Chapter V

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Sex-tradition in Assamese Literature: Its response to and reaction against Freudianism.

1. Complexity of the social and cultural life in ancient India, and the amorphous nature of the sexual tradition in literature –

(a) in the Vedic age, (b) the Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa and (c) the two great epics.

2. Treatment of sex in the romantic plays and Kāvyas of Kalidasa and his contemporaries.

3. The age of 'bhakti' (devotion) and the treatment of sex in the works of Śankaradeva and his contemporaries.

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A superficial knowledge even, of the sources of the tradition makes it obvious how complex the social and cultural life in ancient India was. The complexity in social and cultural life was, as Dr. Banikanta Kakati quotes Mewar to have stated in his Sexual Life in Ancient India, consequent upon the mixture of the Ārya and the Anārya races.  

Sexual life in ancient India that can be featured from our knowledge, handed down to us through the Vedas, the Purāṇas, the epics and the treatises, religious and secular or scientific was amorphous, imbalanced; sometimes highly sacred and sometimes meanly obscene, but always confusing in either extreme. Unrestrained sexual freedom was sanctioned in the Vedic ages for both men and women. Yajñavalka held that women being instinctively pure get polluted by no sexual intercourse. It was on this ground that conjugal fornication was in vogue in ancient India. The Mahābhārata refers to its operation in the northern Kuruprades. The epic also records strong reaction against such sexual liberty, as a consequence of which all sorts of fornications came to be treated as irreligious and indignant, and women were brought under the subjugation of men through strict social inhibitions.

1. Dr. Banikanta Kakati, "Pren Nibedanat Nāri" (Woman in the supplication of Love), Navayuga, Nov. 18, 1964.
Ancient Indian literature as it is embodied in the two great epics, the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata is replete with the eulogy of good women, and abhorrence for the fallen. It is a literature "treasured upon purpose to a life beyond life"; its exclusive stress being on soul and chastity of man and woman, particularly the latter, as criterion of life's perfection. It was a life, subject occasionally to a forceful reduction and occasionally to a wälful renunciation.

Dr. Banikanta Kakati's article in review of the sexual tradition in the Brahmaciivarta Purāṇa describes Bhāratavarsa as a land of purity and 'bhakti' (devotion) - the land of the Āryan, governed by the Vedas. Dr. Kakati quotes Mewar to have stated in his Sexual Life in Ancient India that Manu, the supreme authority and care-taker of the ancient Arya society conceded a woman having an impotent husband the liberty to approach a relative of her for procreation, though not for pleasure.

What we can conclude from our study of the epic and Purāṇas is that in ancient India the biological function of sex was treated as sacred - 'a ladder of salvation', and marriage was considered a very respectable institution for its fulfilment. Love or the psychological manifestation of sex was current only in Heaven among the gods. In Brahmaloka (Heaven)

3. William Henry Hudson, An Introduction to the Study of Literature, p. 15 (Hudson quotes Milton to have said this).
4. See infra, p. 449(1).
prostitution was in vogue. Heaven has in it, prostitutes who lived for the pleasure of the gods. It is a land where the Vedic inhibitions were not in operation.

The literary tradition of sex in ancient India is thus wrapped up tight in a spiritual blanket, a considerable part of which seems woven of superstition. The fact that India has a long tradition of suffering women and suppressed sex in a way unlike anywhere else is no doubt ascribable to the predominance of superstition in the idea of sex and chastity of women. The Ramayana is scintillating with the tear-gems of two women suffering pathetically in the ordeals of chastity. Both Sita, and Urmila are rare instances of women, who have become victims of poetic justice for no fault of their own. Draupadi in the other epic has suffered no less in her attempt to restore chastity in the abductions made by the Asuras (demons). She is forced into nakedness in the court in the presence of her five husbands. The upholders of modern realism frequently quote this scene of nakedness in their attempt to explain obscenity in the tradition, and to substantiate our traditional receptivity to modern realism. They often refer to the fact of her having five husbands as a proof of her instinctual liberty.

There is a farago of abundant eroticism in the romantic plays and Kāvyas of Kalidasa and his contemporaries, represented in a rather confusing way to the effect that both the upholders of the literary Brahmachārya and the despisers of it quote them strategically to substantiate their point. The
erotic behaviour of Hara and Gauri in Kalidasa’s Kumārsambhava, the illicit love between Dusyanta and Sakuntala in the hermitage of the preceptors in Sakuntalā, the sexual exuberance in Puspabana-Bilāsa, Sringāra-Tilaka, Sringār-Rasastakam – each a masterpiece of lyricism – have often been quoted to illustrate obscenity in the tradition and to display its responsiveness to modern realism. The same is interpreted by the Śūrītān critics to illustrate the spiritual preoccupation of the great poets. They would reason that in abounding his plays with erotic abundance, Kalidasa had only worshipped ‘rasa’ which is the other name of God. And rasa is such an achievement of art that it is free of any touch of human indulgence. Kalidasa extolled sex (i.e., the sexual instinct, here not the object involved) through artistic discipline to divine or spiritual delight. Dīmeswar Neog states that all charges of obscenity appears unsubstantial when one comprehends fully the line, “Kāmārta hi prakṛti kṛpa cetana tenesa”. To free the poet from the vice of indulgence in Sakuntalā he stresses on Sakuntala’s victimisation of Durma’s curse.5

