CHAPTER – VI

Contribution of the Writers to their Respective Language and Literature

a. Phakirmohana’s Contribution to Oriya Language and Literature

b. Lakshminath’s Contribution to Assamese Language and Literature
While assessing the contributions of Phakirmohana to the various literary genres in Oriya one can not help recalling the circumstances of his birth and upbringing. He was born into poverty and had to give up schooling to take up sundry jobs as a boy to eke out a living. In contrast his younger Assamese counterpart Lakshminath Bezbaroa was born into wealth and culture. It was only natural that he did not nurture any literary ambition. When he actually launched his literary career he was diffident about their literary merit. He was a self-taught man which stands him in good stead in later years. He became the Headmaster of Balasore Mission school in 1864 which in itself seems to be an achievement of sorts since his formal education lasted only a couple of years at the village primary. It was during this time that he took to journalism, established a printing press, wrote textbooks and devoted most of his energy to ward off the threat to the Oriya language. All these in a way laid the groundwork for his role as a writer in later years.

Phakirmohana’s first foray into writing was his translation of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar’s *Jiban Carita* into Oriya. It was a collection of biographical sketches of famous European scientists. He admits to have translated it at the behest of Vidyasagar himself with whom he had personal acquaintance. In the five years from 1866 to 1870 he mainly wrote textbooks like “Bhарат Varṣar Itihāsa” (Part I and II), ‘Aṅkamālā’ (arithmetic) etc. But he soon realised the role of creative writing in the progress of a language. Henceforth he devoted himself earnestly to creative literature. Though he wrote a great deal he shot to fame as a write with the publication of his first novel *Chhamana Āṭhagunpha* (1898) in book form in 1902. In between 1870 and 1902 he wrote an enormous amount of poetry both in terms of original creation and translations. He followed his fictional career with his historical novel *Lachhamā* in
1913, Māmu in book form in 1916 and Prāyaschitta in 1915. He wrote about twenty short stories. In spite of the epithet Vyāsakavi in honour of his monumental translation work of the great epics, Phakirmohana’s immortality has been assured by his fictional works.

Imitating no original he wrote fiction with a stamp of his own genius. He devoted himself to the task of portraying society with realism and with a reforming zeal. His social realism was enlivened by his ready wit and humour, irony and satire and his language was such as was used by men in day to day intercourse. The novel of social realism he set in motion still continues to hold its sway in Orissa. Its celebrated exponents being Kālindicharana Pānigrāhi and Jnānpith award-winning novelist Gopināth Mohānty. Phakirmohana’s contribution to the fictional genre is discussed elsewhere. (See ch. v and vi) Here a discussion has been made on the other forms of literature of the writer.

Senāpati took to translating the great epics – Rāmāyan and Mahābhārata to console his bereaved wife after the death of their elder son either in 1881 or in 1882. “One of the reasons why I started writing poetry is my wife” he confesses in his autobiography. He was about forty years at that time and nothing to show as a creative writer. He kept up with translation for long 19 years. For this stupendous work he was conferred the epithet Vyāsakavi by a people who revered purāṇa literature above everything else. The success of his translation work, written in easily intelligible style and diction in contrast to the archaic language of the original works, encouraged him to write poetry. He also rendered the Upanishads in to Oriya assisted by one Purnachandra Dās of Balasore. The creative confidence these translation work gave is all too obvious in his Utkalā Vramanārama, a sweet-sour sketch of celebrities of contemporary Orissa. Though it was published under a pseudonym, the readers did not take long to find out the unmistakable stamp of Phakirmohana’s genius. Written in a style laced with characteristic humour and sarcasm and the language racily

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2 Atma Jihana Carita. Ch. 20
3 Mansingh Granthavali, Vol. III, P. 151
idiomatic, it is “the first creative work to have borne the stamp of his originality.” It is not a travel book as the title would suggest but a sweeping survey of famous personalities in public life. Audacious in its conception Phakirmohana lavishes praise or dares censure where it is due. Written in 1892 the work still remains highly entertaining and readable. *Utkalā Vrāmaṇam* is a gem of national aspirations. The vogue Phakirmohana started was caught up with Rādhānāth and Madhusudan. They attempted such writing in works like *Darbār* and *Subās Sāhiya Carcā*, but for want of spontaneity they could not rival Phakirmohana’s popularity.

Phakirmohana’s poetical works are as variegated in subject matter as they are enormous in volume. The subject matter of his poems ranged from the historical to social, nationalistic to biographical, philosophical to devotional. This plenitude highlights the catholicity of his taste and temperament. He had negligible access to Western literature. In spite of this he tried his hand at a few Western poetic forms like sonnet, lyric and ballad. His notable sonnets include *Dhuli, Iswarā Kāhāmi, Grisma, Karmaphāla, Ātmārāmiśana* etc. The misery, sickness and loneliness that he underwent during his old age ironically proved conducive to the lyrical mode. His suffering sharpened sensibility finds expression in various poem collections like *Pusmatndala, Pujāphula* and *Upahāra*. There are some exquisite pieces that will do honours to poets anywhere. “The poems ‘She Departed with Smiles but Left Me Disconsolate with Tears’, ‘Shall I see that Smiling Face Again ?’, or ‘Can Anybody Tell He Where My Companion is Gone?’ are vibrant with the deep felt emotion and the great love that only a poet’s soul is capable of.” He also experimented with epigrammatic style in his four-line stanzas which are actually self-sufficient quartets. Every quartet gives shape and conclusion to a particular idea or moral. In one notable quartet titled *Khatāsarpa* Senāpati lambastes the evil tongue of man which he thinks to be more dangerous than the sting of a serpent.

