Modern Assamese drama may be broadly divided into four classes: mythological, historical, social and romantic. In this chapter, an attempt is being made to discuss the first category of plays, and to see how far and in what ways the writers of these plays have responded to and assimilated the new influence coming from the West, while the other types of plays will be discussed in relevant chapters that follow.

Mythological plays include plays based on episodes taken from the Puranas and the two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Plays written on such themes are nothing new in Assamese: classical Assamese drama or the aṅkiyā nāts were all mythical plays, written as they were on stories and episodes drawn from the epics and the Puranas. But modern mythical dramas are different from the medieval ones not only in style and technique but in the very atmosphere pervading them. The earlier plays, as has been noted before, were a kind of didactic dance-dramas with more of song and dance than dialogue and action; and so much emphasis was given on the cause of the faith that the human element in them was kept to the minimum. Modern mythical drama, on the other hand, presents itself in a different garb, and except for the subject-matter it has nearly no relation to classical mythical plays or the aṅkiyā nāts.
But although the medieval mythical plays have no direct relation to the modern mythical play, the tradition of the ankiya nāts that continued down to the middle of the nineteenth century, and Sanskrit drama, too, to some extent, played some part in moulding the taste of the audience. And the taste of the audience in its turn influenced the choice of subjects on the part of our playwrights. Indian readers and audiences have eternal fascination for epic and Puranic stories, and a work of art on such a theme is sure to appeal to an Indian, regardless of his age and the region he belongs to. This is the reason why even under the full impact of the West, our poets and playwrights chose mythological subjects to write on, only presenting them in a different style and technique. In other words, even though modern Assamese drama is a product of Western influence, the playwright exercised their own judgement in selecting themes, and so far as the mythological plays are concerned, this influence is mainly on techniques and methods of presentation. Yet Western influence again is another important reason why playwrights of the closing years of the nineteenth century and the initial decades of the twentieth chose mythological stories for subjects of their plays: these stories gave them unlimited scope for romantic imagination, which was then a dominant feature in poetry of those who wrote under direct influence of the Romantic Revival in England.

1. A.N.S., p. 132
2. A.S.P., p. 298
3. H.A.I., p. 110
Many of these poets were also playwrights, and nothing could have suited their temperament better than a mythical episode. Again, a few playwrights like Atulchandra Hazarika, Nitra dey Mahanta and Pandinath Kalita, have used elements of Sanskrit drama and ankiyā nāts in their mythological dramas, thus making a blending of Western and native techniques.

The Beginnings

Sītāharan (The Abduction of Sīta) by Ramakanta Chaudhuri is in all probability, the first modern mythological play in Assamese. Ramakanta was the first Assamese writer to imitate Michael Madhusudan Dutt in his poem, Abhimanyu-vadh (The Slaying of Abhimanyu), published in 1874. Nothing is known for certain about Sītāharan, for the play is not to be found now. It must have been published in the same year as Abhimanyu-vadh, if not earlier; and, in any case, there is no doubt that it was a product of the eighth decade of the last century. Satyen Sarma speaks about a play, Sītā-haran, collected by Dugdhanath Khaund in 1909, written in blank verse with unmistakable influence of Michael Madhusudan, and as Pr Sarma suspects, this might be the same play as Ramakanta Chaudhuri’s. Lakshminath Bezbaroa also wrote that he read Ramakanta’s play, Sītā-haran, and kept the book carefully, but it got destroyed with other

4. A.N.S., p. 137
5. Manchalekha, p. 193
6. A.N.S., p. 140 (foot-note)
books as he had left them for a long period at Calcutta. In any case, there can be no doubt that Ramakanta Chaudhuri's *Sita-haran* is the first modern Assamese mythological drama written on the Western model.

During the twenty-odd years between *Sita-haran* and the end of the last century, not more than a dozen plays were written and published most of which are not available now. Of these, mention may be made of *Abhimanyu-vadh* (1885) by Bharatchandra Das, *Savitri-Satyavān* (1891), jointly by Rajanikanta Bardalai, Kanaklal Barua, and Gopal Krishna Dev, *Harishchandra-upākhyaṇa* and *Haradhanu-bhaṅga* (1893) by Purnakanta Sarma, *Chandrahamsa* (1900) by Pugdhanath Changkakati, and *Harishchandra* and *Draupadīr Venibandhan* by Natneswar Mahanta, all of which were written on the Western model with, in the case of some of them, occasional use of elements of Sanskrit drama and āṅkiyā nāṭs. Of the nineteenth-century mythological plays, Purnakanta Sarma appears to be the leading one, for besides the two plays already mentioned, he also collaborated on another, *Makuntalā*. His *Haradhanu-bhaṅga* was in five acts and *Harishchandra* six, and both the plays exhibited a juxtaposition of elements of Western drama and medieval Assamese play. Another characteristic of Purnakanta, despite his

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7. Intro., *Manda-dulal*, p. 6
8. *Manchalekha*, p. 93
9. *N.N.S.*, p. 140
10. ibid., p. 140
mythological themes, is his social awareness, revealed through dialogue and songs, and this is undoubtedly a result of Western influence.

