramas having long stage-directions, and elaborate setting, replacing the former

65. Satyen Sarma, Saṃlāp, No. 3, p. 131
historical or mythical plays written generally in verse interspersed with prose. It was Jyotiprasad Agarwala, who made the first attempt to replace Shakespeare with Ibsen and Shaw, and his well-known play, Kareṅgar Ligirī (The Palace ‘maid), to quote Satyen Sarma, "may be said to have paved the way for the 'problem play' in Assamese." Dr Sarma observes further that "it was the first play to introduce the technique of modern Western drama, and, as in Shaw and Galsworthy, we find in this play elaborate stage-directions at the beginning of each scene."66

It may be mentioned in passing that even in his Sonit Kuwarī (The Princess of Sonitpur), written when he was at school in Calcutta and revised many times before it was published, some of the characteristics of the new drama had appeared not only in technique and characterisation but also in the whole atmosphere of the play. But by the time he wrote Kareṅgar Ligirī, Jyotiprasad was a widely travelled man having spent some years at European Universities, where among other subjects he studied film technology. Deeply interested as he was in the art of drama and play-writing, Agarwala studied most of the leading dramatists of Europe, particularly Ibsen, Shaw, Galsworthy and Maeterlinck, and the result is that in Kareṅgar Ligirī, written while he was in England, all these influences commingle to make it problematic, symbolic as well as psychological, characteristics hardly to be found in Assamese drama prior to this. In his Labhitā, he becomes very much Shavian in style and technique,

66. A.N.S., p. 329
67. Intro. to Jyoti-pratibhā, p. 10
while Rupali姆 admittedly betrays the influence of Maeterlinck, particularly MonnaVnna.  

The growing social and political awareness impelled the Assamese playwright, like his compatriots elsewhere in the country, to deal with problems confronting him and his fellow men and women. It was soon realized that although political independence had been achieved, economic freedom was still a far cry, and that unless the condition of the masses was better, self-rule was not worth having. In fact, the dynamics of Gandhian thought had already boosted the imagination of the Indian writer long before Independence, and the result was that he began "to look for God, not in the temple, mosque or church, but in 'daridra nārāyan' the divine in the image of the hungry outcaste." Along with Gandhism, there was the great intellectual force coming from the West—that of Marxism, which stirred the imagination of the sensitive Indian mind so much that "many writers and intellectuals, who were first inspired by Gandhi, later veered towards socialist or Marxist ideologies. This is true to some extent of modern Assamese literature also; and in drama, too, Gandhian and Marxian ideals appeared from the thirties, if not earlier. Paivachandra Talukdar's Viplav (1937), for example, is a drama steeped in socialist idealism, where the avowedly anti-romantic heroine, Pārvati, daughter of a poet, ridicules the writer because he writes about birds,

68. See author's preface to the play, 1938
69. Modern Indian Literature: a Panoramic, p. 83
70. ibid., p. 77
mountains and streams instead of the common man and his way of living. 71 Enthused much by the idealism of Marx rather than that of Gandhi, she wants to replace the rich exploiters of the poor by a government constituted with the working people, cultivators, farmers and labourers. This was followed by many other plays where the problems arising out of industrialization, urbanization, the breaking-up of family relations, and the like, were dealt with.

All this has given a different mould to Assamese drama since the thirties of the present century. Like any other modern drama, it has become "inward", or at least there have been attempts to make it so. And in this process of psychological probing, Freudian thought has played some part "despite Gandhi to whom sex was sin except in the service of legitimate procreation", although it has to be noted that as elsewhere in Indian literature, 72 in Assamese literature also, the influence of Freudian psycho-analysis has been more pronounced in poets, novelists and story-writers than in dramatists. The growth of the one-act play is proof enough of how our playwright has tried to concentrate on a particular aspect of a character revealed in a few psychological moments. Some playwrights with some sophistication have tried to experiment with the latest techniques of Western drama, and one of them, Arun Sarma, has

71. Viplav, Act I, sc. iv
72. Modern Indian Literature: a Panoramic
tried his hand in the Theatre of the Absurd, particularly in two of his plays, Āhār (Food) and Nivāran Bhattachārvya. In fact, drama is an art in which all kinds of experiments have been made since the earliest times, and Assamese drama, too, is not an exception in this. The young playwrights of Assam are gradually becoming more and more familiar with the techniques and forms of modern Western drama, and this has inspired them to make new experiments in the theatre.

73. See Samlāp, No. 3, 1973, pp. 135-140