Chapter I

POETRY

The early Assamese literature had its real beginning in the writings of Hem Sarasvatī, Harihara Ripra, Kaviranta Sarasvatī and Madhava Kandali. According to Dr R. K. Kākati, the literature before these belong to the pre-Assamese period. The distinct Assamese period of literature, he opines, began with circa 14th century and the earliest writer is Hem Sarasvatī.

The early part of the ancient period includes writings of both pre-Śaṅkarite and Śaṅkarite ages; to be precise, the period includes the vaiṣṇavite renaissance in literature and extends up to circa seventeenth century, when in addition to religion, secular influences released by the Āhom and Kooa courts began to be seriously felt in writings. The Vaiṣṇavite impact continued to be felt in literature of 17th and 18th centuries, but it lost its depth; this led Dimbesvar Neog to call it an age of extension. Kākati calls this age "the middle period" to emphasise its linguistic peculiarities and specially the development of chronicle-prose. However for our purpose, the period from the 14th century to the early 19th century can be treated as one. The sub-division, if any, is not important.

To study ancient Assamese literature we have to take note of its aesthetical ideal and its ultimate goal. We have also to

1. ASR, p.428. All these writers belong to the 14th century.
2. ASR, p.428
4. ASI, p.219
5. NLAL, p.283
6. AFD, p.13
recognise its limitations. Only then we shall be able to evaluate the literature properly. Our specific aim is to study hāsyā rasa. Since hāsyā rasa is to be studied in relation to other rasas and in accordance with the aesthetical criterion proper for it, we have, first of all, to ascertain the literary ideal of the period and the place it assigned to hāsyā rasa. We have so far not come across any major work on poetics or dramaturgy written in Assamese during the period. This however does not mean that the writers were unaware of any aesthetical goal or indifferent to aesthetical thinking. Mādhava Kandali, the conscientious translator of the ancient epic, Rāmāyana, rendered it into Assamese with utmost reverence and humility. His aesthetical attitude is also clear from the following verse: "Vālmīki wrote the śāstra in various rhymes. I have taken utmost care to follow his poem and render the verses as I have been able to appreciate them in concise form. Who can master all the rasas? Just as the birds fly as their feathers allow them to do so, so the poet composes in conformity with popular taste. He takes liberty to add on his own and lengthen or shorten verses as the subject matter demands. This poem is no divine revelation, but of earth earthy." He admits that it was at the behest of King Mahāmānīkya, he has added some kāvyā rasa to the poem. This clearly shows that this poet of the fourteenth century recreated the kāvyā fully conscious of his task as a poet. He takes enough care to follow and appreciate the epic and invent a style appropriate to it, condensing and adapting the verses to suit local taste. While doing so, he does not for a moment forsake his aesthetic aim of creating rasa.

7. Rāmāyana, padas 3963-3967
Sāṅkardeva (1440-1568), the founder of neo-Vaiśnavite religion in Assam, was a great Sanskrit scholar and rendered the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the venerable scripture of Vaiṣṇavism and a storehouse of rich legends, into Assamese. He was a master of style and a genius who could blend his religious insight and aesthetical sense in perfect harmony. His aesthetical creed was bhakti-rasa, a sentiment not recognised in the major classical texts of Sanskrit poetics. Unfortunately no direct or clear statement of his idea of bhakti-rasa is available. His idea of bhakti is no doubt based on dāśya bhāva. L. N. Bezbaruva, the modern exponent of his thoughts, states that the basic state of mind of each of the nine rasas recognised in the classical theory is pleasure (ānanda), which is a transcendental emotion. Madhavdeva (1489-1596), the illustrious disciple of Sāṅkardeva, exactly echoes this when he states that he craves for a bhakti that is replete with rasas. Sāṅkardeva did not stick to the old secular spirit of Sanskrit epic literature that aimed generally at creating poetic sentiments. Sāṅkardeva was wedded to a new spirit of mystical-emotional religion, to which the spirit of literature was attuned. The sentiment of bhakti was equated with sentiment of literary relish or rasa. This new approach is evident in Sāṅkardeva's comments on literary works of his disciples and contemporaries. His interpretation of the rāsa-līlā is erotic-mystical; it sees in the relationship of the Gopīs with Kṛṣṇa a divine sentimental union, a subtilised form of personal transcendental realisation of supreme joys. In the following verse, he asks the rasikas to change their attitude:

8. Sanskrit Poetics, p.267
9. BG, p.382
10. Nām-Ghosa, p.1
srngāra rase yāra āche rati,
āk śuni houka sūddha mati.  
(Those who have attachment to the erotic sentiment should purify their mind after listening to these verses.)

The same approach is evident in his rebuke to Pitāmvara, a composer of popular poetry; the poet, in his adaptation of the 10th Book of Bhāgavata, depicted Rukmiṇī as an erotic and love-lorn lady pinning for her lover and resouer, Kṛṣṇa. Sankardeva disapproved Pitāmvara's preference for the secular (laūkik) rasas and held him to be unfit for a devotee. From Kathā-guru-carit, we further know that Sankardeva also took his disciple Ananta Kandali to task for allowing his adaptation of the 10th Book of Bhāgavata to be dominated by the heroic sentiment. The underlying idea behind this approach was to emphasise the Vaiśnava rasa theory which recognises Bhakti as the king of rasas and to which secular rasas have to play a subsidiary role. Both Madhava Kandali and Sankardeva make mention of kāvya rasa which they use in their poetry, but about which they are apologetic. Madhava Kandali confesses that he uses some kāvya-rasas at the behest of his patron, King Mahāmāṇikya; similarly Sankardeva makes an apologetic reference in his earliest poem, Haraś-candra Upākhyān, to his use of kāvya rasas: "I have used some kāvya rasa for the sake of the fable, lest it becomes harsh." In ancient Assam, there had been a tradition of literature of rasa even

11. SSBM, p.154; Kirtana, pada 975;
12. Purani Assamiya Sāhitya, p106
14. SSBM, pp.39-42
15. BSI, pp.24-27
before the 14th century, but the Vaisnava movement created its own theology and philosophy and along with it, its refinements of psychology and poetics. According to the Vaisnava poetics, five rasas forming roughly five degrees of realisation of bhakti (i.e., śānta or tranquillity, dāsya or humility, sakhyā or preya, vātsalya or parental affection and mādhurya or sweetness) are the principal, to which nine secular (laukik) rasas are subsidiary. But each of these principal rasas are but variants of all pervading bhakti, which is regarded as the essence of all sentiments. The process of relishing this rasa is not based on knowledge but upon a belief-feeling that cannot be stated, but only relished. It is not the rasika, but the sincere devotee who has the proper attitude to realise the transcendental state of true and aesthetic beatitude.

