Chapter VII

Historical Drama

I

Historical Drama Before Independence

Assam has a rich tradition of historical literature that dates back to the beginning of the seventeenth century. Dr G.A. Grierson remarks that "The Assamese have just reason to be proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in history, a branch of study in which the rest of India is, as a rule, curiously deficient."¹ "Buranji", the Assamese word for history, is originally a Tāi word, and means "a store-house of knowledge for the ignorant."² This shows that great importance was attached to the writing and study of history even in medieval Assam, long before the coming of the British. The Āhoms, a branch of the Tāi race, ruled Assam for six hundred years, and during that period they left behind a vast mass of chronicles and historical documents. These chronicles were written generally by men having comprehensive knowledge about state affairs, and so apart from certain panegyrics, they are factual records of events, put in language usually free from sentimental rhetoric.³ This tradition was carried on by some

2. History in Modern Indian Literature, p. 41
3. H.A.I.L., p. 98; History in Modern Indian Literature, p. 43
chroniclers of the nineteenth century; but "All these chroniclers of the early British period appear to have been admirers of the British rule."^4

During that long period prior to the coming of the British, history was only written and preserved; nobody thought of using it as a basis for creative literature. It is a curiosity of our literature that despite so much of importance given to the writing and study of history, it remained expressly religious in nature. Even when historical records of kings and princes were in abundance, our pre-British writers did not think of writing creatively on these subjects. It was only after the coming of the British and the introduction of Western education in the province that historical events came to be used as themes in poetry, drama and fiction. And the modern Assamese dramatist began to use history as subject-matter of drama not earlier than the beginning of the present century: the plays written since the beginning of Western influence up to the end of the last century were mostly on mythological themes with a few exceptions dealing with social subjects.

It has been noted in Chapter IV that the historical play in Assamese begins with Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Jaymati*, published in 1900. Since that date till the Second World War quite a good number of plays on historical themes have come out, and the number alone is a pointer to their popularity. The

^4. History in Modern Indian Literature, p. 54
popularity must have been due to a number of factors among which the growth of nationalism and patriotism was undoubtedly the strongest. Regarding the growth of the chronicle play in England, Allardyce Nicoll says that it "was popular in the nineties of the sixteenth century, partly because it allowed of bustle and action, partly because it could mingle together thoughts serious and merry, tragic and comic, and partly because there had come over England in those years a wave of patriotic sentiment." This can very well be said of the growth of the history play in Assamese also. There was a countrywide reawakening in all activities of life, accompanied by the revival of interest in India's glorious past. The struggle for political liberation that took a definite shape with the formation of the Indian National Congress and the growing awareness that the country's past was not so bad as the present impelled our writers to look at their country's history from a different point of view. They found that the great heroes of history and the victorious battles they fought could symbolize the contemporary struggle of the Indian people for Independence. Secondly, the presentation of the great historical figures on the boards stirred the nationalist and patriotic sentiments of the theatre-goers whose numbers were growing rapidly. Another reason why these plays were popular was that they, as Nicoll says, "allowed of bustle and action." In many ways, our audiences of the latter part of the

5. British Drama, p. 205
nineteenth century and the initial years of the twentieth were much like those of the Elizabethan audience who were fond of witnessing plays full of bustle and external action. And the history plays with battles and declamatory speeches could give them what they wanted. This accounts for the popularity of the mythological plays in the initial stage of the Western influence, and when our playwrights, some of whom had already produced mythological plays, took to writing historical dramas, they were undoubtedly influenced by this factor, so that most of the earlier historical plays are full of bustling external action. Lastly, by dramatizing events in the lives of heroes and heroines whom the people, forming the audience, idolized, and even deified, the historical plays greatly appealed to the popular mind. What Birinchikumar Barua says about the popularity of the history plays and the rôle they played in awakening the national consciousness is well worth quoting here. He writes, "These plays afford great scope for dramatic action - in the fights, the heroic deeds and the like with which history abounds and which make a drama more captivating to the laity."

"Their prevalence", continues Professor Barua, "also indicated the love of historical literature for which Assam has a unique reputation. The playwright depicts the glorious past of the land, her valiant and chivalrous sons and daughters whose exploits form an immortal saga of heroism. Out of them a new demand is made upon the heroism, sacrifice and faith of the present generation for liberating the fatherland from foreign yoke. The historical play thus contributed in no small measure
to the reawakening of the people to their social and political problems."  

We have seen in the preceding chapter how Shakespeare was a leavening influence in the development of modern mythological drama. In the historical group of plays, Shakespeare's influence is even more strongly felt, and quite naturally. It has been noted in Chapter IV that Shakespeare's plays were read with great interest by our pioneers in drama and poetry in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Besides reading Shakespeare's plays, including the history plays, they also had the chance of witnessing the performances of many of these plays in Calcutta theatres in the original as well as in Bengali translations and adaptations. Of the plays, the histories with expressions of nationalist and patriotic feelings in them must have had greater appeals to our young writers born and brought up in an atmosphere of national reawakening. Shakespeare's histories, as we know, are informed by the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. Sometimes, as in King John, the playwright even deviates from history in order to praise his own land and people.  

Our writers of historical plays also selected such themes from the history of Assam as could give them ample scope to unleash their patriotic sentiments. At the initial stages, they confined themselves to Assam's history, but gradually they

6. H.A.L., p. 149

7. Commenting on the patriotism in King John, Nicoll says, "Nowhere has Shakespeare deviated so much from history in order to praise the English and condemn the French" (British Drama, p. 207).
extended their subject-matter to include episodes from the history of the Rajputs and the Marathas. In all these plays, whether they deal with the history of Assam or with the history of any other heroic people of India, patriotism is an animating principle. In characterization and in presentation of situations, Shakespeare's influence on these plays is strongly pronounced. Kings and commanders in an Assamese historical play, written during this period, talk and behave much in the same away as such characters do in Shakespeare. Again, as in Shakespeare, there is in most of these plays a mingling of the serious and the comic. The style, of course, is undeniably Shakespearean with most playwrights using blank verse interspersed with prose. In Bengal, playwrights like Girischandra Ghosh, Dwijendralal Ray and Kshirod Prasad Vidyavinod had already written plays where patriotism reflected from the contemporary Swadeshi movement was an informing element, and they, too, must have stimulated our playwrights to write historical plays. Emile Legouis says that Shakespeare turned to the chronicles because "patriotism was the link which most strongly united the very mixed audiences in the playhouses." This is true of the history plays in Assamese also. In the beginning of the present century, when the first historical plays were written, nothing could have appealed to our audiences more than scenes taken from national history. At a time when even mythological characters were used to express

the writer's patriotic and nationalist sentiments, the real heroes and heroines of history indubitably enabled them to give free scope to these sentiments. And the people with whom these heroes and heroines of history were popular naturally flocked to the theatres in great numbers. Thus, though the historical play in Assamese began somewhat later than mythological and social plays, it became popular almost immediately, so that between 1900 and the Second World War quite a good number of plays were written and produced.

Padmanath Gohain Barua

Padmanath Gohain Barua, who began his dramatic career with a farcical piece, became the first historical playwright in Assamese when his Jaymati came out in 1900. This was followed by three other plays, Gadadhar (1907), Sadhani (1910) and Lachit Barphukan (1915). All these plays are based on the history of Assam during the Ahom rule. The first play shows how Chulikpha or Lara Rajā (the Boy King), in a desperate attempt to eliminate all his rivals to the throne, got Jaymati tortured to death because she refused to divulge the whereabouts of Gadāpāni, her husband, who was considered to be the king's greatest rival. This theme is followed up in his next play, Gadādhar. Gadādhar, being pursued by the king's detectives, disguised himself and took shelter at his brother-in-law's house at Gauhati where he mustered an army with which he attacked the Lara Rajā, defeated him and became king himself. Lachit Barphukan is based on the famous battle of Sāraīghat between the Mughals
under Rājā Rāmsimha of Ambar and the Assamese under Lāchit Barphukan, where the latter came out victorious. Šādhanī deals with the semi-historical story of Šādhanī, daughter of a king of the Chutiyās and married to a commoner who later became King Nitipāl. In the conflict that ensued between the Chutiyās and the Āhoms, Nitipāl was killed, and Šādhanī, for fear of losing her chastity, killed herself.

Patriotism is the informing principle in all these plays. Jaymatī refused to disclose the whereabouts of Prince Gadādhar not only because he was her dear consort, but also because he was looked as the one who would restore good government to the politically chaotic country. Gadādhar had to sacrifice even his dearest wife for a far greater cause than his personal safety: he was determined to put an end to the utter disorder into which his country was plunged owing to the king's weakness and intrigues among the nobility. Šādhanī drowned herself because she considered it better to die than to live under a foreign yoke. Lāchit Barphukan is the very epitome of patriotism: determined to drive back the Mughals, he even beheaded his own uncle, because the latter neglected the construction of a rampart which was to be built overnight if the country was to be saved. "My uncle can never be greater to me than my country", says Lāchit, "and if the rampart is not completed before dawn, none shall go alive."9 And this had

9. Lāchit Barphukan, IV, iv, Racanāvalī, p. 236
the expected effects. Terrified at the spectacle, the sleeping workers got on their feet and started working so hard that the rampart was completed in time and the enemy was successfully stalled.

