CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
Among the luminaries that shed their pure light in the firmament of the Assamese poetry Hiteswar Bor Baruah (1876-1939) occupies a unique position. Despite differences in the backgrounds — social and political, Bor Baruah occupies more or less the same position in Assamese as Milton does in English and Michael Madhusudan Datta in Bengali. Of the domains that constitute the new Renaissance in Assamese Hiteswar Bor Baruah has reserved for himself the domain of literary epics or epic poetry and Sonneteering in Assamese. This 'uniqueness' of Bor Baruah's position is best revealed in his own words: "I was very much interested in reading out-books while I was a student. Those were the days of the Jonaki and Biju. At that time there was an opinion amongst us that the Assamese language was harsh and unfit for poetry, particularly for epic narratives. I thought that, if tried, epic narratives could be written in the Assamese language. With that end in view, I took to the writing of epic poetry (Kavya) and other poems (Sonnets etc.)."¹

Our efforts in this study shall, therefore, be chiefly concentrated in bringing out the uniqueness of Hiteswar Bor Baruah's position, taking into consideration the socio-political

¹ An English translation of the words written in Assamese by Hiteswar Bor Baruah to Neog (Dimbeswar, a noted poet and critic of Assam), with reference to a letter dated 29.9.34. The extract of the letter is recovered in the own handwriting of Bor Baruah.
background of the Assamese literature. To quote the critics of prominence of his time determines the accredited position of Bor Baruah in Assamese. Pandit Hem Chandra Goswami once wrote to Bor Baruah: "I have no hesitation in saying that your language is a new departure in Assamese blank verse and I fully approve of your style .......... The modern Assamese literature is very poor in kavvas and I am really glad to see that you have turned your attention to that department."  

Another prominent poet in Assamese — Durgeswar Sarma wrote to Bor Baruah: "Even the casual readers cannot fail to be impressed with your (Hiteswar's) flow and originality. These are the two elements that distinguish poetry from verse." Yet another prolific writer in Assamese — Padmadhar Chaliha commented: "One cannot but be struck with the ease, the flow, the spontaneity and the lyrical beauty of your (Hiteswar's) poetical pieces."  

A poet, thus accredited in his own time for his literary excellences, has been steeped into considerable obscurity; and this may be due to certain obvious reasons. The late flowering

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2. An extract from a letter written by H.C. Gossain, (Formerly, personal Assistant to the Commissioner, A.V.D., and then E.A.C., Nowgong) to Hiteswar Bor Baruah as appended to the latter's Abhäs Kāvya.

3. An extract from a letter written by Durgeswar Sarma to Hiteswar Bor Baruah as appended to the latter's Abhäs Kāvya.

4. An extract from a letter written by Padmadhar Chaliha to Hiteswar Bor Baruah as appended to the latter's Tirotār Ātmādan or Jyotamati Kāvya.
of the new Renaissance in Assamese did not continue long. The literary epics and sonneteering that rose to the peaks of prominence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave way to romantic lyrics and short stories at the beginning of the twentieth century. The undercurrents of epic narratives and sonneteering that had flowed into the Bengali literature also appeared in Assamese and found glorification in the pen of Hiteswar Bor Boruah. With the lack of popularity of these kinds of poetry in the literature of the twentieth century the poetic excellence of Bor Boruah has been thrown into considerable obscurity. When the first published works of Bor Boruah, his literary epics and his sonnet-poetries, had gone out of market, the second editions never saw the light of day. Unfortunately, the hitherto unpublished works remain ever unpublished. Our endeavours have, therefore, been partly antiquarian and partly literary.

(I) BACKGROUND : SOCIO-POLITICAL :

The year - 1826, in which Assam came under the suzerainty of the British through the instrumentality of the Burmese invaders, marks the end of an age-old monarchy that ruled in Assam and brings about a political change that was total and final. This political event had far-reaching consequences on the socio-economic and literary fields of Assam. Prior to this event Assam saw many a political intrigue and a major rebellion called 'Mowamaria Vidroha' and all led to its culmination in the Burmese invasion that had its most crushing blow on the socio-economic life of Assam. The situation becomes at once clear in the follow-
ing words of Dr. H.K. Borpujari: "Already laid waste by insurrections and civil wars, the ruin of Assam was complete during the repeated invasions of the Burmese. The latter inaugurated a reign of terror, during which plunder, devastation, murder and desecration were the order of the day. The dreadful atrocities perpetrated on helpless Assamese by these inhuman invaders could better be imagined than described." An atmosphere thus surcharged with political instability and social insecurity could never be a suitable soil for the cultivation of art and literature. The first Renaissance in Assamese in the Vaishnava literature had its patronage in the neighbouring kingdom of Kochbehar under the sheltering wings of King Nanarāyana. Between the first flowering of the Renaissance in the Vaishnava period and the second one in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth passed a period of obscurity in the Assamese literature.