This aesthetic ideal became popular as Śaṅkara’s religion gained in popularity. A literature that aims at achieving this feeling of revealed significance can have hardly any serious bias for hāsya rasa, which primarily depends for its effect on incongruity of other rasas. The sentiment of bhakti cannot be evoked unless there is a complete identity between the basic state of mind and the generalised feeling of the devotee. In Vaisnava literature, hāsya rasa therefore is not a basic sentiment. We may often smile at Kṛṣṇa’s playfulness and apparent oddities of his assumed human nature, but these too suggest to a devotee only a feeling of fleeting infinite incongruity. The effect is rarely comic, because it is not normal or even human. The occasional degradation of gods and puranic heroes into the human world and their imitation of human action and behaviour give us some respite for mirth or even low

16. Vaiṣṇava Rasa-Prakāśā, p. 223-236; Sanskrit Poetics, p. 267
comedy; the general tendency is to provide farcical interludes or relief. This impression is confirmed by the improvised elements in the ankiya dramas. It was and is the convention to introduce clowns (bahuvas) in the ankiya dramas to provide farcical relief. These improvised elements do not generally form a part of the written text.

The Vaisnava literature was serious, derivative and averse to take subject-matters from society or characters from life. Society and life are a popular source of comedy and this was not available to it. Its style was attuned to the religious mood; the sense of religious propriety and strict adherence to the original texts rarely allowed the writers the freedom to show broad interplay of characters by releasing them from the pressure of circumstances or fate. All characters in Vaisnava literature are fated to obey the divine law. We rarely meet in them the generality of mankind and human eccentricities which comedy by contrast and juxtaposition bring into focus. Above all, hardly does this literature remind us of our human limitations strictly in the comic spirit.

We shall confine our study to those works which have a distinct art-form and which are likely to yield materials for study. Naturally, the oral literature, which is subject to wide variations of texts and forms, will not be included in it. Some modern writers of farce use a few folk-tales as subject matters; we shall refer to them in the chapter on comic drama. Of written texts, we shall confine our attention to only those which have or appear to have plausible risible elements in them. The works of the pre-Assamese period will, naturally, be left out of consideration.

17. SAHT, p 175
The earliest Kāvyas by Hem Sarasvatī, Harihara Bipra, Kaviratna Sarasvatī and Rudra Kandali are heroic and hardly yield us any substantial material for study. For plausible comic elements, we have to turn to Mādhava Kandali's Rāmāyana. It is a classic work and a source book for almost all later Rāmāyanas, whether in poetry and prose, in Assamese language.  

Rāmāyana is a charming epic and its origin can be traced to popular ballads (ākhya-yikāgāthā). According to Dr Sukumār Sen, the original form of ākhya-yikāgāthā survived in non-Sanskrt aprabhaṁsā literature and finally appeared as 'pāneālikā' in the 15th century Bengal.  

The Rāma story is reminiscent of the structure of rupakathā or folk-tale. Durgāvara's Gītī-Rāmāyana, believed to be written between the last part of 15th century and early part of sixteenth century, seems to retain its popular form. This long narrative poem based probably on Kandali's text is meant for popular recital in accompaniment of music. Two later Rāmāyanas, one by Ananta Kandali and the other by Raghunāth Mahanta, seem to be based on Kandali's Rāmāyana; the first work, written in the last part of 16th century, is poetry and the second work, written in the 18th century, is prose. None of these Rāmāyanas yield us any new materials that we do not find in Kandali's text. The latter therefore is a basic and significant work. It is said to be earlier than Kṛttibāsa's Bengali and Tulsidāsa's Hindi versions of Rāmāyana.  

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18. ASI, p.178; p.102; p.138
19. BSI, pp.108-10
20. BSI, p.107
21. ASI, p.103; See also AEAL, p.17, pp.46-47
22. ASI, pp.177-78
version of Vālmīki's original. He seemed to have translated only five Kāṇḍas (from the second to the sixth), for the other two Kāṇḍas are not available to us. This is interesting because the original Rāmāyana is said to consist of these five Kāṇḍas. In these Kāṇḍas Rāma is not mentioned as an incarnation of Viṣṇu; he is depicted in these Kāṇḍas as a prince, not as a god, by Vālmīki. However the first and the seventh Kāṇḍas were translated by Mādhavdeva and Śaṅkaradeva respectively after him.

An epic is usually a store-house of all rāsas. The dominant sentiment in Rāmāyana is however karuṇa (pathetic), and hāsya rasa occurs occasionally as its limb or as a secondary sentiment; when we take a closer look at its literary elements that evoke our laughter, we discover their isolated and disparate nature, and their somewhat loose linkage with the main plot. The comic incidents, as we shall presently see, are exaggerated and often improbable; there is a farcical overtone in them. Their relevance and significance to the total meaning of the poem is to be ascertained before we can see whether these elements or episodes are farcical or comic.

The comic elements in Rāmāyana serve a different end than those in a comedy. These are intended to amuse; only rarely they give us occasion for smile. The oversized Kumbhakarna, who sleeps half the year, has an enormous appetite and breathes like the west wind, is no witty fool like Vidūṣaka or boastful like Śakāra, but a ridiculous figure that amuses us for a while. The scene of his waking from sleep is purely farcical.25 The comic scenes in which

24. SSR, p.65
25. Rāmāyana, Laṅkā-Kāṇḍa, pp.335-338
crooked and hump-backed Manthara oraves for Bharata's love and Sūrpanakhā woos Rāma and Lakṣaṇa, similarly cause only laughter; but since their pervert amorous desires are mixed with their crucial roles in complicating the plot, we may be tempted to assign some meaning to them. We shall soon see whether these comic incidents are purely farcical or comic. Hanumāna's exploits in Rāvana's Madhubana and his search for Śītā in the sleeping chamber or Rāvana's palace are farcical. But the greedy old Brahmin begging for alms more than he could carry appears to be satirical; similarly the contrast between Rāyaścīnga's26 sexual innocence and the erotic charm (kāma-kalā) practised on him by his enticers, the dancing girls, makes us smile momentarily. Besides these, Mādhava Kandali makes occasional uses of witty expressions to cause laughter or amusement. But all these are incidental in nature.

Mantharā, the old, ugly and hump-backed maid of Kokeyī in Ayodhya-kānda, was instrumental in persuading her mistress to seek the fatal boons from Paśaratha and this ultimately caused Rāma’s banishment from Ayodhya and paved the way for Bharata’s enthronement. Boosted by her success at this crooked trickery, she desired to be Bharata’s paramour. This perverse desire was wholly out of tune with the spirit of the tragic poem and the noble nature of Bharata. Her behaviour is not only incongruous, but highly ludicrous and improbable. There is not only an improbable and ludicrous touch in her efforts to hide her ugliness behind a parade of rich clothes and outfits, but obscenity and vulgarity in her intention to woo Bharata, whom she wrongly thought to have been obliged to her for her crucial role in the events leading to the banishment

of Rāma:

\[\text{Sunileka Kujiye Bharata asi bhoila,} \]
\[\text{Satvare gamane Koikeyi pase goila.} \]
\[\text{Pindhileka harise batriya alamkara,} \]
\[\text{Mukuta kundala grive satesari hāra.} \]
\[\text{Balaya kangkana kānci nupur rāte,} \]
\[\text{Haṁsā keli kare yena sarovara māje.} \]
\[\text{Suvarṇa kholā nivā kujata carāila} \]
\[\text{Katakša dṛṣṭiye Bharatara mukha cāila.} \]
\[\text{Śarirata pindhileka agaru candana,} \]
\[\text{Koikeyira grha lāgi karilā gamana.} \]
\[\text{Rājyogya alamkara pindhi-uri gāve,} \]
\[\text{Kapilā thākila yena candālara thāve.} \]
\[\text{Bimariśa kare kuji aura kibā cāo,} \]
\[\text{Bharataka samīpe kisaka nayāo.} \]
\[\text{Moi bändho rupa bara henaya nohaya,} \]
\[\text{Mohora svarupe dekho āthāno jvalaya} \]
\[\text{Bayasata bara moi bharatata kari,} \]
\[\text{Kāma baśa bhoila sito doṣaka nadhari.} \]
\[\text{Vidite kumāra yebe lāja kichu kari} \]
\[\text{Gupta rupe tathāpito haibo patesvarī.}^{27} \]

