CHAPTER – V

Detailed Study of the Fiction of Phakirmohana and Lakshminath

a. A Study of the Fiction of Phakimohana
b. A Study of the Fiction of Lakshminath
Prose fiction in India is about a hundred years old. The study of its resurgence invariably brings to mind exposure to English education and literature. Prose-fiction really took off during the general resurgence called the Indian Renaissance. Writers took up this medium in right earnest to delineate life on the temporal plane. Previously the mode of writing to tell a tale was largely verse. This shift from verse to prose was actually a shift in the way the writer saw the life around him. It dawned upon the Indian writer 'that the truths of human condition were better communicated in plain prose rather than in verse'.

There was another fundamental shift.

"Nearly all the ancient tales, whether from Israel, India, Egypt or the Middle East, were fundamentally didactic. Some off these ancient stories preached by presenting an ideal for readers to imitate".

In contrast the modern short story has nothing to do with problems as such, its forte is to state the human problem. This holds true of Indian writers today. This change in fiction was symptomatic of the transformation in the outlook of Indian writers in general. Romesh Chunder Dutt, one of the leading lights of the Indian Renaissance, succinctly sums up this changed perception.

From the stories of gods and goddesses, kings and queens, princes and princesses, we have learned to descend to the humble walks of life, to sympathise with a common citizen or even a common peasant. From an admiration of symmetrical uniformity we have descended to the appreciation of the strength and freedom of individuality. From admiring

1 Kishori Churan Das : 1998 : "Beyond the Roots- An Anthology of Oriya Short Stories."
Introduction. P-1
the grandeur and glory of the great we now willingly turn to appreciate the liberty and resistance in the lowly.\(^3\)

This new orientation is nowhere better manifested than in the sphere of prose fiction.

Prose fiction has two versions- the longer version called the novel and the shorter one called the short story. Unlike the novel the short story is not purely a Western importation. To call it an exclusively Western legacy would amount to downplaying 'the complex cultural determinants of a literary genre'\(^4\). Doubtless the West played a seminal role in crystallizing the technique of the short story, Yet the Indian narrative tradition which predates the Christian era also contributed substantially to the growth of this medium in India. In fact Winternitz goes to the extent of asserting India to be the birth place of the short story. He says:

"It is most wonderful that the Indian narrative material has passed from nation to nation in such a way that we find in almost all the countries of Europe and Asia and even among those of Africa, stories and tales of which the original home was in India"\(^5\)

The short stories return to India was therefore, a kind of homecoming. Its elements can still be found in Indian folk tales, fables, anecdotes, myths and legends. This must have facilitated the short story to find deep roots in India. In fact across cultures the short story has been past of man's lived experience in one form or another.

A universally accepted definition of the short story is as yet awaited. People use the term as though it has a precis meaning. It is so because this literary genre is better understood than defined. Nonetheless attempts to define it abound One of its

\(^3\) Literature of Bengal Vide Kripalani, op. Cit., P-415
\(^4\) Meenakshi Mukherjee, op. Cit., P-3
\(^5\) A History of Indian Literature, vol. -III Part-1, P-301
acknowledged masters calls it 'a piece of fiction, dealing with a single incident material or spiritual, that can be read at a sitting: it is original, it must sparkle, excite or impress, and it must have unity of effect or impression.' Similarly K. R. Srinivas lyengar emphasises the idea that inspires and sustains the story. According to him 'Every short story has a sort of structure; there are characters and incidents, there is a suggested tangle of relationships, and there is a conclusion that, as it were, stings and consoles at once.'

The short story as a literary genre appeared first in Bengali and Hindi literatures. 'Madhumati' is supposed to be the first short story in Bengali. It was published in the pages of 'Bangadarshan' in 1873 written possibly by Purnachandra Chatopadhyay. But it was in Rabindranath that Bengal (and India) found its first consummate artist and one of its great exponents. It is for this reason that Rabindranath is called the father of the Bengali short story. In Hindi Insa Allah Khān's 'Rāni Ketki Ki Kahāni', Published in 1888, takes the credit of being the first attempt at the genre in the language. But the credit for being a true short story in form and content goes to Kishorilal Goswāmy's 'Inchumati' 1900. With Premchand's collection 'Sojebatam' in 1907, this form came of age in Hindi literature. He took the short story to great heights unmatched by anybody before and possibly after him in certain respects.

The opening of the floodgates of Western education and thought made inroads into Indian life in the 19th century. The synthesis between the cultures of the Orient and the Occident took a new shape in India. Instead of imitating the Western model in form and spirit Rabindranāth and Premchānd brought in Indian elements to the short story.