In structure, all these plays are much like a major Elizabethan play having five acts, subdivided into scenes. There are in all these plays gay scenes thrown in between the serious ones. Even a hurried reading through any of these dramas will give one the impression that Shakespeare must have been used as a model for characterization as well as the general arrangement of scenes. As in most Shakespearean plays, a scene opens with little or no stage-directions, and the setting is not described at all. The words, praves and prasthān, Assamese equivalents of ‘enter’ and ‘exit’, are used much in the way Shakespeare does. Except Lāchit Barphukan, the others are in blank verse, interspersed with prose used at all times by the ‘low’ characters and at certain moments by the ‘high’ characters according to moods and situations. The rejection of blank verse in Lāchit Barphukan, the last of his historical plays, only shows how great Shakespeare’s influence was on Gohain Barua at the earlier stages of his career as a historical drama writer. It may be presumed that he used blank verse because Shakespeare had used it, but when he came to realize that it would neither suit a historical character nor appeal to his audience he gave it up, and his last play is entirely in prose.

Jaymati is Gohain Barua’s first attempt at writing a tragic drama. In spite of the fact that the first modern drama
in Assamese is a social tragedy, the plays written and published between 1857 and 1900 are either farcical pieces or mythological plays with only one exception, Rāṅgal-Rāṅgalanī, which strikes a tragic note but is of little merit both technically and stylistically. Gohain Barua it is who for the first time after Rām-Navami makes an attempt to write a tragic drama basing his work on the life of the most celebrated of heroines in the history of Assam. Nearly all our leading critics are one in asserting that Jaymati is a tragedy, because they find in the historical character of this princess everything that goes into the making of a tragic heroine. Tragedy is anathema in Indian dramaturgy, and in Western literature tragedy has almost always been associated with the masculine. The tragic figure is either a man with certain amount of hardness and sternness in his character, or a woman stripped of nearly all the womanly qualities, so that she comes very near to being masculine in everything she does. "The central figure, then, of all great tragedies," says Allardyce Nicoll, "will be a man, or else a woman who, like Lady Macbeth or Iphigenia or Medea, has in her temper some adamant qualities and severity of purpose not ordinarily associated with the typically feminine." Professor Nicoll observes further that

The feminine in high tragedy, we may repeat, must either be made hard, approaching the masculine

11. The Theory of Drama, p. 157
Looked at from this point of view, Jaymati comes very near being a tragic heroine. At the beginning of the play she is full of the womanly qualities, but when she is questioned about her husband's whereabouts, she shows that she is made of sterner stuff. She refuses to say anything about Gadadhara, because he is not only her dear consort, but the future of the country itself depends on his safety. And so, she finds herself pitted against the powers of the king and his court. She is imprisoned and tortured, and yet she would not tell where her husband is. With iron determination she endures all her sufferings till she dies tied to the post with the executioners about her. According to Aristotle, the act which undoes the tragic hero is 'hamartia' or an error. It means that the calamity is not imposed from outside; it proceeds from within, the hero in some way contributing to his fall. Yet the action that produces the calamity need not necessarily be a fault; it may even be a virtue like overwhelming love or nobility of spirit. To Aristotle, of course, even this is a flaw, because "he believed that the good life generally consists not in one or a few intense and heroic acts, but in the lifelong practice of moderation."  

Jaymati appears to come very close to this

12. ibid., p. 158
concept of tragedy: the heroine's very virtue, her nobility of spirit and overwhelming love for her husband and her country proves her undoing.

Jaymatī, then, is responsible, at least partly, for the tragedy that befalls her. The tragedy in Sādhani, on the other hand, is of a different kind. Sādhani is a princess married to a commoner, who afterwards becomes the ruler of her father's kingdom and comes to be known as Nītipāl. Nītipāl proves to be a weak and irresponsible king and fails to defend the country against the Ahom aggressors. Consequently, he is killed in a battle, and Sādhanī, refusing to give herself and the mysterious treasures so long guarded by her father, up to the enemy, kills herself. Sādhanī's suffering does not stem from any flaw in her nature; she suffers because people closely related to her have made mistakes. She in no way influences the course of action, nor does she try to do so. Her unexpected marriage with a commoner just to satisfy her father's whims shows that she is fated to the type of calamity that befalls her. And yet Sādhanī is a tragedy: it is like what E.M.W. Tillyard calls, the "tragedies of simple suffering, where the sufferers are not greatly to blame." 14

Gadādhar is a corollary of the Jaymatī theme. It shows how Gadādhar, after Jaymatī has been tortured to death, wanders in disguise in order to evade the king's soldiers, till he arrives at Gauhati where he musters a strong force with the help

of the viceroy and his close relative, Bandar Barphukan. Gadādhār attacks Gargāon, the capital of Assam, defeats the king and his supporters, and becomes king himself. The play ends with his coronation striking a note of hope. The country has for long been in a chaotic state, both politically and economically, and a new society is to be ushered in under the rule of king Gadādhār.

"I promise to my subjects (that) the propagation of peace is my chief aim", declares the new king just a few lines before the play ends. But Gohain Barua has not been able to prepare the character of Gadādhār for the great tasks that lie ahead. The Gadādhār of Gohain Barua's play is moody, introspective and eloquent, so that he fails to give the slightest indication that he is going to be the great ruler that history tells us he was. It is for this reason that Birinchikumar Barua finds his character disappointing. Gadādhār first appears with a long soliloquy that runs to nearly a hundred lines, where his procrastinating nature is clearly revealed. In other matters, the playwright almost invariably keeps close to the historical facts, yet he shows originality in the creation of the character of Rambhā. Rambhā is the daughter of Salāl Gohain, the king's deputy at Darrang, where Gadādhār, disguised as a bard, takes refuge. She instantly falls in love with Gadādhār, but helps him to escape because she knows that his life is not safe in her father's court. This episode of Rambhā and Gadādhār is developed

15. Gadādhār, V, vi, Racanāvalī, p. 123
17. Gadādhār, I, ii, Racanāvalī, p. 85
as a sort of miniature sub-plot having some impact on the main theme. Rambha not only helps Gadadhar to escape, she also gives him secret information concerning her father's court; and but for this role played by Rambha, the play might have taken a different course.

In Lāchit Barphukan, the playwright keeps close to history in so far as the main plot is concerned, but he adds two subsidiary episodes in an obvious attempt to present variety to the audience. Both these episodes are based on love. One of them deals with the love between Pijali Gābharu, Lāchit's daughter, and Prince Gandharvanārāyan, who are united after the victory at Sarāighat. The other episode is more ingeniously planned, and has some relation to historical facts. According to a previous peace agreement concluded with Birjumālā, the Ahom king had offered a princess, named Ramani Gābharu, as a gift to the Mughal emperor. Gohain Barua presents this princess as a lover of Lāchit Barphukan and makes her come back to Assam disguised as a personal attendant to Rāmsimha. She risks her life to come back to Assam, because she loves Lāchit and her own country: "It's time I thought how to save the country of my birth. My birth (as a human being) will be meaningful only when I can do at least some good to my country at this hour of danger." So, when she finds Nasrat Khān trying to strike Lāchit from the back, she throws away her disguise, fights with the Mughal captain and gets killed. Thus, she sacrifices her life for the sake of her country as well as of

18. Lāchit Barphukan, I, ii, Racanāvalī, p. 203
Laehit Barphukan whom she loved so much and on whom the country's future depends. Through this subsidiary story the playwright not only dramatizes patriotic sentiments, but also caters for the tastes of that section of the audience who looked for thrilling action in a drama. But none of these secondary plots are integrated to the main plot. "Minor actions or subplots are, therefore, admitted on one condition, which is, however, indispensable", observes W.H. Hudson, "that all the elements of the plot are woven together and made interdependent as cooperating factors in the evolution of the plot as a whole." Gohain Barua introduces subplots in imitation of Western drama, but he fails to handle them in such a way as to make them contribute to the unity of action.