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3 P.M.S.P., Balasore (ed) : 1983 : ‘Phakirmohana - His Life and Literature’, the article “Phakirmohan Senapati” P. 45
Phakirmohana the writer is but one important expression of his deep commitment to Oriya nationalism. His patriotic fervour finds outlet in a few of his poems, like Bhāi-Kaṭi, Utkala Yubaka, Mu Bairāgi, Shesh Prasthāna etc. His poems about nature do not rise to the level one would come across in Rādhānath but the sincerity of feeling can hardly be missed. Simple to the extent of looking naive he wrote poems on animals and birds. Some poems of Phakirmohana voice his social concern. He was particularly agitated about the plight of widows. In his Rāma Ratha Kathā, Bidhabār Abhiśāpa etc. the writer severely takes to task the Brahmins for not allowing their young-widowed daughters and daughter in laws to marry. They would rather allow them to be prostitutes than let them live in dignity in remarriage. The anger of Phakirmohana against the inhumanities heaped on the widow results in sarcasm of an acute kind.

In his poem Pāṭua-Pātoi (tribal couple having barks and leaves for dress) the unadulterated life of a Juang tribal couple is portrayed. Written with sympathy it was an outcome of his first hand experience from his stint as dewan or manager of the various tribal dominated feudatory states of Orissa. Senāpati is considered as the first proletariat writer of India particularly for the moving sketches of the oppressed much before Premchānd could attempt the same in his monumental work Girdār. Senāpati had achieved the same in his Āṭhaguntu a good fifty years earlier. The same concern spills over to his poetry as well. His Utkala Krṣuṣaka is a realistically moving account of the sad plight of the Oriya peasant due to chill penury. Phakirmohana indicts the British land settlement, particularly Roitwari Act. responsible for the suffering of the peasants. The enduring quality of the poem is its realism and its language which was really spoken by men. Though written a hundred years ago it still remains largely true today. Oriya literature has found many votaries of such proletariat concern but none has surpassed the original master. In fact one of Phakirmohana’s most notable contributions to Oriya literature is this concern with ‘the dust and scum of the earth’ which is a recurrent motif in Oriya literature.

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Ibid.
Mausingh Granthavali, Vol III, P. 158
Phakirmohana remained a believer all his life. Spiritual fulfillment is one of his important longings. This longing intensifies further in his old age. Poems like *Jiban Rangālay*, *Sambalka*, *Diya Dekha* of this period veer round the poet’s spiritual concerns. That Phakirmohana was a universalist in religion is brought in his poem *Saptarsi*. This poem is unique in its conception that faiths of all shades are true and capable of spiritual fulfillment. His *Saptarsi*, one sage denoting one creed, includes all the major faiths in the world like Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism as manifested in Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Nānak, Śankarācārya, Caitanya and Rāmmohan. The last mentioned was not a saint but a social reformer. It show the emphasis that Phakirmohana put on social reform. One of his epical creations is *Buddhavattār Kānyā* devoted to the ideals of Buddhism. Phakirmohana was drawn to Buddhism from his early manhood because it was not a refuse of those vices that afflicted Hinduism. The preface he wrote for the poem is of great value. It is informed by Phakirmohana’s deep understanding, scholarship and logical powers.

In spite of the large output and the epithet attached before his name Phakirmohana’s poetical works has not been assessed properly even today. Probably his greatness as a writer of fiction has overshadowed his poetic achievements. Besides the dominance of Rādhānath in the field of poetry too must have its effect on Phakirmohana’s stature as a poet. The one advantage he enjoyed over his contemporary poets was that he could transform all manner of subjects in to the sphere of poetry. Mudhusudan and Rādhānāth confined themselves to poetic themes. For Phakirmohana any theme could be poetic. This inclusiveness can be exemplified by a poem as mundane as the virtues of the cooperative movement. What he really lacked was the capacity for ornamentation and the capacity to chisel language to make it more musical. This apparent inability may very well be interpreted as a virtue since his language remains true to his innermost feelings and convictions. “Numerous as they are”, remark Mansingh, “these poems seldom reach great heights, but their naive simplicity, flowing felicity of versification and their depth of sincerity cannot fail to touch the heart of the reader.”