Drama leans on a stage and an audience, and this fact greatly influenced play-writing in the nineteenth-century Assam. As has been noted already, serious drama began in Assamese as early as 1857, but the number of such plays continued to be meagre and a sizeable audience was yet to be attuned to the new drama. True that nearly all the plays mentioned above were performed in towns and villages, but in most cases the theatres were improvised thatched sheds with poor seating facilities for the audience. Since 1857 efforts had been made to erect a theatre at Guwahati, but the building, which eventually came up, was destroyed by the earthquake of 1897. Not that writing of plays and their performances stopped altogether; plays still continued to be written and performed, but at a very slow pace. By the turn of the last century and with the beginning of the present, theatres began to be established at different towns, so that within few years there was an encouraging increase in the number of plays, mythological, historical and social.

Twentieth-century mythological drama may be said to have begun with Vaidehī Vicched (1901) by Devanath Baralai. Born in a family with a tradition of drama-writing—he was the

11. Manchalekha, pp. 93-94
son of Rudraram Bardalai, author of Rangal-Rangalani, one of the earliest social plays in Assamese—Devanath was also connected with the stage, and so he knew how to satisfy the taste of the audience. He knew that the story of Sita had always been popular with Assamese readers and spectators; he also knew that songs could hold his audience in rapt attention. Consequently, his six-act play written on the Western-model, contains no fewer than twenty-five songs, of which eighteen are lamentations that remind one of a medieval Assamese drama. But what is important about this play is the use of blank verse, which is an import from the West. In the opinion of Satyen Sarma, Bardalai's attempt at writing this kind of verse is no doubt praiseworthy, but he cannot be said to have achieved success in this. Yet on account of the juxtaposition in it of elements of Western drama and native ankiya nāts as well as its experimentation with a new verse form, Vaidehi-Vicched is not without some historical importance. In fact, Vaidehi-Vicched, with its ankiya nāt elements, is more like the earlier mythological plays of the nineteenth century than those to follow it in the twentieth, because although the inspiration for writing these plays came from the West, echoes of medieval Assamese plays were still heard in them. So these plays may best be regarded as preparatory works with promises for better ones to come, when the writers would come to know more of Western drama and its technique.

13. Asamiya Nātya Sahityar Jilingani, pp. 138-139
14. A.N.S., pp. 140-141
Chandradhar Barua.

It is with Chandradhar Barua that modern mythological drama really came to its own under the influence of the West that he received partly from Michael Madhusudan Dutt of Bengal and partly through his own reading of English literature. For Chandradhar Barua studied at Vidyasagar College and the Metropolitan Institute where he, like Bezbaroa and others, must have studied English as well as Bengali authors. He wrote three mythological plays, Meghnād-vadh (1903), Tilottamā-sambhav (1905) and Rājarshi (1937) which, particularly the first two, almost revolutionized modern Assamese drama by introducing blank verse and by humanizing epic and Puranic personages.

Chandradhar's first mythological play, Meghnād-vadh is apparently based on Michael Madhusudan Dutt's epic poem on the same subject. He himself acknowledges his indebtedness to Madhusudan and says that apart from changes made here and there to suit the dramatic form, he has tried his best not to depart from Dutt's ideas. In writing his poem, Madhusudan, who was widely read in European literature—he knew Greek, Latin and Hebrew besides French, German, Italian and English—was inspired by poets like Homer, Virgil, Wilton and Tasso. We do not know how much of European epic poetry Chandradhar read, but by modelling his mythological characters on Madhusudan, he gave a

15. Preface to 1st ed. of Meghnād-vadh, p. 1
new dimension to modern mythical play. Speaking of his intention to write few "Epiclings", Madhusudan said that he would not borrow Greek stories "but write, rather try to write, as a Greek would have done." So he has drawn highly on Homer for his "epicling", Meghnād-vadh. Tasso's Gerusalemme liberata, Milton's Paradise Lost, and Virgil's Aeneid also had their influence on Madhusudan. In fact, he, on his own admission, appears to conform more to Milton, whom he considers "divine", than to Homer. The influence of all these epic poets of the West conglomerates in Madhusudan with the result that in Meghnād-vadh we find something entirely different from the story in Valmiki's Rāmayana: Meghnād and Rāvana are heightened to tragic grandeur instilling in them the spirit of the age during which Madhusudan wrote.

In Chandradhar's play, the basic concept of Madhusudan is invariably followed: the characters of Indrajit (Meghnād) and Rāvana are sympathetically drawn; instead of presenting them as 'rākshasas' or demons symbolizing all evil, they are humanized and made to represent the spirit of noble heroism and patriotism. In Act III, sc. 1, where Meghnād asks for his mother's blessings before going to the battle-field, he appears before us as an undaunted patriot, who is ready to risk his all to protect his country from invaders:

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16. Western Influence in Bengali Literature, p. 141
17. ibid., pp. 141-142
18. H.R.L., p. 200
To let Rāghava smash the glories of my dynasty,
To let him besmear the golden Laṅka with the taint of infamy,
And to see it all done with my own eyes:
Fie, fie : fie, fie :
Hundred thousand times better it is to die
Than not to enter the battle-field for fear of death.