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8. Narendranath Chakravarty: 1357 (Bangabda) 'Bangla Chhotagalpa: Samkhipta Samalocana', P-15
9. Ibid.
The rise of the short story depended upon certain preconditions like the introduction of printing press to diffuse the written word, presence of a sizable reading public, publication of journals and magazines, development of prose as a literary medium etc. The spread of Western education and the consequent rise of the middle class facilitated the growth of the short story. The establishment of printing press by William Carey and the translation of the Bible in to Bengali gave fillip to prose as a viable medium of literary production. Before the establishment of Fort William College there was no example of the use of prose for literary purposes. With the active encouragement of Carey, the Head of Department of Bengali at Fort William College, texts were written in prose. Ramram Basu's 'Pratapadityer Charitra' (1801) is accepted as the first prosework in Bengali.

Publication of journals in various Indian Vernaculars fostered the growth of the short story. In Bengal journals published by Christian missionaries like 'Digdarshan' and 'Samachar Darpan' prepare the groundwork for literary renaissance. Tatwabodhin and 'Baṅgadarshan' gave ample scope for stalwarts like Vidyāsāgar, Debendranāth, Dwijendranāth, Bankimchandra and others to diffuse and popularise knowledge in various aspects of life. In Hindi literature the period between 1850 to 1900, called the Age of Harischandra, journals like Kabibachaan Sudhā (1867), Harischandra Magazine (1873), Harischandra Chandrikā (1874), Hindi Pradip (1877), Brāhma (1880), Bhārat Mitra (1877) etc. flourished. The entertaining stories that appeared in these journals carried some salient features of the modern short story. But the Hindi short story as a literary genre came of age only after 1900. By that time Bengali, Oriya and Assamese short stories made their presence felt in the minds of the reader.

Shortly after the inception of the short story in India it began to appear in Oriya and Assamese. The credit for pioneering this genre in Oriya and Assamese literatures go to

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11 J. B. Mohanty, op. Cit., P-111
13 B. C. Samal, op. Cit., P-128
Phakirmohana Senapati and Lakshminath Bezbaroa respectively and they are rightly anointed as father of the short story in their respective provinces. In fact Phakirmohana claims to have written a story titled *Lachhmanid* during his teachership days in Balasore. It was probably written in 1868. This would make him the first short story writer in India. But the glory garland of fathering the short story in India eludes Phakirmohana since *Lachhmanid* remains untraced. Even if his claim is left to the realm of possibility he still remains the acknowledged master of the genre in his own language.

For thirty years, i.e. from 1868 to 1898 Phakirmohana goes into hibernation as a short story writer surfacing with his *Rehati* in 1898. It is accepted not only as the first printed short story in Oriya literature but also one of its greatest. "It marked an unprecedented exercise in story telling, which went beyond the era of legends and folk-tales."

Before Phakirmohana's *Rehati* there were of course some tentative attempts at the genre. Madhusudan Rāo's *Chandrārā*, Pranayara Adhīhuta Pariṇām (both 1874) and Hemalatā and Rādhānāth Rāy's *Itīlyā Jūbā* (1873) were published in the contemporary journals either as novels or stories. Chandarā was serialised in Dipika under the label novel. It was based on M. Cullock's Course of Reading. Pranayara Adhīhuta Pariṇām too was not an original creation since it was an adaptation of a foreign story dealing with the love of Henry and Matildah. Only Hemalatā comes closer to being a short story. Rādhānāth's *Itīlyā Jūbā* is also an adaptation of an English story. In spite of the linear progression of the narrative, simple presentation and limited characters, its claim to the title of a short story is weak. But it must be admitted in all fairness that these attempts, inspite of their inability to catch the spirit of the short story as we understand it today, undoubtedly laid the groundwork for the growth of the genre in Oriya literature.

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14. *Āmeṣājīhāna carita*, ch. 21
15. K. C. Das op. Cit., Introduction, P-VII
16. Sanrantrai op. Cit., P-525
17. Samal, op. Cit., P-267
Besides these stories contemporary journals also saw the publication of stories, some under assumed names common during that time. Phakirmohana himself wrote at least two short stories *Baleswar Rāhājāni* and *Rebati* under the penname 'Shree'.¹⁸ One year after the publication of *Rebati* a story titled *Kūlid Kūntalā* appeared in *Utkalā Sāhitya* under the assumed name 'Shree-Dhurjati'. The Senāpati-like ambience of the story led many to think it to be a Phakirmohana creation. Another story *Kabītwā Bisarjana* in the pages of *Mukura* appeared about the same time. Its theme - the disillusionment of a College student -cum- aspiring poet, with his unlettered wife was to resurface in Phakirmohana's later fiction. This is also credited to Phakirmohana's,⁰⁹ *Maṭhara Sambāda*, a story written by one 'Shree' and published in *Pradip* in 1885 has, as its theme the impact of the West on the tradition-bound Orissan society and its consequent fermentation. It is surprisingly modern in its theme and treatment, in its use of language and power. Yet its latent elements are not properly execute the story.²⁰