The already dark period of the Assamese literature had the mischance of becoming darker still under the linguistic expansionism of the neighbouring Bengalis, some of whom came to Assam with the British rulers. But the undercurrents of the Vaishnavite literary tradition used to flow till the beginning of the nineteenth century that saw the birth of the modern Assamese literature. The political expansionism of the British coupled with the language expansionism of the Bengalis had its cumulative

impact on the birth, growth and development of the modern Assamese literature. Explaining the predicament Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee observes: "Through some thoughtless mistake, both in a knowledge of the realities and in state-craft, the Bengali language was made the medium of administration and education in both Assam and Orissa, which were looked upon as parts of Bengal. This mistake was ratified later on —— but from 1826 to 1873, the administrative languages for the Assamese people were English and Bengali, and Assamese children at school were taught through the Bengali language. Owing to the closeness of these two languages to each other, and because it was a Government order, the Assamese people and Assamese students accepted Bengali, but from the beginning this was under protest which grew in volume as the years passed."6

In the Dark Period (1826-1873) there was, therefore, no certainty if Assamese would have its due place in the administration and the education of the State. Pandit Hem Chandra Goswami observes: "It is in a sense the most remarkable period of the Assamese language, since, during this period, for some time, the fate of the Assamese language was trembling in the balance. The right of the Assamese language to be ranked as a separate language was seriously questioned by some interested persons, and the Government of Sir George Campbell instituted an enquiry into the matter in the seventies of last century."7

6. Dr. M. Neog (ed.): *Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam*, page 4.
7. B. Sarma (ed.): *Pandit Hem Chandra Goswami Rachansavali*, p. 848.
The Herculean task of rescuing the Assamese language from the imminent crisis was performed by Mr. Nethan Brown, Mr. Oliver Cotter and Mr. Miles Bronson of the American Baptist Missionary. The Baptist Missionaries laid the foundation of the modern Assamese language and literature through the publications of the first Assamese Grammar, the first Assamese Dictionary and the first Assamese news-magazine - Orunudoi.

The Missionaries also established schools for primary education, and thus brought the Assamese people to the touch of the rest of the country. An immortal patriot of Assam - Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan - joined hands with the Baptist Missionaries in their colossal task of reforming the society and of reconstructing the language. And all the efforts were at last crowned with success and the Assamese language came to be recognised in 1873 by the British rulers as an official language in the law-courts and also as a language of educational institutions in some districts of Assam, i.e. Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. In this context it is worth mentioning the observation of Dr. Hiren Gohain: "The impact of the tribals on the soil of Assam has been gradually recognised. The Mahāpurusia religion has been assimilated in the nerves of the Assamese throughout the ages. Similarly, there has been a deep impact of the Ahom rule on the administration, the political organisation and the social system of Assam. The Assamese language cannot be a separate entity from all these memories and traditions."

The next important date is 1889, in which an Assamese monthly - Jonātk - was published from Calcutta, marks the date of the modern Assamese literature with the flowering of its second Renaissance. The year, prior to the publication of the Jonātk, saw the birth of a literary organisation entitled: Assamīva Bhāṣār Unnati Sādhini Sabha (The Assamese Language Developing Society). The Assamese students residing in Calcutta formed this purely literary organisation with a view to developing the Assamese language and literature. The Jonātk was the mouthpiece of this literary organisation. It was published by Chandra Kumar Agarwalla with the active cooperation of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. The main purpose of publishing this periodical, in the words of Chandra Kumar Agarwalla, was: "We are going to fight against darkness. Our aim is the progress of the country — moonlight."

(II) IMPACTS OF ENGLISH AND BENGALI:

The waves of Western literary thoughts and idiom had flowed into Assamese through the channels of the Jonātk. The English and Bengali literatures had profound impact on the Assamese writers that wrote on the pages of the Jonātk. Dr. Maheswar Neog, commenting on the modernity of the Assamese literature through the Jonātk and its circle, says: "It was, therefore, the monumental achievement of the Jonātk and those that circled round the Jonātk in bringing about the complete modernization of that literature."9

There had been trying times indeed in the wake of the rebirth of the Assamese language and literature in its modern form. One venture led to another, and the period, 1889-1917, saw the hectic activities of the promising young men of letters, who had their literary camp in Calcutta. The Assamese young men, having a dip into the stream of European Renaissance through the medium of the English education came up and employed themselves restlessly in the battle of the pen. In the shortest possible period of 1889-1917, several epoch-making journals were published in Assamese that laid the pillars of modern Assamese in all its branches. At the close heels of the Jonâkî, the Bibuli came to be published in 1890. Padmanath Gohain Barua's Usâ was published in 1907, while Lakshminath Bezbaruah's Bânhî followed it in 1909. Another monthly journal Alocani was published in 1909, and it continued to serve the literature upto 1917. Side by side with these major journals many other short-lived ventures were also made. The cumulative effect of all these literary ventures saw the flowering and fruition of the new Renaissance in Assamese, and the echoes of it still predominate in our literature.