Indrajit am I,
And will I fight my enemy
To the last drop of my blood

(Meghnād-vadh, III, i, Chandradhar Baruwa-granthāvalī, p. 117)

And the character of Meghnād is ennobled even further when he is attacked at prayer by the sneaking Lakshmana, whose words, compared to Meghnād's heroic defensive, smack of cowardly opportunism at the cost of all principles of a Kshatriya or warrior:

The tiger is in trap
And who will think of principles now?
How can I follow the rules of a Kshatriya
When it comes to you?
Thy end has come,
Nor can you escape it now.
Kill my enemy I will,
Either by force or by tricks.

(Meghnād-vadh, III, iv, Chandradhar Baruwa-granthāvalī, p. 163)

No doubt Lakshmana sinks into almost a weakling before Meghnād's heroic stature; and such an attitude to the brother of Rāma,
believed to be an incarnation of God, could not even be thought of in the days prior to Western influence. This is Miltonic, and Satan must have been the model for the Meghnād of Chandrādhar. The character of Pramilā, Meghnād's wife, is again a direct borrowing from Michael Madhusudan, who, although he modelled her on Homer, Virgil and Tasso, yet gives her such touches as to make her "essentially an Indian creation not less heroic than Padminī, Durgāvatī or the Lakshmi Bāi of Jhansi." In the play Pramilā first appears as a loving wife, who lets her husband go to battle because the mother-land must be saved from foreign invaders, and when she finds that Meghnād has not returned till late in the evening, herself decides to go armed to the field of battle. Her meeting with Meghnād before he goes to battle for the last time and her self-immolation after her husband's death raise her character to tragic heights putting her in the hierarchy of the traditional Indian heroines. In fact, Chandrādhar's sympathetic treatment of characters like Rāvana and Meghnād, who from the days of the Rāmāyana have been looked upon as symbols of evil, and his expressed contempt for Vībhīṣaṇa, so long regarded as an ideal follower of Rāma, for his betrayal of the country, are in line with Madhusudan Dutt and expressive of the new ideas that swept the country in the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth under the impact of the West.

19. Western Influence on 19th-Century Bengali Poetry, p. 85

According to Jogindranath Basu, the prominent part played by Lakshmi Bāi during the Sepoy Mutiny, which took place on a few years before the composition of Meghnād-vadh, might have suggested the high characterization of Pramilā (op.cit., see foot-note).
Chandradhar, like Madhusudan, uses blank verse in his play; but his verse is more like that of Girishchandra than of Dutt. Chandradhar knew that Madhusudan's unrhymed verse or 'amritrāksar chanda' with its insistence on having fourteen syllables in each line, was more suitable to epic poetry than to drama, so he adopted the more flexible free verse used by Girishchandra Ghosh in his plays. It may be mentioned that Chandradhar, as many incline to believe, was not the first to introduce blank verse in Assamese. Before him Bholanath Das had used blank verse in his epic poem, *Sītā-haran-kāvyā* (1888) "in which the influence of Michael Madhusudan Dutt is broadly discernible." In drama Padmanath Gohain Barua in his historical play, *Jaymatī* (1900), and Devanath Wardalai in his mythological play, *Vaidehī-Vicched* (1901) had already made use of this verse; but it was certainly Chandradhar who made it an effective instrument for serious drama by making it more pliable on the model of Girishchandra. Chandradhar, like many other writers using blank verse believes that such lines should be couched in dignified and stately language, and so he has tried not to use many words of ordinary day-to-day conversation. Here is an example of his verse:

kiya bhay karichā janani?
tumul ranat mai
dubar jinicho rāghavak;
jānā nije parākram dāsar tomār,

20. H.A.L., p. 112
21. Preface to 1st ed. of *Meghnād-vad*, sakābd, 1862
taju āshisat devī,
cira rana javi meghnād;
sāmanyā rāmarprati kīya bhay janani?

(Meghnād-vadh, III, 1, Chandradhar Baruwa-granthāvalī, p. 116)

Why do you fear, mother?
Twice have I defeated Raghava
In battle fierce.
You know the strength of mine, your slave;
And by your blessings
Meghnād is ever-victorious in battle.
Why fear an ordinary Rāma?

This is very much like the metre of Girishchandra, and a kind of stateliness is no doubt achieved with the language often Sanskritized. But sometimes he goes back to the fourteen-syllable line of Madhusudan Dutt:

virar duhitā mai vīrār grihini
vir rakta pravāhit prati shire more;
prakāshi vīrār tej vīrār bhāvere,
bāhur balere āji pashim purit
cāo bāru kirupe nibāre mok rāme.

I am a hero's daughter and a hero's wife;
Heroic blood runs through every vein of mine.
Showing my heroic blood, and like a hero
I'll enter the city today with the strength of my arms.
And let's see how Rāma stops me now.