Some of our writers (minor writers) are seen to have been curious to establish a relation between the ancient mode of erotic treatment and the modern one, and in their attempt they prefer to the scientific basis6 of Kalidasa’s treatment of

5. Dīmeswar Neog, “Sāhityat Aśūlitala Avāntar” and “Asamiyā Sāhitya and Sāhityikar Ādarsa” (two articles mentioned earlier).

6. Kalidasa and his contemporaries based their plays and poetry on Vātānyayana’s Kāmasutra which has been recognised as a scientific treatise on sex and marriage. Koka’s Rati-ṛahasya, St. Nagarjun’s Siddha Binodan, Kalyanamalla’s Anāṅga-Banga and many other treatises, religious and secular, had set the
sex, the abundance of physical eroticism, illicit love etc.

It is, however, a long way from ancient Indian poetry to modern fiction. The limitations of the classical Sanskrit poetry in comparison with those of the age of Shakespeare and of the great Greek poets (as pointed out by A. Berriedale Keith in his *The Sanskrit Drama, Its Origin and Development (Theory & Practice)*) are many. Without going farther into the limitation we are content here to conclude that the classical age was not for specific reason suitable for psychological investigation of sex and other aspects of life. It was socially a life of 'hush' and individually one of agonising whisper. The poets with their preoccupation in rasa were towered too high to be in touch with the common soil. Modern realism falls far apart from rasa or spiritual sex. Rasa is a divine delight; modern sexual realism in its psychological level is a disease which infects and profanes the body and the mind.

This is, I think, the real explanation for the difference between old rasa and modern sexual realism. Kalidasa and his contemporaries could discipline sex through art and poetry; the moderns in their turn, make it appear obscene with their low and realistic prose.

Life in the middle ages was even more imbalanced. It impresses sometimes as one of exuberance and obscenity; sometimes

rules of sex and marriage.
as one of uncomplaining endurance and even of renunciation in preparation of a peaceful death.

Eroticism in all its forms, physical, emotional and religious or mystical, abounds in medieval Indian literature and painting; but the question of obscenity was not raised, perhaps due to the fact that Sudras and women were sanctioned no place in them.

This is more or less the general trend of literature and arts in medieval India. Particular literatures merit particular treatment. What is applicable to the rest of India must not with equal warmth be applied to Assam or Assamese literature in the middle ages. Our conclusion that religious literature during the middle ages was characterised by a wilful renunciation of life in preparation of a peaceful death has been drawn in consideration of Assamese religious poetry, particularly that of Sankardeva and his followers. Vaisnavites poets in the other provinces of India wrote most erotic poetry, where it is hard to surmise whether the erotic hymn is for self-indulgence or for soul's salvation. All eroticism has in the opinion of Georges Balaïlle, a sacramental character. But the eroticism of these poets is so fussy with physical and emotional violence that it can hardly be thought to have achieved spiritual quietism beyond everyday reality. Religious eroticism is concerned with the fusion of beings with a world

beyond everyday reality. It is hard to go any farther along Balaille for fear of missing our point. 8 We have, therefore, limited our consideration of mysticism to the mystical experience linked with the positive search of God's love only, which is most characteristic of the religious works of Sankaradeva and his devout disciple, Madhavdeva (The part of it, connected to the systematic "assenting to life up to the point of death" 9 as exemplified by Sankaracharya or in Buddhism is deemed without our range).

The poet in Sankaradeva has, for both sets of our critics, been of grave concern. In his writing, poetry and preaching get so merged as to efface any possibility of marking out their separation. He wrote for edification and also for soul's enjoyment—religious preaching and real poetry in the one and the same writing, to the astonishment and misgiving of his worshippers and critics. The greatest of the Assamese Vaisnavite preachers was the greatest of our poets.

The Vaisnavite critics interpret his treatment of sex as subduer of desire and the modern realists, as arouser of it. The root of this confusion lies in the nature of his creative activity, which glows with rampant eroticism. The three plays, namely, Keli Gopāla, Rukmini-Harana and Rām Bijoya and the great Kirtana Ghosā, particularly the Hara-Mohana section of

9. Ibid.
it have frequently been referred to by the critics either to illustrate the purity of sexual tradition or to display its responsiveness to modern realism.