The Assamese writers under the influence of the English romantics like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron took to lyric poetry, expressing various moods and sentiments of the human heart. In Chandra Kumar Agarwalla we hear for the first time a tone of deep humanism. A contemporary political event like the French Revolution had its dominating impact on
the English romantic poetry, but in the Assamese romantic poetry there was no such direct impact of any socio-political event. So the Assamese romantics had to wait for some inspiration from within, and that came to them spontaneously from the pain due to the loss of Independence and the tyranny of the British rule. We feel, therefore, in the Assamese romantic poetry a strong sentiment of self-consciousness and a patriotic urge. The English romantic writers under the spell of the lofty ideals of the French Revolution wanted to reform the existing social order of their own; but the Assamese romantics, not to speak of any reform in the existing social order, had to raise their faltering voice against the British Empirical rule, sometimes directly and cautiously, and sometimes indirectly through the expression of their patriotic sentiments. The rebellious movement against the British hatched by Gomdhar Konwar had its culmination in the hanging of Maniram Dewan (1857) and Piyali Phukan. Benudhar Sharma, a noted historian of Assam, makes the following observation on the involvement of Assam in the political uprising against the British:

"Considering the weight and breath of thoughts of the martyrs in the Sepoy Mutiny of '57 or indirectly in the struggle for Independence it must be admitted unhesitatingly that the contribution of Assam to that struggle was never unworthy. People may say with their hundreds of mouths that there was no Sepoy Mutiny in Assam, but not a single mouth can say that there was no involvement with the sepoys for the sake of bringing about the Independence."10

10. English translation of an extract from Benudhar Sharma's Maniram Dewan; p. XV.
The movement though nipped in the bud had its profound impact on the sentiments of the Assamese people. The sword falling, the romantic writers took to pen to fight a cold war against the colonial rule.

Thus, the patriotic sentiments found expression in all the writings of the age. The loss of Independence and its consequences on the character and accomplishments of the Assamese people had painful impacts on the minds of the writers, and the anger, resulting thereof, is seen in the writings of all the writers of this period. This strong patriotic sentiment has been painted not only in the social satires of Hem chandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua and Lakshminath Bezbarua, but also through historical plays, historical novels and epics of the time. The historical plays of Lakshminath Bezbarua and Padmanath Gohain Barua, the historical novels of Majani Kanta Bordoloi, the historical epics of Hiteswar Bor Baruah, and many other longer lyrics of Kamala Kanta Bhattacharjee, Sailadhar Rajkhowa, Ambica Giri Raichoudhury and Dimbe swar Neog — are based on the events of the Assam history of the pre-British days. And this digging into the soil of history helped create an atmosphere intensely surcharged with patriotism.

It was indeed unfortunate on the part of the Assamese that their language did not get the due official recognition up to 1873. And from 1836 to 1873 Bengali was the language of education and court in Assam. Almost all the writers of the new Renaissance had had their early education through the medium of Bengali. After its official recognition as language, Assamese
ushered itself as literature through the publication of the Jonâki in 1889 from Calcutta. So in the Dark Period Assamese was searching for its homeland, while Bengali, its sister language, saw the flowering and fruition of the great romantic ideals as well as renaissance aspirations in the poetry of Michael Madhusudan Datta, Hem Chandra Bandopadhaya and Nabin Chandra Sen, in the novels of Sarat Chandra and Bankim Chandra and in the immortal lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore. So on the Assamese literature of this period there was a direct influence of the flourishing Bengali literature. The very publication of the first Assamese monthly from Calcutta testifies to the fact. Lakshminath Bezbarua, the Charioteer of Literature of the period, had undergone matrimonial relationship with the famous Tagore family of Bengal. The following observation of Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee drives home this point: "More than any place in Assam, Calcutta became the real centre of a progressive literary and cultural movement for the Assamese people; and the real modernisation of the mind of Assam began with Lakshminath Bezbarua and his group. This group included most of the promising Assamese students who had come to Calcutta for education."  