The comic characters like Sarvānanda, who has a Falstaffian flavour, and Shāṅku, do not speak blank verse: they talk in simple conversational prose much like the comic characters in Shakespeare.
Of his two other mythological plays, *Tilottamā-sambhay*, too, is based on Michael Madhusudan Dutt's blank verse poem of the same name. The play in four acts deals, as Madhusudan's "epicling", with the mutual destruction of two demon-brothers, Sunda and Upasunda, through their rivalry for the hand of Tilottama. In Madhusudan Dutt's poem, there is an unmistakable influence of Western poets such as Milton and Keats, and the theme itself might have been suggested by the Greek story of the Apple of Discord.22 The Assamese play shows the influence of Madhusudan Dutt in the development of the plot while the verse is influenced by Girishchandra. But as a play *Tilottamā-sambhay* is certainly weaker; it may better be called a verse drama, and the author points this out in his preface and asks the reader to accept it as such. In fact, "the flowing verse, the sweet rhymes, and the songs with which the drama abounds, make it look like one long poem."23 This may again be due to the influence of Madhusudan Dutt, who, in his turn, was influenced by European poets. Of characterization there is not much, and the light scenes introduced as comic interludes have not helped to give better effect.24 Likewise *Rājarshi* (1937), that deals with the Puranic story of king Harishchandra, is of "inferior technical merit",25 and apart from its blank verse, it hardly contributes anything to the

22. Western Influence on 19th-Century Bengali Poetry, p. 61
23. H.A.L., p. 154
24. ibid., p. 154
25. Assamese Literature, p. 188
Much as Chandradhar leans on Michael Madhusudan Dutt for both his major mythological plays, there is little originality about his plot development and characterization; but his skill as a playwright is revealed in creating situations as well as manipulating the verse form. Yet in the development of modern Assamese drama Chandradhar occupies an important place; it is he, who for the first time, drawing inspiration from Madhusudan Dutt, raised characters like Meghnad and Ravana to tragic heights and introduced a more flexible type of blank verse on the model of Girishchandra, which continued to be an effective medium for serious drama till the late 'fifties.

Durgeswar Sarma

Durgeswar Sarma presents a subtle blending of the spirit of the East and the West both in his drama and poetry. A successful translator of English Romantic poetry, particularly Wordsworth and Shelley—he is popularly known as the Assamese Wordsworth—Durgeswar has written a sort of philosophic poetry in which Eastern mysticism and Western romanticism conglomerate. That Durgeswar was well-read in English literature is evident from his translations as well as original writings which often echo English authors. Here are a few lines from a

poem in which Shakespeare's influence is unmistakable:

We are always inacting a play here in the world;
Each of us is taking a part in it.
We are exactly actors;
And we know how to play our rôle
Laughing, crying and dancing.  

It is an echo of Shakespeare's

All the world's a stage
And all men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His act being seven ages.

(As You Like It, II, vii, 140-143)

He also adapted two Shakespearean plays in Assamese, As You Like It and Cymbeline, and called them Chandrāvati and Padmāvatī, respectively. He himself was an actor and was connected with the Naṭya Samāj (Dramatic Club) of Jorhat.

So it is to be expected that Durgeswar Sarma's mythological plays, Pārtha-parājaya (The Defeat of Pārtha, 1909) and Bāli-vadh (The Slaying of Bāli, 1912) reveal, besides their general framework, considerable influence of Western drama in the dialogue and characterization as well. Much of this

28. Manchalekha, p. 107
influence undoubtedly comes from Shakespeare, and to quote Hem Barua, "the influence of Shakespeare's dramatic craft on the playwright is pronounced." Pārtha-parājaya deals with the defeat of Pārtha or Arjuna, the third of the Pāndavas of the Mahābhārata by Vabruvāhana, King of Manipur, who is an unrecognized son of the former. Purgeswar, although he has not departed much from his source, tries to show that Gangā's revenge motive is the main cause of Pārtha's defeat. By some stratagem Arjuna has felled the invincible Bhisma, Gangā's son, in the war of the Mahābhārata, and in order to take revenge on him the goddess comes down to the level of a human being with all her tricks and scheming. And Gangā's frantic bid to realize her revenge on Arjuna as a woman of vindictive nature, is a piece of originality in our playwright, and seems to be influenced by the revenge motif in an Elizabethan drama. Again Pārtha, the chief character of the piece, from whom the play takes its name, sinks almost into insignificance before Vabruvāhana, who, like the Meghmād of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and of Chandradhar Barua, is presented as a symbol of such qualities as undaunted courage, heroism, filial love and patriotism. At a time when feelings of nationalism and patriotism were becoming stronger, it was but natural that such a hero as Vabruvāhana would stir the imagination of an enlightened Indian like Purgeswar with the result that the king of Manipur in Pārtha-parājaya stands as a patriotically inspired hero ready to risk his all in defence of his country.

29. Assamese Literature, p. 188
30. A.N.S., p. 149
The character of Prabhāvatī is the playwright's own creation, and must have been influenced by the character of Pramīlā in the Meghnād-vadh of Wadhusudan Dutt and of Chandradhar Barua.

The play is in blank verse, and some of the lines in the dialogue, like some of his poems, reveal, sometimes clearly and at times vaguely, an influence of Shakespeare. The following lines, for example,

mānuhar shakatir kshudra kshamatār
bāhireo āche bahut bismayakar kām:
dithakat bhābībānoārā, sapanar kalpanā atit.

