CHAPTER II

HITESWAR BOR BORUJAH'S BIOGRAPHY
Birth And Lineage:

Exactly a century ago in 1876 on the 28th day of the month of Pausa (1797 Saka) was born into the illustrious Bor Boruah family of Jorhat the master sonneteer and epic-writer in Assamese; Hiteswar Bor Boruah. In a letter addressed to Lt. Col. P.R.T. Gordon Bor Boruah wrote about his lineage in the following words: "I am a member of the Ahom Community. I belong to the very respectable Bor Boruah family (a ministerial family to the late Ahom Rajha), being a grand son of late Bhodoree Bor Boruah who held the office of the Rajmontree or Prime Minister during the reign of the Assam Rajha, and a son of late Chikott Gogoi Bor Boruah who was a mousadar."¹

A genealogical chart that appears in the Ahomar Din, the unpublished History of Assam by Hiteswar Bor Boruah reveals that the first father of the Bor Boruah family was Thioruntao. In its eleventh generation was born Bhadari Bor Boruah who happened to be the Prime Minister of the Ahom king - Kamaleswar Singha. This lineage is known as the famous Handyque clan of the 'Gat Charia Ahom'. Bhadari's son Deoram was the father of Padmanath Duarah Bor Gogoi. Padmanath's son Chikên Gogoi Mousadar Bahadur was the father of Hiteswar Bor Boruah. Bor Boruah's mother, Ushâ Kideo was the first daughter of Prince Damburudhar who had been the son of Swargadeo (King) Jogeswar Singha. And Chikott Gogoi gained her hand in marriage.

¹ An extract from the copy of the letter written by Hiteswar Bor Boruah to Lt. Col. P.R.T. Gordon, dated 29th March, 1915.
at the age of sixteen. The parental lineages of Hiteswar Bor Boruah are worth taking note of as they acquaint us with the composition of the blood in the poet. This royal blood made Hiteswar not only a proud patriot and a proud historian, but also a proud poet who sang the glories of the Assam history in his 'Kavyas'.

**Early childhood:**

Although the royal blood was flowing in the veins of Hiteswar, the chill penury was his lot of life. But during the life time of his grand-father Padmanath, the Bor Boruah family was in an affluent condition. That was the time the British had taken the charge of administration from the Ahoms. It was a fact that among all the prominent Ahom families the Bor Boruah family was the wealthiest. As the Prime Minister, Bhadari Bor Boruah made a huge fortune. Padmanath, therefore, even cared not for an offer of the British Government pension. As a reply to the offer, Padmanath said: "I do not want any pension. Particularly I bowed to one King (Ahom) once, and with the same head I cannot bow to the English."

2 This treasury of royal wealth was squandered away by Chikua Gogoi, the father of Hiteswar, through evil practices like gambling, and the Bor Boruah family appeared on the sand of dire poverty. Boruah into such a condition of the family Hiteswar had to

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2. A translated version of an extract from Mor Kudra Jibanar Atma Sonwarani: an incomplete autobiography of Hiteswar Bor Boruah as published in the All Assam Ahom Satria Federation Journal called Sana ram Vol. I. No. 3 edited by Tanu Konwar p. 25.
lament his lot. He says in his autobiography: "Just to say I am ill-starred— and I happened to be born into this world with a pan of fire on my head."\(^3\)

At the time of Hiteswar’s birth Chikoti Gogoi was almost a pauper. To repair his fortune Chikoti approached the then Chief Commissioner of Assam with a letter from the retired king Kamaleswar Singha. With the blessings of the Chief Commissioner Chikoti received some mouzas; but his fortune could never be repaired. He squandered the mouza-earnings too in the way of gambling, and his mouza was liquidated. Hiteswar was then a child of ten. And as a bolt from the blue came the death of his father a few years after the loss of the mouza. The family was big enough to consist of five daughters and three sons, - Hiteswar being the fifth child of his parents. The first three were daughters: Mukteswari, Ratneswari, Durgeswari, and the fourth one was Dharmeswar Bor Boruah. After Hiteswar were born Jayada (sister), Sureswar (brother) and Ratnada (sister). To quote again from the autobiography: "There are fifteen mouths, but there is not a handful of rice at home. There is not a paisa in the hands of my mother or grandmother. The land-property is almost nothing. The land-revenue was not paid for \(3/4\) years. Moreover, my father left many loans. The lenders started filing suits, and the Mousadar also filed suits for the unpaid revenue, and sold on auction all our lands except our homestead and the house."\(^4\)

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3. Ibid: p. 26 (The extract is a translation from Assamese)
In the conditions such as these Hiteswar could not be sent to any school in his very early childhood. Instead, his mother started teaching him at home the vernacular, and Hiteswar could read the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana. This earliest acquaintance with the lessons of the great Indian Epics sowed surely the seeds of his becoming a modern epic-writer in Assamese.

