Chapter VIII

Social Drama

I

Social Drama before Independence

Pre-British Assamese drama, it has been already noted in Chapter II, was religious in nature. Right from the days of Sahkaradeva and Madhavadeva, when Assamese drama had its heyday, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, many a play was written and produced, but none of them has a subject which can even distantly be called 'social'. Sanskrit drama, although it primarily dealt with mythical subjects, did not altogether neglect social themes. According to V. Raghavan, the social play was "a well-represented class of Sanskrit drama", which manifested itself in the Prakarana, Prahasana, Bhāna and Vīthi, the Prakarana being "the perfect form of social play in Sanskrit." Medieval Assamese drama, the aṅkiyā nāts, on the other hand, dramatized only epic and Puranic themes. Reflections on contemporary life and society are found in some of these plays, but the social play as such did not exist then. Even the latter-day plays including a few pieces written in Sanskrit during the eighteenth century, were all on

1. It is interesting to note that a five-act play, called Dharmodava by Dharmadeva, appeared in the eighteenth century, which peculiarly enough, based its action not on any epic or Puranic themes but on the contemporary intestinal commotion in the Ahom kingdom in the form of a rebellion of a sect of Vaisnavas (Assamese drama and Theatre, p. 19). But it was a lone exception, and had no impact on the contemporary Assamese drama.

2. The Social Play in Sanskrit (Transaction TT), pp. 1-6,
religious themes modelled mostly on the technique of medieval Assamese drama.

The Indian mind, as we have noted already, continued to be largely medieval in outlook till the advent of the British and the consequent spread of Western education and thought. It took some time for the new ideas and thoughts to filter into the mind of a people who had so long been in a morass of religious bigotry and medieval superstitions. This is why even though Assam came under the British in 1826, her literature continued to be largely religious in spirit for quite some time, and in drama the new note, as we have already noted, was struck definitely in 1857 when Gunabhiram Barua's Rām-Navāmī Nāṭak came out. This is the first modern play in Assamese, and it deals with a social theme. But despite the fact that the first modern play was a social tragedy, Assamese drama of the latter half of the nineteenth century continued to be largely mythical in subject-matter, although the technique was modelled on European playwrights, particularly the Elizabethans. During the period between 1857 and the end of the century quite a good number of plays came out; but of these only four deal with serious social themes, the rest are either mythical dramas or farcical pieces. This points to the fact that the epic and Puranic stories still had their popular appeal and that the playwrights, with a few exceptions, had not yet learnt to look at life seriously. It is only with the beginning of the present century that drama started becoming largely social, but the fact that the first modern play in Assamese is on a serious social theme shows how humanism, which is essentially a Western concept, influenced our playwrights as early as 1857. Humanism,
which means "a shifting of values and a new self-consciousness of the human spirit," grew with the rise of the towns when religious values came to be replaced by the more immediately perceptible values of Nature and of man. It is universally agreed that in India humanism as a movement of the mind began under the impact of the West, and in Assam it started taking root with the Orunodol (1846), although in dramatic literature it did not reveal itself till 1857. Since then humanism has become an informing principle in the drama as much as in poetry or the novel; and even some mythological plays, as has been noted in Chapter VI, are replete with this spirit.

The social plays published during the ninety years between Rām-Navamī (1857) and the attainment of Independence may broadly be divided into two main groups: serious plays and farcical pieces or low comedies. The former group of plays has for their subject-matter a variety of problems that started affecting life and society with the growth of urbanization and sophistication of the mind as a result of the Western impact. The latter group of plays, on the other hand, deals with the lighter side of life, their aim being to amuse as well as to teach. These plays are primarily based on rural life, while the writers of the serious plays concern themselves chiefly with the complexities of life lived in the newly growing towns. This is the reason why the initial stage in the growth of modern Assamese drama is marked by an abundance of farcical plays. In the second stage, we get

the mythological and historical dramas, and it is only after these three types of dramas had been played out that plays on serious social themes came to be written, despite the fact that a play of such nature had appeared as early as 1857. This shows how drama is closely related to the tastes of the audience and the spirit of the times. During the fifties and the sixties of the last century when modern drama began, Assamese society was basically a rural one. Gradual urbanization and spread of Western education started affecting the outlook of the mind; but the change was slow, and it was not easy for the playwright to immediately shift from farcical and mythological themes, which had so much of popular appeal, to serious social subjects. But the change was inevitable, and although serious social plays appeared rather desultorily till the thirties of the present century, the period from the thirties to date remains primarily one of social drama.

The First Trio: Gunabhiram, Hemchandra, Rudraram

Gunabhiram Barua (1834-1894), Hemchandra Barua (1835-1896) and Rudraram Bardalai (1836-1899)—these three names are intimately connected with the growth of modern secular drama in Assamese. The plays they wrote within years of one another deal with three different problems which were eating into the very vitals of the contemporary society. Gunabhiram's **Rām-Nāvamī Nātak** laid bare the evil effects of child marriage and advocated the necessity of widow remarriage; in **Kāniyār Kirtan**, Hemchandra showed how opium had become a canker to the Assamese society,
while Rudraram's *Baṅgal-Baṅgalani* showed in a loosely organized dramatic form the harm, moral and economic, caused to society by the immigration into Assam of unknown outsiders in the wake of the British take-over of the province. Thus Assamese drama broke away for the first time from its age-old tradition: these three pioneers not only replaced religious themes with secular ones, but also introduced for the first time tragic matter, which had so long been taboo on our stage. And all this was an inevitable result of the Western impact, for not only in subject-matter but also in technique these plays were obviously modelled on Western dramaturgy.

Gunabhiram Barua was one of the first young men from Assam to go to Calcutta for collegiate education. He studied at Presidency College for two years, but had to discontinue his studies, and joined Government service. During his stay at Calcutta as a student he came into close contact with the new ideas that marked the Indian renaissance. Attracted by the liberal ideas of the Brahmo Samaj, he adopted Brahmoism and wished that Assam might prosper by accepting this faith, which had been actually propagated by Saṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva centuries ago. He was greatly influenced by Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, and not only advocated widow marriage, but himself married a widow (1870).

*Rām-Navaṁī Nātak* was written in 1857 when the author was on his way back home from Calcutta. The same year it was published in instalments in the *Orunodoi*, although it did not come

4. *Gunabhiram Barua, Asam Buranjī*, p. 198
out in book form until 1870. **Hemchandra Barua's Kānīyār Kirtan** (The Holy Song of Opium Eaters) was published in 1861. Thus, although Hemchandra’s play was the first modern drama to be published in book form, Gunabhiram’s was certainly the first to be written and serialized in the first Assamese periodical.\(^5\) The story of the play may be summarized as follows: **Navamī**, daughter of **Śivakanta Sharma**, became widow when she was a child. She was married at such a tender age that she did not even know then what love or marriage was. But as she grew up she began to realize her plight. Meanwhile, she came into contact with an educated, liberal-minded youth, **Rām**, and the two soon fell in love. **Navamī**’s kind-hearted sister-in-law, **Jayantī**, helped them to get married secretly, and in due course **Navamī** conceived. The matter came to light, and they were excommunicated. The young couple soon realized that it would be impossible for them to live any longer, so they committed suicide. **Jayantī**, thinking that she was responsible for their tragic end, also knifed herself to death.

**Rām–Navamī** shows that like many writers and thinkers of Bengal, Gunabhiram of Assam was deeply concerned about the problem of child marriage which led, not unoften, to tragic plights of minor girls. As a result of the untiring efforts of **Vidyasagar** the Widow Remarriage Act (1856) was passed only a year before this drama was written. In the same year, **Voomesh Chandra Mitra’s Vidhāvā-vivāha Nāṭak** in Bengali had come out.

---

Mitra was the first to write in support of the Widow Remarriage Act. There is reason to believe that Mitra's play influenced Gunabhiram, and Sukumar Sen holds that the success of Mitra's play was responsible for the first modern drama in Assamese, Gunabhiram Barua's राम-नवमी नाटक,.