It is to be noted that Gohain Barua wrote mainly for a popular stage. In those days there were fewer means of recreation, and a popular audience would sit over a play for a whole night if it could give them amusement. This is why all his historical plays are long; characters are many; and the serious and the comic mingle in all of them. There are sensational scenes with girls disguised as boys and brandishing swords; there are long soliloquies and declamatory speeches; there are all sorts of physical violence and what not. It is hardly to be doubted that for all this Gohain Barua draws chiefly on Shakespeare. He shows ingenuity in delineating common characters with their rustic

19. An Introduction to the Study of Literature, pp. 243-244
20. A.N.S., p. 207
simplicity, and there is no doubt that these scenes and characters are modelled on Shakespeare's knockabout low-life scenes introduced for contrast or light relief. True, Gohain Barua's historical plays are mostly long and diffused; they also suffer from serious technical drawbacks; yet as the first attempts in Assamese at writing historical plays after the style and technique of Western drama, these plays are of no little importance. It was Gohain Barua who inspired his younger contemporaries to write such plays, which gradually increased in number as the years passed.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938)

Commenting on Bezbaroa as a writer, Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterji says that "there was no branch of literature which he did not touch, and there was nothing he touched which he did not adorn." He 'touched' and 'adorned' the drama too, and it is he who placed the Assamese historical play on a firm footing. Padmanath Gohain Barua had pioneered the work and left it at a particular stage of growth. Bezbaroa took it up, developed it further, and made it into a distinct genre capable of standing by itself. Bezbaroa wrote seven plays, besides a few irregular playlets. Of these, three are on historical themes: Jaymathi-kuwarī, Chakradhvajasimha and Belimār (1915). It may be noted that Bezbaroa's earlier dramatic works were either farcical pieces

21. 'The Nineteenth Century Renaissance in India and Lakshmināth Bezbarā of Assam' in Lakshmināth Bezbarā, the Sāhityarathī of Assam, p. 9
or light comedies, and when he began to write serious historical plays, he was already a middle aged man. It signifies that before he set about writing historical plays, Bezbaroa had made the necessary preparations for it by studying the history of Assam minutely and observing the details of Shakespearean dramatic technique on which he draws heavily.

When Bezbaroa was a college student at Calcutta he was as much impressed and fascinated by the poetry of Shelley, Keats and Milton as by the dramas of Shakespeare. He informs us in his autobiography that Shakespeare’s Hamlet, King John, King Henry the Fourth and A Midsummer Night’s Dream were his textbooks at college, and that he intended to write some plays like those in Assamese. With this end in view, he scribbled two or three scenes of a play to be called Hemchandra, apparently on the model of Hamlet. But he gave it up and tried to write another, Dinar Sapon after A Midsummer Night’s Dream and that, too, was never completed. He also undertook to translate Hamlet into Assamese, but did not proceed beyond the first scene. All this shows that Shakespeare had great fascination for Bezbaroa, and that he aimed at introducing Shakespeare’s plays to Assamese readers and audience either by translating them or writing plays himself in imitation of them. But gradually he came to realize that both translation and direct imitation of Shakespeare would be neither desirable nor stimulating, so he took to writing plays where Shakespearean characteristics are assimilated with something that his native genius creates.

22. Mor Jivan Sowaran, Granthāvalī, I, p. 54
And so he wrote the three historical plays in his maturer years where the influence of Shakespeare is very conspicuous. "Through these plays", observes Maheswar Neog, "the flood-gates of Shakespearean influence on Assamese drama were flung open." But it should not be understood that Rezbaroa is merely imitative, and that he has no philosophy of his own regarding the history play. Far from it. His idea of a historical play is clearly set down in the preface to Belimār, the last of his historical trilogy thus:

The duty of a historical playwright is to represent the historical past by reanimating the historical personalities and their deeds without materially altering the historical facts, incidents and characters. I have, therefore, tried to portray the historical heroes and heroines of my plays as they are described or represented in history. I have neither painted them in blacker nor in more brilliant colour than what history has said about them. To embellish the historical figures so as to make them ideal heroes and heroines will be a deviation from the path of writing a true historical play. You can mould the characters of imaginary men and women according to your choice, but while doing so care should be taken that the characters of your own creation may not alter the course of historical events or cripple the main historical personalities of the play. Side by side with the historical characters, imaginary characters bearing different colours and serving different purposes may be introduced; otherwise the play would be a dry presentation of historical facts. These extra characters are like so

23. A.S.R., p. 303
many decorative elements that go to embellish the main characters and incidents, and, therefore, should not be used as impediments which retard the free movement of the historical personalities. It should always be borne in mind that all the men and women, historical or imaginary, irrespective of their rôle or status, belong to a particular period of history, and they should be judged accordingly.24

This observation of Bezbaroa about the historical play is quoted in length, because it not only gives us an idea of what he himself thought about this type of drama, but will help us to see how Western influence—particularly Shakespearean influence—worked in him. It has already been noted how the growing spirit of patriotism and nationalism was at the root of the growth of the historical play. With Bezbaroa the love of Shakespeare was an added factor, for it was in the historical play that he found scope to realize his hope of writing plays in Assamese after the great master. All his three historical plays are based on the history of Assam during the Ahom regime. Jaymati deals with the story of faithfulness and self-sacrifice of Princess Jaymati, who laid down her life for the cause of her husband and her country. Chakradhvajasimha unfolds a glorious chapter in the history of Assam culminating in the defeat of the Mughal invaders under Ramsimha by the Assamese under Lachit Barphukan. Belimar (The Sunset) deals with the history of decadence and fall of the Ahom

power in Assam. Padmanath Gohain Barua, it has been seen, had already dramatized the Jaymati, Gadapani and Lachit Borphukan themes in his historical plays, which were by and large structured after Shakespeare. But Bezbaroa did what his predecessor did not or could not do: he infused life into the dry bones of historical figures by reanimating the dead personalities with the help of the great creative powers he was endowed with. Bezbaroa's plays, serious or comic, do not reveal any influence of Sanskrit drama or the ahikiyā nāts: ancient Indian dramaturgy does not seem to have any appeal to him. On the other hand, the style and technique of the Elizabethan dramatists, especially Shakespeare, appear to have the greatest fascination for him, so that he develops the dramatic form much on their line. Division of a play into five acts, each being subdivided into varying number of scenes; juxtaposition of tragic and comic elements; use of asides, long soliloquies and declamatory speeches; placing of a light anticipatory scene before tragic or serious one; and presentation of 'low' characters with all their rustic simplicity and mannerism are some of the devices employed by Bezbaroa which he naturally imbibed from Shakespearean plays. These characteristics are common to all his three historical plays, but a separate treatment of each of them will show how he assimilated the foreign influence with his own native genius.

The plot of Jaymati builds up against the background of political chaos in Assam in the seventies of the seventeenth

25. ibid., p. 138
century when within a few years the power-hungry and unscrupulous nobility enthroned, dethroned and killed several princes till the Prime Minister (Buḍhāgoḥāin) installed one Chulikphā or the Lārā Rajā (Boy King) who soon became just a puppet in the hands of the former. There was a custom among the Āhoms, the ruling tribe, that a physically handicapped prince could not lay claim to the throne, and so the king at the instigation of the Prime Minister started maiming or killing all the potential claimants to the throne, so that his position could remain unchallenged. But Gadāpāṇi, the ablest and strongest of the princes, made good his escape at the instance of his wife, Jaymatī, and all efforts of the puppet king to trace him out failed. Advised by the Prime Minister, the king, then, summoned Jaymatī to the court, and when she refused to divulge the whereabouts of her husband, ordered her to be tortured. Jaymatī did not submit to the inhuman treatment meted out to her, and the torture continued for sixteen days until she died without uttering a single word.

The play opens with a serio-comic scene where through the conversation between a cook and a housemaid, the audience indirectly informed of the political condition of the day. In the second scene, the playwright draws a picture of the happy conjugal life of Jaymatī and Gadāpāṇi only to intensify the tragedy that befalls the princess at the end. The play is apparently based on the conflict of the two rival claimants to the throne, but the real dramatic conflict develops between Jaymatī and Buḍhāgoḥāin, the Prime Minister.26 The Buḍhāgoḥāin

26. ibid., p. 140
aims at becoming king himself by eliminating all the eligible claimants to the throne, and this he reveals in one of his long soliloquies, while Jaymati is determined not to divulge the whereabouts of her husband, heedless of the calamity that threatens her life. Compared to the obstinacy and self-will of the Budhagohain, the king sinks into a nonentity. He is just a puppet in the hands of the former reeling and staggering at the thought of Gadapani being alive. Like Lady Macbeth, he has not been able to sleep since the day Jaymati was arrested. Whenever he goes to bed he fancies that Gadapani's spear is thrusting on his breast. His mental imbalance has become such that, like Lady Macbeth, he suffers from somnambulism, and the scene where it is shown is clearly an echo of Shakespeare.