After acquiring the first learning in the vernacular, Hiteswar read for one or two years in one or two Lower Primary Schools, and had the credit of passing the School Leaving Examination with a scholarship which was awarded to him at the rate of Rs. 3.00 per month. With it he entered the English School. Hiteswar had 'double promotions' sometimes, and could secure the second prize always in all the Promotion Examinations. Hiteswar was thus a student of merit and he continued his studies amidst his born poverty. There is a painful narration of his life as a student in his autobiography: "I had no shoes and stockings, no pocket-watch, not even a good dhoti. My school dress consisted of a home-woven 'Khania' or 'Chelleng' (a kind of cloth), a coarse dhoti and an ordinary market-shirt. I had no relationship with any scented oil. Even I did not use mustard oil on my hair. Moreover, not always I got food to eat before going to school. The grand-mother was late in cooking food someday, and I went to school without any meals. At times my mother had no money to buy paddy or rice and we had to starve for 3 to 4 meals. But I never absented myself from school. Even with a continuous starving of 3 to 4 meals I used to go
to school. Seeing me going to school with a blackish face, my mother got much pain in mind and used to shed tears, but she never forbade me to go to school without meals."

Bor Boruah's mother had all the good qualities that an efficient housewife should possess, and she managed the family well in the teeth of financial distress. And she was somehow able to push her son Hiteswar up to the Entrance class of the English High School of the time. But owing to certain difficulties Bor Boruah could not appear at the Entrance Examination of the Calcutta University. There came the end of a brilliant academic career.

**Literary Career:**

The academic career silently gave way to his immortal literary career, although Hiteswar Bor Boruah happened to become a Tea Garden clerk all throughout his life. At the initial stage he served in Tifook and Mahbandha, and later on in the Sakalatinghee Tea Estate, Jorhat as the Head clerk for more than 35 years of his life. He was popular with all sections of the garden life right from the Manager down to the labourer, and could discharge his duties as nobly and sincerely as possible. But the bored service-life could not dry up the fountain of his poetry. Bor Boruah was a voracious reader and restless writer. His hand-writing was of a peculiar type: straight and bold as if signifying his heroic temperament. He read almost all the classics in English and Bengali,

5. Ibid. p. 35
and left nothing of Assamese. He had a big library of his own where the books of all the famous English poets, novelists and dramatists were available. It is said that after four months of his service, instead of improving his dresses, he bought the classics of Milton, Cowper and Southey. That he was well versed in the English and Bengali literatures can be known from the quotations he used in all his epic narratives and lyrics so appropriately. He quoted mostly from Kalidas, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton, Voltaire, Dryden, Pope, Murry, Goldsmith, Cowper, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Longfellow, George Eliot, and what not. Besides these literary masterpieces Bor Boruah was widely read in the histories of England, Greece, Rome, India and Assam; and he developed thereby a keen consciousness for history and a historical background in his literary ventures. Sri Uma Kanta Gohain⁶ writes on this aspect of his range of study: "He (Hiteswar) was immensely fond of historical matters, and anything historical he had once read he did not forget. Even while on his sick bed, some of the Assamese present day historians, some of whom have since died, — used to often visit him and took down notes from what he told them on historical matters; and the notes taken by them used to be copious and those information as fathered from him they utilised in their historical writings."⁷

⁶ Sri Uma Kanta Gohain, B.L., now a retired District Judge of Nowgong, is one son-in-law of Hiteswar Bor Boruah.

⁷ Uma Kanta Gohain: A Brief Account of Late Hiteswar Bor Boruah's Life (In manuscript), p. 3.
Hiteswar Bor Boruah had, in the fitness of his heroic pursuit of history, the fortune to preside over the Historical Branch of the Asam Sahitya Sabha Session at Nowgong in 1925, and he happened to be the first President of this Branch.