The drama is in five acts, each subdivided into scenes, called दर्शनास. There is something like a subplot involving the love story of Mangalu and Sonaphuli, man-servant and maid-servant in the houses of the hero and the heroine, respectively. This subsidiary story of love between two unsophisticated persons appears to have been included as a sort of comic relief. The medium is prose, and the playwright claims that he is employing such language as is used in day-to-day conversation. It may be noted that when राम-नवमी was written असमीजी prose, properly so called, was almost in a nascent stage. It was, therefore, not easy for Gunabhiram to dramatize a tragic theme in a language which had so long been used for the expression of religious and comic matter.

Yet Gunabhiram did it, and the tragic intensity is sustained up to the end of the fourth scene of the fifth act, when राम, the hero, hangs himself after the heroine, नवमी, has committed suicide. Like the technique, which is largely modelled on the Elizabethan dramatists, the language also occasionally betrays Shakespearean influence. There are soliloquies used

7. H.B.L., p. 179
8. ibid., p. 180
9. Preface to राम-नवमी नाटक, 1870
much in the Shakespearean way, although less poetically. The very title of the play, Rām-Nāvamī appears to have a savour of Romeo and Juliet. In Act III, sc. v, Navamī says to Rām:

नामे की कारे? गोलापक यदि गोलाप नुबुलि पालास बोला हय ते पुराणों पोवा नेदाबने?

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

(Rām-Nāvamī, III, v, p. 45)

This is clearly an echo of Juliet's

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

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

After the death of the hero (V, iv) another scene is added which is of the nature of an epilogue, where the chastity of Navamī is asserted and the necessity of widow remarriage suggested. Here Iswarchandra Vidyasagar is indirectly referred to, and in another place there is a direct reference to Vidyasagar. This is only to be expected, because the play was written with a purpose: to show the evils of child marriage and to emphasize the necessity of widow remarriage.

Although the play is largely modelled on Western dramaturgy, the influence of Sanskrit drama and medieval Assamese drama is also there. This is evident in the use of slokas, either

10. Rām-Nāvamī Nāṭak, V, i, p. 59
fully in Sanskrit or in a mixture of Sanskrit and Assamese, as well as in certain situations where characters, especially the hero and the heroine, behave in such ways as are reminiscent of Sanskrit drama. For example, Rām and Navamī meet for the first time in a garden, and when Navamī's friends want to go back she tries to lag behind in order to look at Rām by pretending that her feet are being pricked by thorns.11 This is undoubtedly an influence of Kalidāsa's Sakuntalā. Again, towards the end of the play the Sūtrābhāra appears in the guise of a 'pujārī' (priest) and extols widow remarriage in a song written in one of the popular verse forms (lechārī) used by the medieval Vaisnava poets in their devotional lyrics. There are other points both in technique and characterization that reveal such influence, but they need not be detailed here. All this was rather natural, because Rām-Navamī was written at a time when the aṅkiya nāts of medieval Assam were still popular and a new dramatic form based on the Western model was yet to be fully developed. This was just the beginning, and the fact that the first modern drama in Assamese was a social tragedy is itself revolutionary indeed.

Another play, called Vivāha-rahasya, appeared in the monthly, Asam-bandhu (1886) edited by Gunabhirām himself. Although the author was not named, the subject-matter, style and technique of the play, which was left incomplete, have made nearly all our critics and literary historians conclude that Gunabhirām was the writer. The subject-matter of the play is a piece of criticism.

11. ibid., II, iii, pp. 25-26
of the contemporary society. The play opens with a nandi in payāra verse sung by Manu Sūtradhāri, and the theme is opened up through a dialogue between the Sūtradha and his wife, Āchāndi. This is undoubtedly an influence of Sanskrit drama, but in subject-matter as well as in spirit this incomplete play is very modern. The Sūtradhāma complains that everybody writes about the old world and nobody looks at the present society. So he has written this play in order to open up the modern world before the audience.  \footnote{12.
Rām-Navāmi Nāṭak, Appendix A, p. 75. This incomplete play is included as an appendix in the book containing Rām-Navāmi Nāṭak, ed. Jatindramohan Bhattacharyya, Gauhati, 1968}

It is difficult to say if Gunabhirm's plays were ever enacted on the stage. We have no records either to prove or to disprove it. Atulchandra Nazarika thinks that Rām-Navāmi was never performed because its subject-matter was too revolutionary to be presented on the stage in those days. \footnote{13.
Manohalekha, p. 91} Whatever that be, the fact remains that with Rām-Navāmi Nāṭak modern Assamese drama was born.

Hemchandra Barua's Kāniyār Kirtan (1861), which the author subtitles in English as a "Play in Assamese on the Evils of Opium-eating", was, of course, put on the boards quite a number of times at Sibsagar and elsewhere. And this was the first modern Assamese play to be performed on a modern stage at Sibsagar. \footnote{14.
Ibid., p. 92} We learn from the author's preface in English to the second edition (1868) of the play that, contrary to expectations, it had proved
to be popular, and that it was so is further evidenced by the fact that by 1891 the drama passed through as many as five editions.\textsuperscript{15}

The story of the play, briefly, is as follows: Bhadreswar Baruā, a revenue-collecting officer (mouzādar), had a son, Kirtikānta. One day an Assamese preceptor, Padmapāni, paid a visit to Bhadreswar's house. Padmapāni, who was an opium addict, would not be satisfied unless he was treated to a bit of the drug. Kirtikānta saw him eat the opium and could not help tasting it. This turned him into a regular opium-eater, and the result was that he was soon reduced to a skeleton. In due course, his wife, Chandraprabhā, too, became a victim to the evil. Kirtikānta was unable to run the office of his father when it fell to him, and took to unfair means even for mere existence. At last he was arrested and sent to jail. Meanwhile, his wife died. After a few days in prison Kirtikānta also died in utter repentance.

\textit{Kāniyār Kirtan} thus is a purely social play, dealing as it does with a very serious contemporary problem. As the author himself says, "This little playlet ... was composed with a view to exposing the mischievous effects of opium-eating which had long been preying upon the very vitals of Assam."\textsuperscript{16} Technically as well as stylistically, it is decidedly an improvement upon Gunabhiram's \textit{Rām-Nāvami}. It has nothing to do

\begin{thebibliography}
\item 15. Origin and Development of Assamese Drama and Stage, p. 77
\item 16. Preface to 2nd ed. of \textit{Kāniyār Kirtan}, 1868, p. 1
\end{thebibliography}
with prastāvana, nandi or Sūtradhāra: the technique as well as
the style is largely modelled on Western dramaturgy with no
influence at all of Sanskrit drama. No doubt, the playwright
has a moral to convey, but it is not delivered through a
Sūtradhāra but through the hero himself, who admits repentantly,
"Opium is the worst of poisons. The opium-eater hasn't the least
wisdom. Alas! Alas! What a terrible misery! Opium is at the
root of the destruction of Assam."¹⁷ The play is in four acts
(āṅkas) with three to four scenes (darshanas) to each act. The
playwright shows some skill in dramatic construction. The plot
is developed well, and the degradation of the hero as a result of
a deep rooted evil is tellingly shown. Kirtikānta is otherwise a
good young man with a noble family background, but he brings
disaster on himself by indulging in opium eating. The scene in
the prison hospital where Kirtikānta dies in agonized repentance
is touching indeed. This not only drives home the playwright's
expressed intentions but also enacts, as it were, the tragedy of
a whole society.

The play, despite its serious theme, bristles with
bitter satire and biting sarcasm. It is because Hemohandra, as
we have already noted, was reformist in his intention. Through
this play he not only shows the disastrous effects of opium-eating,

¹⁷. kepā-kāni bihar ses,
kānlyār nāi jñānar les
hāil hāil ki ghor kles,
kāniyei khāle asam des.

(Kāniyār Kirtan, VI, iii, p. 63)
but also exposes the follies and hypocrisies of the so-called spiritual leaders and preceptors, who, in the name of religion, exploited the common folk. He also shows how the Assamese peons employed by British officers took to speaking Hindusthani instead of their mother tongue just to mislead and mystify the simple villagers. To do all this the playwright has to resort to satire and sarcasm. But the satire and the sarcasm are only on the surface: they should not be allowed to mislead us into believing that Kāṇīyār Kirtan is a farcical piece. The subject-matter of the play is essentially a serious one; and the play, although it begins in a lighter vein, becomes more and more serious in tone as it develops. Kāṇīyār Kirtan is thus the second serious social play in Assamese.