*Maṭhara Sambāda* touched upon a theme which was to occupy the attention of the writers in the late nineteenth century Orissa. In fact it was a pan-Indian concern during the Indian Renaissance. The adverse impact of the West as a subject was of immediate historical relevance. The national resurgence of Orissa heralded with the movement to salvage the Oriya language and identity impelled writers towards this kind of theme. It also gave new direction to the short story to ground itself in subjects that touched the life of Orissa. In this context the critic Sengupta has remarked --

These stories belong to a new genre which reflect a peculiarity of Indian life, the complexity and confusion which may be produced by people with opposed interests and incompatible temperaments forming a single social unit.²¹

¹⁸ *Ātmajibana Carita*, P-165
¹⁹ J. B. Mahanty, op. Cit., P-52
²⁰ Ibid., P-285
With this transformation the short story is implanted strongly in the Indian soil and became an inevitable part of its literary climate. The genre was localised and was given a local habitation and name.

In the pre-Phakirmohana era short story writing one can perceive to marked traits—stories based on love and sentimentality drawing their inspiration largely from foreign influence and stories that sprang from the native soil employing satire and irony to cleanse contemporary society of its ailments. Christian missionaries who wrote stories for proselytising purposes in the first half of the 19th century had little bearing on the growth of short story in Oriya literature. The same can be said about Assamese literature also. The Renaissance in most Indian literatures 'took a different shape in the context of the Indian race, moment and milieu and as a result nationalistic, reformistic and revivalistic thinking found their way'. Of the three above mentioned concerns Phakirmohana and Bezbaroa never believed in the sacrosant nature of all that was ancient, and therefore, revivalism was never been one of their interests. What they were passionately concerned with was human condition in a given social milieu. Undestandably they show a marked social bias in their writings.

Phakirmohana never had the benefit of schooling, and this in retrospect, seems a blessing in disguise. He never came directly under the spell of Western education and thought. It spared him the trouble of wasting his talents in emulating Western models and themes. In stark contras his more fancied friends Rādhānāth Ray and Madhusudan Rāo spent their creative energies in giving shape to their romantic ideals, inspired as they were by Western models. The preponderance of medieval themes in their writings shows their fascination with romance. This is not to underplay their immense contribution to Oriya literature. But modernism, in the sense of grounding literature in problems affecting day to day life, had never been their concern. Their promise was largely poetry whereas

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22 B. C. Samal, op. Cit. P-286
23 Indranath Choudhury, op. cit. , P -33
Phakirmohana's was prose fiction. The typical social bias which Phakirmohana introduced in Oriya literature endures to this day. Though in changed form. A brief outline of his prose fiction will highlight the social focus that underlie them.

As has already been mentioned Phakirmohana launched his career as a short story writer in 1898 with 'Rebati'. Since then till his death in 1918 he wrote twenty short stories and four novels. His fictional work is said to delineate the life and history of Oriya people for two hundred years from 1700 to 1900, though the society of his literature is, to a large extent, the society of his time. His works may stand before us as individual entities but the underlying thought content bring alive the uneven path of the rise and fall of the Oriya race.

Before Rebati Phakirmohana had published his first novel Chhamōna Ṭhagantarha in 1897. Historically speaking this novel was not first of its kind being preceded by some fictional works. But this short story, as we understand the term today, marked the beginning of the genre in Oriya literature. It is a remarkable piece of writing even by the most rigorous of standards. It showed neither the tentativeness expected of a first work in a new genre nor it betrayed any conscious attempt at an effect. It is the "story of blighted hopes and ambitions of a country girl". Rebati the protagonist. The tragic consequences that overtake her family were supposed to be the result of her decision to study. Sending the girl child to school was a taboo in the tradition-bound, superstitious, backward Oriya society of the time. Shyāmabandhu Māhānta, the father of Rebati, appoints a teacher Bāsuder to teach his only child. It was violently opposed by his mother who would have Rebati concentrate on honing the skills of household chores rather than on something as useless as learning the letters. In a strictly role-oriented society where women were

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24 P. C. Mohanty, op. Cit., P-206
25 Natabara Samantarai, op. Cit., P-45
26 Kishoricharan Das, op. Cit. Introduction, P-VIII
assigned the duties of home and hearth teaching the women was an anathema. Rebati's grandmother represents this attitude. However misfortune strikes Shyāmabandhu Māhānty's family in the form of cholera. In the final whirlwind sweep of fate her father, Rebati and her grandmother die. Before the old lady dies she makes it clear that Rebati's decision to learn was responsible for the tragedy that befell her family.