Sri Uma Kanta Gohain further informs us: "Of the English writers I found him to be very fond of Shakespeare, Byron, Milton, Shelley and Wordsworth, and he could even cite the lines of each of these authors dealing in important and significant matters. He was likewise apt in quoting from memory lines from Bankim and other Bengali writers like Michael Madhusudan Datta. He had a store of writings of the Assamese writers from Sankardeva and Madhabdeva down to the writers of his age."\(^8\)

These information are particularly important as there has been profound impact of the English and Bengali epic poets and sages on the similar writings of Hiteswar Bor Boruah.

The reading habits of Bor Boruah were peculiar. He used to read in the evening both before and after his night meal. After completing his meals, mostly at 9 P.M., Bor Boruah used to continue his study upto mid-night. During the day time also he used to read and write whenever opportune moments appeared to him. He used to open many books at a time on his table, and moved about, perhaps, in search of appropriate quotations to head his writings. Sometimes in midst of his writing he used to go out of his study and look after his domestic affairs. When some leisure moments were in hand in the midst of his

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8. Ibid. p. 3.
clerical duty, Bor Boruah devoted himself to his creative writings, that made the moments immortal.

It is interesting to note that he was a very popular poet of his time. While his predecessors like Bholanath Das were drowned in invectives, Bor Boruah had, to his credit, high appreciations from the prominent personalities and critics of his time. A scholar like Pandit Hem Chandra Goswami highly recommended his experimental literary ventures in narrative epics and Sonneteering in Assamese.

Hiteswar Bor Boruah was a man of benevolent disposition. He was loving and kind to all in and outside his family, particularly to his servants. He was renowned for his hospitality, and he was unhappy to pass a day or a night without a guest in his family. Bor Boruah was by nature loving and kind and humble in his dealings with people of all ranks, and took pleasure in helping men and women in distress. Moreover, he was a man of philosophic temperament, and he used to look upon life with a philosophic resignation. He used to look upon things and events in life with the eye of a poet. "He used to take all the mishaps in his family and whatever distress and worries that befell on him or his family members with a philosophic resignation."9

9. Ibid. p. 4.
Impacts of Personal Bereavements on Literary Life:

Hiteswar Bor Boruah and his wife Khetekesvari saw three sons and two daughters as the fruits of their conjugal life. Of them the first three were sons: Nalini, Jiten and Bipin, and the last two were daughters: Hironmayee and Kironmayee. The pull of Destiny was harsh enough for Bor Boruah and he saw one tragedy after another in his family circle. In his letter written to Neog in 1934 Bor Boruah records his tragedies in the following words: "My wife died on 30th May, 1912; my children are Sri Nalin Bor Boruah, late Jiten (who died in 1910) and late Bipin (who died in 1921). Of the two daughters one is given in marriage to Sri Uma Kanta Gohain, B.L. of Nowgong and another to Sriman Iswar Chandra Gohain. Bipin died after his mother, while Jiten died during the lifetime of my wife. At their premature deaths I became totally destitute of hopes. I bought a phial of quinine, and some pills were somehow swallowed by Jiten; and he could not be saved at all costs. Bipin died of Kālāzar (Black fever), catching the disease at Nowgong while he was there for study. His death saw the birth of Chakulo, and from that time I gave up my literary culture. At present I am a dead man in the living form."

In the body of the same letter Bor Boruah noted two other family tragedies: the death of his beloved younger sister Ratnada in April, 1903, and his dear younger brother Sureswar

10. Neog is Dlabesvar Neog, a prominent poet and critic of Assam.
in December, 1906. Thus in a period from 1903 to 1921 Bor Boruah received five strokes of destiny. These tragedies, centring round the death of his beloved young wife made him take shelter on the shore of poetry. Borna with chill penury and bearing the blows of tragedies Hiteswar depicted human life in general and his own in particular with tears in his literary epics, lyrics and sonnet-sequences. The undercurrent of his tragic life tends to flow just below the surface of his poetic stream, and at times it comes up to create confusion. We may quote such instances from his Kavya narratives.  

The poet also gives vent to his personal tragic feelings in several elegiac lyrics like the Pranar Jiten.