The third social play, Baṅgāl-Baṅgalani (1871) by Rudraram Bardalai, deals with a problem which was largely a result of the immigration of outsiders into Assam after the British takeover of the province. An Assamese girl, Tābhulī by name, was first married to a local youth. After some time she left him and became a concubine first to a local young man, then to someone of the Marwari community, and then again to one Bengali youth, Rām Mohan Paddār. The marriage of Tābhulī and Rām Mohan was duly registered. But after a few years Rām Mohan went back home leaving Tābhulī alone and stealing away her money. When he returned

18. The play is not available now. A hand-written copy is being preserved in the library of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Gauhati. The copy, we are told, was made from a printed version with four pages missing (pp. 53-56).
he was badly rebuked by Tābhulī and not allowed to live with her. Meanwhile, she married someone else. Rām Mohan had an attack of small pox and died soon after. There was none to cremate the dead body; it was somehow dragged out and thrown into the Kalāṅg river.

Like the two plays discussed above, Bāṅgāl-Bāṅgālanī is written largely on the model of Western drama. It has eight acts, each subdivided into scenes, called paricchedas. But the influence of Sanskrit drama and the medieval Assamese ankiyā nāts is also noticeable. There is a Sūtradhāra who usually appears towards the end of a scene and speaks in rhymed verses commenting on the immoral activities of Rām Gopāl and Tābhulī. In one place (II, ii), the Sūtradhāra sings a song in Bengali. The intended moral of the play is conveyed by him at the end of the play. The playwright himself offers a sort of apology (doṣa-khandān) where he tells us about the intentions with which the play was written.

In his zeal for social reform the playwright tries to lay bare the evils of illicit love, scoundrelism and knavery. But sometimes he betrays lack of refined taste.¹⁹ The language, of course, is free from artificialities: the local characters speak in colloquial Assamese; the Bengalis in Bengali; and the Marwari characters speak in broken Assamese. True, judged by modern standards, Bāṅgāl-Bāṅgālanī would be found lacking in artistic subtilities; but the seriousness of the playwright's

¹⁹ Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 21
intentions cannot be doubted. The theme of the play was much of a problem at the time. Bardalai aimed at enlightening the audience and making them aware of the problem. That is why, he wrote the play with a particular stage in his mind. The play was performed at the Bināpāṇi Nāṭya-mandir of Nowgong, and the author himself played a rôle. 20

Our discussion of these three earliest plays clearly shows that modern social play in Assamese is a product of Western influence. All these plays have social themes; all end unhappily either with the death of the hero or the heroine or both; and the technique used in all three is largely modelled on Western dramaturgy. Use of social themes, breaking a play into acts and scenes and making it end tragically, which are all characteristics of Western drama, were thus for the first time introduced into Assamese. It is true that as pioneers, two of these three playwrights, Gunabhiram and Rudraram, as we have seen, were not completely free from the influence of ancient Indian drama and the medieval Assamese ankiya nāṭs. But that influence was peripheral as it was confined to the introduction of a character like the Sūtradhāra and a few metrical verses. The overall atmosphere of all these plays is unquestionably modern. But even that peripheral influence of Sanskrit drama and ankiyā nāṭs was soon to disappear, so that when we come to the next important play of this category we find that both the propagandist motive and the Sūtradhāra have vanished.

20. Manohalekha, p. 92
Benudhar Rajkhowa (1873-1955)

After Bangal-Bangalani no serious social play came out for over two decades. And when Benudhar Rajkhowa's Seuti-Kiran was published in 1894, it showed that Western influences had been actually working in insensible ways, for we find in this play besides the general dramatic pattern, a marked influence of Shakespeare, both in theme and its treatment. Benudhar Rajkhowa was a student at Ripon College in Calcutta where Surendranath Banerji taught English literature. It was but natural that he developed great love for English literature, particularly Shakespeare, whose influence on him is reflected itself in this play which he wrote when he was still a student at college.

Two young persons of Gauhati, Kiran and Seuti, were in love and decided to marry. Another youth, Surath, who also loved Seuti, became jealous and started intriguing against them. Surath succeeded in making Kiran suspect Seuti's character, and in order to avoid her Kiran left Gauhati and came to stay at Sibsagar. Meanwhile, he married Jamuna just to please his parents and friends. It did not take long for Jamuna to discover that Kiran's heart actually lay with Seuti. So, she entrusted one Mainak with the responsibility of taking away Kiran's mind from Seuti. Mainak came to Gauhati and got a play written by Seuti herself in which the hero would pretend to love someone, while in reality he loved another. Kiran saw the play, and when he came to know that it

21. Mor Jivan Dapôn, pp. 102-103
was written by Seuti he became mad with jealousy. Without suspecting any conspiracy behind it, he murdered Seuti, and when the truth was revealed to him by Seuti's ghost he killed himself.

From the story summarized above it would appear that Seuti-Kiran is more like a romantic tragedy than a realistic social play. The fact is that this play reveals a peculiar aspect of the Western influence acting and reacting on our playwrights towards the close of the last century. A growing awareness of the immediate problems of life and society impelled Benudhar to dramatize a theme which was social in so far as it reflected the society's attitude to love and marriage. The play in essence shows, on the one hand, the moral degradation of some of the young men living in towns and having Western education and, on the other, the orthodox stand taken by the older generation on marriage and family relations. The tragedy of Seuti and Kiran was due not only to the machinations of Surath but also the unsympathetic treatment of Kiran by his parents and relatives, who forced him to marry another girl. Kiran's love for Seuti was pure and sincere, but he let himself be hoodwinked too easily by a jealous rival. Thus his credulity and his inability to assert himself against the crude social conventions, to which his parents stuck, proved his and his lover's undoing.

And the peculiar aspect of the play, referred to above, lies in the fact that such a plot is couched in a dramatic form which is by and large modelled on Shakespeare. Shakespeare was naturally the most read and admired of Western dramatists at that time, and the naturalistic technique of Western drama introduced
by Ibsen was yet to make its way into Assam. Besides, as noted in Chapter IV and elsewhere, the few young men from Assam studying English literature at Calcutta colleges during the latter part of the nineteenth century, were so much captivated by Shakespearean drama that it became almost an obsession with them to imitate Shakespeare. This is the reason why Elizabethan dramatic conventions—and they learnt these conventions from Shakespeare—came to be introduced even in a drama with a fairly realistic theme. It is, therefore, no wonder that we find a ghost and a play within the play in Seuti-Kiran. In other words, the subject-matter of the play is realistic, but the technique used is largely romantic. Kiran comes to know of the truth from Seuti's ghost much in the same way as Hamlet learns the truth from his father's. Again, Kiran's jealousy and subsequent murdering of Seuti is at once reminiscent of Othello's strangulation of Desdemona. There are also two spritely figures, called Kinnar and Vinnari, who are moulded much in the fashion of Shakespeare's witches. In fact, Shakespeare is much of an influence in Seuti-Kiran.

Benudhar was himself an actor and associated with literary and dramatic activities wherever he was posted during his tenure of government service. Once he played the rôle of the Duke in Bhrama-ranga (The Comedy of Errors) performed by the A.S.L. Club at Calcutta, and later he took part in different dramatic performances organized by various theatres in Assam. So Benudhar knew how to make a play appealing to the popular

22. Manchalekhā, p. 103
taste. The introduction of ghost, murder, and suicide might be due, besides Shakespearean influence, to the fact that such external incidents, as pointed out earlier, had great appeals to the popular audience of the time. As a play Seuti-Kiran has drawbacks, but to discuss them would not be germane to our purpose. From the point of view of Western influence it is a very significant play, for it points to an important factor in the making of modern Assamese drama. While our playwrights of the latter part of the nineteenth century had learnt to deal with social themes dramatically, a proper dramatic form was yet to be developed for that purpose.