There are critics who find no vitality in the romantic movement of Assam. But if we take the socio-economic-political background of Assam into account, more particularly its language struggling for existence, we cannot say that the romantic movement in Assamese lacked touch with the society. The first

and foremost duty of the writers, belonging to this period, after the safeguard of the language, was to unify various tribes of the Assamese people with a deep national sentiment. Over and above this unification due emphasis was laid on the formation of a national character free from all superstitions and malpractices of the social and religious organisations. This was indeed not an easy task for them. So all the writers of this period fell back upon the glorious events of the Assam history and wove them into plays, novels, stories, epics and many other longer narrative poems. Lakshminath Bezbarua's *Joymati Konwari* and Chakradwaj Singha, Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Joymati* are a few plays dealing direct with patriotism. Rajani Kanta Bordoloi's novels (*Miri Jivari, Manomati, Hangili* and *Nirmal Bhakat*) are at once historical and full of patriotic urge. Hiteswar Bor Boroah wrote a series of literary epics in blank verse on the most memorable political events of Assam. Bor Boroah's historical epics are:

*Yudhakshetrat Ahom Kamani* or *Mulagabhary* based on the heroic sacrifice of an Assamese lady for the sake of her motherland, and
*Tirotar Atmadan* or *Jaymati Konwari* based on the heroic sacrifice of an Ahom princess for the cause of her motherland; and
*Kamata-pur Dhvajasa Kavya* based on an intrigue in the Royal family of Kamatapur, leading to the ruination of the Kamatapur kingdom. The spirit with which such historical events were taken up by Bor Boroah as the subject matter of his literary epics was simply patriotic. It denotes not only the poet's longing for the past, but also his urge for a strong national sentiment. Bor Boroah was a proud Assamese, particularly as belonging to the illustrious
Royal family of the Ahoms, from whose hands the British got the charge of ruling the realm. While dedicating his famous Kāvyā Yudhakshetrat Ahom Ramani to Hon’ble Lt. Col. P.R.T. Gurdon, Bor Baruah expressed this aspect of his patriotic sentiment, and this book of heroism of an Assamese lady seems to be a befitting presentation of a patriotic sword from the vanquished patriot to the ruling usurper. To quote a few lines from this famous letter of dedication makes the point crystal clear: "I (Bor Baruah) am a member of the Ahom community. I belong to the very respectable Bor Baruah family (a ministerial family to the late Ahom Rajhas) being a grandson of late Bhodoree Bor Baruah who held the office of the Rajmontree or Prime Minister during the reign of Assam rajhas, and a son of late Chikon Gogoi Bor Baruah who was a Mousadar.

I am glad to mention to you here, and I deem it a great privilege indeed to do so, that I have written a book in the vernacular which is now being printed in Calcutta. It contains in verse a description of the heroic deeds of the widow (whom I have named 'Moola Gābhoro' in my book) of Chao Fracheng Moeng Bor Gohain, who went out to the battle field to revenge the death of her husband and to defend freedom of her country, and died there fighting bravely with Turvak, a general of Mussalmans, who treacherously put her husband to death in the battle-field, — incidents that occurred during the Ahom supremacy when the Muhammadans invaded Assam for the 6th time. I need scarcely acquaint you with these facts, you yourself being thoroughly
The 'Ahom Supremacy' or the supremacy of the Assamese is sung through the epic narrative of the Ahom heroine, and the heroic tales such as this told in prose and poetry of the time prepared the ground in Assam for the Indian Nationalist Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. Even at the cost of the neat epic structure, Bor Bëruah at times digresses in the midst of his epic narratives to give vent to his powerful feelings of patriotism. In a literary survey it appears to be a defect, but a deep dive into the under-currents of the feelings and sentiments of a people that lost its Independence makes it clear that the pen of patriotism tried to prove itself mightier than the sword of the British.

Not only through the epic narratives, but also through the direct compilation of a voluminous History of Assam entitled Ahomar Din, Hiteswar Bor Bëruah fell back upon the national history, and his motive was obvious. Bor Bëruah wrote to the Editor, Times of Assam: "Some ten years ago, I informed the Assamese public of my attempt to compile a voluminous History of Assam under the Ahom rule. I now beg to inform them that labouring under various difficulties and heavy pressure of multifarious works I have been able to complete by this time almost all the

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12. An extract from a letter dated 29th March, 1916, Jorhat, written and signed by Hiteswar Bor Bëruah to Hon'ble Lt. Col. P. R. T. Gurdon, a member of the Imperial Legislative Council of India, and formerly the officiating Chief Commissioner of Assam.
volumes of my Ahomar Din or the History of Assam." The history of free Assam before the advent of the British constitutes the basic foundation upon which the new Renaissance literature in Assamese has built its superstructure; and this proves to be true in case of Bor Baruah as well as in any other writer belonging to the Age.