(pada 2282-2289)

*When the hump-backed woman heard that Bharata had arrived, she went to Koikeyi. Being overjoyed, she wore every variety of ornaments. She put on a necklace, ear-rings and a crown on her head. She wore bangles and bracelets in her hands and nurpura in her feet. Having worn these ornaments, she played like a goose in the lake. (or these ornaments played on her body like geese in the lake). She covered her hump with a gold ornament and cast an imaginary glance at Bharata's face. She annointed her body with sandalwood paste and made for Koikeyi's chamber. Having thus adorned her body with ornaments befitting a royal personage, she stayed*

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27. *Rāmāyana*, padas 2282-2287, p.139
there like a tawny cow in the house of a candāla. The hump-backed woman said to herself: 'What more do I need? It is true that I am not beautiful to look at, but I possess the bodily attributes of a woman (āthān). He may not find my womanliness deficient in any manner, specially if he is possessed by erotic desire. When he will come to his senses, he may be a little ashamed. Yet I shall remain a queen, though clandestinely.'

The hump-backed woman is very antithesis of a heroine befitting to śṛngāra rasa; there is not the slightest indication that Bharata is inclined to her, or even aware of her desire. The erotic sentiment is therefore improper. This incongruity of erotic sentiment gives rise to laughter, but this laughter is low and caused by an improbable and ludicrous situation. This is clearly a farcical element. However the author seems to have contrasted her ugly and obscene behaviour with Bharata's nobility of mind and exemplary behaviour in refusing to occupy Rāma's throne, and even harbours a satirical intention in allowing Śatrughna to punish her. But the final effect is farcical, as physical sensationalism predominates over the comic or satiric suggestion. Mādhava Kandali, as we have seen, confesses that he had to make concession to the popular taste and this improvised scene of low laughter exactly serves this end. Hāsya rasa here is caused by the impropriety of śṛngāra rasa and is farcical.

Śūrpanakhā, Rāvana's sister, is also a low character; her desire to seek Rāma's love is prompted by lust and is immoral. That she has no moral scruple is clear from her fickle-mindedness. When Rāma refused to return her advances and sarcastically advised her to woo Lākṣmāna, she unhesitatingly complied with it. Rāma's joke
was subtle, but she was insensible enough to understand it:

Dhanyato jīvana tora Šūrpanakhā nām
mahāpatibratā nāri āche mora Sītā,
mohoka nelāge cala laksmanara bhita.
āmāra bacana tai drdha mane dhar,
bhayāi anātha sisu tāra gati kar. \(^{28}\)

(Ayodhya-kānda, pada 2812)

Rāma said, "I see your name is Šūrpanakhā. All luck to you! But there is no need to come to me since I have a highly chaste wife, Sītā. You better listen to my advice. Go and woo Laksmana, as he is unlucky like an orphaned child."

The very word Šūrpanakhā which literally means a person with a nose resembling a semi-circular and flat basket (kulā), suggests a pun. Rāma's paradoxical advice to woo Laksmana, who was married, is also a joke. His reply as a whole is paradoxical and is not without its satiric intention. But the dull-witted lady is devoid of normal intelligence and therefore, does literally what Rāma apparently advises her to do. She woos Laksmana, but is disappointed. She shamelessly turns to Rāma again and encounters a fresh disappointment. This rouses her demoniac nature and she goes to devour Sītā, whereupon Laksmana, receiving a clear hint from Rāma, pounces upon her and punishes her insolence by cutting off her nose and ears.

This incident of erotic misadventure is a case of impropriety of śṛngāra rasa, but laughter here is mixed with wit and low satire. The whole episode is farcical, because it is fantastic,
ludicrous and sensational. But the comic contrast between chastity and lustfulness is indirectly suggested. The incident, as a whole, is meaningful, as it helps in the development of the plot; it leads to the abduction of Sītā by Rāvana and ultimately brings about a fatal conflict between Rāma and Rāvana. Yet the contrast does not create a genuine comic effect, as the tragic overtone of the epic submerges it. Judged by the effect, the whole incident is more farcical than comic.

Madhava Kandali, like all ancient writers before and after him, allows his low characters to use comic monologue, which, because of their insensibility, makes them ridiculous. Often, no particular individual speaks, but many of them express their feelings in the same monologue. This reduces its effectiveness somewhat, as in the following monologue by the frustrated kingly suitors of Sītā. After Sītā's choice was made in favour of Rāma, the victorious breaker of Hara's famous bow, the kings, under the spell of foolish jealousy and scorn, remark: "Now look at Janaka's behaviour. We invited us here with the express intention of humiliating us. When he knew he was going to marry his daughter to a particular suitor (ignoring us), he should not have sent messengers to invite us here ... Let us now save our prestige by singling out Rāma and kill him right now."29 (Ādikāṇḍa: padas 1232-1233). This rage and seern born out of wounded but false pride is pointless; this is at best mock-heroism that merely amuses. It is based on false premises and extremely ludicrous. The incongruous feeling it causes is however gradually raised to a ludicrous proportion; for they say, "After careful thought, we find that the fault lies with the bride alone. For it

29. Rāmāyana, p.75
is she who has belied the kings' hopes. She is hard-hearted and cruel. It is she who cheated us by bestowing her choice on a tender boy. In her view, the glass is more valuable than the jewel. She will be taken away by another man before our very eyes. It is only for her sake that we came to this foreign country for a sojourn, giving up our attachment to kingdom, wives and offsprings."  

(padas 1235-37). The mental degradation is complete. The kings call Rāma evil-minded and accuse him of raping Sītā, whom each of them desired to possess. Rāma is compared to a grass-hopper which is about to immolate itself in the fire or to a foolish man who wants to cross the sea by jumping (pada 1318).

However when the actual battle takes place, the sons of Daśaratha easily win and the kings flee for life. It is then Laksmana's turn to ridicule the vain and immoral boasters. Here hāsya is caused by the impropriety of the heroic sentiment. The laughter is low and arises out of incongruity of speech and manners of the kings. However the element of laughter is so exaggerated and outward that it lacks fine artistic merit. It tends to be faroical.

Similarly, Hanumāna, who goes to Laṅkā as Rāma's messenger in search of Sītā, exceeds his mandate to prove his worth as worthy messenger (eka ye kāryaka āsi aneka kāryaka kare sehise uttama hove dūta); he creates much fun for us. His disguise as a Saurāstrīva

30. Rāmāyana, p.75. "Vicāri cāhilo doṣa kevala kanyāra, karileka ḫāṣ bhanga sakala rājāra. ati nidāruna kanyā kathina hrdaya, sabāko banciṁ śiśu cavāla baraya. mānika eriyā kāca karileka sār, eko āne niba huno ḫagata amar. jata rājya ghara bhārya putra eri ās, tāira nimitte maro khātiṁ prabās" (.75).