Other Plays (1900-1947)

For more than a decade after Seuti-Kiran no serious social play came out. The reasons for this are not far to seek. Assamese life in those days, despite the countrywide intellectual and political renaissance, was rather slow, and hence deficient in the stuff of which serious drama is made. The society had not yet fully freed itself from medieval superstitions and ignorance, so that it presented materials suitable for farces and low comedies rather than for serious plays. Another reason might be that the popular fascination for farces and mythological plays was still very strong with the result that playwrights did not easily dare to tread into the realm of serious social plays. But the tradition begun by Gunabhiram as early as 1857 and carried

23. A.N.S., p. 281
on by others, though spasmodically, was bound to continue, fertilized more and more by new ideas and technical innovations coming in from the West; and although there was a temporary lull, plays on social and realistic themes were soon to appear again.

Two important plays, published during the early years of the twentieth century, were Nabinchandra Bardalai's *Grihalakshmi* (1911) and Ghanakanta Barua's *Uma*. The first play shows how an educated young man of a middle class family and married to a pious and lovable wife was nearly ruined, both morally and economically, under the influence of wine and women. The playwright, it seems, aims at exposing the evil effects of blind imitation of European manners and customs. The hero of the play, Haricharan, educated at Calcutta and well read in drama and poetry—he frequently quotes from Shakespeare as well as Assamese and Bengali poetry—is more a type than an individual representing as he does a class of young men who, under the impact of pseudo-Westernism, proved to be sad misfits in their own society. Haricharan not only drinks and bites his wife because she knows no Western manners but also mixes with bad characters, who regularly meet in the house of a prostitute. This woman and his so-called friends fleece him of all his money and betray him at his most difficult moments. Finally, these people are exposed in their true colours; and Haricharan, having realized his foolishness, comes back to his wife and family and vows to reform himself.

The play is in four acts subdivided into scenes. The theme is realistically presented, although the playwright has not
been able to free himself from the use of soliloquies and asides. But it has none of the romantic and melodramatic elements that characterize the social dramas before it. Nor does it have an overtly didactic tone, although it intends to amuse as well as to teach. This is largely because Bardalai knows how to sugar-coat his bitter criticism, so that he achieves his purpose without being pedagogic. In fact, Bardalai it is who modified Assamese drama from the fistian of nineteenth-century melodrama, romantic sentimentalism and extravaganza.

Ghanakanta Barua's Uma deals with a domestic theme showing how a wicked housewife's lust for money can ruin a happy family. Instigated by his wife, Sumitī, Lakshmikānta, son of a land-owner, separated from his brother Devakānta, who was compelled to go to a town to look for a job, leaving his wife, Umā, and a little son alone at home. The money that Devakānta sent to his wife at regular intervals never reached her, for it was received by Sumitī who counterfeited Umā's signature. The education of Devakānta's son had to be stopped for want of money, while Umā had to suffer untold miseries at home. Meanwhile, Sumitī, taking advantage of her husband's weakness, transferred all his property to her name. Lakshmikānta, bankrupt and repentant, almost went mad, while Govardhan, Sumitī's wicked brother and accomplice, had to go to jail. Ultimately, Devakānta came to know of all this and returned home only to find his wife, Umā, at death's door.

The play is apparently based on a story told in a Bengali Novel, Svarnalatā (1873).24 Written by Taraknath Ganguli

24. ibid., p. 282
Svarnalata, in the words of Sukumar Sen, "was the first domestic novel in Bengali with some genuine realism". The subject-matter of the novel, to quote Dr Sen again, are "The day-to-day life of the lower middle class people, their mean jealousies, petty bickerings, dumb suffering and simple joys." Like the characters of Svarnalata, those of Uma also are directly drawn from life. There is realism in the development of the plot, and dramatic interest centres on the opposition between the characters of Uma and Sumitra. The tragic intensity is felt when Uma, the noble heroine, who has suffered so much of injustice silently, dies touching her husband's feet. So far, Assamese dramatists dealing with social themes, had been following broadly speaking, an established vogue: ending their plays with reward to the good characters and punishment to the bad ones. It is for the first time that a virtuous character dies on the stage making her one of those "Who with best meaning have incur'd the worst", to repeat what Shakespeare's Cordelia says in King Lear. This makes Uma a genuinely social tragedy.

The old tragic theme of child-marriage reappears in Nirmala (written, 1924; published, years later) by Lakshmidhar Sarma. An M.A. in Bengali and a devoted follower of Mahatma Gandhi, Lakshmidhar was by temperament a reformist. It is said that Nirmala is based on the playwright's own experience. One of his nieces was widowed when she was a child, and since widow-remarriage was still a taboo in Assam, she had to bear the brunt

25. H.B.L., p. 217
of the cruel custom throughout her life. And Lakshmidhar could not do anything except to focus on the tragic consequences of such a social evil. The drama shows how Nirmalā, married to an aged man, became a widow even before she attained puberty. In a bid to alleviate the poor girl's suffering, her parents engaged for her a private tutor, named Padma Hāzarikā, an educated young man. In course of time, mutual love grew between them, and they decided to marry. But society stood on their way, for marriage of a widow was not allowed. In utter frustration both the lovers committed suicide.

Drama dealing with the evils of child marriage and advocating widow-remarriage had appeared, as has been already noted, as early as 1857 with Gunabhiram Barua's Rām-Navami. In fact, it is likely that Nirmalā, besides being a product of the playwright's personal experience, was influenced by the earlier play. But both in technique and characterization, Nirmalā presents decided improvements over its predecessor. This is natural, for during the long period that separates these plays, our playwrights had learnt, through their reading of English as well as Bengali plays, much about dramatic art as it was being practised in the West. Consequently, Nirmalā is free from the influence of ancient Indian drama or medieval Assamese drama. It is a five-act piece with five scenes to each act. Although the playwright has not been able to rid himself of the soliloquy and the aside, it is otherwise a realistic presentation of life.

26. Origin and Development of Assamese Drama and Stage, p. 83
There is no naively expressed moral tagged to it. Instead, we find the playwright's views on life and morality expressed through the heroine moments before she ends her life: "... Let society realize that women, too, are human beings. They are also made of flesh and blood. They also feel both pleasure and pain, and have a thing like conscience. Let society understand further that it will be ruined in no time if its women, instead of being educated and honoured, are made objects of men's enjoyment." This is not only an attack on the conservative outlook of the society; it also heightens the tragic intensity.

The third decade of the present century was much too poor so far as serious and realistic plays are concerned. After Nirmalā no such plays came out till the mid-thirties when a few dramas dealing mostly with domestic themes on the problems of poverty and casteism were published. In fact, between the beginning of the forties and the Second World War, hardly a dozen such plays appeared. As it was a period of great national ferment, the stage was dominated by mythological and historical plays upholding the cause of nationalism and patriotism. Consequently, from the beginning of the third decade, as Maheswar Neog points out, the Calcutta theatres had begun to engage the mind of the Assamese playwrights, actors and theatre-goers. Such popular enthusiasm for the great plays produced at Calcutta goaded some playwrights and actors "to make indifferent renderings of Bengali masterpieces". Dr Neog writes further that Devalā Devi,

27. Nirmalā, V, v, p. 110
28. A.N.S., pp. 284-285
Chandragupta, Nurjahan, Karnarjun, Uma, Sita, ‘ewar-patan, Rana Pratap, Shajahan, Kalapahar were some of the dramas which produced much 'strutting and fretting on the Assamese stage'. These translations, together with the original Assamese mythological and historical plays, almost dominated the stage, and although social plays as we have seen, had come to some prominence towards the later thirties, not much headway was made in this respect till the Second World War.

Of the few plays that appeared in the thirties, mention may be made of Lakshmikanta Datta's Samsar Chitra (The Picture of a Family, 1936), Daivachandra Talukdar's Viplav (The Revolution, 1937), Atulchandra Hazarika's Kalyani, Prabin Phukan's Kalaparina, Satyaprasad Barua's Cakai-Cakua (1939) and Dadhi Wahanta's Abhiyan (1940). The motif that informs all these plays is social reform. Both in form and matter, they are undoubtedly influenced by playwrights like Arthur Pinero, Arthur Jones, Ibsen and Shaw. It is difficult to say which of these European playwrights most influenced which particular play, because the influence has been absorbed in such a way that identification becomes almost impossible. Broadly speaking, it can be said, as Hem Narua holds, that the domestic dramas are of the type of Pinero and Jones, while plays dealing with socio-political problems or conflict between society and individual are Ibsenian in nature. Again, the ideology of these plays appears to be largely inspired by the philosophies of Gandhi and Marx.