The story is remarkable for more than one reason. Phakirmohana's effective handling of black humour where the tragedy is 'justified' is in fact an indictment of society rather than fate. "This comment on the human condition in a given social milieu is a deadly mix of irony and intensity, which is far removed from the direct authorial statements on the good and evil, or on the inscrutable ways of the gods that characterized earlier Indian literature."27 Beside being a candid statement of the prevailing attitude towards women's education, it is also Phakirmohana's only love story handled with great sensitivity and suggestiveness.

When the story was first published it carried an extract of one of Rev. G. H. Gurney's poems28 which foreshadowed the calamity that befall Shyāmabandhu Māhānty's family.

The social attitude towards women's education tallies well with condition of women's education in Orissa of Phakirmohana's time. A school for girls was established at Cuttack in 1871, but in ten years its enrolment could rise to only 25. Out of the 25 only four were Oriya.29

Phakirmohana, though himself did not get the benefit of schooling, was a supporter of education both for boys and girls alike. The education he envisaged would take in to

27 Ibid. Introduction, P-VIII
28 "But of some shining April morn Is darkened in an hour. And blackest grief O'er joyous home, Alas! Unseen may lower."
29 P. C. Mahanty, op. Cit., P-189
account, besides the ānām and Vijnāna of the West, the native values that sustained Indian life for centuries. But to his utter dismay he found Western learning dazzle the Indian people into blindness- a blindness that failed to perceive the finer points of their own cultural life vis a vis the materialistic orientation of the West. In many of his stories Phakirmomana deals with the pernicious impact of Western education and thought on those who came in contact with it. In these stories he not only showed his deep allegiance to community values but also exposed how the individualistic mooring of the West did not enter in to any chemical combination with the former. This explains the moral design in his stories. To this category belong stories like Dāka Munshi, Patent Medisir, Sathiya Jamidār, Bisvāla, Sunā Bohn etc.

Dāka Munshi  is the story of a formerly obedient son. But once he acquires a smattering knowledge of English he drives away his old father for the sake of an inflated sense of dignity and selfrespect. English education fostered a notion of society in which each individual sought to fulfill his own personal ends. In this story Hari Singh, a postal peon, puts his everything into educating his son. He conjures up visions of a happy and respectable life once his son secures a government job. But when the son Gopāl lives up to his father's dreams and becomes a hākim, Hari Singh's woes, instead of lessening, get compounded. The Western educated son, afflicted with 'civilized' consideration, finds it hard to stand his uncouth, ill-clad and uneducated father. Things reach a flashpoint when Harē Singh passes before Gopāl's female friends (all obviously Westen-educated like Gopal and were clad in Western-style fittings). His son's self-respect and dignity was hurt Gopal not only refuses to acknowledge his father but eventually evicts him from his official residence.

The bewitching impact of the West with its emphasis on individualism eroded the native values based on group consciousness. In this story Phakirmohana has taken up cudgels on behalf of the life values of the Indian soil. Indian writers of this period like Lashmiāth Bezbaroā have also contested the alien values and reasserted the precolumnial
values of community. Bezbaroa's *Malak Guin Guin*, a short story largely in the farcical and caricaturist vein, is a pointer in this regard. In the words of S. Abid Husain "What actually happened was that many educated Indians became imitation Englishmen in outward appearance but in the moral and intellectual spheres they were either totally influenced by the English character or assimilated its worst features which turned them into unprincipled, unbalanced, denationalised individuals." Phakirmohana and Lakshminath both brought in to full glare the hollowness of those who basked in the glory of an alien sunshine.

Commenting on Phakirmohana's idea of education the Boulton has this to say

"... many of Phakirmohana's Western 'educated' people behaved stupidly, i.e., in Phakirmohana's opinion they were not educated at all: for him education meant being trained to behave with intelligence. (1) It is a means of stimulating intellectual growth so that from infancy children could tackle various problems of life with intelligence."

What dismayed Phakirmohana was that Western education created a bunch of parasites who hankered after white collared jobs under colonial dispensation and distanced themselves from traditional vocations. His short story *Sahhya Jamidār*, published in 1914, drives this point home effectively. Gopāla Mohāpātra, though unlettered, was intelligent enough to learn from life. From an excellent cook he becomes a successful business man and finally a landowner by sheer dint of hard work and practical sense. In contrast his son Rājiv Lochana turns into an idler who mouths abstract western notions which were in no way related to the reality he was born in to. While the unlettered father acquires all the traits of real education, his socalled educated son turns out to be a social misfit and an ignoramus in the practical affairs of life. His extravagance and snobbery ruins

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30 *The National Culture of India* P-108
31 *Phakirmohana*: *His life and His Times*, P-338
the fruits of his father’s labours. Ironically he ends up being a cook (‘khānsāmā’) in faraway Assam.

The story of Rājiv Lochana repeats itself in the life of his wife, Nayantāra Her father, a ‘khānsāmā’ to an English tea-garden manager, gives his daughter English education. Thoroughly Westernised she becomes a total misfit to play the role of the daughter in law in a traditional, orthodox Hindu family. As a wife she compliments her husband towards ruin.