Besides the historical characters, the playwright has himself created a few others of whom the most fascinating is Dalimi, a Naga girl of wonderful quality, who has stirred the imagination of readers and critics of Bezbaroa since the day Jaymati was brought out. There have been attempts to see if Bezbaroa had any particular source to draw on for this little girl of uncommon gifts. Before him Padmanath Gohain Barua made an attempt at such a creation, but his Jinu of Gadapani faded before she flowered. Dalimi, on the other hand, is a full grown daughter of Nature, who, although she is only eleven years of age, stands before us as a symbol of love and beauty. She is a

27. Jaymati-kuwari, IV, iv, Granthaval, II, pp. 1158-1159
28. ibid., III, i, p. 1150
creation of a poet-dramatist writing under the full impact of Romanticism and is clearly reminiscent of a creature like Shakespeare's Miranda and Wordsworth's Lucy. Gadāpāṇi meets Dālimī, daughter of a village headman (Gām) during his fugitive days when he is taking refuge with the headman's family in the Naga hills. To Gadāpāṇi she appears like a mysterious being smiling and singing with the streams and running after butterflies. To us, readers and spectators, she is a happy blending of physical beauty and mental warmth, sweetness and simplicity, knowledge and ignorance, precocity and boldness behoving a creature born and brought up under the tender care of Nature. At the very first meeting she is fascinated by Gadāpāṇi, the manly and dignified plainsman, and saves his life from his pursuers by killing them with her deadly arrows. Gadāpāṇi, too, finds solace in the company of this innocent girl, but his love for his country and his wife is too strong to keep him playing with her any longer. So one day, sadly and stealthily, he struts away from the sheltering roof of Dālimī's father never to return again. And Dālimī, when she finds that Gadāpāṇi is no more with her, jumps to death in a stream that winds its way to the plains. Such a creature of Nature, as Satyen Sarma points out, is, no doubt, reminiscent of Wordsworth's Lucy. But it is Shakespeare's Miranda who appears to have been in the mind of Bezbaroa when he created Dālimī. Maheswar Neog calls Dālimī a younger sister of Miranda. This remark of Professor Neog is significant. Miranda

29. ibid., III, ii, p. 1151
30. "The historical plays of Lakshminath Bezbaroa", op.cit., p. 140
31. Ādhunik Asamiyā Sāhitya, p. 22
of *The Tempest* was only three years old when she came to the island with her father, and since then she has not seen any human being except Prospero. So at the first sight she falls in love with Ferdinand and replies back to her father's reproofs in the following way:

My affections
Are then most humble, I have no ambition
To see a goodlier man.

(*The Tempest*, I, ii, 482-484)

Dālimī, too, is born and brought up in the jungles of the Naga hills, and she has not seen any young man from the valley before she meets Gadāpāṇi. So she is attracted towards him, loves him and tells him that if he goes away leaving her alone, she will throw herself into the running stream and go wherever it takes her. But the parallel between Miranda and Dālimī does not go further: the love between Ferdinand and Miranda is the natural love of two young persons that finds fulfilment in marriage, but the love between Dālimī and Gadāpāṇi is of transcendental nature. Dālimī, as it were, is not a human being of flesh and blood; she is a poem, a dream. "That one girl—not a girl, but a dream of happiness", says Gadāpāṇi, "and I have been charmed by that dream all these days." Such a creature is possible only when Romanticism is at its highest.

32. Jaymatī-kuwarī, IV, iii, op.cit., p. 1158
33. ibid., IV, v, p. 1167
Bezbaroa also introduces a number of minor characters like Pithu Chângmâi, Nenâi Chamuwa, Manâi Kâdi, Litik Chipâdâr, Khuhutîâ Pandit and Jalahu, and the scenes where they appear "not only serve as comic interludes, but also convey the reaction of the common people to the political intrigues and machinations."

Through these characters and scenes Bezbaroa tries to give a true picture of contemporary Assamese life outside the court circles, but there is no doubt that in presenting them he had in his mind similar characters and scenes in Shakespeare. The influence of Shakespeare's Fool on the character of Khuhutîâ Pandit (The Witty Pandit) is unmistakable indeed. Like the Fool, who is in constant company with the suffering Lear, the Khuhutîâ Pandit, too, is very much with the Budhâgosbain, who finds pleasure in his company even in the midst of the cares and anxieties that fill the Prime Minister's life. This witty pundit, like the Fool, also makes pithy comments in the course of his seemingly meaningless talks. In short, the comic characters and scenes are presented much on the model of Shakespeare. They not only relieve the nerves of the audience strained too much by tragic and serious matter, but also heighten the intensity of the main theme through contrasts and ironic comments.

Chakradhvajasimha dramatizes a glorious chapter in the history of Assam. It deals with the liberation of Gauhati from Mughal occupation, the second invasion of Assam by the Mughals under Râmsimha, and their crushing defeat at the famous battle of

34. 'The historical plays of Lakshminath Bezbaroa', op.cit., p. 140
35. Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 25
Sarāighāt. The play, obviously, has two phases, the first showing the reoccupation of Gauhati by the Assamese, while the second depicts the war between the Mughals and the Assamese ending in the rout of the former. The play is a spectacular display of patriotism, and the playwright himself tells us in his preface that his primary aim is to show in dramatic form the glorious past of Assam. Consequently, the play develops into a spectacle of battles and vigorous display of valour and verve with little or no inward appeal. The plot is woven around external conflicts between two warring forces and so it lacks an important characteristic of modern drama, inwardness.

But whatever place the play gets in critical estimation, Chakradhvajashimha is important for our purpose. In this play Shakespeare's influence is even more pronounced both in characterization and plot development. It contains two sets of scenes dominated by imaginary characters. One of them is concerned with the love episode between Chenehī, daughter of the Barphukan, and Sadiyākhowā Gohāin. But this does not develop into a subplot, because there is no dramatic tension involved, nor does it affect the main plot of the drama. 36

The second series of scenes involve a number of comic characters fashioned on the model of Shakespeare's Prince Hal, Falstaff and their associates of Eastcheap Tavern. In The First Part of King Henry the Fourth, six out of the eighteen scenes

36. 'The historical plays of Lakshminath Bezbaroa', op.cit., p. 142; A.N.S., pp. 215-216
are dominated by the Prince, Falstaff and their fellows, Poins, Bardolph, Peto and Gadshil. In Bezbaroa's play there are twenty-six scenes of which six show the activities of Priyarām, Gajpuriyā and their companions, called Sidhināth, Japarā, Takau and Takaru. Priyarām is the son of General Lāchit Barphukan, who acquires bad habits in the company of Gajpuriyā and his fellows. Like Prince Hal and Falstaff, we first meet them in the second scene of the first act at Gajpuriyā's house in the capital town of Gargaon. Gajpuriyā, like Falstaff, is a corpulent, witty, carefree and indolent drunkard. He keeps on flattering Priyarām and behaves much in the same way as Falstaff, whether it is at home, on the street or in the battlefield.

But while Bezbaroa develops the characters of Priyarām, Gajpuriyā and their associates after the great master, he takes care to see that they do not look like mere copies of Shakespeare's characters. He knew that although the model for these characters was Shakespeare, they must fit into Assamese life and society. Besides, Bezbaroa had to see that in handling these characters and their activities he did not affect the historical facts. Consequently, Priyarām, who is the counterpart of Prince Hal, is not the king's son but the general's because, unlike king Henry IV, the Āhom monarch, Chakradhvajasimha, did not go to the front himself. Secondly, Bezbaroa very skilfully manipulates the character of Mistress Quickly in order to transform her into a convincingly Assamese woman. In the Assam of those days, there was nothing like taverns or inns, nor can an Assamese woman of the time be even thought of as keeping a shop. So Mistress
Quickly appears as Mrs Gajpuriya whose duty it is to entertain Priyaram and her husband with home-made liquor. Her constant care to keep Priyaram in good humour by giving him as much drink as he wants and her going to the battlefield to look for Gajpuriya where she picks up ornaments and other valuable things from the dead soldiers are very much in keeping with a character like this.

It is clear, then, that Bezbaroa pays no little attention to these comic characters and scenes where they appear. But however much one tries, it is impossible to make another Falstaff. Satyen Sarma observes, and rightly, that in Gajpuriya Bezbaroa only imitates the external form of Falstaff, his internal or intrinsic qualities cannot be imitated.37 "... unimitated, unimitable Falstaff, how shall I describe thee?" — so marvels Dr Samuel Johnson at this unique creation of Shakespeare.38 Yet Gajpuriya, who has been a constant source of fun to readers and audience alike since the day he first appeared, occupies an important position among comic characters in Assamese.39

Belimār (The Sunset) depicts the decline of the six-hundred-year-old Ahom rule in Assam and its final collapse as a result of three successive Burmese invasions. It thus covers a long period of Assam's history extending over eight years and ending in the annexation of the country by the British. In

37. ibid., p. 143; A.N.S., p. 217
39. A.N.S., p. 217
developing the plot and presenting the historical characters, the
dramatist truthfully follows the sequence of history,\textsuperscript{40} although, as in the other plays, here too, subsidiary characters and events are introduced. As the plot embraces a long period of history, the play becomes rather diffuse with thirty-five scenes of varying lengths and a big number of characters, historical as well as imaginary. There are a number of principal characters, Pūrṇānanda, Badanchandra, Satrām, Chandrakāntasimha, Ruchiṇāth all of whom are responsible for the tragedy of the country, that is, the loss of independence. But none of them may be said to be the principal character, so that there is no hero or heroine among the dramatis personae. The hero of the play is, as it were, the Assamese nation itself,\textsuperscript{41} and the tragedy is not of an individual but of a whole people.\textsuperscript{42}