29. Assamese Drama and Theatre, pp. 27-28
30. Assamese Literature, p. 196
Samsār Chitra is a domestic play of the type discussed above where the stress and strain of middle-class life is depicted. In Viplav and Abhiyan, we find for the first time an unmistakable influence of Marxian gospel. The theme of the first play is revolt of tenant farmers against their landlord ( zamindār). The revolt is led by an educated village girl, Pārvatī, who is the daughter of a poet. Evidently enthused by Marxian revolutionary ideas, she aims at replacing the rich oppressors by a government constituted with the common people like cultivators, labourers and artisans. "We must rule ourselves", says Pārvatī to a farmer "the ruler shall never be a puppet in the hands of the rich." Even Bipin, the landlord's son, who was a college student at Calcutta with money, wine and women about him, gradually realized the greatness of Pārvatī's mission and the meanness of his exploiting father. Disguised as a villager, he joined the revolutionaries to fight against his father's exploitation of the poor. One day he was badly beaten by the police, who could not recognize him. The father, when he came to know all this, was disillusioned and accepted the demands of the revolting tenant farmers—to spend the collected revenue for the welfare of the people and accept democratic ideals. The play ends with the union of Pārvatī and Bipin.

Pārvatī, the heroine of the play, is presented as a popular leader whose only mission is to restore the human rights to the poor and down-trodden. She not only enlightens them on their rights but also goads them to fight for democracy and

31. Viplav, II, v, p. 32
Independence. An anti-romantic and a practical worker, Parvati, even attacks bitterly the romantic and escapist literature of the time. She says to her father, who is a poet,

You are busy describing the cuckoo, the 'Veteki' bird, hills and springs. You always talk about your own good, your own happiness. Why don't you write about the common folk, their pleasure and pain, weal and woe, dangers and difficulties. Why don't you write poems, plays and novels in the language that the common man can understand?

_Viplav_ is thus a very modern play where the ideas of Marx and Gandhi are blended in order to draw up the dramatist's picture of a socialistic pattern of society. The characterization is poor, but from the point of view of treatment of ideas, _Viplav_ is an important play.

_Dadhi Mahanta’s Abhiyan_ (1942) is of a piece with _Viplav_. Exploiting the drama as a means of popular entertainment, the writer tries to show how educating the masses is a 'sine qua non' for the establishment of socialism. Dina and Karuna are two educated youths determined to free their villagers from the clutches of exploiters and other social evils by teaching them reading and writing. They set up an evening school where they start teaching the illiterate people of their villages. They are also assisted by two young girls, Sādarī and Raṅgdāl. In the course of time, the people become enlightened; they give up all evil practices and begin to do their work in right earnest. The exploiters like

32. ibid., I, iii, p. 8
land-owners, money-lenders, and the so-called preceptors are also exposed. Pricked by his conscience, Thagirām, who has been cheating ignorant people for a long time, admits his evil designs and gives back wrongly-acquired lands to the lawful owners. The play ends with the marriages of Sādarī and Dīna on the one hand, and Raṅgdai and Karunā on the other. As a play Abhiyān is very weakly constructed: it is rather a collection of detached scenes loosely pinned together. Nor does the characterization show any signs of promise. It is expressly a propaganda play, everything in it being subordinated to the writer's pronounced purpose. Mahanta is by no means a playwright. He is a devoted socialist with profound faith in Marxian philosophy. Yet such plays are important from the point of view of Western influence, because they show how even writers who were not basically playwrights tried to exploit the dramatic form, as used by Shaw and Galsworthy, to hold before the people their own socio-political ideas.

Of the other plays, Atulchandra Hazarika's Kālyānā (1939) is worth noting because in it, as Hem Barua points out, "the influence of Gandhian renaissance is clearly evident."33 Set against a medieval background, the play turns on the conflict between orthodoxy and liberal humanism, between hatred and love. Kālyānā, daughter of a royal priest, stood against her father and laid down her life for the cause of the untouchable and the downtrodden. A devoted Gandhian,34 Hazarika thus gives a modern touch

33. **Assamese Literature**, p. 197
34. See Chap. VI
Another notable play is Satyaprasad Barua's Chākai-Chakowā where there is a genuine attempt at psycho-analytic probe into characters. Bijit is an artist; Minati a social worker; and they try to get life's fulfilment through devotion to their own missions. They love each other, but the call of duty makes them suppress everything else. Bijit goes to Calcutta with an Assamese opera party, and Minati, while leading a procession of the down-trodden, gets injured in a scuffle between the people and the police. They meet in hospital and are finally united. There is nothing new in the plot which is rather weak, nor is the characterization especially striking. But the significance of the play lies, as noted earlier, in the playwright's attempt at delineating psychological states of characters. Bijit loves Minati, but he does not speak out his feeling. Indeed, he almost worships her painted picture. Gradually, he realizes that they are human beings and that reality has to be faced. Again, the play may be called a drama of ideas or a discussion drama like those of Shaw. There are long deliberations on the meaning of life and art. Both the hero and the heroine are social revolutionaries: liberty and equality are their watch-words. "The present age is an age of revolution", Minati asserts, "and to attain liberty by taking off the chains of servitude is its religion."  

The play has no act divisions. There are nine scenes, each beginning with elaborate stage-directions. Soliloquies and

35. Chākai-chakowā, sc. i, p. 18
asides are completely done away with, nor are there any melodramatic declamations. Thus both in matter and form the influence of playwrights like Shaw and Galsworthy are evident.

Low Comedies and Farces

It has already been noted that the latter half of the nineteenth century, despite the fact that realistic social drama had appeared as early as 1857, did not produce many such plays. Between Bangal-Bangalanī and Seuti-Kiran there was a gap of over two decades, and after the publication of the latter (1894), no such plays came out for many years till Nabinchandra Bardalai's Grihalakshmi (1911). The reason for this is not far to seek. Popular tastes during the period were largely for mythological plays and farcical pieces. About the popularity of the former we have already spoken.36 The latter were popular because the nineteenth-century audiences, being mostly ignorant and illiterate, promptly responded to theatrical shows that could excite mirth. The society at the threshold of a new age presented many incongruities which farceurs and writers of low comedy did not fail to exploit. The rustic, whom the light of modern knowledge had not yet reached, was himself a good subject for mirthful treatment, while the newly educated with all their idiosyncrasies and excessive love of Westernism easily lent themselves be made the butts of ridicule. Thus, the period offered ample scope for plays of lighter vein, so that the initial decades in the growth

36. See Chap. VI
of modern Assamese drama are marked by a preponderance of farces and low comedies.  

Farce may be roughly defined "as physical sensationalism of a ludicrous kind, bearing the same relationship to comedy as melodrama bears to tragedy." The aim of both comedy and farce is to excite mirth, "but while comedy does so by a comparatively faithful adherence to nature and truth, farce assumes a much greater license and does not scruple to make use of any extravagance or improbability that may serve its purpose." The plot of a farce depends on a skilfully exploited situation rather than upon the development of characters, and the "situation, moreover, is of the most exaggerated and impossible kind, depending not on clever plot-construction, but upon the coarsest and rudest of improbable incongruities." Considered from this point of view, modern Assamese drama, especially of the nineteenth century and of the pre-War decades of the present century to some extent, contains a fairly large number of farcical pieces and low comedies.