Brahmin, who begs for fun and ultimately ravages Rāvan's Madhuvana, and his fantastic burning of Laṅkā with his long ignited tail, are farcical. So is his stupid attempt to identify Sītā by measuring the length of Mandodarī's hair. When this exercise proves futile, he smells Mandodarī's mouth to ascertain whether it gives odour of wine or not; evidently he thinks that as Sītā never drinks and her hair is as long as eight hāts (or four yards long), she cannot be identified by these two tests. This is mere horseplay and therefore clearly farcical.

The farcical and the laughable elements are presented in Kandali's Rāmāyana in a disparate manner merely to create fun or amusement. These elements always tend to become farcical and low comedy. Their occurrence is usual. Compared to these elements, real satire and wit are rare. The greedy, poor and old Brahmin of Ayodhyā-kānda, who comes to Rāma for alms on the eve of latter's departure to the forests, provides an occasion for mild and transient satire. By a neat combination of dialogue and narrative, the poet creates a satiric effect in the scene where the Brahmin is seen moving towards the thousand vessels of coins to lift as many of them as he can:

Rāg̱hava Bolanta dhana āge diyā goila,
sahasreka caru tāra avaṁeśa roila.
rākhite pārike yata āpuni loiyo
bīlamba nakari jhānte loiyo dhariyoka.
śukāi goila carmasava pānji hena kesā,
drādha kari gāthi bāndhi āgata prabesa.
hāte laru dhari calilahā dvijabara,
pāva thira nohaya kāmpaya kalevara.

32. Rāmāyana, p. 256, Sundarā-Kānda.
When the old and greedy wretch comes to take alms, Rāma informs him that almost all money has been distributed as gifts. However he points towards the remaining thousand vessels and asks him to take as many as he is capable of. At this, the greedy Brahmin, leaning on his stick, walks with difficulty to the place where the vessels are lying. His skin and hair are grey like ginned cotton. His feet are unsteady and his body shaky. Yet he darts towards the vessels by gearing himself up. At this moment, Rāma dissuades him from his attempt, and remarks that noticing his evil desire, he simply cut a joke at him.

Rāma thus has a dig at the Brahmin's inordinate greed. Evidently his satire is meant to expose the old man's folly and after he actually succeeds in doing this, his satiric mood is over and he offers large gifts to the Brahmin out of compassion. The sense of compassion dilutes, and mars the satiric effect.

Wādhava Kandali's work is not comic; its characteristic tone is pathetic. The narrative is often made lively by means of description, dialogue, monologue and characterisation. We have already seen that the occasional light incidents and passages tend to be more farcical than comical, perhaps to suit the taste of the audience. The low characters, as we have seen in case of Mantharā, are often described or drawn neatly; they are lustful, greedy, ugly, gluttonous or insensible. Above all, they are fantastic. Low humour and satire in these occasional incidents or passages tend to

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get submerged in farce. Kandali however has wit; his similes and other figures of speech do often create a good comic effect. Kandali creates plausible satiric effect in his similes and witty comments. In pada 1576, we find that the odd sounds made by Manthara with her hands and teeth to express her disapproval of Koikeyi's happiness at Rama's impending coronation is compared to the disagreeable sounds made by the oilpresser's grinding instrument (āsaja śuniyā yena telīyāra jānta). The simile indirectly suggests that her behaviour is, disharmonious with the whole tune of the epic. In pada 2315, Bharata, who is grieved at Rama's banishment and taken into arms by Kausalyā is compared to a fish in red-hot pan (tapata telata kare mācha yena mata). Similarly in pada 276, the demon Ilvala, who wants to kill sage Agastya by serving him the fatal dish of meat prepared from his brother's body, is compared to an over-intelligent tortoise that scales the beach, being little aware that it is going to be killed. This comment is interesting, as also the witty remark in the pada 3121. Here we see that Rāvana is waiting like an angler with his eyes fixed on the fish-hook, for an opportunity to abduct Sītā (Baraśiyā Rāvanara puṅgātese drṣṭi).

Witticism or occasional farcical interludes interspersed with comic or satiric elements are normal features of not only Kandali's Rāmāyana, but also of almost all other poems of the ancient period. Because of their disparate or incidental nature and

34. Rāmāyana, p.96
35. Rāmāyana, p.141, Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa.
37. Rāmāyana, p.190, Aranyā-Kāṇḍa.
of their existence as subordinate elements in a Kāvya of pathetic sentiment, these elements in Rāmāyana serve merely as humourous or farcical relief of the pathetic epic. The idealistic view of life that death is only a passing stage in the eternal existence of soul takes away poignancy of tragedy, sharpness of satire and slim feasting smile of high comedy. When Rālī rebukes Rāma for killing him in an unjust manner and dubs his continence as oat's continence, he appears to be bitterly satiric. But soon we find that he accepts Rāma as his saviour, and this takes away the sting from his satire.38

The Mahābhārata is a rich source of tales, legends, myths and moral narratives; it is primarily a heroic poem, but its range is vaster. Its predominant sentiment is śānta or quietistic.39 It offers more scope of incidental hāsya rasa in the narrative, specially in dialogue and through depiction of various kind of incongruities. The major portion of the epic was rendered into Assamese by Rāma Sarasvati;40 his most popular works are known as badha-kāvyas or poems of war, which are included in the Vana-parva. The spirit of his Mahābhārata and sixteen badha-kāvyas is permeated by a feeling of devotion to Viṣṇu; as a devout neo-vaishnavite, he accepts the didactic and moral aim of giving religious instruction to the illiterate masses. A contemporary of Śaṅkardeva, he was deeply influenced by the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, which was the great sacred book

38. Rāmāyana, pp.221-222. "yena dhari āchā birālara brahmaoharjya tothibira pati tumī hoilā akāraṇa, uttam nārīra svāmi yehena tentona."
39. SSBR, 195
40. AEAL, p.179
of Assamese Vaishnavism. The Puranic Kṛṣṇa, the ever-smiling God of the bhakti cult, seems to exert much influence on Rāma Sarasvatī's writings, and this is specially evident in the poems of war. The sources of these badha-kāvya are said to be Yāmala samhitā, Hamsakāti and Śivarahasya, but scholars have so far been unable to solve the problem of their origin. These stories of adventures of five wandering Pāṇḍavas are innovatory. Dr R. K. Kakati likens these war poems to the European mediaeval romance epics; their aim was to establish a kingdom of heaven on earth.

The Assamese Mahābhārata only yields us occasional risible elements which are hardly worth examining. This is true not only of Rāma Sarasvatī's voluminous translation, but also of minor translators of different parvas. This is partly no doubt due to reduction of the original material to bare essential; but the original Mahābhārata too, strictly speaking does not contain elements of high comedy. This deficiency in a quietistic epic is natural. The badha-kāvya, barring the farcial poem Bhīma Carita, also are either poems of romance or adventure, where the stress is laid on the heroic and the devotional. The most popular comic character in the Mahābhārata and its cognate literature seems to be Bhīma; therefore we propose to treat the comic elements associated with him.