In the development of the plot and arrangement of scenes, Shakespeare's influence is noticeable. There is juxtaposition of serious and comic scenes much like that in Shakespeare. Bezbaroa also introduces two sets of events that go parallel with the main course of the drama. One of them deals with the conjugal life of Oreshānāth Dhekiyāl Phukan, who is indeed in a dilemma, placed between two wives of opposite temperaments. One of them, Pijau Gābharu, is a highly cultured, graceful, loving and poetically gifted lady; while the other, Māju āideo, is a woman of uncouth,

\textsuperscript{40} Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 25
\textsuperscript{41} A.S.R., p. 303
\textsuperscript{42} 'The historical plays of Lakshminath Bezbaroa', op.cit., p. 144
quarrelsome and ostentatious nature. Naturally enough, Piñau endears the husband far more than the other. And in conceiving this character Bezbaroa appears to be influenced by Ophelia of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Piñau is daughter of Badan Barphukan, and when she comes to know that there is an order of arrest on her father, she secretly informs him of it beforehand so that he can escape. He does escape and brings the Burmese invaders to Assam who devastate the country. Badan is finally murdered, and the thought that she has been partly responsible for the Burmese invasions resulting in untold miseries to the people, and the miserable end of her father's life, badly tell upon Piñau's mind. She becomes crazy and behaves much in the same way as Ophelia does after the death of Polonius. Like Ophelia, she gives vent to her agony through songs, and finally drowns herself in Jaysāgar tank.

The second series of scenes, which are not directly connected with the main plot, are comic in nature. Yet they are introduced not only as comic interludes, but also intended to throw light on principal characters like King Chandrakāntasimha and Satrām, his arch-companion and adviser. These scenes show how the boyish king, his closest friend, Satrām, and officers like Bakatiyāl Phukan and Mājumelīyā Baruā while away their time in dance and drinking revelry, where Dhanshirī plays the rôle of a nautch-girl. They are thus not merely sources of comic entertainment, but also indirect comments on important characters. Through them the degradation of these characters is shown, and the impending sunset of the country's independence
suggested. Indeed, some of the songs of Dhansširi and Sobansširi, that give entertainment to the audience, unmistakably hint at this sad state of affairs.

But the most entertaining of the comic characters is undoubtedly Bhumuk, a famous wit from history whom Bezbaroa develops into a character like the Shakespearean Fool. Like Khuhutia Pandit of Jaymatī-kuwarī, Bhumuk Barua, too, talks and behaves much in the way Lear's Fool does. As the crazy Lear disappears with Kent when the storm is on, the Fool speaks a "prophecy" before he goes.

When priests are more in word than matter;
When brewers mar their malt with water;
When nobles are their tailors' tutors;
No heretics burn'd but wenches suitors;
When every case in law is right;
No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;
When slenders do not live in tongues;
Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;
When usurers tell their gold in the field;
And bawds and whores do churches build -
Then shall the realm of Albion
Come to great confusion.

(King Lear, III, ii, 81-94)

Much in the same vein, Bhumuk also makes the following pithy statement:

vaikunthar krishna āru kailāsar siva
lāhe lāhe deshkhan maribalai thiya.

43. Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 25
nijar bhitarat himsāhiṣu ānak atyāsār
rāije rajār kāṣalai āhi nāpāi subisār.
dukhik dukh di raṅg pāi prajāk kare ghin
seighar raja seikhan deshar āyus kei din?

Krishna has his Vaikuntha and Siva his Kailas;
The country is going deep down to hell.
There are jealousies amongst ourselves and
oppressions on others;
The people do not get justice from the king.
When the poor are injured and the subjects hated
How long will that king or the country live?

( Belimār, I, v, Granthāvli, I, p. 1187 )

All this shows that Bezbaroa as a historical play
owes a great deal to Shakespeare. Bengali dramatists like
Girishchandra and Dvijendralal also inspired him to write such
plays. In the preface to Jaymatī-kuwarī, he candidly expresses
his indebtedness to Dvijendralal whose Piyaṛē of Shājāhān has to
some extent influenced the character of Jaymatī in the initial
stages. In fact, whether it is through Bengali playwrights
whose plays he read and saw performed or directly from Western
sources, the fact remains that Bezbaroa's historical plays are
largely a result of Western influence. And Western influence in
his case largely means Shakespearean influence as we have seen
thus far. Bezbaroa was a devoted follower of Saṅkaradeva whose
āṅkiyā nāţs had some impact on him during his early years, but
nowhere in his plays do we find any influence of these plays or
of ancient Indian drama for that matter. It has, of course,
been already noted that Bezbaroa is not merely following the
Western dramatic methods. He knows how to assimilate foreign
influences in such a way as to make them part of his own creation, so that even his most directly and consciously imitated characters like Gajpuriya and Priyaram do not fail to give us the illusion of being original.

Yet in one important aspect Bezbaroa makes a bold departure from Shakespeare. This is in the use of language. Despite the fact that he was so much influenced by Shakespearean plays, and at a time when the accepted medium for serious plays was blank verse, Bezbaroa discarded it altogether and used prose instead. This appears to be mainly due to two reasons. In the first place, Bezbaroa realized that verse would neither suit a historical play, nor would it appeal to his audience; and secondly, being a skilled prose-writer, he naturally preferred prose to verse. Indeed, Bezbaroa does not treat his plays on a poetic level; they are recreation of history in dramatic form covering three distinct epochs of Assam's past. The use of prose, varying the style and mode of expression according to characters and moods, undoubtedly help him in presenting a realistic picture of historical characters. But even in the dialogue of the plays, the impact of the English language is noticeable. An expression like "mor pichat bān" (After me the deluge) is a direct echo of a well-known eighteenth-century French saying, which does not

44. Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterji holds that Bezbaroa was "primarily a 'prosateur', although he published some beautiful lyrics and songs which are unique of their kind in Assamese" (The Nineteenth-Century Renaissance in India, and Lakshminath Bezbaroa of Assam', op.cit., p. 9).

45. Belimār, I, i, Granthāvalī, II, p. 1178, MME DE POMPADOUR (1721-1764), "Après nous le deluge" (After us the deluge).
fit into the mouth of a historical character of the seventeenth-century Assam. Again, Palimi says to Gadapani, "putau : mānuheo mānubak māribalai bichāré" (It's a pity man wants to kill man). Such expressions unmistakably have a savour of the English language. In fact, Bezbaroa was so liberal in the use of words, phrases and even syntactic patterns that the Asam Bandhu (3rd Vr., No. 4) remarked that "Bezbaroa's sentence patterns are often based on English ones, and at times they look like exact copies of English sentences." But this proved to be a blessing rather than a bane for Assamese language and literature. So a leading critic rightly points out that Bezbaroa's greatest gift to Assamese prose lies in the fact that he freed it from the trammels of stiff Sanskritization and religious colouring, and made it suitable for the expression of modern thoughts and ideas.

Nakulchandra Bhuyan (1895-1968)

Another leading historical playwright is Nakulchandra Bhuyan whose Badan Barphukan (1927) and Chandrakantasisimha (1931), both based on the closing years of the six-century-old Ahom rule, are expressly informed with patriotic and nationalist feelings.

In Belimār (The Sunset), Bezbaroa, as we have seen, has dramatized

46. Jaymatī-kuwarī, III, ii, Granthāvalī, II, p. 1152
47. Quoted by Dr D.K. Barua in his article 'Bezbaroār Sāhitvadārshan', Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Assam Publication Board, p. 32
48. D.K. Barua, opcit., p. 32
a series of events covering quite a long period of Assam's history leading to the final collapse of her independence. Bhuyan, on the other hand, makes two plays on this theme of national tragedy where, within the structure of the history play current at the time, he is trying to show imaginatively the possible causes that led to the downfall of a great people.

Both the plays are in five acts subdivided into varying number of scenes of which some are comic in nature. The comic scenes are dominated by imaginatively drawn characters from the lower rungs of society, who not only provide comic relief to the audience but also occasionally throw light on the main action through contrasts and ironic comments. In both the plays there are subplots which, although they are not directly connected with the main plots, at least serve as foils to them. Like his predecessor, Bezbaroa, Bhuyan uses prose as his medium, varying the style according to characters and moods. In these plays soliloquies abound, so that some of the chief characters speak aloud more to themselves than to others. All this clearly points to the influence of Elizabethan—or more precisely, Shakespearean dramatic technique on Bhuyan. It may be noted that introduced by Gohain Barua and developed further by Bezbaroa, this was the accepted mode of the historical drama during the earlier decades of the twentieth century, and so it need not be presumed that Nakulchandra Bhuyan drew on the Elizabethan dramatists for his dramatic craft. He only followed in the footsteps of his predecessors, thereby contributing to the growth of a histrionic form which had been largely designed on the Western model.
During the reign of the weak and opium-eating king, Chandrakāntasimha, the actual government of the country was in the hands of the Prime Minister, Purṇānanda, who was a very shrewd and practical statesman. Badanchandra, the king's deputy at Gaubati and a close relation of Purṇānanda, had become despotic and tried constantly to flout the orders of the Prime Minister, while one Satrām, a low-born youth but a close friend of the king, kept on instigating the king against him. When Purṇānanda came to know of the machinations both of Badan and Satrām against him, he got a sentence of arrest passed on the former, while orders of banishment were secured for the latter. But Badan, being secretly informed by his daughter of the sentence passed against him, fled the country, went to Burma and appealed to the Burmese king to help him free his country from the clutches of the Prime Minister. The Burmese, then, invaded Assam and caused severe atrocities on her people. Purṇānanda, old and ill, and finding himself unable to resist the invaders, killed himself. And Badan, who became Prime Minister after Purṇānanda's death, was finally killed by one Rupsing at the instance of the Queen Mother.