Similarly in the Bengali literature Hangalal, Bankim Chandra and Nabin Chandra took to the episodes of the Indian History as the background of their poetic achievements. Hangalal, Bankim Chandra and Hem Chandra fell back upon the events of the Mughal rule, and they spread the germs of inspiration for the National Independence through their poetries and novels, while Nabin Chandra took up a burning event of the Bengal history i.e. the Battle of Plassey and depicted it in the form of a kāvyā Palāśīr Yuddha. The event described in this narrative epic spread only for nine hours of a day. The subject-matter, if superficially surveyed, may appear to be lacking in the grandeur of an epic, but judged from the inner depth of heart, the subject-matter of the Palāśīr Yuddha is the land of Bengal and the mind of the people of Bengal. The depth of the subject lies not in the objective episode, but in the subjective involvement of the poet himself and his people through the medium of art. This subjective element is very strong in all the literary epics like Milton's

13. An extract from the news-letter addressed to the Editor, The Times of Assam, Vol. No. XXX, No. 21 (issue), 24th May, 1924, with the heading Assam Under the Ahom Rule.
Paradise Lost, Madhusudan's Meghnadbadh, Nabin Chandra's Palasir Yuddha as well as in the historical kavyas of our poet Hiteswar Bor Baruah.

(III) PREDECESSORS IN THE FIELD OF EPIC AND SONNET POETRIES:

In Hiteswar Bor Baruah we have the unique combination of Michael Madhusudan Datta and Nabin Chandra Sen of the Bengali literature. He is a Michael when we come to his sonnet poetry and lyrics in blank verse; and he is a Nabin Chandra when we come to his historical kavyas. Profoundly influenced by the English poets — Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Byron, Hiteswar Bor Baruah has made unique contributions to the domain of Assamese poetry. Gifted with a natural poetic temperament and immersed in personal tragedies of life Bor Baruah came to be prominent in the two branches of the Assamese poetry — the literary epics and the sonneteering. Though Bor Baruah may be called the Pole Star in these two branches for writing a series of epics and sonnets, he had his predecessors too, though they were a very few in number. As mentioned earlier, Bor Baruah came to these branches of poetry by way of experiments in Assamese. So it was but natural that he had none to compete with or to prevail upon. But fortunately it was for Bor Baruah that he had been some bold specimens of experiments in these fields, and he drew just inspirations from them.

The literary epics and the sonnet poetry of Bengali literature caught the attention of the young Assamese writers like
Hama Kanta Choudhury (1846-1889), Bholanath Das (1858-1929) and Hem Chandra Goswami. The superb impact that fell upon these writers came from Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-1873) both in the epic and the Sonnet poetries. That was indeed the Age of Madhusudan. The promising young writers of Assam were caught in the spell of Madhusudan's Meghnadbadh Kavya. The first Assamese literary epics Hama Kanta's Abhimanyubadha and Bholanath's Sita-haran Kavya were born out of the womb of Meghnadbadh Kavya. Profoundly inspired by the poetic ideals and the innovation of blank verse, these Assamese poets came to write their literary epics at a crucial point of the birth of the Assamese medium, and it was a wonder that the two poets were at the height of their achievements even at the first flush of their experiments.

Bholanath Das sings the glory of the Muse and Salutes Madhusudan Datta as his guardian angel in poetry:

"Sehi Ramayan git
Gaibe banchicho ami muda akischan
Amitra-akjar chande, he matah Bagdevi!
Ji chande Gaila bahu madhumay git
Taba anugrahe ati priya putra taba
Sri Madhusudan Banga- Kabikulamoni."15

(That song of the Ramayana a fool like me is going to sing in blank verse, O Mother Bagdevi! It is a verse in which many a sonorous song is sung by the Master - poet of Bengal ——— Sri Madhusudan.)

Ramä Känta Choudhury, though he had not made any such open
declaration, was also influenced by the poet of the 
*Meghnädbadh Kāvyä* in poetic diction, poetic inspiration and also in the 
choice of the subject-matter itself. Ramä Känta perhaps dwelt on
the idea of writing an epic on the killing (badh) of Abhimanu,
Son of Arjuna from an epic reference or simile that appears in
the *Meghnädbadh Kāvyä* : "Kahilä Väsabdeta, (Abhimanu Jathä-Heäl
Sapta Sure Mir Tapta-Lowha Kiti-Rokhe)" etc. 16

The blank verse that came from English to Bengali through
Madhusudan entered into Assamese through Rama Kanta and Bholänäth.
The *Abhimanubadh* as it falls into our hand is an incomplete epic.
We can merely conceive of the poet's plan of it, his poetic dict­
ion and the poetic situation. And had the epic been found in its
completed form, it would have been a literary epic par excellen­
ces. Abhimanu's promise; Uttara's role as a devoted wife; her
seriousness to see her husband; her heroic determination in the
face of the mighty enemies; her arrival at the camp of her hus­
band; her union with her husband; her fear at the separation from
her husband :— all these are situations, described in Assamese
blank verse with apt similes, carrying us to the similar situat­
ions in the *Meghnädbadh Kāvyä* : Promila's determination to see
her husband at all costs on the eve of the the *nikumbhilä räma,*
her union with her husband and her ultimate separation from her
husband etc.