10 Ibid., P. 175
11 “Phakir Mohan Senapati”, P. 43
Phakirmohana was one of the handful of essayists who enriched his language by his vigorous prose style. Though he wrote a number of essays on a variety of subjects it is the least explored aspect of his literary works. The inspiration to write essays came from the rich prose literature of Bengal. His essays are variegated in subject and in treatment ranging from the humorous to the highly philosophical, from literature and literary personalities to history and scriptural subjects. Senāpati is probably the first writer in Orissa to attempt belles lettres in his immensely readable Nanānka Pānji. Written in a mixture of prose and poetry in the manner of Bankim Chandra’s Kamalā Kāntesr Daptar, it too portrays contemporary Orissa like Utkalā Vramanam. Besides the socio-cultural life it presents a sweeping picture of the literary scene of Orissa. He employs satire and sarcasm to great effect against those who villified poet Upendrabhanja without understanding him. He was not opposed to foreign influence but he exhorted his countrymen not to become blind followers of Western literature. The writings in Nanānka Pānji are a happy union of matter and manner one hardly comes across in Oriya literature.

Phakirmohana had a profound respect for India’s cultural heritage with a matching understanding of it. His writings touched almost every major sacred text of India. In one of his essays ‘Sudra O Bedādhikār’ he highlights the true spirit of the Vedas which were free from all narrowness. He convincingly pleads for the right of Sudras on the sacred texts. It was a courageous move at a time when Orissan society was under the stranglehold of Brahmins whose right over the Vedas seemed to be unassailable. This essay interestingly has many meeting points with Bezbaroā’s essay on the evolution of the caste system.

In his Autobiography his philosophic vent of mind becomes quite clear while narrating times of great stress. It is even more evident in his philosophical essays driving home his abiding interest in philosophy. It was not his personal interest alone that drove him to write philosophical essays but a desire to bring philosophy nearer to the common reader. At that time only people with considerable knowledge in Sanskrit could read philosophy. His Jogaśāstra is an eloquent attempt at interpreting the Ṣastras in a new light to link them to day to day life. He considered Joga to be the
cornerstone of success in every sphere of life. To that extent he called every achiever in life a *Jogi*, including the ones in the scientific field. This was an attempt at freeing philosophy from the obtuse. This could also be an attempt at harmonising the *Jnāna* of the East with the *Vi jñāna* of the West. However what is even more remarkable is that the typically ascetic connotation of the word *Jogi* was broadened to include achievers in the material domain. Phakirmohana was saddened to see his Western - educated neglect the rich cultural heritage as manifested in the sacred texts. He expected his countrymen to learn from India's ancient heritage and history to fashion a culture of work and progress.

To understand the roots of Hinduism Phakirmohana wrote a well-researched essay on *Gotra*. Without any formal training Phakirmohan was not expected to be conversant with anthropology as such. Yet the essay has all the elements that an anthropological study needs and can very well be accepted as an anthropological study today. Besides highlighting Senāpati's capacity for objective, scientific study it indicates his reformative zeal and his veiled crusade against the scourge of casteism.

Phakirmohana's essays on literary topics bring out his familiarity with the finer nuances of literary appreciation. Essays like 'Kavi Gopaṣa Krishna Pattaṇāya', *Utkala Bhāṣā Bhūta Bhābisyata*, *Sāhiyara Prāṣa Pratisthā*, *Madhusudana*, *Megharūda Buddha Kāvyā* etc. bear the impress of his keen critical acumen. At a time when journalese writings were the order of the day these essays helped create a critical tradition in Oriya literature.

Phakirmohana considered literature to be national heritage. He had a strong conviction that the progress of a people was dependent on the progress of literature of the said nation. His essays were attempts at driving home these points.

The remarkable thing about the essays is the use of language. He did not follow one but different styles to suit the subject matter since technique or the manner

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12 P.M.G. Vol. II, P. 649
13 Ibid.
of saying something follows what one has to say. He made effective use of snippets of Sanskrit slokas, village proverbs, words from Persian, Hindi, English, distortions of common proverbs for humorous effect. Lighted by his characteristic wit, and humour and sarcasm, his logical development of the subject matter, his command over the aesthetic aspects of the work under consideration – all combined to make his essays highly readable. He is first an essayist, then a fiction writer. Therefore any evaluation of Phakirmohana as a prosateur must, of necessity, take into account his forays in to the genre of essay.

Another enduring contribution, which would stand next only to his fiction, is to the genre of the autobiography. Written at the fag end of his life under the persistent insistence of his friends and well wishers his Ātmajībāna Carīta remains one of the most celebrated human documents in the language. Its lively narrative style, its disarmingly honest self-revelation, its faithfulness to contemporary flow of events, its brilliant insight in to situations and personalities make the autobiography read like fiction. Phakirmohana does not withhold or conceal even the occasional lapses in his character. Besides he also lights up many significant facets of contemporary Orissa which would have been lost to posterity.

Thus the Ātmajībāna Carīta is also an invaluable social document. Some eminent critics are of the opinion that Phakirmohana’s autobiography is “one of the few really great autobiography in the whole of Indian literature”.17 Literary men of repute in Oriya like Godābarish Mohāpātra, Pandit Nilākantha Dāsh, Kālindicharana Pāṅigrāhi and others have also attempted to write autobiographies. It is observed that Godābarish’s ‘Ardhasatābdhir Odissa O’ Taḥire Mo Sthān’ is quite a remarkable work. Yet Phakirmohana’s autobiography remains unrivalled in its genre.18 In this regard Bezbaroa’s autobiography Mor Jiwem Sōwara comes to mind. It faithfully documents all the major events of Assam of his time in a way Senapati does not.