Dr. Maheswar Neog and Dr. Satyendra Nath Sarma, have remarked upon the Bara-Mohana section of the Kirtan Ghoșa, based on the Bhāgavata Purāṇa as one of the finest pieces of poetry in all Sankardeva’s writings. The picture of Mohini and the illusion of the garden where she appears to the infatuated Bara are all imagination, and shows what Sankardeva could do in the way of painting with the colour of erotic sentiment—Dr. Neog states. But at the end of the poem the poet warns against the dire illusion created by women. He concludes the poem with a clear hint at Sringara as purgatorial of the mind, i.e., subduer of the erotic tension.

Sankardeva’s spiritual disposition here as well as in the plays is crystal clear. Sex has no place in his poetry in the ordinary human sense. This is further proved by his contempt for his contemporary poet, Pitambara who wanted to drag divine love into human indulgence.

Pitambara’s rejection of Sankardeva’s ‘bhakti’ ideal is a significant step on to the platform of real life. Perhaps

10. Dr. M. Neog, Sankardeva and His Times, Early History of the Vaisnav Faith and Movement in Assam, pp. 171-172, 198-199, 255. See also Dr. Sarma’s The Epics and Puranas in early Assamese Literature, p. 167.

11. Sankardeva reproached Pitambara for making Rukmini lament like an ordinary human beloved the separation of Krisna in his Rukmini-Parinya Kavya.
in so doing the poet was following a 'Brahmachārya' more widely defused and more liberally accepted in the other provinces of India. As a matter of fact, all the Assamese Vaisnavite poets took in some form or other poetic liberty in the portrayal of characters’ sentiment and setting of their Kavyas. Sankardeva’s Rukmini-harana Kavya is imaginative in details. Anantakandali’s Kumār-Harana is too full of Usāj and Aniruddha’s erotic sentiment in their union and separation to mark it all detached. Madhav Kandali’s treatment of Krishna and Rāma in the different versions of the two epics is not balanced. In his poetic indulgence he sometimes drags the God of his devotion to an ordinary lover of woman. The scene of Rāma’s conjugal reaction in receipt of the news of exile has been referred to by Dr. Satyendra Nath Sarma as an instance of this deviation.12 Rāma laments and curses himself as an ordinary human being for not being able to enjoy Sīta. And Sīta’s reply to her husband’s reaction is so humanly or ordinarily dealt with that we have reason to fear if a modern realist would spare exploiting a situation like this in his convenience. Sīta may in her morbid excitement be taken for close correspondent to Malik’s Padma and Usā.

Again the unholy desires of Manthara to seduce Bharata, successor of Rāma in his absence, as a concubine in her superannuation (intended though for popular humour by the poet) may be picked up by a Freudian realist as a phenomenon of clinical observation.

12. Dr. S.N. Sarma, Epics and Purāṇas in Early Assamese Literature, p. 29.
Sex has without doubt a dignified place in medieval Assamese poetry, for it is generally and almost always treated devotionally to a spiritual end. But there had also been poets like Pitāmbara who were up to set fire to the spiritual fortress for omavings as low as life itself. Sankardeva had to revolt against the debased practice of the Tāntrik, which continued undisturbed till his rise. Assam is described here as a land of natural instinct, free from all rigours of self mortification. "Infinite variety of sexual relationships ... were in vogue among the Kirata people. The companionship of a woman is the prime requisite of a Vāmācārī devotee; when ... women are not available for love, they are procured by money or force." Sankardeva succeeded partially in compelling the Vāmācārī to abandon these practices. But the possibility that these will rise at a time in a different form was twinkling in the literary horizon. This is a substratum of life where men are men with their strength and weakness — at best Pitāmbaras and at worst, Vāmācārīs. They are without the region of the visionary preachers and inspired poets. Pitāmbara's poetry represents the lowest ebb of religious eroticism, and Sankardeva's, the highest flow of it. Sankardeva branded him an unvaisnavite for his human indulgence in divine love in the

13. See for the sexual practice of the Tāntrik Kālikā Purāṇa and Yogini Tantra as explained by Dr. Bankimanta Kakati in his Mother Goddess Kamākhya, pp. 47-48.

way as a puritan critic brands a modern novelist a 'worshiper of sex'.