These are the historical facts connected with the subject-matter of the play, and the playwright largely follows them in the development of the plot. The play is a tragedy and chiefly builds up on the conflict between Purṇānanda and Badan, although at the initial stages the interest hangs on the tension between Purṇānanda and Satrām. But after Satrām's exile this tension ends, and the dramatic action develops on the conflict between the characters of Purṇānanda and Badan. And yet the
conflict is not properly outlined and seems to be drowned in the tumult of the fast changing political events. Badan is determined to get the country out of the despotic hold of Purnānanda, while Purnānanda is bent on getting rid of Badan whom he considers an enemy to his king and his country. But Badan, instead of developing into a character aiming at delivering the country from the hands of the Prime Minister, becomes nothing sort of a villain guided by revenge motives. In fact, he turns out to be a Machiavellian character who does not hesitate to get his own country devastated by foreign invaders just to wreak vengeance on his enemy, Purnānanda. Purnānanda's character stands out in sharp relief against his antagonist: he is not only a patriot ready to die for his country, but also a hard task-master bent on making away with anybody that stands on his way. In the portrayal of the character of Purnānanda, the playwright appears to be influenced by Indian leaders struggling for independence. His exciting speeches and diplomatic manoeuvres are much like those of a modern statesman, and this is due, it seems, to our playwright's conscious attempt to rouse his audience from slumber and make them unite against a common enemy.

There is a subplot built on the eternal triangle involving Sarugohāin, Dekāphukan and Golāpi. In the treatment of this love story the dramatist appears to be influenced by the story of Othello and Desdemona. Sarugohāin and Golāpi are in love, and the former presents a ring to the latter as a token of his love for her. The sensual Dekāphukan, who wants to get the lovable Golāpi as his wife, tricks Sarugohāin into believing that she actually loves him and produces before Sarugohāin a ring
having exactly the same look as the one he has presented to Golāpī. Estrangement between Sarugohāin and Golāpī follows, but the former comes to know of the latter's innocence when he overhears a conversation between her and Dekāpukhan. When the Burmese invaders are besieging the royal palace, Dekāpukhan is found trying to violate Golāpī, and Sarugohāin in trying to save her, is mortally wounded. Thus, like the action of the main plot, this subsidiary story of love also ends tragically.

It has already been noted how Bezbaroa was influenced by the character of Ophelia in developing that of Pijau in his Belimār. In Bhuyan's play, Pijālī or Pijau appears for a very short while, but the dramatist succeeds in showing her inner conflict. Placed between duty to her father, Badan, and her country, Pijālī suffers from intense mental tension, and in depicting this character the playwright appears to be influenced by Bezbaroa. The last scene of the play has an unmistakable echo of Shakespeare. Badan tries to sleep, but he cannot, because he fancies that he sees the apparition of Purnānanda. When he fails to sleep despite all his attempts to do so, he utters to himself, "No, you cannot sleep. You have taken away sleep from so many eyes. How can you sleep in peace?" This reminds one of Macbeth who speaks in the same vein in a similar situation.

Chandrakāntasimhā is a sequel to Badan Barphukan and deals with the next two Burmese invasions of Assam leading to the

49. See Pijālī's soliloquy in Badan Barphukan, III, ii, p. 75
50. Badan Barphukan, V, x, p. 138
loss of the country's independence. The character of Chandrakāntasimha, the hero of the tragedy, is firmly drawn. At first weak, idle, selfish, short-sighted and surrounded by intriguing officers, he makes a bold, although belated, attempt towards the later part of his life to regain the lost power and prestige of the throne. The contrast between the early Chandrakanta and the later is tellingly brought out, and intensifies the tragedy that finally befalls him and the nation. In fact, Chandrakāntasimha as he takes up arms against the Burmese, becomes an embodiment of patriotism, and his impassioned speech to his forces as well as his monologue in prison is much like exhortations made by a twentieth-century nationalist leader.

Two series of subsidiary scenes run parallel with the main plot. One of them deals with the love of Rahilā, a simple unsophisticated Miri girl, for Chakradhar, an officer in the Ahom court. The conflict in Chakradhar's mind, when he is compelled to leave Rahilā to attend to the call of duty, is clearly brought out, while Rahilā's wanderings in search of her lover are touching indeed. Chakradhar marries Devajani, the king's daughter, at the instance of the king himself. While Rahilā comes to know of it, she acquiesces and goes away silently. In depicting the characters of Chakradhar and Rahilā, Bhuyan appears to be influenced by Bezbaroa's Gadāpani and Dālimi, who, as we have already noted,

51. Chandrakāntasimha, V, vi, pp. 92-93
52. ibid., V, ix, p. 103-104
53. A.N.S., p. 228
were influenced by Shakespeare's Ferdinand and Miranda.

The other series of subsidiary scenes show how Janmi Dekaphukan, Badan's son, is in an intense mental conflict being placed between two forces pulling him to opposite directions: his determination to take revenge on king Chandrakanta and the late Buḍhagohain's family, who were instrumental in murdering his father, and his growing love for Lilāvatī, the king's adopted daughter. Gradually love overwhelms him and turns him into a patriot, so that instead of conspiring to overthrow the king, he takes arms against the Burmese. Lilāvatī is married to him by the king himself right in the field of battle. This subsidiary story is developed into a subplot having thematic connection with the main action of the play. It is his love for Lilāvatī that transforms Janmi from a vindictive Machiavellian into a patriotic fighter, and but for this the grandeur of the play, the informing principle of which is patriotism, would have sufficiently diminished.

Nakulchandra Bhuyan's historical plays are modern in spirit as well as style and technique. We do not find in his plays any element of ancient Indian drama or the pre-British Assamese ankiyā nāts. While his dramatic technique is largely modelled on Elizabethan playwrights, either directly or through Bezbaroa, the spirit of the play is that of a modern writer writing under the full impact of the West.

54. The author received many letters informing him that Chandrakāntasimha was a great inspirer to the people at a time when the country was on the road to freedom (Preface to 2nd ed. of Chandrakāntasimha, 1947).
Revenge Plays

Some of the plays written during the period under review may be called 'revenge plays' in so far as they not only have revenge as the driving motive but also betray characteristics similar to those of the Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge and horror plays. These plays are considered in this chapter because the subject-matter of them has some base in history, although they cannot be called pure historical plays. The writers of these plays concentrate their attention not so much on the historicity of the characters and events as on the amount of incident to be presented on the stage. Consequently, the dramatis personae lose much of their importance as external action dominates the play.

The tradition of writing revenge and horror plays, which were very popular on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, started in the late 1590s with a group of plays including The Spanish Tragedy, Titus Andronicus, The Jew of Malta, Richard III, and, possibly, the early Hamlet. These plays became very popular because of their theatrical qualities and produced, as J.M.R. Margeson points out, a notable progeny. These plays, as Mr Margeson observes further, have certain elements in common: they depend for much of their effect upon violent and shocking crimes to which the major characters react with passion; villainous characters of exceptional cunning and cruelty set the plot in

55. Allardyce Nicoll observes that the revenge play got confused with the horror drama, and that the two can hardly be dealt with separately (British Drama, pp. 186-187). As both the types in Assamese also show common characteristics, they are being considered as one genre, the revenge play.

motion, and the pattern of the action is a process of crime 
followed by a process of retribution, usually in the form of revenge."57 The revenge plays are characterized by intrigues, 
machinations, schemings, all sorts of physical tortures and what not. Now an examination of the Assamese plays included in this 
category will show that all of them are marked by such character­ 
istics. Ambition and revenge are the motivating force in all 
these dramas which, developing through a series of excitingly 
theatrical incidents, and disastrously. It may be noted that 
not to speak of such plays, even the presentation on the stage 
of any kind of physical violence is taboo on the traditional 
Indian stage, nor do we find anything like this in pre-British 
Assamese drama. It is only when more and more writers became 
familiar with Western drama, particularly Elizabethan and 
Jacobean drama, that such plays came to be written in Assamese. 
Allardyce Nicoll observes that "the romantic love of incident"58 
was one of the reasons for the popularity of the revenge play in 
Elizabethan and Jacobean England. This can be said of such plays 
in Assamese also. The first few decades of the twentieth century 
during which these plays were written were the time when romant­ 
cism was at its highest. Poets and playwrights alike were ready 
to seize anything that gave them scope for free play of their 
fancy and imagination. The audience too, like their Elizabethan 
counterpart, enjoyed such plays, since they gave them not only 
enjoyment but excitement as well.