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15 Ibid. P. 127
16 Ibid.
17 Mansingh, 1983, P. 40
then they were writing autobiographies not the social histories of their time. Both writers in their own way have made path-breaking contributions in this genre.
Bezbaroa was a many splendoured genius. He tried his hand in most of the literary genres. Judged from today’s point of view his contribution to some literary genres is outstanding while he was not as successful as some of his contemporaries in others. Yet their literary merit, besides the historical one, can not be overlooked. “Though he did not achieve the same success in all these forms, he gave Assamese literature something which can not be ignored as insignificant for the development of Assamese literature”. Of the various roles he played as a writer – dramatist, essayist, critic, novelist, short story writer, biography and autobiography writer, it is in the short fictional genre that his chief literary fame rests. He is universally acknowledged as the father of the modern Assamese short story (see Ch.V). These stories stand their ground as literature even today. In the words of Bhaben Baruâ – “it is in his short stories that we find him in his most creative role”.

Bezbaroa actually paved the way for short story writing in Assamese. Here an assessment of his contribution to the form of this genre will be made besides the other genres he made use in his prolific literary cancer. Bezbaroa sincerely believed the native Sādhū-Kathā i.e. folk-tale to be the mother the short story. Therefore he preferred to call his stories Sādhū-Kathā or Galpa rather then chhunti-galpa i.e. short story as is done today. The folk-tale ambience of many of his stories owe their origin to this conception of Bezbaroa. What looks like defects in his stories may well have been an attempt at indigenising the short story medium. In a way he attempted at giving a local habitation and name to the technical device which is essentially Western. The traditional folk-tales are moral vehicles. Bezbaroa in keeping with his
conviction tries to present a moral in his stories, sometimes openly and at times indirectly. This concern with general truths explains the moral tone in many of his stories. This is why some critics are of the opinion that Bezbaroa could not draw a distinction between the folk-tale and the short story which explains their moral orientation. But the later Bezbaroa probably wanted to write without any specific agenda.

Why the short story and the folk tale shade into each other is probably because of the role Bezbaroa played as a collector and compiler of folk tales. These folk tales were published in the volumes like ‘Sādhukathār Kuki’, ‘Budhīnīr Sādhu’ and ‘Kokā Dēutā Ārū Nātī Lārā’. What is common to these folk tales is the human interest they show. The same human interest is the forte of the modern short story. With his generous temperament, sympathetic understanding and catholic outlook it was but natural that Bezbaroa should take interest in the life around him, particularly life at the lower wrungs of social ladder. What K.R.S. Iyengar said about Tagore’s stories can very well be applied to Bezbaroa’s that ‘the poetic interest in the human beings always superseded the technician’s preoccupation with plot’ and they ‘are a poet’s attempts at fiction, and hence share the glory and limitation of their source of origin’.

More than the plot and the art it is characterisation that holds perennial interest for Bezbaroa. There are of course some exceptions. In stories like Bhaduri, Pātungī, Nakām, Jalkwari etc. he succeeds in blending form and content, achieving singleness of effect so essential to the modern short story. Bezbaroa has brought in great variety in subject matter and treatment. It was helped in no small measure by his close affinity with life in three provinces – Assam, Bengal and Orissa. Therefore he could make the uneventful life of the common folk portrayed in his short stories engagingly interesting. His stories may lack technical finesse but the extraordinarily lively interest he shows in men and women amply make up for this. This verisimilitude of his stories to life is the reason why they appeal to the modern reader.

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In the longer version of the fictional form Bezbaroa has a single attempt to his credit. His *Padum Kuwari* is a historical novel. The feudal clash between two aristocratic families – Haradatta and Biradatta versus the Barphukan, the viceroy of the Ahom king stationed at Guwahati, forms its background. Lakshmināth’s avowed fidelity to historical facts leaves little room for the love triangle (Surya Kumar–Padum – Phul) to develop fully. As such it works to the disadvantage of handling the plot which becomes a casualty to the novel’s historicity. In fact it proves to be the weak link in the work.\textsuperscript{21} In spite of its promising beginning the characters seem rather too much circumscribed by the flow of events, adversely affecting the heroic theme. The overtly sentimentalising tendency and a jarring comical note come in the way of sustained serious treatment which the theme requires. The Barbaruā of Bezbaroa makes forcible intrusion to destroy the sombre note of the high romantic occasions. Bardoloi’s *Dandhū Droh*, based on the same historical framework, is artistically more successful. Both Bezbaroa and Bordoloi attempted at recreating Assam’s historical past in order to inculcate a sense of among the Assamese. In a way the latter’s genius is more attuned to the novel form justifying the sobriquet *Upanyās Samrāt* bestowed on him. Lakshminath may have been aware of his own limitations regarding the novel. And he never attempted another novel in his long literary career.

In spite of its limitations as work of fiction *Padum Kuwari*, written when Bezbaroa was still a young man, was the first historical novel in Assamese. This remains his only attempt since he could realize that his genius was not moulded to the novelistic mode. In spite of its limitations, its role in creating historical consciousness can not be denied. In this regard Tagore’s remark about history is worth quoting. He opined that “history had the power to revivify the wasted self-esteem of Indians”\textsuperscript{24} If not anything else *Padum Kuwari* fulfills this condition to counter the negative impact of colonial rule.