As has already mentioned Phakirmohana was not opposed to Western education, being himself an indirect beneficiary. What he opposed to was the ape-like imitation of its frills without imbibing its intrinsic merits. Abid Husain highlights this dichotomy between appearance and reality:

In fact the intrinsic merit of Western culture, apart from the glamour that everything associated with the ruling nation has for a subject people, lay in its modern scientific attitude of mind and practical efficiency. But unfortunately the way in which the fresh blood of modernism was transfused in to the anaemic body of Indian society deprived it of just these vital ingredients and on the whole it did more harm than good.32

If acquisition of Western education played havoc with indigenous way of life, lack of education, even of the native variety, was no better. In Pāthoi Bohu Phakirmohana castigates women who are not trained or who are ill-trained to play their assigned role - the role of house keeping. It was the edifice on which the agrarian village life was based. Illiteracy. And ignorance in the traditional village girl has the potential to bring woe to herself and her husband’s family. Saraswati Dei of Pāthoi Bohu is a manifestation of this. Gopal babu had expectations of marrying an educated girl who could keep household accounts and help his mother with household chores. But in a traditional society like India

32 *The National Culture of India*, P-106
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The marriages 'happen' and the individual has little choice in it. The same happens with Gopal, his wife Saraswati, though beautiful and domesticated, was illiterate. He tries his best to get his wife interested in education so that she could develop her intelligence but his efforts go in vain. Ironically Saraswati has an inflated sense of her own intelligence, the result of her mother's pampering. Finding his wife to be not so companionable Gopal spends most of his time at the village club. This sows the seeds of suspicion in Saraswati's mind. But she fails to muster up the courage to question her husband's nightly outings. This almost brings her life to ruins. Gopal bābu, sensing what was actually wrong with her, makes her learn the truth the hard way.

Despite its hilarious treatment Pathoi Bohu has a serious undertone to it. Phakirmohana here questions the efficacy of the traditionally ideal wife to bring happiness to her husband's family. It is part of a larger issue concerning marriage where young people have little or no choice in deciding who they should marry. What the educated young men wanted in their wives was companionability- someone who could participate in intellectual issues and respond readily to their emotional needs. But when coyness was virtue and the daughter in law was assigned to the darkest corner of the household companionship was an impossibility. Besides the custom of housemaid (puili) accompanying the newly married girl everywhere came in the way of fulfilling the emotional needs of the young man. The story Gāruḍī Mantra develops the theme of Pathoi Bohu further. It was published in 1916 and deals with the period forty years before its publication i.e. 1876-77. Madan Mohana, the protagonist belongs to the first generation English-educated, being a student of F.A. class at Ravenshaw College. Naturally he came under the impact of prevailing ideas regarding women's emancipation and education and the freedom of the individual to choose his life-partner. Paradoxically he was married off though he was unwilling to marry. In spite of this he loves his wife and yearns for her company. But the paraphernalia of a conservative household come in his

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33 J. V. Boulton, op. Cit., P-356
34 Ibid.
way. Particularly the housemaid Padi, who accompanies his wife like a shadow, proves to be a dampener. Madana invents an ingenious method to get rid of the maid and succeeds. Phakirmohana's thesis in this story could be this - that traditional etiquettes prevented rather than facilitated marital happiness.\(^\text{35}\)

In writing this story Phakirmohana may have been indebted to *Bohu Roga* by one Sridarshaka. Published a good two years and eight months before *Gāruḍhi Mantra* Phakirmohana probably read the story. The educated youngman Ananta is thoroughly disillusioned and disgusted with the assumed dumbness of his wife. It becomes clear in the letter he writes to his friend. Written in English it runs thus:

"My dear friend,

You know all about my wretched life. The civil surgeon says that my wife is suffering from dumbness, owing to the disuse of the organ. It will gradually be removed by tempting her to speak.

Take lessons from my bitter experience. All these things are due to my foolish obedience to evil customs and their silly superstitions. Khurda is the hotbed of this evil thing. Would you try to bring this to light.\(^\text{36}\)

*Bohu Roga* is an indictment of the pernicious impact of the so called virtues of a newly married woman which turned her into a dumb thing. Ananta's attempts at highlighting this custom points to the reformative zeal of the educated youngmen of the time. Madana Mohana is one step ahead of him so far as he devises ways to fight this backward looking custom, albeit on a personal plane.

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\(^{35}\) J. V. Boulton, op. Cit., P-359

\(^{36}\) N. Sadangi : 1991 : 'Phakirmohanaäka Gupña Jagata : Sūparitt,' P-38
It should be noted in this regard that Phakirmohana was a supporter of the role-oriented idea of Hindu family. Though he was all for women's emancipation he would never support the thought of women shirking household responsibilities.