In the Ādi-parva, we meet with juvenile Bhīma. His childish exploits and his amusing encounter with the Kaurava brothers in the fruit orchard give us moments of innocent and hearty laughter. The laughter is aroused by the manner of narrative. Durjyodhana and his brothers are envious of Bhīma's carefree nature and prowess, but they

41. AEAL, p.188
42. Purani Asamīyā Sahitya, pp.25-31; ASI, pp.142-44
dread him as they would an unbridled bull roaming in an open street. They therefore avoid him and go to a suburban orchard to gather fruits. Bhīma gets scent of it and finding them out on the tree-tops, begins to shake the trees violently. The boys fall upon the ground and are wounded. Then Duryodhana apologizes and successfully appeases Bhīma.

Bhīme bole bārekara kṣamiboho doṣa,
Aura hena nālāgaha moka asantoṣa.\(^43\)

(ī pada 1363)

(Bhīma replies that he would put up with their faults, but should not be offended again.)

But the wicked Kaurava boys do not keep their promise; instead they tried twice to kill him. Fortunately, they fail in their attempts.\(^44\) This juvenile hero no doubt suffers at the hands of his jealous brothers, but he is magnanimous enough to forgive them for their follies. His prowess is proverbial, but he is innocent. It is childish innocence that makes this plain narrative comic.

We meet Bhīma frequently in the heroic poems of Rāma Sarasvati. There is however little comic element in the heroic narrative of badha-kāvyas as such, except for occasional odd similes and some rare humorous elements of contrast. In Āsvakarna-yuddha of Vana parva, Rāma Sarasvati likens the tongue of Āsvakarna, the old demon of unusual size, to a trunk road (jihbā khāna tāhāra yehena rāja āli).\(^45\) This fantastic simile is farcical. But in Jānghāsura

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43. Mahābhārata, Ādi-parva, pp.94-95
44. Mahābhārata, Ādi-parva, p.95
45. Aśvakarna-Yuddha, p.1013; Mahābhārata, 1st Part.
Badha, the asura women's admiration of Bhīma's manly physique presents us a rare instance of smile (smita). The comedy lies in the contrast made by the demonesses between the ugly Rākṣasa physique and Bhīma's robust manly appearance.

Some among them says, "hear me, O sister, I have never seen an one-headed man even in my dream. Look, the one-headed man is good to look at. In contrast to him, our menfolk appear to us to be great bores." The women thus became enamoured of Bhīma's beauty and qualities. But none approached him for the fear of the king.

The impropriety of erotic sentiment and the sense of surprise cause genuine humour. But this piece of humour in a heroic kāvya is merely a drop in the ocean.

As a popular clown, Bhīma appears in his best form in the small badha-kāvya by Rāma Sarasvatī, Bhīma-Carita. The main story is that of killing the ugly and cannibalistic demon Bakāsura, but two other stories are added to it: (1) Bhīma's funny exploits as Siva's cow-boy and (2) the Kubera episode. In this lonely farcical poem of ancient Assamese literature, we meet not only fantastic farcical elements but also the only attempt at what can be regarded as an approximation to social comedy or satire in the otherwise supernatural atmosphere of medieval poetry.

46. Janghāsur-badha, p.1052
Bhīma's farcical encounter with the cannibalistic demon is not entirely devoid of social significance. It was at his mother's behest that Bhīma went as a prey to Bakāsura's place; the sole aim was to save a weaker prey, the son of a poor Brahmin. The prey however turned out to be a killer. Everything that Bhīma does from the moment of Bakāsura's arrival to the moment of his death is funny, exceedingly exaggerated and fantastic. Both the prey and the killer are enormous eaters, although being demon, Bakāsura is ugly and has a face that resembles sweeper's shovel (patha cāribāka yema hārīra kodāla). We need not describe the enormous meal that was meant for Bakāsura, but is actually appropriated by Bhīma, who simply ignore former's dreaded presence.

"Who are you, 0 wicked person?" asks Bakāsura in surprise, "you are eating my meal inspite of being the sacrificial object!." Bhīma's reply is audacious, "Wait till I finish. You are merely like my servant. No houseowner serves his dog food unless he finishes his own." The fantastic meal is followed by a fantastic fight which is described in the exaggerated manner of ancient heroic Kāvya. Everything is clownish and even the demon's death is just funny. This rabble-rousing laughter is hilarious, even though the demon's death is recognised as a social necessity, there is no trace of that moral sense in the final effect.

It is farce, because that is what Rāma Sarasvatī aims at. The next episode is also tinged with farce, but here the social or domestic setting in which the incidents and conversations take place makes the eccentricities of three characters, - Bhīma, Śiva and

47. Bhīm-carit, p.10, line 22.

48. Bhīm-carit, p.11, lines 8-12; "Mai bhāta khāo tai thāka bāta cāi. Tai jāna bakāsura mohora sevāka, grhasthe nakhāle kone diye kuku- raka."
Pārvatī, meaningful. Bhīma is a poor peasant boy who comes to serve in the household of Śiva, a hemp-addicted and eccentric householder. The servant’s gluttony and the landlady’s discomfiture at his overbearing manners are all humane, but abnormal. His speech is typically comic in spirit inspite of the farcical undertone.

"Bhīma says 'Let me tell you frankly, mother, that I need seven heavy loads of boiled rice in one meal to assuage my hunger. The curry I need amounts to a quantity that shall fill seven empty boats. I frankly state this, lest, in future, it may lead to family quarrel. Your house is in wretched condition. The walls are in dilapidated state; my master’s wallet (juli) is tattered. There is not even a handful of paddy in the house. Everybody thinks that Śiva is a giver of all boons, but your house does contain nothing. Clothes, rice, gold, beads and necklace of pearls are conspicuously wanting. He wears a garland of human heads and serpents in the neck. It emits such bad odour that life seems to ebb out of me even at a distance. There is no oil in the house; hence the knotted hair in his head; serpents whirl around his hands and neck. You are called the teachers of the world, but God Śaṅkara gets his food only by begging. Tell me mother, who will not laugh at such a state of affairs?'

Pārvatī relies, "it seems that the boy is naughty. Even though his age is tender, he speaks like an adult."

Bhīme bole āi mai kathā kaho bhāngi
Nitya moka lāge jānā bhāta sāta sāngi
Byañjana lāgaya jānā nāo sāt kunḍā
Pāce jāno gharata lāgaya khakākhundā
There are two sets of contrasts in the episode. Firstly, the heavenly world is contrasted against the earthly world; secondly, the antithesis between two differing attitudes of the master and the servant in the medieval peasant household. Both sets of contrasts are clearly brought out in the comic speech. We know that Siva is a god, but his manners and behaviour are those of an odd and eccentric peasant householder; Pārvatī, the goddess, behaves perfectly as a landlady. Bhīma, the great Pāṇḍava hero, behaves as a servant and cowboy of Siva and he expresses his sense of grievance against the poor and delinquent master exceedingly well. Even though the incident is trivial, it is being viewed from earthly and social points of view and this give some meaning to the contrasts. It reminds us of our human limitations and there is a sense in the way it is being balanced.