So far as the paucity of production is concerned Bezbaroa’s poetical works will stand alongside of his novel. Like Senāpati, he was diffident about his poetical prowess. Chandra Kumār Agarwāla’s greater hold over the medium may have proved

\textsuperscript{21} Hem Bana, Op. Cit., P. 59  
\textsuperscript{24} In Ellike Bochmer, *Op cit.*, P. 122
a deference to Bezbaroa as Râdhânâth did to Phakirmohana in Orissa. He has slender
volume of poetry collection – *Kadam Kali*, to his credit one critic\(^{25}\) tries to explain
this in terms of ‘contrary impulses’ – the pull between a socially committed literature
which was the need of the time and poetry which rather was a product of individual
sensibility.

“Bezbaroa and his contemporaries could not think of pursuing a pure literature
concerned with nothing but aesthetic accomplishment. The consciousness of their
social mission and their sense of historical relevance were very much in their
minds”.\(^ {26}\)

Some of the poems in *Kadam Kali* are ballads of which mention can be made
of *Dhamabar Āru Ratani, Mālati, Nimāti Kanyā* and *Ratanir Bejār*.\(^ {27}\) They are in
keeping with the Romantic movement in Assamese literature. Some others like
*Priyatamār Saundarya, Prem, Priyatamā* are exquisitely wrought pieces that would
do honour to any poet. His best poems are charged with true poetic fire but his
emphasis, almost always, was ‘to express delicate sentiments and complex and
sophisticated feelings’ so as to help Assamese ‘acquire a softness and pliability
unknown before.\(^ {28}\) Thus his poetic endeavours, like his other writings, were
fundamentally related to his nationalism, albeit of the culturo-linguistic vintage.
Without this pressure, one is tempted to assume, he would have been a greater poet.

One of the hallmarks of Bezbaroa as a writer was his sincere attempt at
establishing a living connection with the past. His poetry is no exception. Some
didactic pieces included in *Thāpitarā* and *Renukā* are a plea to his countrymen to fling
away their sloth and devote themselves to the task of national reconstruction. In some
pieces his innate optimism and his inclination towards work culture become apparent.
Bezbaroa did not put much emphasis on originality. The striking a parallel between a
poem by George Darley and Bezbaroa’s *Priyatamār Saundarya* is a pointer in this

\(^{25}\) D.K. Barua : ‘Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Poet, and the Romanti Ideal in *The Sahityarath of Assam*, P.
\(^{26}\) Ibid. Pp. 102-103.
\(^{27}\) S.N.Goswami. Op. Cit. P. 60
regard. What he wanted to hold forth was Assamese Language’s capacity for delicate and complex expression. Chandrakumār Agarwāla’s Ban Kūwāri in the first issue of Jonāki fills Lakshmināth with Jubilation not so much for the novelty in theme and treatment as the revelation that Assamese was capable of such delicate sophistry.29 As has already been mentioned Bezbaroa was not averse to borrowings provided they serve the cause close to his heart. His borrowings were skillfully adapted to the local milieu, making them original pieces in their own right. Anybody who reads Darley’s rendering into Assamese would find the stamp of Indian poetic tradition on it. The use of Indian cultural equivalents to foreign allusions – Madan, the Indian god of love for cupid, Sendhiriyyā Gāl for vermilion cheeks etc. have lifted the poem from plain plagiarism to the level of original creation.

"Bezbaroa was a poet of joy, a poet fulfillment."30 He did not give in to the idea of the world as illusion, a maya. As a man he was full of joi de vivre, and he expressed it in his poems. "The absence of personal memories and agonies is one of the essential charms of Bezbaroa’s poetry.31 An inveterate lover of the local folk tradition he rendered many folk songs in ballad form. Nimāti Kanyā and Tikā are ballads shaped out of the rich oral tradition called Ban-git. Poems like Basunia, Tarā, Sandhyyā have an air of Wordsworthian pantheism about them. The Rāsaraj of the belles lettres too force its way into satirical pieces like Dhowā Khowā, Cālam Āru Beji, Pakā Culti etc. which attack obscurantism, religious bigotry, indolence and such other vices of his day. Nationalist to the core, he gave to his people their national song in O Mor Aponar Deś. In Been Āru Barāgi he recreates Assam’s glorious past for his indolent countrymen to emulate. Not too much concerned with the nitty gritty of aesthetics he moulded the genres to raise his language and literature in all manners he could.

Though Bezbaroa had a few triumphs in poetry, he did not perhaps take to it as passionately as he took to prose. Yet whatever little poetry he wrote is marked by a

29 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
passionate attachment to his native earth. In fact the way Assamese national character is reflected in his writings is almost unrivelled.32

In his dramatic work, as in much of his creative writings, Bezbaroa seem to have been carrying out the agenda he, alongside with his friends, set for themselves - the agenda of national resurgence through language and literature. Conscious of the role historical consciousness can play in this regard and particularly through the genre of representational art, he wrote a few chronicle plays. Of these works mention can be made of Chakra Dhwaja Sinha, Jayamati Kôwari and Belimdr. “Race pride”, as Boehmer asserts, “was to be recovered in the excavation of ‘ancestral origins’.33 It is only through the understanding ones subjectively in the socio-cultural perspective a fallen people can rise to their erstwhile glory and greatness. In simple his historical plays are an exhortation to his countrymen to imbibe a sense of nationalism through national pride.