57. loc.cit.
58. British Drama, p. 180
An examination of some of the most popular plays written by leading playwrights will help us to see in what ways Western influences worked in shaping these plays in Assamese. One of such plays is *Nilāmbar* by Prasannalal Chaudhuri which, though published in 1933, was written in 1921 when electrification was introduced for the first time in the Rān Theatre of Tezpur. The play, we are further told, was written with an eye to suit the newly introduced lighting arrangements. The theme is to some extent based on history, but imaginary characters and situations predominate. Nanda, bastard son of the last king of the Pāl dynasty, resorts to all sorts of intrigues and machinations to kill king Nilāmbar and his old and faithful minister, Sachipātra, with a view to making himself king of Kamatāpur. While Nilāmbar and Sachipātra are historical figures and the invasion of Kamatāpur by Hossain Shah, the Mahamedan ruler of Gaur, are historical facts, Nanda is an imaginary character having some affinity with Iago. Besides exhibiting most of the traits of a revenge play, Nilāmbar betrays some influence of Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Dwijendralal Ray’s *Chandragupta* which the playwright himself admits. Like Iago in *Othello*, it is Nanda who sets the plot in motion and is directly or indirectly responsible for the series of crimes that are committed in the play. In his dialogue with his associates, Nanda’s villainy comes out very

59. Preface to the 1st ed. of *Nilāmbar*, 1933, p. 1
60. *A.N.S.*, p. 237
61. See preface to *Nilāmbar*, 1933, p. 1
62. *Nilāmbar*, I, iv, passim
clearly: he discloses that he has chosen the bloody path in order to wreak vengeance on those who look down upon him as a bastard, and to fulfil his ambition of gaining the throne he has been deprived of. He boasts to them that he has in him "the cunning of a fox, the hungry look of a tiger, the poisonous breath of a snake, and the nightmarish capacity to kill an embryo." Consequently, he commits a series of crimes like arousing jealousy in the innocent Nilāmbar, instigating him to kill Sachipātra's son and to make the old councillor eat the flesh of his own son in the king's banquet. When Sachipātra is told of this horrible crime, he becomes furious and revengeful and, despite his love for his country, invites Hossain Shah of Gaur to destroy Kamatāpur. Nilāmbar is thus much like an Elizabethan revenge play. The play, set in motion by motives of ambition and revenge, moves through a series of external incidents and ends disastrously with a number of deaths caused either by murder or through suicides.

Anandachandra Barua's Kamatā-kuwari (written 1931; published 1940), though based on the same theme, is more faithful to history than Nilāmbar. Taking the outline of the plot from Hiteswar Barbarua's account of the destruction of Kamatāpur and Dr Wade's An Account of Assam, the playwright shows how ambition and thirst for revenge were at the root of the country's fall. But as external action dominates the play, resulting in the

63. ibid., p. 18
64. Preface to Kamatā-kuwari, 1940, P.1
preponderance of intriguing situations, Kamatā-kuwarī is more like a revenge play than a true historical tragedy. There is no villain of the type of Nanda, but murders, suicides, eating of one's son's flesh and the like make it a play no less ghastly than Nilāmbar. The suspicion of the Nilāmbar of Kamatā-kuwarī of his wife's integrity after he has discovered under her pillows a love letter, supposedly written to Monohar, the minister's son, is obviously modelled on Othello. When Nilāmbar understands that the letter was not actually written by his wife but by one of her friends, he repents of the wrong done to her, but it is too late to right it. The character of Bimala, too, seems to be fashioned after Shakespeare's Ophelia. When her lover, Monohar, is banished by the king, she becomes desperate, takes to incoherent singing, and finally drowns herself. Waritāl, a comic figure obviously modelled on the Fool in Shakespeare, has something very revealing to say about the characters of the play. "It's nice to be with people", he declares, "one does not feel like leaving their company. But the cruelties caused by the beasts in them are bitter, very bitter indeed." And it is the beastly natures in some of the major characters that make the play one of horror rather than a genuine tragedy.

Bāmuni-kowar (The Brahmin Prince, 1939) by Naivachandra Talukdar is much of a kind with the English revenge tragedy of the early seventeenth century with murder, revenge, jealousy dominating the play and a number of beastly acts being perpetrated.

65. Kamatā-kuwarī, IV, v, pp. 89-90
66. ibid., IV, ix, p. 75
on the stage. Like any other plays of this kind, Pamuni-kowar, too, is set in motion by revenge motives. The very first scene is an enactment of extreme treachery with the murder of an innocent king. The ruler of the Chutiyas, just to satisfy his vindictive motives, cold-bloodedly kills the Ahom king, Chutupha, under cover of friendship and orders his soldiers to cut the dead body into pieces. This is the beginning of a series of incidents, all stemming from the desire for revenge. The elder queen orders the younger, who is pregnant, to be killed because she is jealous of the other; and the Ahom king, Tyăokhămthī, not only avenges himself on his brother's murderers but also wreaks vengeance on his elder queen and her accomplice by ordering their hair to be shaved and noses cut. There is even one more murder of a king done cold-bloodedly and presented on the stage. As Tyăokhămthī sits brooding over his eternal separation from his beloved younger queen, he is stabbed from the back by a murderer appointed by the Budhāgohsin (Prime Minister). In fact, there is so much of intrigue and hair-raising external action that, although the theme of the play is based on history, the grandeur of a historical tragedy is entirely lost in the tumult of a theatrically exciting melodrama. Even the story of real love between Rāramī and Rahdai, both from the Chutiyā clan, fails to alleviate the grisly atmosphere of the play: Rāramī is banished by a jealous king and Rahdai, becoming desperate at the cruel separation from his beloved, behaves much in the way Ophelia does in Hamlet.

67. A.N.S., p. 241
Kamalananda Bhattacharyya’s *Nagā-kowar* (The Naga Prince, 1935), which Satyen Sarma calls a “historical romance” seems to outdo all other plays in the presentation of horror and sensational external action. Based on certain historical events of the fifteenth century, the play dramatizes the story of the Ahom prince, Kanseng, who was called the ‘Nagā-Kowar’ because he was born and brought up in the Naga hills. He was later made a Barpātra Gohain or Minister of State, and fought the Mughals heroically when they invaded Assam. But the play is so much thick with horrid and sensational incidents and situations that instead of being a genuine historical tragedy it turns out to be a play of the revenge and horror type. The very first scene creates thrill and sensation when Ahalyā raises her sword to murder her own daughter and, failing to do so, kills herself. In another scene a spy, Barati, cuts off his own tongue in the presence of the king and courtiers rather than tell them an unpleasant truth. This is obviously reminiscent of Hieronimo’s biting out his tongue in *The Spanish Tragedy*. We do not know if the writer of *Nagā-kowar* was acquainted with Kyd’s play, but the parallel is indeed striking. In fact, there are as many as nineteen deaths and murders in the play. The play develops through a series of revenge motives. Kachitarā, minister of the defeated Wachāri king, joins the Pāthān invaders only to take revenge on the Ahoms. Chuklehgmung wreaks vengeance on his own father, king Subhuṅgmung

68. ibid., p. 246

69. *Nagā-kowar*, II, viii, p. 97
and gets him killed by Renuka, who thus avenges herself on her father's murderer. Chuklengmung aims at killing Kanseng or the Nagā-kowar because the former considers the latter a rival in love for Renuka, a princess disguised as a palace maid. Consequently, the play is full of such horrors as murders, suicides and like, unsurpassed in Assamese literature.

Other Plays

Besides the plays considered so far, there are many others written during the period, mostly by minor writers, but hardly any of them shows anything, either in characterization or plot construction that may arrest one's attention. Yet a few pieces, mostly by important writers and not considered so far, should be mentioned before we conclude our review of the historical drama prior to the Second World War. One of them is Mūlāgābharu (1924) by Radhakanta Handique, a play in five acts and written in blank verse interspersed with prose. The playwright is faithful to history in so far as Mūlāgābharu's character is concerned, but he adds two imaginary love episodes which cast a romantic glow over the historical background. The play may be called a serio-comedy; it does not close with the tragic deaths of Mūlāgābharu, the heroine, and her husband, Chāophrāseṣa; but extends by two more acts in which the defeat of the Wughal invaders and the happy union of two pairs of lovers are presented. The play is modern in spirit—so much so that the playwright betrays a

70. A.N.S., p. 223
few anachronisms, obviously in his enthusiasm to attach modern ideas to historical characters and events. While the dramatist glorifies ideal womanhood through Mūlāgābharu, the play as a whole remains an embodiment of patriotic feelings of a writer, who writing under foreign domination, pined for freedom:

There is no happiness even in heaven
When the noose of servitude is around your neck.

