Chapter XI

Conclusion

It must have been seen from the foregoing pages that forces originally Western played a predominant role in the development of modern Assamese drama. Not that drama in Assamese is something that arose as a result of Western influence; it had been there in Assam since the sixteenth century when Sāṅkaradeva and Wādhavadeva wrote and produced their plays. Deriving its subject-matter from the epics and Puranas, and having a technique which was a blend of elements of indigenous folk dances, Sanskrit drama and, possibly, dramatic performances of other parts of India, the ankiyā plays were a well-developed histrionic form. While there are similarities between this drama of Assam and the medieval European drama, not because of any mutual indebtedness but because of the identical spirit of the times, the ankiyā plays, particularly the shorter ones by Wādhavadeva, also present features which would make a modern drama. There are stage-directions spoken by the Sūtradhāra; the dialogue comes close to the language of common speech, and the human interest is projected through the pranks of Child Krishna, although the end is unmistakably moral.

The tradition of writing and producing plays on the model of Sāṅkaradeva and Wādhavadeva continued till late into the eighteenth century, and even the nineteenth; but the drama gradually degenerated as the writers were mostly imitative having no knack of play-writing. An important change was, of course,
noticeable in this decadent drama: the artificial but easily understood dialect of Brajabuli came to be gradually replaced by a pseudo-Brajabuli dramatic prose, and still later plays came to be written "frankly in Assamese." During this period a few dramas were written in the style of Sankaradeva, but in Sanskrit interspersed with songs in Assamese, the subject-matter being largely religious. The Assamese drama suffered seriously, like anything else in the land, when the Ahom monarchs lost their kingdom to the Burmese. And when Assam came under the control of the Company in 1826, it was in a completely chaotic state — politically, economically and socially, so that all artistic and literary pursuits were almost at a standstill. True, the Ḡākiyā plays continued to enjoy their quiet life mainly in the countryside, but drama as a living literary form had nearly ceased to exist. With the introduction of English education and the increasing familiarity of our writers with English literature, Assam and its literature gradually began to experience the great renaissance that had been going on in the neighbouring Bengal.

The impact which the Western or English civilization had on the nineteenth-century Indian mind is aptly summarized by Rabindranath Tagore on his eightieth birthday, when he says that "the educated of those days had recourse to the English language and literature. Their days and nights were eloquent with the stately declamations of Burke, with Macaulay's long-rolling sentences, discussions centred upon Shakespeare's drama and

1. Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 18
Byron’s poetry and above all upon the large-hearted liberalism of nineteenth-century English politics. The process by which the new influence percolated into Assam was rather gradual; the channels through which it came were many, and the media that carried it were mainly English and Bengali in the initial stages, and Assamese a little later. The chief agents who helped in disseminating the new ideas and thoughts were the missionaries, the government as well as private individuals—Europeans, Bengalis and Assamese. The nineteenth-century reform and nationalist movements were also greatly responsible for instilling into the mind of the Assamese an urge for the new and the modern. It was Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, a contemporary of Raja Rammohan Roy, in whom the new consciousness first revealed itself. He, along with the Baptist missionaries, not only fought hard to secure for Assamese its rightful place in Assam but exhorted his countrymen to be patriotic and enlightened, and to shake off torpor. He was joined and followed by many others, all of whom received higher education at Calcutta, and thus the new age that had already flourished in Bengal, now dawned on Assam.

It is true that the impact of Western civilization was felt in Bengal and in the South many years earlier than in Assam, but the modern age in Indian literature as a whole actually began with the first struggle for India’s freedom in 1857 and the rise of political consciousness. The contact with the West thus

2. Crisis in Civilization, Visva-Bharati, 1964, p. 9
3. B.K. Barua and P. Goswami, ‘Assamese’ in Indian Literature, ed. Dr Nagendra, pp. 443-444
4. Dr Nagendra, Indian Literature, Intro., p. xvi
gave rise to an open conflict which was responsible for much of the literature produced during the years that followed. It is remarkable that the first Assamese drama, written on the Western model, *Ram-Navami Nāṭak* by Gunabhiram Barua, came out in that very year. He was soon followed by Hemchandra Barua (*Kāṇīyār Kirtan*, 1861) and Rudraram Bardalai (*Raṅgā-raṅgālani*, 1871), and this trio was thus the pioneers of the new drama in Assamese. Although not without some flickering traces of Sanskrit drama and the *āṅkiyā-nāṭa*, these plays in reality registered a complete break with the pre-British drama. The subject-matter of all these plays was social and realistic, while the style and technique were largely modelled on Western dramaturgy with occasional echoes of Shakespeare.