Farce or Prahasana was a popular dramatic type also in ancient Indian literature. It was a one-act drama intended to excite laughter. The subject was the poet's invention, and

37. A.N.S., p. 314  
38. L.J. Potts, Comedy, p. 137  
40. The Theory of Drama, p. 214  
41. H.H. Wilson, On the Dramatic System of the Hindus, p. 18
dealt essentially with the tricks and quarrels of low characters of every kind. Thus the Sanskrit Prahasana is much like the European farce, but it cannot be said that the former had any influence on our modern farce writers. We have no records of any farce being written in pre-British Assam, either in Sanskrit or in Assamese. Medieval Assamese drama, as we have already noted, was intended to please and edify, but it does not present a single instance of farce. In other words, Assamese literature does not have any tradition of farce writing. The writing of farces, like other types of drama, was undoubtedly a product of Western influence, which came directly through English and also indirectly through Bengali. During the early years of the growth of modern Bengali stage farces were more powerful and lively than serious drama: the heat and excitement that arose from the conflict between the old and the new in the society are nowhere more in evidence than in these plays. The Assamese students studying at Calcutta during the latter half of the nineteenth century, who read Bengali plays and also saw many of them performed, and who later became playwrights themselves, undoubtedly imbibed much of the art of farce-writing from Bengali. Since the Assamese society of the time presented almost similar phenomena, it was not difficult for them to write farcical pieces like those in Bengali. It is also noteworthy that even of Shakespearean drama it was the lighter comedies almost verging on the farce that first attracted our earlier playwrights. All this shows that the nineteenth

42. S.D., p. 348
43. Ajitkumar Ghose, Bengālā Sāhitye Ḥāsyaraser Dhārā, p. 471
44. ibid., p. 472
45. The first Shakespearean play to be done into Assamese was, as we have already noted, The Comedy of Errors (Bhrama-ranga, 1888). See Chap. V
century and the earlier decades of the twentieth were congenial for farces and light satirical comedies rather than serious social drama—the audience wanted them, and the writers not only found the material for such plays but also models to follow.

Assamese has a meaningful term to signify farces as well as plays of low comedy type. It is 'dheméliyā' which means 'mirthful'. In two of the three earliest social plays, which have already been considered, Kāniyār Kirtan (1861) and Bangal-Bangalanī (1871), there is much of farcical element, despite the fact that both in spirit and intention they are basically serious plays. The first published farce, properly so called, was, of course, Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s Litikāi (The Servants of a Brahman, 1890) to be followed by Pāchani (The Holy Man), Nomal, and Chikarpati-Nikarpati (1913). All these pieces depend for their theatrical effects on exaggerated situations, incongruous characters, malapropisms, and other deviations from the normal. Litikāi is based on the humour of a situation where seven brothers, all numskulls, provide all the mirth through their foolish and incongruous manners and behaviour. In Pāchani, the humour stems from the clash between the holy man’s love of guests expanded to ridiculous proportions and his wife’s parsimonious nature. The former would not take a morsel of food if he had no guests to eat with him, while the latter would employ cunning tricks to dismiss visitors. In Nomal, the mirth is created through a series of situations in which a rickety old man is constantly humiliated and mortified because of his foolishness and malapropisms. Chikarpati-Nikarpati arouses laughter through the
two thieves' display of methods used by them in larceny as well as of corruption in the court. These plays are nothing but purely farcical pieces which undoubtedly appealed to the rustic audience of the time. Except in Chikarpati-Nikarpati, where the corruption of the judiciary is exposed, there is nothing of serious intent in the other plays. In fact, exaggerated situations, irony of thought and words, malapropisms and humorous dialogue are the characteristics of these plays. 46

Padmanath Gohain Barua has left us three farcical pieces: Gāobudha (The Village Headman, 1890), Teton Tāmulī (1908) and Bhut ne Bhram (Is It Ghost or Illusion? 1924). Gāobudha, the earliest yet the best of the three, is rather a light comedy than a farce. 47 It gives a near realistic picture of the British administration of the time. The contemporary Assamese life and society in the countryside are also nearly truthfully depicted. The play shows how one Bhogmāj manages to become the headman of his village in the hopes of raising his position in society and how he is subsequently disillusioned. The village headman's post is honorary, but he has to work all day in order to satisfy the whims of the local administrator who, in his turn, has to please his superior British officer. So much occupied he has to be with his official duties that the headman hardly gets time to look after his family. But he gets nothing for his work except insults from one and all. Broken mentally and financially, the headman gives up his post admitting that it is better to be a

46. H.A.L., p. 150
47. ibid., pp. 152-153; A.N.S., pp. 319-320
common man than to serve such an office. Bhogman's plight is pathetic; he arouses pity rather than laughter in the audience. The humour lies in the dialogue and situations in which Assamese peons, orderlies and cooks, employed by British officers, speak and behave ludicrously. Mr Young, the Sub-Divisional Officer, provides much of the mirth through his broken Assamese and the way he interviews Bhogman for the headman's post. Nervous and puzzled, Bhogman misconstrues almost every question that Mr Young puts to him with the result that the whole scene of interview (II, iv) becomes a humorous one. But it is humour of a different kind. There is sadness in it; Bhogman makes himself a butt of ridicule because he knows no English and also because he is ignorant of the ways of a British officer. "Humour, we shall find, is often related to melancholy of a peculiar kind", observes Nicoll, "not a fierce melancholy, but a melancholy that arises out of pensive thoughts and broodings on the ways of mankind." The humour of Gāobudhā is certainly of such nature because, despite the fact that much of it appears in words, manners and situations which are apparently ludicrous, it is as a whole tinged with thoughtful broodings over the ways of the world. This is clear in the conversations between Bhogman and his wife as well as between him and other village headmen. These are full of concern about their own lot. It is only the way they talk and their mannerisms that often make us laugh.

Of the other two plays Teton Tāmulī is pure farce, while Bhut na Bhram? is a didactic piece written in a lighter vein.

48. The Theory of Drama, p. 199
Based on a popular story, the former depicts the extremely humorous activities of the sly Teton, who, with the help of his wit and cunning, converts all his defeats and failures to personal gains. Exaggerated situations, ludicrous characters and humorous dialogue are the stuff of which this farcical piece is made. The other play is, in the words of the author himself, "a series of scenes" drawn with a view to removing the popular superstitions about ghosts. "Considering the advanced age of the author", Gohain Barua further observes, "the play, it is true, may not deserve to be called a farce, but he (the author) would consider his labour rewarded if only it helps in removing, at least partly, the superstitions concerning ghosts in which the society is steeped." The way in which the educated members of a "Reforms Committee" try to prove the unreality of ghosts, their initial doubts and hesitations, the dialogue of the rustic folk concerning spirits, are sure to rouse laughter even in the most reserved among the audience.

All the three plays are in five acts divided into scenes. The matter in the plays is so thin and light that hardly any of them needs a five-act structure. This only shows how fast the tradition of the five-act play held on Gohain Barua even in the third decade of the twentieth century.

Another important farce-writer was Durgaprasad Majindar Barua (1870-1928) whose Mahari (The Tea Garden Clerk, 1896) was "a roaring success on the stage for several decades." The play

49. Preface to the 1st ed. of Bhutne Bhram, Sakabda 1846
50. Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 22
in three acts with a few scenes to each act depicts how a young man, with the help of the European manager's native mistress, succeeds in getting a clerical post in a tea garden and how his own ignorance together with the jealous head clerk's conspiracy ultimately compels him to leave the job. There is much in the play to rouse laughter: the eccentric Mr Fox, the English manager of the garden; the fisherwoman, Mākari, who is the manager's mistress; and Bhābirām, the newly-appointed young clerk, provide most of the fun. In fact, the characters, the situations and the dialogue are all contrived in such a way as to create mirth. Bhābirām's ignorance of English, Mr Fox's smattering of Assamese, and Mākari's often unrefined and biting language are the sources of much of the fun which is so characteristic of the piece. Mahari, indeed, was so popular on the stage that the eccentric Mr Fox and his fisherwoman mistress, Mākari, "became by-words for hilarious comedy, and several good actors of Assam became widely known by these rôles." It also gives, although light-heartedly, a realistic picture of life in Assam tea gardens about the close of the nineteenth century: the contrast between the wretched life of the over-worked, ill-paid native clerk and the licentious and tumultuous living of the English manager is piquantly brought out. Of his other farces, Negro (?) which is not available now, ridicules the blindly Westernized people of Assam, while Kāliyug (1904), written in collaboration with Benudhar Rajkhowa satirizes the hypocrisies of preceptors and priests.