Western education encouraged individualism which sown the seeds of nucleus family in the place of joint family and collective responsibility. The daughter in law, instead of taking moral responsibility for the inlaws and other dependent members, considers them as burdens. The perceptive reader can hardly miss its overtone in Sundā Bahni. It is the story of an erring daughter in law and how she was made compatible to larger responsibilities. Nima, the daughter in law comes to her husband's house thoroughly brainwashed into believing that she would be the mistress of the house by virtue of her salaried husband. This leads her to regard her mother in law and sister in law as burdens. She expects them to do all the household chores since they make a living out of her husband's labour. Under this erroneous idea she desists from doing a thing in the house. It was a matter of great concern for Sibu (her husband), his mother and sister. They devise a plan to purge Nima of her misconceptions. They arrange a fictitious marriage of Sibu which rings alarm bells in Nima's mind. She realises her mistake soon and accepts her responsibilities in the household. The selfish inclinations of individual consciousness is made subservient to group consciousness, albeit in the context of a small family.

Phakirmohana waged a relentless crusade against the many evils that ate in to the vitals of contemporary Orissan society. One of the aims of his writing was to purge those evils. Stories like Patent Medisin, Birei Buswāla, Mādha Māhāntīnika Kanxi Sinā, Dhiṭa Bābā and Maunu Mauni come under this category. Of these Patent Medisin has a peculiar flavour.

Patent Medicine is the story of a wayward husband brought to goodsense the hard way by his broomyielding wife. Its protagonist Chandramqi had a taste of English education, though not of the higher kind. For the neo-elite of the time wine was a
Chandramoni babu is not only addicted to wine and 'gamyā' but he has the habit of visiting prostitutes. He got in and out of job many times and was recovering from the debilitating effects of his pernicious habits. His wife Sulochana is not so much concerned with loss of job than with her husband's physical and mental wellbeing. She keeps an eagle eye on her husband lest he should fall back on his old habits. In spite of her strict vigilance Chandramaṇi succeeds in visiting the prostitute surreptitiously by making the servant a decoy for him. He returns home inebriated extolling the virtues of the woman. When Sulochana discovers the truth she is saddened and angry. As a last resort she wields the broomstick against her husband. This radical step reforms her husband. Therefore it is comically alluded to as patent medicine.

Phakirmohana musters all his witticism and comical powers to bring the story alive. In a traditional patriarchal Hindu society beating the husband was more sacrilegious than desecration of a temple. Here the author tries to bring about a balance between his sympathy for Sulochana and the vices that Chandramaṇi personified.

About the prevalence of wine Phakirmohana says in his autobiography:

During that time the educated youngman not used to wine became a butt of jokes. Some youngmen who gave up the evil practice kept a bottle of wine in their houses to save themselves from taunting remarks. While mixing up with the so-called respectable people they sprinkled some wine on their moustaches and behaved drunk. Wine was not limited to the educated class alone. It was prevalent among every section of people from the lower wrungs of society to Brahmins. "During that time people from the lower class to the Brahmins were addicted to wine. It was a common drink. The servant would get separate bottles for each member of the family from the market alongside with other eatables." In an otherwise conservative, caste hierarchical society wine demolished caste

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37 P. M. G. Vol. I. P-62
38 Ibid. P-103
barriers. Among the Brāhmōs wine was an inevitable part of their ritual. Phakirmohana himself was not innocent of this unhealthy habit in his heydays and his personal experience must have gone in to the making of Patent Medisin.

Patent Medisin, according to an Oriya critic, is not an original creation but an adaptation of Satyendranāth's Bengali one act play Nididhyāsan, which in turn was a transliteration of the Japanese play Za Zen. Phakirmohana gave the story an Orissan look and climate to bring the evil in to public consciousness.

The short stories Birei Biswāla and Mādhul Māhāntukā Kanyāsuntā allude to an evil practice which was prevalent in Oriya and Assamese societies - that of 'selling' the daughter to the highest bidder in marriage. In Orissa this heinous practice was known as kanyāsuntā, while in Assam it was called gā-dhan. Rāghava Pātra gives away in marriage two of his hapless daughters to bridegrooms old enough to be their grandfathers for two thousand rupees. As a consequence they become widows before long and lead a most wretched life. When this was brought to his notice his conscience does not prickle. Instead he absolves himself by taking recourse to an old Oriya adage that 'one gives birth to children and not write their fate'. When Birei Biswāla decides to marry Kamaḷi, the youngest daughter, the oldman's only concern was the bride-price (kanyā-sunā). After long hard bargaining Birei was asked to pay seven hundred rupees, a considerable amount for the bridegroom. Kamali gets on her greedy father by stealing the entire money from her father. Her action had the support of the entire village.