Besides the chronicle plays Bezbaroa wrote five farces – Littikā, Norna, Pācam, Chikarpati and Nikarpati and Gadādhar Rajā. To the last mentioned goes the credit of being the first One Act play in Assamese.34 Through these farcical plays Bezbaroa honed his skills before he attempted his historical plays. Both forms had their own designated role to play. “What distinguishes comedy from farce is its temper and aim. The aim of comedy, as is commonly understood, is to provide ‘thoughtful laughter’; it is social in the highest sense of the term which farces, judging from their nature, is not”.35 The absence of satirical intent turns the farcical plays in to simple sources of hilarious laughter deriving largely from the incongruity in character and situation. The inspiration behind them may have been the hugely enthusiastic response that Littikā received. At a time when readership in the language was restricted, these plays written in racy colloquial idiom, may have been an attempt at drawing more and more readers to Assamese.

33 ‘Colonial and Post-Colonial Literature’, P.113
34 G.P. Sanna, “Lakshminath Bezbaroa as a write of Farces.” In ‘Sahityarath of Assam’, P. 129
The farcical plays of course are not entirely devoid of social purpose. The one theme that runs through all these plays like a *Leit motif* is the danger besetting ignorance and illiteracy.\(^{36}\) The tragic consequences attending ignorance is all too clear. Six of the seven brothers perish and the seventh, Litikāi, survives because he had a smattering knowledge of letters. In spite of this the farces, in their preponderance towards hilarious laughter, are more likely to drown whatever social relevance they may have.

It is to his historical plays that one must look for to ascertain Bezbaroa's place as a serious dramatic artist. Fidelity to historical facts is one of the avowed aims of Bezbaroa. Therefore one hardly comes across an idealised historical character in his plays since "he admits that his main purpose in writing ... was to focus attention on the wealth of ancient history".\(^{37}\) To this extent he seems to have accepted unconditionally everything that the past has brought, both its shame and its heroism.\(^{38}\) The same trait is conspicuous in his historical novel *Padum Kūwari*.

"The prominent personalities of history playing important roles in Bezbaroa's plays have neither been emotionally lionised nor unduly portrayed in darker shades."\(^{39}\)

It sharpening of the historical consciousness was Bezbaroa's aim, his historical plays are immensely successful. Having said this one must not overlook the literary merits that these plays have.

*Belimār* dramatises the waning power of Ahom rule against the backdrop of three successive Burmese incursions and depredation of Assam and the subsequent loss of independence due to lack of amity between its ruling powers. *Joymoti Kūwari* too makes use of Ahom history. It is the story of Joymoti, the wife of Gadāpāni, and her exemplary courage and self-sacrifice in the face of great odds. This play is remarkable for the concentration of effect aided by the single story line. *Cukradhvaja Simha* underscores the patriotic fervour and independent spirit of the Ahom king of

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\(^{36}\) G P. Sarma, op.cit., P.133  
\(^{38}\) Bochmer, Op.cit., P.120  
\(^{39}\) S.N. Sarma, Op.cit. P.137
the title. One would hardly miss the clarion call of Bezbaroa to his countrymen to rise from stupor and inertia.

Bezbaroa seems to have imbibed little from the dramatic tradition of Assam, which dates back to the days of Sankardeva. Even ancient Sanskrit dramaturgy did not fascinate him. Besides the apparent impact of Shakespeare, he was indebted to Bengali masters like Girish Chandra and Dwijendralal to some extent. His disregard of the three unities, division of the play into acts and introduction of comic interludes remind one of Shakespeare’s impact.

As a playwright Bezbaroa is credited with the creation of some memorable characters out of which Dalimi, Joymoti and Gajpuri stand out. In fact the last mentioned is called the Assamese fall staff with his dazzling wit and bufonery. It is in the creation of minor characters that Bezbaroa is found in his dramatic best. The historical personages did not leave him the leeway to exercise artistic freedom, hence they look constrained in some ways.

Though Bezbaroa’s genius did not lend itself seriously to the rigours of dramatic art, he certainly was instrumental in the creation of a dramatic movement in Assam alongside with Padmanath Gohainbaru.

In his autobiography Bezbaroa has one of his greatest triumphs. In this genre of writing he had a predecessor in the form of Hemachandra Barua’s Ātnajthuti Carita. Bezbaroa’s Mor Jiwan Sowaran turned out to be one of the most candid documents ever in Assamese. While faithfully documenting his life it also chronicles the major milestones of contemporary life in a way no other work does. To this extent it is not only the life and times of a man but of a people on the throes of transition. All life histories are social in nature. In this respect Bezbaroa’s autobiography can be read as social history of Assam of the latter half of the 19th century.
“Apart from being a living record of a man’s life, Bezbaroa’s autobiography gives a vivid account of the social life of the 19th century.”