The next scene is also partially meaningful. It centres round the familiar Hindu idea of crime in killing a cow. Siva's

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49. Bhīma-carit, p.22, line 1-18. J. N. Sarmā's observation on Bhīma-carit is interesting. He says in his article, "Rama Sarasvatī and his times", that Bhīma's gluttony, Siva's lack of knowledge of worldly affairs, the helplessness of gods and sages - all these add an element of humour into this piece of work and combined with its vivid picture of poor peasant life, the book has made an appeal that no other book has done among the rural population." p.190, ARAL).
bull destroys sage Visvāmitra's orchard of sweet fruits. The sage rightly blames the cowboy for his negligence of duty in letting the bull ravage his orchard. Enraged Bhīma holds the bull by the tail and whirs it about several times; when he leaves his hold, the bull falls and lies apparently dead on the ground. On being charged of killing the bull, he shifts the blame to Śiva's sons, who are witnesses to the incident. When he is challenged, he unhesitatingly names the sage as a witness to the crime. This enrages the sage terribly and he decries Bhīma as a wicked knave. This is perfectly legitimate, but Bhīma this time cunningly shifts the blame to the sage himself. He says: "O sage, your eyes have been blinded by crows; How do you dare to play a witness to my crime? The fact is that the bull has been found lying dead in your orchard (amidst your crops). There is least doubt that you killed the bull after he had eaten your crops. You have in your hand that punishing rod. It does not behave you to play the sage by displaying your beard."50

Visvāmitra sees his point; in case, Śiva's sons side with him, his guilt will be established and he shall have to face punishment for his crime. He flees. Soon after his flight, the bull of course recovers from his stupor and brings the incident to a comic end.

The idea of a sage being mortally afraid of punishment for a crime he has not committed is to remind us of our commonness, our need to obey the laws of physical and social necessities. Visvāmitra has to care for the fruits of his orchard and be concerned about punishment, for a crime of which he is innocent. This comic view is

directly suggested by the episode, even though the caricature of the sage has something clownish or farcical about it. In this comic incident, both Bhīma and Viśvāmitra are derobed of their heroic and saintly garb and presented as an abstract of society. Neither of them are free of the limitations of the taboo-ridden medieval society.

The social aspect of the comic sentiment is seen more fully in the Kubera episode. Śiva is here a hemp-addicted and less enterprising cultivator, while Kubera, his friend, is a money-lender and a miser. Bhīma is, as usual, Śiva's household servant and helper. An abstract of medieval Assamese peasant household economy with its dependences on the money-lender and the ploughman is suggested by the whole episode. Śiva still retains his peculiarities of dress and character; he rides on a bull, and wears garment of serpents and tiger-skin. He is also hemp-addicted, and interested in money and production of food. His bodily outfit that perfectly suits his divine nature becomes abnormal in his human form. His divine manners and his human behaviour are contrasted with each other. Further, as a cultivator, he is not only found wanting but subjected to ridicule by his servant. The great puranic hero, Bhīma, is reduced to the status of a mere servant; in the narrow world of domesticity, he is wily, irreverent and even inclined to sly wickedness. The size of the hero makes the oversize of the clown. Kubera too is reduced from his divine status to a petty rural money-lender and miser who is even unwilling to help his friend. He is a typical miser and is a laughable character because of his insensibility to charity and inclination to greed. Uprooted from the heaven or the ideal world, but not entirely rooted in earth, each of the characters brings into mind the contrasts between the two worlds; then by acting in
their relation to each other in society, they present the comic view of the world. According to this view, even gods have needs for food, hemp, money and clothing; the great hero too needs to work under servility for his bread.

When Bhīma finds that the miser is unwilling to lend money to his friend, Śiva, for cultivation, he subjects him to summary punishment whimsically. He shaves his head and paints his body with lime, as villagers customarily do to a proved offender or a small criminal. His arbitrary action is ultimately disapproved by Mahādeva, who makes peace with his friend. When Mahādeva questions Bhīma's action, he gives an evasive reply in the manner of a clown:

Bhīme bole suna ore bhaṅguvā śāṅkara,  
Tatālike lare dekho kathā tahatara.  
Etikhane bole kuberaka dhari ān,  
Kila bhuku bāṭata māribā paremān,  
Pārvatīka cāhi bole dekhiyoka āi,  
Tumi purve kathā āhā āchā samudāi.  

( Bhīma says, "hear O hemp-addicted Śāṅkara, you change your words (or orders) frequently. Not very long ago, you asked me to bring Kubera here. Moreover, you instructed me to give him good beating and thrashing on the way." Then turning to Pārvatī, he says, "mother, you were present when he said this and I hope, you heard everything.")

The reply is typical of a clown, who always tries to dodge reality and action. Bhīma resorts to a permissive lie as a way of dodging the world.

51. Bhīm-carit, p.38, lines 7-12
The Bhīm Carita thus is a farcical poem with an element of low comedy embedded in it. It is not always easy to distinguish between farce and comedy. The general distinction is however clear: in farce, action is trivial and its sole aim is to excite mirth. When the aim is to evoke either by indirection or even directly certain meaningful feeling or significant attitude towards life, it is comedy. It depends mainly on the response of the reader or the spectator. Since Bhīma Carita partially evokes in us a certain kind of attitude towards the society of the times, it is comedy, but it is embedded in farce.

The isolated similes or satiric and witty lines in the narrative of the Mahābhārata are often amusing, but these lack freshness, and significance. The vanity and pride of frustrated kingly suitors in Draupādi's svayamvastra is compared to a serpent that recoils at the smell of medicine. The kings on the other hand decries Arjuna, who is present in the assembly disguised (and is about to hit the fish-target by his arrow) as a Brahmin that comes to receive the ritualistic food (bhōjanī). These are not only common-place but have no impact on the narrative of the epic or its part.

There are some ludicrous scenes, incidents and conversations scattered here and there in the narrative of the epic, but most of them are casual and ineffective. So these can be left out of consideration. We however briefly mention the Kīchaka episode, which is full of typically farcical devices.

52. Ādi-parva, Mahabharata, p.125 (the Ādi-parva is composed by Dvija Aniruddha).
Kanjilal opines that the character of Kichaka in the Mahabharata can be regarded as the earliest prototype of the character of Sakara in the Sanskrit Prakaranas. Kichaka, like Sakara, is involved in illegitimate love affairs or adulterous behaviour; he is also a very influential courtier. But he is dull, ignorant, boastful and lustful. He readily complies with Draupadi's request to come to the rendezvous without suspecting in the least that he is entering into the death-trap. His immoral lust for Draupadi prompts him to win her over by vulgar means. He boasts before her about his manliness, beauty, knowledge of the art of love, charity and efficiency in work. Yet he is unable to detect that it is not Draupadi, but disguised Bhima that he is addressing. Bhima's reply is taunting and judiciously appropriate, and full of witticism:

Tāra bola suṁi Bhīmsene bole hāsi
Apanāka apuniye bolsa prasāmśi.
I tini bhuvane nāi tomāra samāna,
Tiri ki puruṣa tāra nāhike giyāna.
Itoyaya puruṣa yito śāstrata kusala,
Nāte āive cuile pāi laksāna sakala.  

(Bhīmasena listens to his speech and replies with a laughter, "you are indulging in self-praise by claiming that there is none who is equal to you in the three worlds. Yet you are so senseless that you cannot differentiate between a man and a woman. A person who is well-versed in the Kāma-sāstra knows the bodily features of each simply by the touch of his hands.)