There are many more things
Beyond man's little power
That cannot be thought, nor dreamt of.

clearly echo Hamlet's

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

(Hamlet, I, v, 166–167)

and the following ones

bipadak parājī ranat karoḍādi dukhar nirmūl
āhibane punu ghūri shāntir topani?
lāhe lāhe karo mai maran kāmanā
maran topani eke guni bahut kathāte
duyute biram hai yamar jātana
hridyar asayya bedanā:

If I overcome danger and put an end to all my happiness in the war

31. ibid., p. 150
Will the sleep of peace come back again?
I long for death
Knowing that death and sleep are much alike.
In both, the pangs of dying and of hurt minds are calmed.

vaguely remind one of Macbeth's

- the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravel'd sleave of care
The death of each day's life, sore labour's both,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

(Macbeth, II, ii, 36-40)

The second play, Bāli-vadh dramatizes the Rāmāyana story of the killing of Bāli, king of Kiskindhyā, by Rāma. It follows the general pattern of the mythological plays of the period: it is in five acts and the medium is blank verse. Besides the general structure, the influence of Shakespeare is especially seen in the employment of ghosts of murdered characters to give information useful for the development of the plot. At the first attempt Rāma could not kill Bāli engaged in fighting with his brother Sugriva because he could not distinguish between the two. Then the spirits of Pundubhi and Maya Dānau, who on previous occasions were killed by Bāli, appear before Rāma and tell him how Bāli is to be slain apparently with a view to having revenge taken on their slayer. This is our playwright's own invention, undoubtedly inspired by Shakespeare, particularly Hamlet.32

32. ibid., pp. 151-152
It is Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903-1951) who gave "Ibsenian depth and momentum" to modern Assamese drama even with his mythological play, Sonit-kuwari (The Princess of Sonitpur), written when the writer was in his teens. Jyotiprasad, who was later to spend quite a good while in Europe, particularly in England and Germany prosecuting higher studies, had already made himself familiar with Western dramatic technique through his close contact with Calcutta as well as his own reading. In this play, we do not find the playwright's almost unique mastery over dramatic style and technique that is to be revealed in his later and more mature works, but as Birinchikumar Barua observes, "The Sonit-kuwari, composed while the dramatist was very young, combined in equal proportions the choicest talents of a budding poet and dramatist."

The budding poet-dramatist's talent is revealed in the way he handles the mythological story of Ushā, daughter of Rāñj, king of Sonitpur, and Aniruddha, grandson of Kṛishna. The popular Puranic episode, already treated in Assamese by medieval Vaisnava poets, tells how the beautiful Ushā, kept confined within a burning rampart (agnigar) and heavily guarded, dreams of the handsome Aniruddha, who is secretly lured to her chamber.

33. Jyotiprasad matriculated from the National School at Calcutta established by Chittaranjan Das. He himself informs us that even before Sonit-kuwari was first produced on the Rāñ Stage at Tezpur, he used not only to take part in plays translated from Bengali, but also saw the Bengali originals performed at Calcutta (Preface to 2nd ed. of Sonit-kuwari, p. 96).

34. H.A.L., p. 159
by her friend, Chitralekhā. When Rān comes to know of it, he challenges Aniruddha, defeats him and keeps him chained with his famous serpent-noose (nāg-pāsh). Then war follows between the armies of Rān and Krishna in which Siva himself sides with the king, his greatest disciple. Ultimately Rān, routed and humbled, acknowledges Krishna as God incarnate, and gladly marries his daughter to Aniruddha. The Vaisnava poets treated this story primarily because they wanted to show the omnipotence of Krishna. They were not much interested in the romance between Uṣhā and Aniruddha; for them it was simply a means to an end. Our young dramatist, on the other hand, working as he does under the impact of Western education and training, focusses his attention not so much on the fight between Hari and Hara (Krishna and Siva) as the romance between the young lovers. Sonit-kuwari was written at a time when Assamese romanticism, inspired by the nineteenth century Romantic Revival in England, was in full swing; and Jyotiprasad, who was some years later to write a first-rate romantic drama, Kārengar Ligiri (The Palace Maid), found in this Puranic episode a fit subject with which to experiment what he was going to develop later on.

The most telling new note is struck in the character of Chitralekhā, who, as it were, is not a corporeal being, but a symbol of love and beauty. With her the romantic imagination of the playwright soars high as does Shakespeare's with Ariel. In fact, the way Chitralekhā lures Aniruddha to Uṣhā's chamber by means of her song and hypnotic spells is reminiscent of Ariel bringing Ferdinand to the presence of Prospero and Miranda.
Jyotiprasad’s stage-directions run:

Chitra looks at Kumar (Aniruddha) and slowly goes away; Aniruddha, charmed, following.

*(Sonit-kuwari, III, v, p. 55)*

And this is how Shakespeare’s read:

Re-enter Ariel invisible, playing and singing; Ferdinand following.