The story has two clear sections- one dealing with the rise of the destitute Birei through hard work and perseverance and two, Kamali's teaching a lesson to her soulless father. Though artistically it suffers from a lack of singleness of effect Phakirmohana’s professed intention was to create social awareness against the evil called kanyā-sunā.

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39 'Imajibana Carita,’ P-53
40 P. C. Mahanty, op. Cit., P-267
Madha Mahanty is the counterpart of Râghaba Pâtra of Birei Biswâla. The story deals with Madha’s all-consuming greed for money and its tragic consequence. Madha Mahanty, like Râghaba Pâtra, married one of his daughters off to an old man for the sake of money. He was about to repeat the same with his younger daughter Mâlati. But for the trickery played upon him by Mahanta Lachhman Dâs. By a neatly executed plan Mâdha Môbânty was tricked into giving Mâlati in marriage to Binoda, the Mahanta’s assistant.

The despicable practice of kanyâsundar becomes even more despicable in that the girl in most cases was given in marriage to much older people for it fetched the highest price. The older the man the higher price he would offer to get a young wife. In both the stories the daughter, though virtuous, connive with others to teach a lesson to their greedy fathers. These stories mark a departure so far as Phakirmohana’s idea of ideal womanhood was concerned. "By June 1913 Phakirmohana was beginning to realise that there was no such thing as absolute virtue- virtue, like personality, was dependent on circumstances. What was a virtue in one circumstance could be a vice in another"41

Phakirmohana also touches upon this evil practice of kanyâsundar in a couple of his poems. 42 They were attempts at touching the sympathetic cord of his readers. They also stand testimony to the reformative zeal of the writer.

Most of Phakirmohana’s fiction, both short and long, follow a moral pattern of crime and punishment. Given the social reality of the time such a scheme of things can be hardly faulted with. What he expected of his countrymen was freedom from ignorance, obscurantism and superstition. These things, Phakirmohana makes it amply clear, made the people a gullible bunch open to trickery from all and sundry - from scheming landlords and money-lenders to false godmen.

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41 J. V. Boulton, op. Cit., P-283
42 Chandraprabhâra Nirjala Upâbâsa (P. M. G. I. P-424) and Bidhabara Abhisâra (Ibid. P-545) also deal with the theme of bride price.
Dhulia Baba is the story of a false godman who hoodwinks the simple village folk into believing in his superhuman powers. The story, as Phakirmohana tells, is partially true.43

Mahanta Bāndar Das hits upon a plan to deceive the gullible, god-fearing villagers. He promises the villagers that he would make the Fire-god speak to the people. The news spreads far and wide like wild-fire. On the appointed day hundreds assemble to see the miracle. The holy fire is lit and the mahanta sits before the fire with the air of a godman. Under the impact of ganja (hemp) he hits the fire with a heavy iron implement to make the Fire-god speak. Seeing no answer forthcoming he hits the fire with greater force. His action proves tragic. Two of his disciples were positioned themselves under the fire by digging a narrow tunnel from the sanctum sanctorum of the monastery. They were to personify the Fire-god and answer the prayers of the gathering. But the whole plan goes haywire since the religious frenzy that accompanies such an occasion—the beating of drums and cymbals, the devotional song and dance, prevents any communication between the mahanta and his hidden disciples. When he fiercely hits the blaze for an answer the thin layer of earth holding the five caves in. Engulfed in flames the godman and his two disciples meet with a tragic end.

The same sort of trickery is employed by Mangarāja in Chhamdāna Thayuni Hā to defraud the innocent weaver couple Bhagīi and Sārii. Though evil triumphs initially, divine justice catches up with him at the end, just as it happens in the case of the mahanta.

Every story by Phakirmohana explores one or other hidden aspect of Orissan life to bring it to our notice.44 His Randipua Anantā (Ananta : The Widow's son) occupies a unique position in the whole range of his short fiction. It is a touching tale of selfless

43 Dhulia Baba was published in the Utkalā Sāhitya of February 1913. Phakirmohana wrote in the footnote at the end of the story—“The incident is partially true. It occurred at Dasapalla. The Mahanta did not die in the fire as it happens in the story. but was caught by the police after he amassed considerable fortune.” Utkalā Sāhitya. 19/11 (Feb. 1913)

44 Mayadhar Mānsingh, op. P-209.
sacrifice of a village lad. Ananta, the protagonist, would give his life if asked for help but would turn vicious against those who slight him in any manner. Gifted with inexhaustible energy and given to antics that prove headache to many, he sacrifices his life to save his village from inevitable submersion and calamity. When a breach in the embankment threatens the village Anantā wrenches the heavy door of the temple and dhenky (a heavy wooden implement to make rice from paddy) and runs towards the river bank. He holds the water with the door by supporting it with his back. He shouts at the villagers to throw earth and sand to stop the breach without caring for his personal safety. In the process he is buried alive. In many ways Rāndipuo Anantā is the first story of humanism pure and simple. It showed the way to laterday writers like Kālindī Charan Pānigrāhi and Kāntakavi Laxmikānta Mohāpatra to explore the inner humanism of man in many of their short stories.45