53. Mahābhārata, Kīchaka Parva, p.1297, pada 19165
54. Mahābhārata, Kīchaka Parva, p.1298, padas 19166-67
Here the laughter is caused by impropriety of the erotic sentiment, but it is not mere laughter. There is a moral intention in the episode which ends in Kīchaka's death. It seems to say that the virtue must triumph over the vice. This seems to give some meaning to the farcical episode.

There is a class of poems called pāncālī in ancient Assamese literature; in comparison with the idealistic neo-Vaisnavite poetry initiated by Śaṅkaradeva, it is more realistic in its response to life. Of these, the Manasā-Kāvya of Mankar and Durgāvar as well as the Sukannānī of Sukavī Nārāyana contain some elements of laughter. These are mainly expressed in the plot and through the characters. The Manasā poems treat classical gods and goddesses like human beings and retain their popular appeal through farce and obscurity.

Mankar's treatment of the theme of marriage between Śiva and Pārvatī is typical; the burlesque tone of the poem is revealed in the way the story is narrated and in the travesty of classical deities and sage in characterisation. The writer is believed to be a contemporary of Śaṅkaradeva, but seems to be not at all influenced by the neo-Vaisnavite movement.

The plot itself is funny. Śiva appears here as a married householder who lives happily with his illustrious wife, Gaṅgā. Nārada, Śiva's nephew, enters the scene and arranges a secret meeting between him and the young virgin, Durghā, in the flower-garden. Nārada then goes to Gaṅgā and informs her of his secret love-affair and arouses her jealousy by giving a cogent account of his amorous behaviour to the young girl. Śiva, he says, presents her flowers that perfectly befit her beauty, combs her hair, massages her hands
and feet, and becomes one with her bodily; he cunningly adds that his uncle's slavish devotion to Durga precisely means that she is going to be reduced to the status of a maid-servant in her own house.

mama dasa hoila tana, tumi sevakin.\textsuperscript{55}

Narada's intrigue brings about a crisis in the relationship between the husband and the wife. But Gangâ's persuasion fails to dissuade Siva from marrying the youth-ful bride. It is brought about by divine will.

The farcical episodes are introduced. Narada is sent to the bride's home as the carrier of joron (ornaments, dress and other customary things meant for the bride that are sent before the marriage-ceremony). On the way, the gluttonous sage and his carrier, Basuyâ, eat all the eatables in the baskets and fill them with filthy non-eatables and spittle.

\begin{quote}
Paremane peta bhari larka khaila
Ita mati aniye handite bharaila.
Guâ-pân khaila sabe narada bapurâ,
Pinke cobai bharaila sakala saphura.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

When Durga's mother examines the contents in the baskets, she is angry and about to call off the marriage. But Durga saves the mishap by filling the baskets anew with the proper goods by supernatural means. Narada however seems to enjoy the whole episode as it tickles his fancy. He creates fresh mischief in the inner parlour inside Durga's house. He is charged of molestation and is

\textsuperscript{55} Manasa-kavya, p.36
\textsuperscript{56} Manasa-kavya, p.46
beaten black and blue. His helper, Bāsuyā, also receives his share of beating and has ultimately to strip himself to save his lord and his own self. The women shocked at this outrage of civility, flee.

māranata bāsuyaya udās koilā dehā,  
āi sauge riśiānī palāi lāja pāyā.  

Another funny crisis develops on the marriage-day. Śiva appears at the gate of the bride's home in his serpent and hide robes riding his famous bull. This abnormality shocks Durgā's mother, who has come to give the bridegroom the customary welcome. Nobody knows what would happen to the marriage, till Śiva uses his supernatural power to change his dress and appearance to suit his mother-in-law's taste.

The deities thus imitate the human world and the sage turns into an intriguing and farcical clown. The spirit of low comedy pervades the narrative; it is made livelier by the burlesque tone and inclusion of farcical episodes. The poem as a whole appears to be farcical, as its sole purpose is to excite mirth. Like this poem, Sukannāṇī of Sukavi Nārāyanadev uses similar farcical devices and the same theme to produce laughter. Nārada here plays a slightly different role in the marriage episode. Contrary to Śiva's instruction, he actually goes to Pārvatī's mother to dissuade her from giving her daughter in marriage to the poor, wretched, oddly dressed, three-eyed and hemp-addicted bridegroom.

ghare nāhi bhāta tāra cāle nāhi khera,  
suite sāya nāi, pārite kāpara.  
marāra angāra bhaśme āipe sarva gāi,

57. Manasā-kāvyā, p.50
(He has neither food to eat, nor (thatch in the) roof in the house. He has also no bed to sleep on and clothes to wear. His body is smeared with ashes of the dead, and over his head, serpents hiss all along.)

Here also the risible element of the poem is farcical.

We have already seen that the juvenile exploits of Bhima give us enjoyable and innocent laughter. Some Vaisnava writers take Krsna's juvenile exploits as themes of poem and drama. Girdhar Kandali of the later Vaisnava period is the author of a very amusing poem, Kāṃkhovā (The Ear-Eater). The story is simple. When Yasodā refers in her lullaby to the demon called Ear-Eater, Krsna enjoys it and puts her a very embarrassing but humorous question. He pretends never to have come across with any such demon in his former incarnations and so asks his mother to show it to him. There is a gentle touch of innocent humour in the sweet poem, but its tone is that of vātsalya rasa, i.e., the filial sentiment.

The poetry of Saṅkardeva (1449-1569), Mādhavdeva (1489-1596) and other Vaisnava saints contain little hāsya rasa. The dominant tone of their poetry is devotional sentiment, and as we have mentioned in the introduction, other rasas are subordinate to it in the Vaisnava aesthetics. The works of several Vaisnava poets, specially Saṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva, are classics of Assamese literature, but there is not a single comedy or satiric work. The sentiment of devotion and the sense of aesthetical discipline are so


59. Kāṃkhovā, pp.5-6.
strong in their poetry that a comic or a satiric vision of life is entirely foreign to it, while to the farcical it is least inclined. However, the elements of comic relief that is occasionally found in the narrative are generally cases of impropriety of other rasas; but impropriety of srûgâra rasa is the usual cause of laughter.

In the 8th Book of Bhâgavata (the chapter on amrîta manthan), Siva's satyr-like behaviour gives us occasion for laughter; but we know it is transient and illusory, as he soon regains his composure. There is incongruity in Siva's erotic passion for Laksmî and specially in his lack of self-control; for Siva is the supreme lord of the yogîs. The relevant narrative describing Siva's passion is worth reproducing: "Siva is affected by the power of her side-long glance. He becomes deeply troubled by passion and his knotted hair is stirred. The dambaru and the trident fall from his hands. Even the serpents in the body become restless. When the serpent girdle loosens and the garment of hide slips from the waist, Bholânâth (or the self-forgetful Lord) becomes naked. He covers his limb by his hands and lowers his head. Even Siva's bull becomes infatuated at the sight of Laksmî's face."