*(The Tempest, I, ii, 374)*

Aniruddha follows the dancing and singing Chitralekha much in the same way as Ferdinand follows Ariel, and both come face to face most unexpectedly with their future partners: Ferdinand with Miranda, Aniruddha with Ushā. But the parallels do not go further. Ariel is a spirit executing the magic of his master, Prospero, whereas Chitralekha is a superb artist—painter, singer, dancer, all rolled into one. It is not crude magic that Chitralekha uses to lure Aniruddha, but hypnotism; and according to Banikanta Kakati, “this use of modern hypnotism in place of magic in the Puranic story is a skilful invention on the part of the playwright.”

But the most important innovations are to be found in the introduction of setting and elaborate stage-directions, and secondly, in the adaptation of Assamese music to a stage modelled...

35. Bānhi, 13th yr: No. 8, sakābda, 1847

Dr Kakati’s critique on the play is also included as an appendix in *Sonit-kuwari*, 1964, pp. 121-127
on Western fashion. No dramatist prior to Jyotiprasad gives detailed stage-directions, nor does any of the earlier playwrights show interest in elaborating setting and background. Jyotiprasad it is who for the first time introduces naturalistic technique in Assamese drama. True that his handling of the new dramatic form is rather weak in Sonit-kuwari as it was written when the author was very young, and so immature in many ways; but what matters here is the introduction of the new technique as is seen, for instance, in such stage-directions as the following:

Ushā's bed-chamber. She is fast asleep in a bed.
One of the windows remain open; the stars are seen dazzling in the sky. Madan and Rati are living in wait for shooting flower-arrows at Ushā. Then slowly and stealthily, the Dream-goddess appears, and starts looking at Ushā with all her attention.

(Sonit-kuwari, III, iii, p. 29)

Almost all the scenes begin with such elaborate setting and stage-directions, and it is done for the first time in modern Assamese drama. This technique is developed later in his more mature plays, and followed by other playwrights after him. It is Jyotiprasad, again, who for the first time dares to introduce kissing, so far considered taboo on our stage. Like Romeo kissing Juliet at their first meeting, Aniruddha, too, imprints kisses on Ushā's cheeks, although, unlike Juliet, Ushā blushes and covers her face much in the natural way of an Indian girl.

36. A.N.S., p. 157
Written as it was when the writer was very young, Sonit-kwari is not without drawbacks,\textsuperscript{38} technical as well as stylistic; but in its use of elaborate setting, naturalistic technique, and methods of modernizing mythological characters, it is almost revolutionary.

Atulchandra Hazarika

Atulchandra Hazarika (1906– ) has written a fairly large number of plays, the majority of which are on mythological themes. His mythological plays, Beulâ, Nandadulâl, Champâvatî, Kurukshetra, Sṛī-Rāmchandra, Narakāsur, Rukmiṇī-haraṇ, Nirvātītā and Satī are all based either on the epics or the Purāṇas. While discussing his plays, it must be noted that Hazarika “wrote dramas to meet the demand of the Assamese stage, which, before he started writing, had been practically monopolized by the dramas of the Bengali playwrights, Girishchandra Ghosh and Dwijendralal Roy.”\textsuperscript{39} His first play to be performed on the then famous Ban Stage was Beulâ (1923) and the success of this maiden venture inspired him to take up play-writing which he has not given up till now. In Hazarika’s plays we find, besides western influence, the influences of Sanskrit and medieval Assamese dramas as well as the Bengali Yāṭrā, which was still active in Assam, especially at the time Hazarika wrote his first play. And

\textsuperscript{38} See the critique on the play by Dr Kakati already referred to.

\textsuperscript{39} H.A.L., p. 158
the Western influence in him often comes through Bengali playwrights, for the influence of Girishchandra and Dwijendralal is strongly felt in his plays. An examination of the mythological plays of Hazarika reveals certain characteristics, which, it appears, are result of a subtle assimilation of Eastern and Western dramatic techniques and methods.

Hazarika merely dramatizes readymade stories, but he shows considerable skill in localizing situations. For this purpose he adds certain scenes or characters and subtracts others whenever necessary. Regarding this aspect of his plays, Birinchikumar Barua observes "The local atmosphere is evident in the portrayal of Rukmini's nuptials in Rukmini-haran, the cordon of the bride for groom in Beulā, road-construction by labourers in Narakāsur and the solemnizing of the marriage in Śrī-Rāmchandra." Such localizing of situations and modernizing of mythical episodes are found in some of the other plays also, and to quote Dr Barua again, "These establish a close intimacy between the reader or the spectator and the characters taken either from mythology or from everyday life." 41

Though modelled chiefly on Western dramatic structure, Hazarika's mythological plays in general reveal a sort of blending of Western and Eastern techniques. The use of the Prastāvanā for example, which is found in all his full-length mythological plays,

40. ibid., p. 156
41. ibid., p. 156
except Nandadulal and Champavati, is an instance of the influence of Sanskrit drama. But in tone these prologues are not exactly like those in Sanskrit drama. They often strike a modern note inasmuch as some of them, like the one in Narakasur, are patriotic songs urging the spectators to serve the country in whatever capacity they can. Others like those in Sri-Ramchandra and Kurukshetra, are short introductions to what is going to be presented in the plays, while the 'prastavana' in Damayanti appears to be directly modelled on Sanskrit drama with a 'Sūtradhāra' introducing the story of the play. The use of the 'prastavana', allusions to celestial voices (ākāsh Vāni), introduction of the 'Sūtradhāra' and his companion (Saṅgī) are all unmistakable traces of Sanskrit drama and medieval Assamese drama. Again, the expansiveness of the themes, lack of dramatic climax and presentation of characters as allegories rather than real human beings bring down plays like Kurukshetra, Sri-Ramchandra, and Nandadulal to the level of a yātra.