An observation of Assamese literature during the reign of the Ahom monarchs shows a different trend. With the adoption of the Śākta religion by the later kings, and the development of the Śākta outlook on life, the influence of Vaisnavism declined. Books with the predominance of erotic sentiment with a decisive inclination towards human indulgence came to attract more and more attention. The Purāṇas are a rich store-house of love anecdotes. The Ahom monarchs encouraged poet and authors to render them into Assamese for their amusement. They made it a practice to engage scholars to read out to queens, princesses and high-born ladies popular Kāvyas, love-romances and erotic sāstras. Even in the Jikir and Jari written in Assamese on the model of Sufi religious teachings, the original Sufi ideal was completely shorn off. In place of the soul's love and aspiration for God and its ultimate union with Him, the Assamese poets emphasised earthly and human love both in union and separation. "Naturally, in the Assamese Kāvyas erotic tendencies predominated, and they are replete with passages describing intimately every feminine charm and treating of love dalliances with an easy frankness." 15

Thus we notice a decisive change in the sexual tradition in Assamese literature during the reign of the Ahom

15. Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua, History of Assamese Literature, p. 94.
monarchs. The life of poverty, austerity, sincerity and repression that the Vaisnavite were accustomed to live passed away; and that of pomposity and artificiality began. To quote Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua, "a notable distinction between the Vaisnavite and the Ahom period is that whilst in the former the spirit divine was the subject of literary treatment, in the latter man is the centre of literature. Literature now ceases to be other-worldly and idealistic. The shift is towards realism, even in poem and romances, men and women of the common work-a-day-world now engage the poet's attention."

Now, from where we are, we have, a few steps to pace towards where we are bound. It is not a very long way from romance to fictional realism.

Modern Assamese fiction, long and short, has no trace in it of any direct bearing or borrowing from antiquity. It grew under the influence of the west in the period culminating in the first World War, and it differs widely from the old Assamese stories, tales, myths, fables, parables and anecdotes in both matter and technique. A novel by which we mean "the long story of contemporary life and manners" is a new form of literary art which offers the writer a fresh field to work independently. It is democratic in its free treatment of the characters and doings of all sorts and conditions of middle-class and low-life. It was not so with our old epics, with

18. Ibid, p. 149.
the romantic plays of Kalidasa and his contemporaries and the
religious plays of Sankardeva and even with the romances of the
Ahom period. The characters in the epics and the dramas are
supernatural beings who enjoy love and perform their activities
with men below as dutiful but uncritical audience. The romances
though not as are the epics and dramas, other worldly and
idealistic are almost consistently aristocratic in their range
of interest.

Our historical novels of Rajani Kanta Bardoloi do not
differ much from the romances. These are old in a sense, the
treatment of sex in them has been very idealistic. These novels
written under the influence of the English Scott are not
strictly historical with historical events and characters, but
are romantic stories with an historical background. Bardoloi
has great reverence for the past and for Assam's cultural and
literary heritage and was always inspired by lofty idealism,
particularly in the delineation of female characters. His
women, namely, Manomati, Rangili, Rahdai Ligiri, Aghoni etc.
are all 'satis', noted for their sexual restraint, pure "love,
fidelity, tenderness, mental resourcefulness, resolution and
extraordinary courage" in the face of heavy odds.19 In the
depiction of some of them he seems to have been inspired by
the ideal of 'rasa' in his concentration in the extollation of
the instinct for the purpose of elevating the object (the woman
involved). Dr. Birinohi Kumar Barua states : "The good and

19. Dr. Birinohi Kumar Barua, History of Assamese Literature,
p. 170.
distinguished lady Rangili has her earthly love, but this love
is gradually sublimated to divine love." The union between
Dhaneswar and Aghoni in the novel, Tāmreswari Mandir, which is
crossed mostly among other factors by the Tāntricisum of the
temple itself is "finally effected by the victory of Vaiśnavism
over it - "of all embracing love over blind ritual." When
tyrrany becomes oppressive, Râhdai takes to yoga and thereby not
only saves herself but also changes the mind of Dayaram" (her
lover). Mirnal Bhakat does not despair of life. He becomes
a Vaiśnavite devotee and spends the rest of his life in
religious peace, whereby, according to the Upanishadic Seer,
"what has not been heard of becomes heard of, what has not been
thought of becomes thought of, what has not been understood
becomes understood."23

The historical novels of Bardoloi have a number of
phenomena of classic sublimation, but hard to conclude whether
these are the result of a psychological supplement or that of
his genuine or unmixed devotion for the values of antiquity.

In the rest of our pre-war fictions the treatment of
sex and other aspects of life is realistic, though not psycho-
analytic in the way a novel written under the impact of Freudian

20. Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua, History of Assamese Literature,
p. 169.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
Psychology is psycho-analytic. A psycho-analytic novel is distinguished from an ordinary realistic novel by its attention to details, to the investigation of the vital relationships between man and woman, of motives, feelings and all the phenomena of the inner life of characters. It is free of the illusion of chastity, divine delight (rasa) and moral peace (bhakti) in the exploration of life.

This process of investigation has indeed been very exacting. Life has lost in consequence, its poetry and the illusory notion of its perfection, i.e., its link to a life beyond life. But we have with it come down to life as it is, realised the importance of sex in it. The deviation has taught us to experience what we were accustomed to adore, to assess in prose, medium of our speech, what we idealised in poetry, medium of our prayer.