Sivata lâgila kataksa chatâ,  
Kâme jarjarita kâmpaya jatâ.  
Hâtara parila dambaru sül,  
Gâvar sarpa siyo biyâkul.  
Sarpara mekhalâ goila husaki,  
Kaâita parila câla sulaki.  
Bhoilanta ualaâgata bholânâtha,  
Hâte aûga dhâki câparâi mâtha.  
Laksmî mukha dekhi Siva balada,  
Bhoila manatâro kâma dagadha. 

60. Śrî Śaṅkara-bâkyāmṛta, pp.476-77.
Siva's loss of mental balance and self-dignity is evidently incongruous with his image as the master of Yoga, but the purpose of the writer is not to excite our mirth, but to make us wise. He allows Siva himself to be overcome by shame and to repent. This meaningful suggestion gives this humorous episode a comic effect; however the humour is incidental and conventional.

Siva gives us a similar occasion for laughter in the Haramohan chapter of Kirtana. His infatuation for the illusory lady is described by Sañkardeva with great delight, and the narrative itself, when viewed isolatedly from the rest of Kirtana, appears to be highly charged with the erotic sentiment. The comic sentiment is only incidental to it, and occurs in a few passages. But as we come to the end, we realise the intention of the writer clearly; it is to show that desire (kāma) is merely an illusion and it is necessary for devotees to overcome it. The illusory lady is none other than Viṣṇu in his most enchanting form. Unless one is able to realise the illusory nature of Kāma, one is unable to realise one's true self. In light of this attitude, the effect created by Hara's infatuation for the enchanting lady is transiently comic. The contrast between the transcendental love for the supreme reality and the gross desire for the most enchanting lady is brought out with gusto in the narrative. The tone of narrative of Hara's ludicrous behaviour and infatuation is particularly evident in his address to the lady: "If you really do not relish my visage, O beautiful damsel, just tell me to shave my knotted hair. I shall replace these serpents by fine ornaments, the garland of human heads by gold necklace and the robe of tiger hide by clothes befitting the gods. I shall use agaru cosmetics in the body in lieu of ash-powder. In fact, I shall do everything you ask for without delay. It is unbearably
painful to notice your aversion to cast a glance at me and address sweet words."

Dekhite novāra yebe āmāra kubesā,  
Jaṭāka mundāo tabe diyoka ādesā.  
Sarpa gúcāi gale āro hemahāra,  
Rāgha cālā cāri pindho debāṅga bhuṣaṇa,  
Bhasma gúcāi gāve ghaso azaru candana.  
Yehi lāge sehi bolā jhānte mai karo,  
Mukha cāi nāmāta ātese mai maro. 61

This erotic obsequiousness on the part of the divine lover sounds absurd. This the writer does not deny, and after allowing us to gloat over the ludicrous scene for a while, he reminds us that it is a lapse never meant to be enduring. In fact, the lapse provides an occasion for moralising, in which the Vaisnava poetry abounds. The element of low comedy, i.e., matter concerning sex and dress etc. tends to make the laughter inherent in the scenes farcical; but it does remind us that even the highest God is unable to transcend the limitations of the body, which has basic desires, and needs dress to cover its nakedness and ugliness. But the writer wants to transgress these very limitations and makes us aware of a higher and spiritual norm, against which we are asked to read the true meanings of the contrasted worlds. This infinite incongruity tends to make the piece elegantly humorous.

Very few neo-Vaisnavite poets try to achieve this ideal harmony in dealing with risible elements. Ananta Kandali's love poem, Kumar-haran Kāvyā, contains a farcical episode that reminds us of the Manthara episode in Mādhav Kandali's Rāmāyana. The old

61. SSBM, p.508
hump-backed maid of Madhumati, Usā's mother, is here the very an-
thesis of the love-lorn Usā, who is engaged in a secret amour with
her beloved, Aniruddha, inside her chamber. The maid breaks the
news of secret amour and of the presence of the lover in the cham-
ber to King Bāna in the royal court itself; she is dressed in her
best robes, and has been assured by a cunning astrologer that she
would be King's chief queen just on the eve of her errand to the
King. She is totally unconscious of her vulgarity and ugliness; the
barbar's mirror in which she earlier saw her unpleasant face is
therefore pronounced defective. In fact, she remarks that her face
appears ugly only due to the defect in the mirror (dāponara dose
mukha dekho bilaksana). The barbar, for the sake of fun, agrees
with her judgement.

The king is angry at her audacity and metes out to her a
cruel punishment; her ears and noses are cut off. When she comes
out of the royal palace mutilated like Śūrpanākhā, the barber teas-
eses her by addressing her as 'the chief queen' and the astrologer
apologises in a jocular manner. The astrologer says, "I read all
your days, but a mistake occurred in not taking into account the
effect of Rāhu's influence; as a result, this has come to pass."

Ganake bolaya dina gāñilo sakala
Rāhu goṭa nagañilo tāra ehi phala. 62

This episode is farcical. It has no bearing on the main
plot of the abduction of the prince Aniruḍḍha and the secret amour
of Usā; the author does not seem to have introduced it with any
subtle design and is therefore appears to be purely farcical.

62. Kumar Harap Kāvyā, p.108
In the later medieval age, the ancient Assamese poetry seems to be on the decadent. But no burlesque or parody appears to be written; neither is there a genuine attempt to continue and enrich the tradition of popular and meaningful humour created by Bhima Carit. What we get is mere degeneration of the spirit of poetry itself. In Sisupāla Badha by Sista Bhattachāryya we find even Kṛṣṇa descending himself to the level of vulgarity. The neo-Vaiśnavite aesthetical discipline seems to have broken down. The following speech by Kṛṣṇa bears witness to it: "Now for a long time, you are provoking me for a fight ... The bearded goat dares to laugh at the lion, as if he is the sturdier of the two. The worthless dog bites a man without caring to know whether he is the master or the servant."63 This derisive speech is directed at Sisupāla. The whole poem suffers from aesthetic poverty; this sort of dialogue does not serve the end of comedy; nor can it be cited as plausible farce. For it does not excite mirth, but disgust.

This brief survey may not seem highly rewarding. The elements of laughter, examined here, are however typical. They seem more farcical than comic, intended to give relief than to present a comprehensive and precise response to life. The literature was derivative; the contemporary audience were unsophisticated. The writers seem apologetic about introducing Kāvyā rasa. Even though it cannot be incontrovertibly said that laughter is social (or laughter is comedy), a sizeable part of high comedy is social. Satire too finds a congenial soil for growth in society only. The ancient writers neglected society, at least in the sense as we

63. Sisupāla-badha, p.4. Dr S. N. Sarmā has quoted this passage in full in ASI, p.183. According to him, the author of the book was Sista Bhattachārya of circa eighteenth century(latter part).
understand it now, as a subject-matter; This exclusion of comedy's ready source of subject-matters may account for the paucity or lack of high or even plausible whole comic works in ancient Assamese literature. The epic or poetry of course is a genre in its own right; yet no satirical poetry is to be found in the ancient period. The reason is to be sought in the aesthetical ideal, the overwhelming religious sense and lack of a virile tradition of comedy or satire. The human world was by and large neglected, and the humanised gods, sages and puranic heroes can at best be partial vehicles of man's aspirations in art or hardly reveal the human nature in an adequate and profound manner. Comedy is a way of revealing the profound truths about human nature.