The earlier writers treated mythological themes in order to exalt the Godhead and discomfit Satanic natures represented by demoniacal characters. Hazarika, like Chandradhar, modernizes mythical characters and situations and tries to interpret them from a modernist point of view. To him Vibhiṣan of the Rāmāyana is not a person to be commended as he was to Valmiki or to most Indian writers of an earlier period, but a

42. A.N.S., p. 165
weakling who joins the enemy of his own country, while his nephew Meghnâd and son Taranisen, both of whom refuse to side with Râma, are looked upon as embodiments of patriotism and nationalism. When Vibhiṣaṇ has decided to join Râma, the incarnation of Vishnu, Taranisen says:

You know your faith best
And you are bound to follow it;
But, father: if worshipping a foreigner be religion
The sons of Lânkâ shall never pursue it.
My mother-country, the land that gave me birth,
Is greater than heaven;
And to serve that mother in life and through death
Is my only religion.

(Srî-Râmchandra, II, 11)

Meghnâd also echoes the same feeling when he ridicules Vibhiṣaṇ for following his "religion" of leaving the country and joining the foreign invaders (Srî-Râmchandra, IV, iii). In fact, the two conversations are but speeches on patriotism, glorifying the native country through the young patriots, Meghnâd and Taranisen, and casting Vibhiṣaṇ, the enemy of his own land and people. Such feelings of patriotism and nationalism run through most of his other mythological plays. In Beulâ, the playwright not only strikes a patriotic note but also emphasizes the need of international cooperation through trade and commerce:

Let friendship between Kâmrup (Assam) and the island of Lânkâ (Sri Lanka) be established through trade and commerce. Let all mankind be united this way through interactions of
nations, countries, languages and cultures.

(Beula, I, iv)

The speeches of Meghnāđ and Taranisen and this speech from Beulā are another way of saying that while we are ready to be friends with other nations, we cannot barter away our freedom for that matter. And the loudest voice of protest against the British rule in India is heard in the mouth of Śrī Vṛishna in Kurukshetra when he criticizes the oppressive rule of the Kauravas and welcomes the new age to be ushered in under Yudhisthira's guidance:

The wheel of fate has come full circle;  
The despotic monarchy has come to an end;  
And from today dawns a new age on Bhārata (India).

(Kurukshetra, V, iii, p. 155)

While the language echoes Edmund's "The wheel is come full circle" in King Lear, the feelings expressed are that of an Indian freedom fighter, who is anxiously looking forward to the days when popular rule will be established in his country.

Gandhism is a strong force in Atulchandra Hazarika, as in many other writers of pre-Independence days, and even his mythological characters often act as Gandhi would have them do. In Act II, sc. i of Śrī-Rāmchandra, Rāmchandra embraces Guhak Chandāl, a social outcaste, saying:

Untouchability is a great sin;  
And the difference between the 'high' and the 'low'
Is man's own making.
To God there is none untouchable,
Nor does He hate anybody.
You are really the Naranārāyana;
Give me an embrace of love.

And Krishna says to Yudhisthira:

O' pious king: disguised as a poor man,
You are wandering among the poor,
Living in every corner of Bharat.
You understand what the poor feels;
You have realized, too,
That the people are really the Naranārāyan.

The attitude of liberalism and humanitarianism, which the Indian intellectual developed chiefly through contact with the West, runs through most of his other plays. And this is how Fazarika modernizes mythological characters and situations in order to express the feelings and sentiments of a modern writer.

Another way in which Fazarika humanizes mythological characters is to bring them down to the level of ordinary human beings by making them mix with people such as servants, menials, boatmen and the like. So in his mythological plays, we find 'low' characters living their humdrum life and talking in colloquial prose side by side with high and exalted figures speaking blank verse. Through these ordinary mortals Fazarika "holds, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature", by giving the illusion of a realistic picture of the local scene. They also provide comic relief to the audience through their simple jokes and humorous manners. True that such characters are often imposed
from outside; they are hardly organically connected to the main theme of a play; yet they undoubtedly contribute to modernizing the else other-worldly climate of a mythological drama.

As has been noted already, Hazarika "wrote primarily for the stage in order to stamp out the inroads of Bengali yatra theatre." Mainly with this end in view he wrote plays on various subjects—and his largest number of plays belongs to the mythological group. Despite the fact that mythological plays by their very nature offer little scope for liberty on the part of the writer, Hazarika has shown ingenuity in infusing the new spirit into most of them. Although he tried to stop the inroads of Bengali plays and yatra upon the Assamese stage, "his plays borrowed heavily from Bengali prototypes in the particular genre, following the familiar example of rivals being also emulators." It is true that the sheer number of Hazarika's plays—they come to nearly forty—blind critics to his many flaws, technical as well as stylistic; but one thing remains certain: while he follows the Western model in writing his plays, he is not a slavish imitator of everything Western; instead, he takes something from both Indian and Western dramatic crafts, and assimilates, or at least, tries to assimilate them, in order to evolve a form of his own.