16. Michael Madhusudan Datta : *Meghnädbadh Kāvyä* : Sixth Canto : 
**WW** 491-493.
Again, the Meghnādbadh kāvya starts with the fall of Vira-
bāhu, while the Abhimanyubadh kāvya starts with the fall of 
Vīma. To maintain the 'high seriousness' and epic grandeur the 
poet of the Meghnādbadh kāvya often moves from the earth to the 
Heaven or to the Hell. The poet of the Abhimanyubadh also does 
the similar job by carrying his readers from the earth to the 
Heaven, and vice versa. It is indeed unfortunate that this first 
literary epic with all its signs and symptoms of maturity could 
not be recovered in toto.

Bholānāth Das's full credit lies in the depiction of the 
character of Hāvana in his Sītā Haran Kāvya. All other characters 
in the epic are properly depicted in accordance with the epic 
tale of the Rāmāvana. Bholānāth perhaps has had the hint of writ-
ing a full length epic on the skeleton of the flash-back tale, 
narrated by Sītā to Sārāmā at Lankan, on her kidnapping by Hāvana 
as found in the Meghnādbadh Kāvya. In that narrative Hāvana 
appears to be a crude and inhuman kidnapper. But in Bholānāth's 
Sītā Haran Kāvya Hāvana is a king, conscious of his situations 
and actions. He sings his prayers to Sīva for strength to take 
appropriate revenge against his enemies — Hāma and Lakshmana 
who have insulted his sister Surpanāsā and killed hundreds of 
his heroes and soldiers. As a tit for tat for the insult meted 
cut to his own sister, Hāvana has come upon a heroic determina-
tion to kidnap Sītā, the wife of Hāma Chandra. As Milton has 
glorified Satan in his Paradise Lost, Madhusudan his Hāvana in

18. Michael Madhusudan Datta : Meghnādbadh Kāvya : Sixth Canto : 
VV 491-493.
his Meghnādbadh, so also Bholanath upholds Rāvana in some predicaments in his kāvyā Abhimanyubadh. After the kidnapping of Sitā, Rāvana is justifying his action in the following words:

"Cira dās āmi
Tomār; nājāno āne —/, mor khātra kule
Ihen lānchanā ghate? Jāi nāk kan
Narahāte gōdārir? Hāsoi jagate?
Yhākile ki kṛpā taba eī vṛtya prati
Pasupati! banpati vir vṛātidwaya
Dvīrad sadriś, ban-rakhobal saha
Hai khoy? sune punah gali nārīmukhe?
Yadi nohe kṛpā taba eī dāsa heto,
Bṛāthā bhakti ārādhanā padāmbuje taba
Niyata vṛtyar tabe; bṛthā tente, prabhu
Bholānāth Dās mok bole sarbajane I=18

[I am your eternal servant. How is such an insult possible in the famous tribe of mine? How can the nose and ears of my sister be gone at the hands of men? Why should the world laugh at? If you have kindness, O Lord Pasupati! how can the two heroic brothers destroy the jungles with their occupants? Again, should I listen to the reproaches of a woman (Kidnapped Sitā)? If you have no kindness for me, my worships and offerings at your feet shall go in vain; and people call me Bholānāth Dās (the servant of Śiva) for nothing.]

Here is a superb pun on the term 'Bholānāth Dās' — meaning both Rāvana, the servant of Śiva and the poet himself (Bholānāth Das) concluding the poem. The use of such puns and similes is

abundant in the epic and it upholds the texture of the narratives.