51. ibid., p. 22
Benudhar Rajkhowa earned wide popularity as a farceur with his Kurisatikār Sabhyatā (The Civilization of the Twentieth Century, 1908). Tini Ghainī (Three Wives, 1928), Ashikṣītā Ghainī (The Uneducated Wife), Chorar Sristi (The Creation of Thieves, 1931) and Topanir Parinām (The Consequences of Sleep, 1932). In the first, the playwright exposes the hypocrisies of the Westernized youths of Assam. They are contemptuous of the older and time-honoured faiths of their own land, but are not prepared to accept whole-heartedly the Western faiths either. They profess to be atheists and non-believers in the caste system, whereas in reality they follow all the older customs for fear of society. Tini Ghainī and Ashikṣītā Ghainī show how co-wives and uneducated wives can make a husband's life miserable. In Topanir Parinām, laughter is created through a play on the word 'topani' meaning 'sleep'. A young man, called Topani, seduces a young girl and is compelled to marry her. Chorar Sristi appears to be patterned after Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors and The Taming of the Shrew. Two husbands, Dhumuhā and Maurāṃ, lead unhappy lives with their wives because of temperamental incompatibility. Dhumuhā, a quarrelsome and excitable young man, is married to a simple and amiable woman; while Maurāṃ, a peaceable youth, is married to a termagant. One night a clever and well-meaning thief comes to know of this unhappiness, and with the help of a charm that he knows gets the wives exchanged. The shrew, who was making Maurāṃ's life miserable with her fiery temperament, is completely tamed by the stormy Dhumuhā.

These little plays of Rajkhowa may be called light comedies of situation. The mirth is created not so much through characters and dialogue as through shrewdly contrived situations.
But beneath the laughter lie the playwright's corrective motives. In all these plays he not only exposes the hypocrisies of the educated class but also pleads for a rational approach to life.

Of the many other farces published before the thirties, mention may be made of Chandradhar Barua's Bhāgya-Parikṣā (Fate Decided, 1916). Based on the tale of Khaza Hosen in the Arabian Nights, this little play in lighter vein dramatizes the relative merits of fate and affluence. Padmadhar Chaliha in his Nimantran (Invitation, 1915) creates laughter by exploiting the lack of common sense on the part of four 'foolish wise men'. Mitradev Mahanta, a leading actor and playwright, has published quite a good number of farcical pieces of which Biyā Biparyaya (The Marriage Debacle, 1924) and Kukurikanār Āthmaṅgalā (The Reception of the Night-blind son-in-law, 1927) were at one time "warmly received at every theatre in Assam." In the former piece, mirth is created through incongruous situations and behaviour. He also ridicules through dramatic exaggeration such evils of the contemporary society as child marriage, dowry and superstition. The source of laughter in the latter play is mainly the incongruous behaviour of the son-in-law, who, in his vain attempts to conceal his night-blindness, only exposes himself and makes himself ridiculous. In recent years Mahanta has published a few more farces such as Etā Curat (One Cigarette), Teṅgar Bhengar (The Clever Rogue), Chechā Jvar (Cold Fever), Achin Kāthar Thorā (The Bluff Giver) and others. All these pieces are meant for mirth which the playwright

52. H.A.L., p. 155
creates through exaggerated situations, spicy dialogue and ludicrous characters.

Farcical pieces and low comedies continued to be written even after the thirties of the present century, but gradually their place came to be taken by serious social plays. Of those who wrote such plays after 1930, mention may be made of Lakshmidhar Sarma, Surendranath Saikia, Kumudchandra Barua, Karunadhar Barua, Binandachandra Barua, Prabin Phukan, Premnarayan Datta and a few others. In most cases the light dramatic pieces written by these writers were like sugar-coated pills because, although their apparent aim was to arouse laughter, they also aimed at exposing the follies and hypocrisies of a society still in transition. But after the Second World War the farce as a dramatic type almost ceased to be a living force, its place being taken by plays on serious social as well as psychological themes. The effects of the War, the disillusionment that immediately followed the attainment of Independence, rapid spread of scientific and technological knowledge, the popularity of such thinkers as Marx and Freud—all these came to have their impact on literature including drama. The audience no longer looked for boisterous comedy created through exaggeration of all kinds; instead, they wanted to see flesh-and-blood human beings in real human situations. The playwright was ready to give them this, and as a result drama became almost entirely 'social' and 'inward' in place of 'farcical' and 'mythological'.
Social Drama after Independence

The bulk of the post-War and post-Independence Assamese drama consists of serious social plays. But there is a marked difference between these plays and the few realistic plays that appeared during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century social plays were didactic in nature. The playwrights, who posed as social reformers, overtly expressed their intentions; and the plays usually ended with a moral. Post-War social plays, on the other hand, are not intended to reform; they are problem plays in which man is presented in his various relationships living a complicated existence. In such an existence problems are many—economic, familial, psychological, and what not; and attempts are made in these plays to lay them bare on the stage. The disparity between the rich and the poor, the widening gap between the older and the younger generations, the relationships between husband and wife and the employer and the employee, unemployment, the influence of heredity, the hopes and despairs of the growing middle class—all these and many more have become the subject-matter of drama. The characters of these plays are naturally life-like; the medium is invariably prose of the conversational type, and the technique is largely naturalistic.

Speaking about post-1947 Indian literature F.R. Grinivasa Iyengar observes that "In the matter of influence, of course, it is not easy to say who influenced whom and how much and in what
way. The reservoir of the writer's consciousness receives periodical replacement from divers sources at different times."  

This can very well be said about post-Independence Assamese literature also, because the influences have been so many and varied that it is nearly impossible to define them. Post-Independence writers are all well educated persons who read not only English authors but many other Western authors, although mostly in English translations. As a result of these minds as diverse as Marx and Freud, Jung, Eliot and Joyce, existentialists like Sartre, absurdists like Beckett and Ionesco, and many other writers and philosophers have exercised their influence on the consciousness of the modern Assamese writer. These influences, it is true, are discernible chiefly in poetry and fiction, and only to a lesser extent in drama. The chief influences on drama, both in form and matter, are, indisputably, Ibsen, Shaw, Galsworthy and Maeterlinck, while Chekhov and in recent years, absurdist playwrights like Beckett and Ionesco have also found favour with some of our younger playwrights.

Assamese drama of the post-Independence period is markedly characterized by what is known as 'realism' and 'naturalism'. These two terms have often been used confusedly, so a distinction ought to be made before we proceed. Bamber Gascoigne makes a very workable distinction when he says that "naturalism is a description of style and realism of content."  

53. Indian Literature since Independence : A Symposium, Intro., p. xviii
54. Twentieth-Century Drama, Preface, p. 7
And it is in this sense that these two terms are proposed to be used here. The content or matter of post-War Assamese drama is realistic in the sense that the themes of the plays represent real situations in which the post-War or post-Independence Indian finds himself. Loss of faith, economic disillusionment, class struggle, intercommunal tangles, familial troubles issuing from incompatible marriages, disintegration of the joint family, are some of the features of life and society after Independence, and all this has contributed to the subject-matter of drama. Realism was a late nineteenth-century movement in drama, and Ibsen was one of the chief instigators who was later followed by playwrights like Shaw and Galsworthy in England. With such plays as The League of Youth (1869), Pillars of Society (1877) and A Doll's House (1879) Ibsen made realism an enduring force in drama. Realism had already appeared in Assamese drama in the thirties, particularly in plays dealing with domestic subjects, but it is only after the Second World War that realism of the Ibsenian or Shawian type came to dominate the theatre. In fact, Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy are very strong influences on post-War Assamese drama, both in matter and form.