Rabindranath’s autobiography *Jiban Smriti*, which Bezbaroa might have read, is largely the life of the man in relation to his works, to his mind, to his family and his immediate surrounding. Bezbaroa in his autobiography works on a much broader canvass. When he writes about himself, more often than not, he writes about his milieu with all the breadth this word can encompass.

*Jiwan Sowaran’s* language is one of its remarkable features. It is neither conscious nor artificial in any manner. Its fluidity is an indication of honest outpourings. Presenting the man inside out. In a way the style is the writer’s personality itself.

As a biographer too Bezbaroa made significant strides. Besides writing the biography of the two great Vaishnavite preceptors — Śankardeva and Madhavdeva, he also wrote one on his father. Biography is not an unfamiliar mode in Assamese literature. Vaishnavite literature has a number of examples written both in verse and prose. But these works suffer from a mythicising tendency where facts and fiction intermingled. Bezbaroa tried to collect relevant material from these sources and from his father Dinanāth to make an objective appraisal of Śankardeva and Madhavdeva. According to his own admission in these works he was not attempting an elaborate biographical sketch of the saints. His principal concern was to make an objective and critical assessment of some aspects of the saints’ lives and to bring to the notice of the Assamese the underlying value and beauty of their writings.

Bezbaroa held the two Vaishnavite preceptors in great reverence which was supplemented further by his profound study of Vaishnavism. These are no doubt positive and wholesome traits in a faithful but they come in the way of an objective

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41 Ibid.
appraisal. He was too deeply attached to them to be critical. Thus it is faith that

dominates where reason should have reigned.\textsuperscript{42}

Modern Assamese literary criticism took definite shape in the hands of
Bezbaroa. Some of his commentaries and evaluations of literary texts published in
\textit{Bāḫi} bring out certain traits of modern criticism. Even the biographies of the
Vaishnavite preceptors bear the impress of his critical eye. "His first book on the life
of Sāṅkardeva is not only a life-sketch of the saint but is also considered as the
beginning of modern literary criticism" in Assam.\textsuperscript{43} He was in a way the literary
arbiter of his age. His comments on literary matters were as eagerly awaited as they
were valued by his contemporaries. "In fact his critical comments carried so much
weight, because of his tendency towards comparative criticism, in the setting of world
classics alongside a sympathetic appreciation of the facts".\textsuperscript{44} Yet Bezbaroa could not
be objective particularly, in his ethico-religious writings because of obvious reasons.
The uncritical acceptance of miracles and superhuman deeds in these writings rob
them of true scientific spirit. Every argument seems to move towards a predetermined
conclusion.

In spite of these shortcomings Bezbaroa stands out as a critic among his
contemporaries equipped with scholarship, understanding and a sharp critical sense.
In the opinion of Moheswar Neog Bezbaroa is at the forefront of criticism as in other
forms of literatures.\textsuperscript{45} His contemporaries expectantly awaited his considered
comments on their published works.

Bezbaroa took to the essay form with an earnestness lacking in any other genre
with the exception of the short story. His essays span an astounding variety of subject
matter – from the ludicrous to the most profoundly philosophic. Their tone and
treatment too vary depending on the topic under discussion. He was equally at ease
with balles lettres type of writing as represented in \textit{Barbarnār Kākatar Topolā},

\textsuperscript{42} T.N. Goswamy : 1988 : 'Sāhitya Kalā: Āru Bicār' , P. 56
\textsuperscript{43} T. Misra, Op.cit., P. 203
\textsuperscript{44} N. Saikia, Op.cit., P. 336
\textsuperscript{45} 'Asamāyā Sāhityav Ruprekha', P. 315
Ovai, Bhābar Burburau and Bulani and with formal essays dealing with language, literature, religion and culture.

It is in his personal essays that Bezbaroa as a humorist finds adequate representation. He is a true humorist combining remarkable resourcefulness, an uncanny sense of human nature, a keen observation and above all his fundamental goodness and human sympathy.

"Generally speaking Bezbaroa’s tone voice does not make one think of a man burning either with indignation or shame, but of a man who is capable of laughter even in the face of grave and serious situation".46

Even when he took to task the many vices besetting Assamese society of his time in his satirical pieces, he was neither cynical nor misanthropic. He was an inveterate optimist who that reclamation was always possible.

Bezbaroa wrote at a time when literacy rate was negligible. The general reading public was not interested in intellectual jugglery. His intimate essays played a vital role in enthusing the reader in diversity of subjects by his style and treatment. In a way in his humorous sketches took the journalistic mantle when journalism itself was at a low ebb. The phenomenal popularity of these essays are an indication of increased interest in Assamese literature. “He proved with irrefutable arguments that Assamese is not a Patois (dialect) of Bengali but an independent language of richness and antiquity".47

The transition from the Kripābaresque essays to the austere formal essays makes an interesting reading. These needed a different kind of approach. He brought to bear considerable scholarship and depth particularly in ethioc-religious essays like Tatwa Kathā, Krishua Kathā and Bhāgwat Kathā. They stand ‘eloquent testimony to his profound erudition, penetrating insight and critical acumen’48 Though a staunch

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47 Padmadhar Chaliha, “Lakshminath Bezbaroa as an Essayist”, in the Sahitvarathi of Assam, P.167
48 Ibid, P. 166
believer in Sankarite Vaishnavism, his catholicity of temper does not denigrate other religious faiths. Bezbaroa also penned articles in defence of his language, literature and culture. The clarity of vision, logical thinking and erudition - the hallmarks of a good critic, are found in ample measure in these essays.