(Mūlāgābharu, IV, i, p. 133)

Sailadhar Rajkhowa's Pratāpsimha (1926) is rather a melodrama than a serious historical play. There is much of intrigue and theatrically exciting external action, and it cannot be classed with the revenge plays as neither revenge is the motivating force, nor is there much of horridness in its atmosphere. There are some genuine attempts at characterization, but the preponderance of external action does not allow the characters to grow internally. The dialogue is both in blank verse and prose, and the character of Mīāsāheb, the Nawāb's favourite attendant, bears some resemblance to Falstaff. Like Falstaff, Mīāsāheb is fat, and talks and behaves much in the way Falstaff does. When he tries to flee from the battlefield, he cries in fear, "I must have a horse to run away on. How can I move with such a bulky body?" The character of Rupahī, Ākhe Gohāin's wife, too, has some Shakespearean touch. At first she behaves much like Ophelia

71. ibid., p. 224
72. ibid., p. 235
73. Pratāpsimha, III, iv, p. 59
out of desperation, as she has not got any news of her husband, who is in the front, but later she disguises herself as a boy in order to save him from an intriguing spy.

Atulchandra Hazarika who, as we have seen, is primarily a mythological playwright, nevertheless, broke fresh ground by using for the first time episodes from history other than the history of Assam as the subject-matter of his two historical plays, \textit{Kanauj-kuwari} (The Princess of Kanauj, written, 1923; published, 1947) and \textit{Chatrapati Shivaji} (written, 1927; published, 1947). The former displays the circumstances that created hostility between Prithviraj and Jaychand ending in the death of Prithviraj and self-immolation (Suttee) of Samjuktä, while the latter presents the spectacular rise of the Marathas under Shivaji. Since the plays were written in the second decade of the present century, they are cast much in the mould current at the time. Neither in characterization nor in construction is there anything striking, but as plays using for the first time all-India topics to enthuse the audience with the spirit of patriotism and nationalism, they occupy an important place in the history of modern Assamese drama.

74. ibid., III, vi, pp. 69-70
75. ibid., III, vi, p. 72
The Second World War and the attainment of the country's Independence had their repercussions on the drama and theatre of Assam as elsewhere. The War caused most of the theatres in the towns to be closed as a result of which theatrical activities almost came to a halt during the war years. And when playwriting was resumed after the War important changes became visible at once. The War nearly unsettled life in its various aspects: social, political and economic, and although the country attained Independence in 1947, economic independence was yet to be in sight. On the other hand, the spread of Western education enabled readers and writers alike to keep abreast of the latest discoveries about man made in the Western world. The wonderful inventions of science and technology, the probings made into the nature of man by Freudian psychoanalysis and the thought-provoking Marxian dialectics, which had already greatly influenced the Western mind, also had their impact on Assamese literature including drama. As a result of all this, dramatists began to concern themselves with problems confronting man and society rather than mythological episodes or heroes and heroines of history. Consequently, by 1947 mythological plays had almost died a natural death, and the few historical plays that appeared after Independence instantly draw our attention because not only in style and technique but also in spirit they are different from those written during the earlier decades.
A very striking characteristic of post-Independence historical play is the emergence of dramas on anti-British themes. It has already been seen how Shakespeare was the main influence both on the form and spirit of the historical plays written so far. But the few historical plays written after Independence seem to have done away with Shakespeare altogether. Instead of the common five-act piece of pre-Independence days, we now find plays either in three acts or with no act divisions as such. Again, the indirectly and suggestively articulated feelings of nationalism and patriotism of those plays have given way to open rebellion against the British. There are no subplots, no love episodes, no intrigues invented by the playwright. There is instead a realistic approach to history with no unnecessary mixing of the tragic and the comic, as was done previously under Shakespearean influence. History in these plays is sought to be recreated objectively and in the boldest possible way, since, with the attainment of Independence, the fear of displeasing an alien ruler has disappeared.

The first indication of change in tone and method is found in _Manirām Dewān_ by Prabin Phukan and the two _Piyali Phukan_ plays, one by Nowgong Nāṭya Samāj and the other by Prafulla Barua, both published immediately after Independence. The first play (1948) depicts how Manirām Dewān, a scion of the Āhom nobility, rose against the British during the 1857 movement in a bid to free the country from the alien domination, and how he was ultimately hanged for his 'rebellion'. The other two plays have for their subject-matter the martyrdom of Piyali Phukan, another scion of the Āhom nobility who, too, had to go to the British
scaffold as he was found master-minding a conspiracy to drive away the foreigners from Assam as early as 1830. In technique, these plays appear to be influenced by the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century naturalistic playwrights of Europe. Twentieth-century British playwrights, particularly John Drinkwater, also seem to have some impact on them. These plays do not have a fixed number of acts or scenes: Maniram Dewan has three acts; Prafulla Barua's Pivali Phukan has two; and the other Pivali Phukan by Nowgong Natya Samaj is divided, much like Drinkwater's Abraham Lincoln, into scenes having, unlike Drinkwater, a heading for each scene. There are elaborate settings and detailed stage-directions in all these plays with emphasis, particularly in the last mentioned piece, on background music. Soliloquies and asides are almost taboo in these plays, while declamations and sentimental rhetoric have become things of the past.

John Drinkwater in Abraham Lincoln demonstrated how the spoken word, without the aid of extravagant action, can be made to appeal to a large popular audience. This can be said of these Assamese historical plays also, particularly Pivali Phukan by Nowgong Natya Samaj, which has been considered the most popular of plays produced after Independence. Pivali Phukan, a lame person walking with a stick but determined to overthrow the great enemy, has in him tragic firmness and idealism of character capable of exciting pity and passion, and the tragic intensity is

76. A.C. Ward, Twentieth-Century English Literature, p. 122
77. Preface to 2nd ed. of Pivali Phukan, 1974, p. 2
heightened not by any contrasting episodes or characters but by the force of the spoken word. This is particularly evident in the last scene where the hero takes leave of the people before he goes to the scaffold.

It may be noted that these plays have not completely broken away from the pre-Independence historical plays in the matter of characterization. Commenting on the early twentieth-century British historical plays, Allardyce Nicoll says that the "multiplicity of individually delineated characters dominated by the one master figure seems a conception borrowed from Elizabethan plays." This can be said about these Assamese plays also, each of which is dominated by the character after whom the play is named. Such characterization of the hero or the major figure reminds one of the pre-Independence historical plays, who, in his turn, as we have already seen, were influenced by the Elizabethan dramatists, particularly Shakespeare. And these historical plays in essence, like those of Drinkwater and the other early twentieth-century British dramatists, are plays of ideas. Manirâm Dewân and the two Piyali Phukan plays are almost a bitter attack on colonial exploitation. In Rajadrohi (1956), a play by Abdul Malik, there is a reinterpretation of the character of Satrâm, who was presented as a villain in history as well as in pre-Independence historical plays, but who in this post-1947 play is represented as a popular leader trying to overthrow an autocratic monarch. In Kushal Kowar (1949) by

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78. British Drama, p. 490

79. ibid., p. 490
Suren Saikia, a play on the tragic death of a Congress worker who was hanged during the 1942 movement, there is not only an exhortation of martyrdom but also a strong denunciation of those opportunists who tried to make capital of the social chaos during the War days. There are a few other plays on historical themes which, in form as well as in tone, are much like the ones considered so far, except perhaps Tikendrajit (1959) by Atulchandra Hazarika who essentially belongs to the earlier generation of playwrights. Hazarika in this drama seems to continue the earlier tradition of the historical play with five acts, mixing of tragic and comic matter, introduction of songs, long rhetorical speeches, and the like. But in this he is almost a lone figure now, and his voice naturally becomes weak.

It is in these ways that the historical play in Assamese has moved since 1900 when it began with Gohain Barua's Jaymati. Both in methods of characterization and plot development the dramatists of the pre-Independence period, as we have noticed, were largely influenced by Elizabethan dramatists, particularly Shakespeare. At the same time some flickering traces of Sanskrit drama as well as ankiya nāts were also visible in a few earlier playwrights like Gohain Barua, although they soon disappeared and the structure of the historical play remained, by and large, Elizabethan up to the Second World War. While the first historical play, Gohain Barua, had experimented with blank verse on the model of Shakespeare, prose soon became the accepted medium, the style being varied according to characters, moods and situations. After the War and attainment of Independence drama
tended to be 'social' and 'inward' as a result of which the historical play has lost its popularity. The few historical plays that have appeared since Independence, as we have already noted, are different from the earlier ones both in form and content. But while these plays are mostly marked by forceful dialogue and modernity of outlook, they lack poetic quality and inward appeal, which are characteristics of a good drama.