Within a few years after Independence some plays, written against the background of the Second World War and the 1942 movement, appeared. The outstanding among these is certainly Labhitā (1948) by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Labhitā, according to the writer himself, is a dramatization of real events some of which happened in Assam during the movement of 1942 and the War years. During those fateful years villagers, both men and women, had often to suffer at the hands of the military. Many women and girls, for
fear of being violated, either became nurses with the army or
gave up their lives in the act of resistance. Many young men and
women joined the Indian National Army led by Subhaschandra Bose, 
and died fighting for the freedom of the country.55 Labhitā was
one of such girls, educated and brave who, suspected of being ill-treated by the military and so spurned by her society, ultimately joined the I.N.A. and was killed by a British bullet.
Another play is Atulchandra Hazarika'sĀhuti (1952) where the playwright shows how the son of one Rai Bahādur Duarā, a devoted supporter of the British Raj, dies fighting against the foreign rulers, and how the son's death for the cause of the country effects a total change in the mind of the father. Many an Assamese youth got killed by British bullets during the 1942 movement, and Ālok Duarā and Sontarā, the educated hero and heroine of the play, may be taken as representatives of that patriotic younger generation. Golak Khaund's Biyāllis-panchallis ('42-45', 1950), set against the background of the War, shows how corruption which became rampant during the War years, not only vitiated the society but also threatened the very foundation on which the family stood, love and mutual understanding. Obviously influenced by the Bengali drama, Praphulla (1891),56 a domestic tragedy by Girishchandra Ghosh, Khaund's play depicts how a lawyer, the third son of a rich tea-planter hoodwinks his other brothers and not only deprives them of their paternal property but also gets them sent to jail. It is only the strongly idealistic

55. See Preface to Labhitā, 1948, p.2
56. A.N.S., p. 292
character of his wife, Jamunā, and a car accident that make the lawyer see reason and amend his ways.

All these plays are realistic presentation of characters and situations. The dialogue of the plays is also of the realistic type, and the technique is naturalistic with elaborate setting, detailed stage-directions and nothing of such old fashioned conventions as the soliloquy and the aside. Jyotiprasad, who had already used Ibsenian technique in his Karengar Ligiri (The Palace Maid, 1934), made in Labhitā a real breakthrough in the direction of naturalism. There are not only detailed instructions about the stage arrangements for a particular scene; even the time when the scene is to take place and the moods and looks of the characters are elaborately described. Here is an example:

Scene — A month later. The house of Gaṅgārām Baruā, a revenue-collecting officer (mouñādar). The back yard of the officer's house. The yard is in between the main bungalow and the kitchen. The veranda at the back of the bungalow is seen on the right of the stage. The kitchen has thatched roofs supported by bamboo posts. The officer's wife is seen seated in the kitchen veranda cutting vegetables. Close by her lie a knife, a dish, and baskets. Thin smoke is coming out through the kitchen door. A few servants and menials are seen moving in the yard. The officer's husky voice coming from the bungalow is clearly audible.

57. For a detailed discussion of this play see Chap. IX
58. Labhitā, II, 11, p. 34
This is evidently modelled on the technique of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy. Ibsen, for example, describes the scene of Act I of *Ghosts* as follows:

Scene - A large room looking upon a garden. A door in the left hand wall, and two in the right. In the middle of the room, a round table with chairs set about it, and books, magazines and newspapers upon it. In the foreground on the left, a window by which is a small sofa with a work-table in front of it. At the back the room opens into a conservatory rather smaller than the room. From the right hand side of this a door leads to the garden. Through the large panes of glass that form the outer wall of the conservatory, a gloomy fjord landscape can be discerned, half obscured by steady rain.  

The houses of Jyotiprasad's revenue-collecting officer and Ibsen's Mrs Alving are naturally different, but the ways they are described are strikingly similar.

In fact post-Independence Assamese drama consists mostly of realistic problem plays, and the technique used by the playwrights is largely the naturalistic one. Surface problems of contemporary society are the subject-matter of these plays; the playwrights hardly concern themselves with deeper psychological problems. Linguistic problems, communal harmony as well as tension, casteism, poverty, the plight of the lower middle class, exploitation of the poor by the rich, corruption, favouritism and


All these plays, as we find, appeared during the fifties. They are realistic in matter and naturalistic in form, dealing with different problems of the time; but none of them stands out in any way as striking by itself and different from the others. In selection of themes and methods of construction, the playwrights are obviously influenced by the European naturalistic dramatists, particularly Ibsen and Galsworthy, but of the deep psychological insight of the former they have almost nothing. In Pratīvād, for example, we have in Zerina a character like Ibsen's Nora. Zerina, in protest against her husband's ill-treatment, leaves his house in much the same way as Nora does in A Doll's House. But Pratīvād is a downright presentation of a surface problem; it reveals none of the psychological study of characters which is so characteristic of Ibsen. Again, Phani Sarma in his Kiya? (Why?) asks why there is so much of economic disparity in

60. Satyen Sarma, 'Sāmpraṭik Asamiyā nāṭak āru ādhunikatā' in Sāmlāp, No. 3, p. 134
society. He presents an artist who spends all his time and energy to give pleasure to others through his artistic creations, but gets nothing in return. His son is seriously ill, but he cannot call a doctor because he has no money, nor does anybody help him with a loan. When the son dies the artist feels frantically frustrated, destroys his books and other artistic creations and asks God why the ways of the world are so. This is pathetic, no doubt; but the playwright fails to delineate clearly the deep psychological tension of the artist with the result that the play does not achieve tragic intensity. There is nothing particularly striking about any of the many other plays published during the fifties: all are realistic problem plays, and the technique used is largely naturalistic.

Naturalism and realism were dominant forces in the late nineteenth-century Western drama. That Ibsen made an impress upon "the younger spirits of other lands," is proved, as Nicoll points out, by Shaw's Quintessence of Ibsenism. Shaw himself, and Galsworthy as well, continued to write realistic problem plays long into the twentieth century, but reactions against the realistic movement had begun long back. Ibsen himself began to veer more and more towards Symbolism as evident in the plays like The Wild Duck (1884), Rosmersholm, or The Lady from the Sea (1888). The Belgian dramatist, Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949), writing in French, began to bring out Symbolist dramas during the last decade of the nineteenth century; and playwrights like Strinberg and

61. World Drama, p. 545
Hauptmann, who were first proponents of naturalism, gradually began to drift away into Symbolism. Besides Symbolism, many other vogues began to appear in the theatre, so that naturalism came to be ultimately dismissed as old-fashioned. There was the poetic drama popularized by W.B. Yeats and other dramatists of the Irish Dramatic Movement, and later revived in England by T.S. Eliot. There was again the expressionistic movement which, developed in Berlin between 1910 and 1920, soon spread to other lands and greatly influenced playwrights like Sean O'Casey. Bertolt Brecht's 'epic drama' also created quite a vogue for some time in the Western world. Then we come to what is known as the Theatre of the Absurd with which are associated a group of dramatists of the 1950s and which has stirred the imagination of many a younger dramatist in diverse lands. In fact, since the beginning of the present century various experiments have been made in the Western theatre, so that what is current today becomes old-fashioned tomorrow.

Mid-twentieth-century Assamese drama, on the other hand, has remained nearly static. Realistic problem plays, which appeared in the thirties and got a boost after the War, are still the vogue. Already in 1929 a symbolic play had appeared, but it could not make much of an impact upon the theatre. Nobody has yet used Expressionism as a theatrical mode, nor do we find any play modelled on the technique of 'epic theatre'. The Theatre of

62. ibid., p. 794
63. See Chap. IX
the Absurd, of course, appears to have influenced at least one playwright, Arun Sarma, whose plays will be discussed later.  

A number of factors are responsible for such a poor state of the present theatre in Assam. A professional theatre has not yet grown in Assam, and amateurish playwrights and actors can hardly afford to make experiments in theatrical art. A new dramatic mode can thrive only when there is an audience trained enough to appreciate it. While there are theatrical activities in most of the major towns of Assam, a regular theatre-going public hardly exists in any of them. Most people still go to the theatre to see a regular tragedy or comedy, and they feel disappointed if they do not get either. The one-act play is quite popular now, but except a few, most of them are either farces or translations. But whatever is the output and quality, the fact remains that modern Assamese drama, through its different phases, has been largely inspired by Western writers. During the latter part of the nineteenth century and the initial decades of the twentieth the guiding spirit, as we have seen, was Shakespeare, followed during the period up to the fifties by Ibsen and other realists like Shaw and Galsworthy. While realism and naturalism still strongly persist, absurdist playwrights like Beckett and Ionesco have also inspired our theatre in recent times, although their influence has been very limited yet.

---

64. See Chap. X
65. Manchalekhā, p. 282