One of the seminal contributions of Bezbaroa is his prose-style. Is his essays and other utterances his style makes a statement as vigorous, free-flowing and explorative of the inherent flexibility of the Assamese language. Its success lies in the fact that it is endowed with a masculine strength and does not look obtuse even while dealing with philosophical subjects. What precisely these things mean is that Assamese is capable of expressing the most complex of ideas if one has the diligence to use it. According to Hem Barua the Assamese language in the hands of Bezbaroa became a pinnacle of glory. The one grey area in his serious essays is the interference of his humorous vein which, through helpful in sustaining readers’ interest, often prove digressive. Certain amount of discursiveness and lack of scientific coldness too take some shine off his formal essays. But when the typical circumstance of his creative milieu – that he was zealously guarding his cultural identity against biased and malevolent propaganda from some interested quarters, the tendency to go all out to prove his point of view was not only understandable but justified.

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49 Op. cit., P. 68
SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR CONTRIBUTION

National resurgence in the various Indian linguistic formations, in almost every case was orchestrated by the elite. These elites borrowed, adapted and even imitated both form and content to combat the denigration of their culture and literature. At the denigration of their culture and literature, Boehmner opines that 'the quest of colonials across the empire was to home conceptual languages which might give shape to their lived experience.\textsuperscript{50} What they borrowed they made into their own. At least they tried to do this. The dilemma ‘to be true to oneself in borrowed robes’ did not really bother writers like Senāpati and Bezbaroa. By the time they burst upon their respective literary scenes many modern literary genres like the short story, the novel, lyric, \textit{belles lettres} were firmly entrenched in Bengali literature. Their impact could bell be discernible in Assamese and Oriya literatures. Through his Western education Bezbaroa was familiar with the various forms and techniques of Western literary genres. He was also well conversant with Bengali and could write with felicity if he wanted. These two were counterbalanced by his rootedness in his own culture. Capacity for change for many is not equated with capacity for reproducing the Western pattern.\textsuperscript{51} He borrowed as much as could be moulded to his own cultural content. The basic tenets of his writing was neither the slavish adherance to the West nor the fetish of traditionalism but one of innovation and invention. This can be discerned both in form and content, particularly in his attempt at synthesising the modern short story and the native folk-tale. Phakirmohana, on the other hand, was not allowed by circumstance to acquire Western education. This apparent handicap actually turned out to his own advantage. His fiction, particularly the novels, were not modelled on any original. Therefore they bear the stamp of his unmixed genius and

remain to this day the best of their kind in Oriya literature. There are some critics who find Bankimchandra’s impact on Senapati particularly that of the former’s Vishavriksha on Chhamāṇa Āṭhaguntha. Lāl Behārī Dey’s Bengal Peasant Life. Which Phakirmohana had read, too is quoted as an influence. But they are simply inspiratons in spite of certain resemblances. But what is noteworthy about their ‘Writing is that they showed great flexibility in assimilating whatever is borrowed in to felt life.53

One of the effects of Western literature and thought was the awareness about the present in literary representations. “Time was when art and literature, mainly occupied themselves with what ought to be. They have now swing to what is.”54 It is a change from the cyclic. Timeless ambience of our old literature to the linear time spatio-temporal reality. This is what distinguishes modern literature from the old. This concern with the present is only one aspect of the writings of Senapati and Bezbaroa. Since they wrote in order to establish their linguistic cultural identity vis a vis Bengal, they also stressed their respective histories and part in their writings.

The epithets Rasarāj for Bezbaroa and Vyāsakavi for Senapati do only partial justice to their total contributions. The epithets bring out the humorous and the satirical in Bezbaroa while it highlights Senapati’s translation work of the great sacred texts. They enriched their literatures by the sheer weight of their creative output. Their respective literatures were in the initial phase of development. It offered these stalwarts fertile ground to try their genius on. Apart from the historical and literary merit of their writings, their efforts at revivifying their mother tongues must be considered to be extremely significant. This can be reinforced by S H. Vatsyayan says in another context: “Language is the lungs with which a culture breathes and vitalises itself. As a country with long history, we have seen how societies can become barren and degenerate; we have also seen how politics can become barren and desiccated of
all significance. Under those conditions, language has provided the means to the remedy, the channels through which the revivifying juices can flow."

Senapati and Bezbaroa must rank among the leading men to have reinstated and revitalised their respective languages. This is not to say that their writings in the various literary genres is less valuable as literature. Far from this. "A creative writer - be he a poet, dramatist, novelist or anything else, is one who communicates experiences or states of consciousness which are valuable for their own sake." Even under this yardstick Senapati and Bezbaroa stand out as tall as any in their respective literatures.

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55 “Complexity of Modern Life” in 'Creativity and Environment', PP. 90-91