Moreover, the situation created by Bholanath at the time of sending away Lakšmana by Sītā after Rāma who has gone after the golden deer (Mārga), and also the situation in which Sītā submits herself to Rāvana seem to reflect the automatic role of the Destiny of Man. The Destiny is not subject to any explanation; it is at the core of any human tragedy. It spares none; the innocent and the guilty fall equal preys to it. The Destiny reigns supreme in this Assamese kavya. Sītā misbehaves Lakšmana for not readily carrying out her command; Lakšmana violates the command of her elder brother against the command of his sister-in-law (Sītā); Rāvana comes to take revenge upon Rāma and Lakšmana as Lakšmana has severed the nose and ears of his sister - Śūrpānasā; Rāvana appears before Sītā as a sage begging for alms; Sītā offers alms to the disguised Rāvana; Rāvana refuses to accept the alms under conditions in which Sītā wants it to offer; and Sītā ultimately submits herself to the Destiny: - everything fits into the tragic human situation. We lose all traditional hatred for Rāvana in the Assamese epic, and gain instead a new sympathy for him. Particularly towards the close of the epic, as mentioned earlier, the prayer of Rāvana for Bholanāth (Siva) shows the sincerity of approach on the part of any aspiring man. And this approach to Rāvana is in the fitness of the nineteenth century Renaissance outlook.

Regarding the language and the blank verse used in these two literary epics in Assamese, Dimbeswar Neog, a critic of repute,
has the following observations to make: "Bholanath's language and style was nicknamed Anglo-Benglo-Assamese for the mixture of the English and Bengali words and grammar with Assamese, and hence he may be left out of account. Ramā Kēnta's language and style were dignified Assamese, and naturally contained a little high percentage of Sanskrit words. Neog's sweeping comments are to be examined in the context of the situations in which these two epic-writers in Assamese took to poetry. Ramā Kēnta's Abhimanyubadh was published in 1875. And Bholānāth's Sītā Haraṇa, though finally published in 1902 in book-form first appeared in the Assamese periodical Assam Bībhātini in a series in as early as 1871. These were the times when the modern Assamese language was still in the process of experimentation, and the final shape of the language had not yet been evolved. If we read the epics with this predicament in mind, we cannot but opine that these were surely very bold and successful steps in the field of Assamese epic poetry. It is indeed unfortunate that Bholānāth was subject to severe criticisms that appeared in the Assam Bībhātini for the language of the Sītā Haraṇa Kāvya. As the language of the time was in a process of experimentation, as the model to be imitated by the Assamese poet was Michael Madhusudan Datta, the severity of criticism caused the genius of an aspiring poet to nip in the bud. "The poet lost his heart, became totally silent. From 1902 in which the Sītā Haraṇa Kāvya was published to 1929 in which the poet passed away, the poet kept himself aloof from

any literary pursuit. Otherwise, from this aspiring post we would have got more of lyric poetry."  

Ramā Kānta had distinct improvement in his poetic diction that appeared in the Abhimanvubadh Kāvya. He also showed his originality in his conception of the epic art, paving the way for the later epic writers in Assamese. The unfortunate thing on the part of this promising epic poet is that his entire epic, as planned, could not be recovered; only the beginning of it with the First, Second and Third Cantos could be recovered. The reading of these Cantos gives us the impression that Ramā Kānta could have been the Michael Madhusudan of the Assamese literature. Poet Atul Chandra Hazarika has the following observation to make on Ramā Kānta: "The writers of the Literary and Cultural History in Assamese cannot but remember Choudhmridev with respect. Ramā Kānta occupies the same place in the pre-Jonaki Age as was the place occupied by Hem Saraswati in the pre-Sambarkar Age."  

Padmanath Gohain Barua, another immediate predecessor of Hiteswar Bor Boruah in the field of epic poetry published his Lilā Kāvya in 1899. "He (Gohain Barua) was married in the mean time and lost his first wife in 1899. He wrote a long poem on this event and in the name of his deceased wife, called it Lilā. It was written in blank verse in imitation of the earlier Kāvyas like Abhimanvubadh and Sitā Haran. But Lilā was written a quarter of a century after them and the verse was certainly

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more mobile." Really, from the point of the mobility of verse the Līlā may be called a literary epic in pure Assamese diction that has its full flowering in the pen of Hiteswar Bor Baruah. Besides pure diction, there are — the salutation to the Muse (Bāgdevi bandāma), the Canto-division, the mobility of the blank verse; and all these make the poem a pleasant reading. Despite all its outward paraphernalia of an epic, Gohain Barua's Līlā is far from the high seriousness and grandeur of a real literary epic. E.M.W. Tillyard, while discussing the characteristics of an epic, observes: "I want to insist that the true epic creates a 'heroic impression'. ...... Heroic poetry often concerns actions in which men know exactly what they are doing, and rise through deliberate valour to a great height of resolution. And it is natural enough to attribute the heroic impression to a poem's heroic subject-matter. But in fact that impression depends also, indeed ultimately, on the temper of treatment. A heroic theme may encourage a writer to treat it in a sustained, 'heroic way' to exercise will to the utmost; but this does not prevent the treatment's being the decisive element. If this is the case with heroic poetry, it follows that literature lacking a heroic subject is not debarred from making the heroic impression." This apt observation of Tillyard helps us, to a great extent, in ascertaining the real nature of a literary epic. And in this sense Madhusudan sings of heroism on Meghnādbadh Kāvya, Nabin Chandra in his Palāṣīr Yuddha, Bholānāth in his Sītā Haran Kāvya, and

22. Dimbeswar Neog : *New Light on History of Assamīva Literature*; p. 423
Bans Kihta in his *Abhimanishadbh Kavya*. But this 'heroic impression' is not there in the *Lilâ Kavya* of Padmanath Gohain Barua.