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43. Assamese Literature, p. 189

44. Banikanta Roy, The Illustrated Weekly of India, Sept 27, 1970. This assessment of Hazarika as a playwright is also included in Hazarika-sahitya-pratibha, pp. 34-346
Others

There were other playwrights who wrote in the hey day of mythological plays, but they all followed the general pattern, and hardly any of them has to show anything new, either in style or technique. Yet mention may be made of one earlier play, Shrīvasta-Chintā (Shrīvasta and Chintā), by Indreswar Barthakur, where an attempt appears to have been made at blending the methods of Sanskrit and Western dramas: "Although the play is modelled on Western technique", observes Satyendranath Sarma, "the influence on it of the art of Sanskrit drama is discernible to a considerable extent."45 Based on a Puranic episode, Shakespearean influence is seen in the setting and arrangement of some of the scenes. The 'high' characters speak blank verse, while the 'low' ones talk in colloquial prose. But, as Maheswar Neog has pointed out, the length of the play and the quality of the blank verse make it rather a play to be read than performed.46 Another playwright to present something worth taking note of is Mitradev Mahanta, who, in his Pracchanna Pāndav and Vaidehī-viyog, particularly in the first one, tries to make a blending of Western and traditional Assamese drama techniques. The introduction of the Sūtradhāra, use of a Sanskrit sloka announcing the names of actors as in the cast of a cinema, use of prose dialogue all through the play, elaborate stage-directions as in a naturalistic play, modernizing sentiments of mythological characters—are

45. A.N.S., p. 158
46. A.S.R., p. 309
unmistakable signs of an attempt to blend modern dramatic technique with the methods of Sanskrit and traditional Assamese drama. Not that Mahanta makes instant success in this, but his attempts at least indicate a tendency to change opening interesting possibilities. The other play, Vaidehi-viyog is cast very much in the prevalent mould: it is in five acts divided into scenes, and the medium is blank verse interspersed with prose used mainly by the 'low' characters.

Conclusion

Mythological plays appear to be on the decline after 1940, and the few plays that have come out since then are mostly plays written before the forties.47 "After the Second World War and the attainment of Independence", writes Birinchipiram Barua, "Assamese literature has entered a new era of creativity and writers are exploiting new themes."48 In drama also this change is visible: playwrights have taken to dealing with themes that affect life and society; and to quote Dr Barua again, "Dramas on classical themes suffer a temporary eclipse, and the little, if any, that is based on classical topics is a reinterpretation of life in new light."49 Drama primarily thrives on an audience, and a play to be successful must satisfy the taste of the audience for whom it is written. After the Second World War

47. A.N.S., pp. 178-179
49. ibid., p. 164
and the attainment of Independence, and with fast political and economic changes following them, people's tastes have changed and epic and Puranic stories, however ingeniously they are retold and dramatized, have little appeal for them. This is the reason why mythological plays have lost ground, and their place has been taken by plays on social and psychological themes.

The forties were a very crucial period for the people of Assam. At a time when the struggle for Independence was intensified and people in large numbers rallied round their leaders, the War broke out bringing in untold miseries to them. Life was seriously unsettled: there was Japanese bombing over Manipur, and many people living in towns went into villages as there was massing of soldiers in the former. This greatly affected play-writing and acting. There was so much of uncertainty about everything that hardly anyone thought of writing a play as it had little chance of being performed. Besides, some of the theatres were closed at least for some time. All this led to a temporary lull in theatrical activities. This state of the drama is summarized by Maheswar Neog in the following lines:

When the theatre revived after the brief spell of the War, it was not the serious type of mythological and historical plays with their heavy subject-matter that came to be written and staged. It is in social comedy and melodrama with 'life's little ironies' that histrionic pleasure was sought. There was, it seems, a serious change of outlook even on the stage. People became less God-fearing and mythology had,
therefore, now lesser significance and appeal for them. History became almost a closed book, for even a little going back in time would bring before people's eyes the gruesome recent past.50.

Other factors also combined to bring about such changes in the attitude of writers, readers and spectators alike. The scars left by the war, the separation of the country, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the bitter communal tangles that happened during those unfortunate days, and the unsettled state of the new-born nation's economy—all these created a sort of nightmare in the mind of the people. And its impact on literature, especially drama, was inevitably felt. Nobody would go to a theatre to see a play where gods and demons fight; even a historical play about the distant past would no longer appeal to a post-War and post-Independence audience. Drama must depict the many problems that confronted life and society as well as grapple with the complexities which grew in the psychology of the post-War man. It meant that the centre of dramatic writing, like any other type of literary composition, became man placed in a complex situation. The influence of Gandhism, the growing popularity of Marxian philosophy and Freudian psycho-analysis—all this gave a new boost to the insight of our playwrights, who, inspired by dramatists like Ibsen, Chekhov and Shaw, took to writing plays, where not gods and demons with their declamatory speeches but real men and women revealed in a few psychological moments, became the focus of attention.

50. Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 34