Although the new drama in Assamese began with plays of a social-realistic type, the later years of the nineteenth century and the initial ones of the twentieth were largely a period of mythological and historical plays and farces, as well as of translations and adaptations. Shakespeare was naturally the first and the greatest favourite to be translated, adapted and imitated, followed in the succeeding years by Ibsen and other leading playwrights of the Western world. But while several of the Shakespearean adaptations seem to have been successful as stage plays, their influence on the Assamese drama is not obvious. The writers of the mythological and historical plays draw their subject-matter from indigenous sources, the former from the epics and Purāṇas, and the latter from the history of Assam as well as of other parts of India, particularly of Rajasthan. But the themes apart, all these plays were modelled on Western dramatic
methods, particularly those of Shakespeare. And with the historical plays of Bezbaroa and Gohain Barua, Shakespeare, whose influence had been felt as early as 1857, became the dominant influence on pre-War Assamese drama. The informing principle in both the mythological and historical plays is patriotism and nationalism, the watch-words of nineteenth century India. A character like Meghnad, for example, is idolized as an embodiment of patriotism, while Vibhisan, who in medieval literature was praised as a devotee of Rama, is ruthlessly castigated as a betrayer of his country.

The drama after the Second World War and the attainment of Independence is primarily of the social-realistic type. By that time the mythological play had almost died a natural death, while historical plays continued to appear in a garb different from that of the earlier ones. The emphasis in these plays is on anti-British themes, and the dramatic technique is modelled not on Shakespeare but largely on Drinkwater and other early twentieth-century British playwrights. The post-Independence historical plays are marked by forceful dialogue and inner conflict of characters in place of the declamatory rhetoric and thrilling external action that characterized much of the earlier drama of this type. The writers of social and realistic plays draw their inspiration mainly from Ibsen and then from Shaw and Galsworthy. It is with Jyotiprasad that the naturalistic technique of Western drama strikes deep roots in Assamese; and he soon becomes a model to be followed by many a playwright coming after him. Another aspect of post-Independence Assamese drama is the growth of the one-act play, which, as we have already noted in the last chapter, is very much
a product of western influence. There is then the Theatre of the Absurd which has influenced at least one playwright. But this influence could not be called even peripheral, possibly because the experiences peculiar to the Theatre of the Absurd are hardly shared by our writers, much less by our audience.

It has to be noted that the qualitative growth of the Assamese drama during the last one hundred and twenty years does not correspond with its quantitative increase. Many of the playwrights are simply imitative, writing as they do to supply the needs of a particular theatre. Others aim at making plays theatrical and stagey in order to catch an audience. This is the reason why many of the plays, particularly of the pre-war period, are more theatrical than dramatic. During the initial decades of the present century, the Assamese theatre was expanding, and while the playwrights used it as an effective means of communication, the audience found in it a major source of amusement. The Assamese cinema did not appear till 1935, and so all histrionic activities during the period centred on the stage. Many plays were written and performed, but not much drama was produced. The period may, in fact, be said to be characterized by what Raymond Williams calls "the paradox of an expanding theatre and a declining drama." Jyotiprasad Agarwala, who made the first film in Assamese (Jaymatī, 1935), was also the man to give us the first real drama (Kāreņgar Līgirī, 1937) after many years. The drama of the post-war period is largely characterized by a tendency to inwardness, but even here, barring a few exceptions, a deep and subtle

psychological probing into characters is not much in evidence. The playwrights have ideas to communicate, but lack of understanding of the human situation has made many of them unable to integrate the dramatic form they choose with the ideas they want to convey. Consequently, a realistic social theme is sometimes found cast into the mould of a Shakespearean romantic drama. While many of the writers of social plays have successfully used the naturalistic technique of Ibsen and others, they mostly have not been able to show the subtle psychological study of characters which is so much a quality in Ibsen. In other words, these playwrights have failed to give their plays, under the prose surface, "the third dimension of poetry", which characterizes the plays of Ibsen and Chekhov. This seems to be the reason why there have been so few symbolic plays and no truly poetic plays at all. Of course, playwrights like Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Parvatiprasad Baruva have written a few real dramas where the influence of Ibsen and Maeterlinck, as we have seen, has been so assimilated as to make it part of their own creative genius.

The tragic view of life, which was taboo on the traditional Indian stage, informs much of our drama at present. For the medieval writer God was in heaven, and so there was nothing wrong in this world. He was concerned with men not in relation to men and this world but with man in relation to God and the hereafter. It is only when our writers came into contact with Western ideas and ways of thinking that they became aware of the human situation. In drama, this new note was struck as early as

1857, and now this is so much a part of our writers' sensibility that the tragic view of life has become inseparable from our own way of thinking. Other ideas and methods, which were originally from the West, have also been assimilated likewise into the native genius.

In fact, there have been big changes in every sphere of Indian life during the last hundred years. No doubt, they originated mostly as a result of the contact and conflict with the West, but have since become part of its own being. Besides with all societies fast becoming industrialized, new sets of values are springing up, and "we are called upon to participate in the painful birth of a new civilization." When all societies turn on a similar set of values, geographical boundaries will have little impact on literature, because it is the social conditions that determine its character.

Of all branches of literature, drama is certainly the most sensitive to social change. The Assamese drama of the last one hundred and twenty years owes for its growth much to its contact with the West, which has also been largely responsible for the remarkable changes that our society, in all its aspects, has undergone during the period. It has, I hope, been made clear in the foregoing pages that this influence has been continuously operating in various ways. Nevertheless, a time seems to be

coming when it would be difficult to clearly mark out this indebtedness to the West, and we might find an inspiration wholly indigenous.