Another important observation by Tillyard regarding the nature of an epic is worth mentioning: "We can simplify even further and say no more than that the epic must communicate the feeling of what it was like to be alive at that time. But that feeling must include the condition that behind the epic author is a big multitude of men whose most serious convictions and dear habits he is the mouth-piece." 24 This observation also goes to prove the epical value of the above mentioned literary epics. This is more true in the case of the literary epics of Hiteswar Bor Boruah. But this epic-quality is not there in the *Lilâ* of Gohain Barua. Judged by these standards *Lilâ* cannot be termed a literary epic, pure and simple. It may be called an autobiographical poem written in the form and style of a literary epic. The mere form without the 'heroic impression' cannot hang the poem on the peg of epicism.

Hiteswar Bor Boruah, therefore, occupies the coveted position in the domain of the epic poetry in Assamese. Dr. S. N. Sarma rightly observes: "The contribution of Hiteswar Bor Boruah to the Treasury of the Assamese narrative epics is the highest." 25

Besides the literary epics Bor Boruah dominates like a colossus in the field of the Assamese Sonneteering literature.

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24. Ibid. – p. 12

25. Dr. Satyendranath Sarma : *Assamîrô Nâhibî Kâvym Prabhû* p. 222 (The extract is translated from Assamese)
Hem Chandra Goswami introduced into Assamese a specimen of the Petrarchan sonnet in his *Privatamar Cithi*. It was indeed a pure model to be intently imitated by Hiteswar Bor Baruah. Several poets including Padmanath Gohain Barua and Durgeswar Sarma of the earlier generation, and Nilamoni Phukan and Dimbeswar Neog of the later generation carried out experiments, at once bold and successful, in the sonnet-poetry in Assamese. But none could endeavour to continue the process for mastery and perfection in the art as was done by Hiteswar Bor Baruah. Bor Baruah has his masterly innovations in the art-form of sonnet and also delves deep into varied experiences of life and its philosophy through his sonnet poetries: *Mālāko* and *Cakulo*. It is seen that Michael Madhusudan Datta and Rabindranath Tagore have profound impact on the maturity of Bor Baruah in this difficult art-form of poetry. The similar topics are dealt with by both Madhusudan and Hiteswar in their sonnet-poetries. Though influenced by the premier poets of Bengal, Hiteswar maintains his distinct originality in the treatment of his subject-matter and the fluidity of diction. A distinct philosophy comes to the top of everything; and this may be called Bor Baruah's *universality*. The broad features of this aspect of Bor Baruah's poetry will come to light in course of discussions in the subsequent chapters.

Bor Baruah has his innovations too. To quote Dr. Mahendra Bora: "Among all the sonneteers, Hiteswar Bor Baruah (1876-1939) is the most brilliant. He combined in his compositions of the genre, a rare depth of feeling, a magnificent beauty of rhythm
and a wonderful idiom of concentrated expression, all the three elements most essential for a good sonnet. Besides, he also possessed abundantly that peculiar knack of some artists who have their pastime in searching of exotic hints by mixing the colours in unpredictable ways. So he could give us certain new samples of sonnet, which do not follow the copy-book types.  

While accepting the above observation on the form of a sonnet, we must delve deep into the philosophy it permeates. It is interesting to note that Hiteswar Bor Bbruah has given us a literary epic, weaving the thread through a series of sonnets and named it Desdemona Kavva. It is indeed a unique combination of epic narrative and sonnet-sequence. And an innovation such as this denotes the position of Bor Bbruah not only in the scene of Indian literatures, but also in the context of the world literature.

Our efforts in this study shall be chiefly concentrated in bringing out the excellences of Hiteswar Bor Bbruah in the literary epic, - the sonnet-poetry, lyrics and in any other branches in which the poet has engaged his pen. Inspite of the fact that a century of his birth (1876-1976) has come to its full circle, this poet — a Pâle Star in the firmament of the Assamese literature should have remained concealed in the clouds of time. And again, as time is the best healer, the Centenary Year (1976) of Hiteswar Bor Bbruah, it is expected, will heal the wounds of obscurity inflicted so long on this immortal poet of Assam.

   (A doctoral thesis in manuscript form)