Bor Boruah deals with women characters in his literary epics, and it is interesting to note that all his tragic women are endowed with heroic virtues: patriotism, heroism, devotion to husband, pure love and sacrifice. But all his heroines, inspite of their 'goodness' suffer and at last succumb to Destiny with a sense of philosophic resignation. The death of his younger sister in 1903 and the death of his wife in 1912 bear to have some impact on the depiction of the tragic women characters. Examining this point Dimbeswar Neog observes: "Besides a genuine poetic temperament with which he was certainly gifted, Hiteswar had a poetic situation created by his very family misfortunes. He lost his second son in 1910, his wife in 1912 and his third son in 1921. These

11. The burial scene of Jaymati by Gadapani in Tirotar Atmadi Kavya appears to be a reflection of the burial scene of the wife of the poet.
occurrences which deeply affected his poetic mind also coloured all his poetical works, and he produced some 'sweetest songs' in Assamese language that 'tell of saddest thoughts'\textsuperscript{12}

Thus, Hiteswar Bor Boruah's poetic life that expresses itself in 1903 (the death of his younger sister) gets a real beginning in 1910 (the death of Jiten), culminates in 1912 (the death of his wife); and having produced a series of epics, sonnets and lyrics it comes to its natural close in 1921 (the death of Bipin). It is really interesting to note that all the masterpieces of Bor Boruah were written and published between 1910 and 1917.

Commenting on this aspect of Bor Boruah's characterisation Dr. Maheswar Neog says: "As in the novels of Rajani Kanta Bordoloi and Padmanath Gohain Barua, the woman character gets prominence in the kāvyas of Bor Boruah. Moreover, the ideal of sacrifice and the tragic vein of life as in the kāvyas of Madhusudan, constitute the centripetal charm of Bor Boruah's poetry."\textsuperscript{13}

**His Patriotism:**

Hiteswar Bor Boruah was a patriot out and out, and his patriotism found expression not only in his writings but also in his way of life. Uma Kanta Gohain informs us that Bor Boruah could not bear to hear any disparaging remarks against Assam and the Assamese.

\textsuperscript{12} Dineswar Neog: \textit{A New Light on History of Assamīā Literature}, p. 430.

\textsuperscript{13} Dr. Maheswar Neog (ed.): \textit{Mālac Āru Cakulo}: p. XV.
Indeed, with a rare patriotic pride Bor Boruah could justly occupy the place of honour as the writer of historical epics in Assamese.

His last days:

The last days of Hiteswar Bor Boruah were full of sorrows due mainly to his family tragedies. While still serving as the Head clerk of the Sokalatingee Tea Estate (Jorhat) Bor Boruah became ill and was struck with nerve failure. With a view to having a steamer trip to Dhubri and back he availed himself of leave and thus came to Nowgong. While staying in the residence of his son-in-law — Sri Uma Kanta Gohain at Nowgong Bor Boruah's illness increased, and it took a turn towards the worst on the 4th January, 1939 when our epic-poet breathed his last.

Chronology of His Works:

Hiteswar Bor Boruah prepares the following chronology of his literary works. 14

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14. It is gathered from Bor Boruah's letter to Dimbeswar Neog with reference to one from the latter dated 20.9.34.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Names of the Books</th>
<th>Probable Dates of composition</th>
<th>Dates of publication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dhopākali</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td>1902</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Birahīnī Bilāp Kāvya</td>
<td>1896-1912</td>
<td>1913</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Tirotār Ātmadān or Jaymati Kāvya</td>
<td>1902-1912</td>
<td>1913</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Kamatāpur Dhvamsa Kāvya</td>
<td>1903</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Abhās Kāvya</td>
<td>1913-14</td>
<td>1914</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Mālitā (A historical novel)</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>1914</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Desdemona Kāvya</td>
<td>1913-1914</td>
<td>1917</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Angilā (A Short Kāvya)</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>1917</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Yudha-Kṣhetra Ahom Kamanī or Mulāgābharu Kāvya</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>1915</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mālac (A Book of Sonnets)</td>
<td>1902/1917</td>
<td>1918</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Cakulo (A Sonnet Sequence)</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>1922</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Tal Sarā Phula Tini Ājali</td>
<td>1899/1914</td>
<td>Unpublished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Ahomar Din (An Exhaustive history of the Ahom Age)</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Do</td>
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This chronology does not include the following books which are supposed to have been written by Hiteswar Bor Boruah from various sources of information:

14. Moinā (A novel)
15. Vaidehīr Nirbāsan (a Kavya)
16. Dhanadākamal (A drama)

Besides these we have the following writings of Bor Boruah:

17. Mor Khudra Jīvanar Itma Sovaran
   (An incomplete autobiography published in parts in two issues of *Sangram*, a periodical published by All Assam Ahom Chātra Federation)


15. We have this information of Moinā and Dhanadākamal from the Preface to Mālač and Cakulo written by Dr. Maheswar Neog.

16. We have the information from the poet's Dedication in the Desdemona Kavya.