Phakirmohana had a fascination for the theme of marital bliss and harmonious family life which he portrays in a few of his short stories and his novels. It may be construed as the manifestation of the contentment his second wife brought in his life. It may also have been influenced by the attitude of his Western educated son from whom Phakirmohana did not get the love and respect he expected. His Bōgulā Bōguli is the story of perfect conjugal love. Bidiā and Chemi lead an uneventful but harmonious life till a bout of sudden fever takes their lives. As a story of conjugal love it is told with feeling and sympathy. But compared to Rebaī and Rāndipuo Anantā it seems to be less remarkable. Clearly Phakirmohana’s creative powers were on the wane when he wrote the story.46

Phakirmohana’s long stint as dewan and manager in the various feudatory states of Orissa brought him a deeper understanding of various aspects of Orissan life one such aspect was the freed and rapacity of the money lenders (mahājāwan and sahuksars) and their oppression of the hapless peasants. We come across one such character in Kuber Sāhu of

45 B. C. Samal, op. P-170
46 Mansingh Granthavali, P-249
Adharma Bitta. His all-consuming rapacity and soullessness ruins many families. He sees to it that no borrower ever escapes from his clutches even after virtually paying more than many times the principal amount. If Kuber is evil incarnate Judhisthir Sahu is goodness personified. God-fearing, generous and kind Judhisthir justifies his name. Phakirmohana obviously does not want to classify the whole Mahājan class to be evil. Kuber's greed is fixed on the wealth of Judhisthir. It almost gets materialised through the marriage of Judhisthir's daughter with Kuber's son. But the boats in which the marriage party was returning comes under the grip of a severe storm on the Mahanadi: Kuber is drowned with all his men and the dowry his son was bringing. Only his son and the daughter in law survive but are separated. Padmābati, Judhisthir's daughter, undergoes some ordeal before uniting with her husband at the end.

The story line is clumsy. Dramatic incidents and happenings crowd it. It seems like an abridged version of a novel. This explains the structural defect in the story.

One another aspect of some of Phakirmohana's short stories was awareness of local history. His autobiography is considered an invaluable document delineating not only the author personal life but the last fifty seven years of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century Orissa. A few of his short stories deal with Orissa's economic, political, and socio-cultural aspects. Particularly he refers to Orissa's shipping, iron-foundry and salt-manufacturing industry and the concomitant prosperity. The advent of British, initially welcomed as messengers of peace and stability, sounded the death knell of Orissa's maritime trade and indigenous industry. Stories like Bāleswar Pāngādāna, Punarmśika Bhava, Kamalā Prasāda Gorāpa and Kālikā Prasāda Gorāpa deal with the economic condition of Orissa. To call them stories would be a misnomer since they are actually descriptive accounts with incidents and happenings added to them. They have little character interest. Yet their importance as social documents, in spite of their dubious
Phakirmohana's Fiction Chapter - V

literary merit, is immense. In one of his newspaper articles titled "Baleswara Bandarare Olandāja Jāt" Phakirmohana dwells at length on the various indigenous industries like ship building, salt-making, iron foundry etc. In his story Baleswari Pangālam he writes, "All the fame and prosperity that Baleswar then enjoyed derived from the Nimak Mahal (the govt. Salt office) salt used to be manufactured all along the eastern sea-board stretching from the mouth of Subarnarekha in the north to that of the Dhāmna (a river) in the south. Salt manufacturing was the only calling of the people of Balasore. When the salt offices were abolished by the government the vital source of Balasore's prosperity was cut off. What happened to Balasore's salt manufacture, befell to its shipping industry too. Orissa, the ancient Kajīnga, had a glorious tradition of maritime trade. Oriyas were a sea-faring nation having trade links with Jāvā, Sumātrā, Borneo, Ceylan etc. They established colonies in those parts the remnants of which is visible even today. Phakirmohana was not unaware of this history. His story Kamaṭā Prasāda Gorāpa specifically deals with the flourishing shipping industry and maritime activities of Balasore. This story can be taken as a metaphor for the spirit of adventure of the Oriya race. The subject matter of the story relates to the year 1853. Kāṭikā Prasāda Gorāpa has the same sort of background like Kamaṭā Prasāda Gorāpa. It makes use of Phakirmohana's newspaper article Baleswara Bandarare Olandāja Jāt. These stories have little claim to the title of short story and are in the nature of personal essays. But their historical importance and in their portrayal of maritime life their worth is invaluable.
In his autobiography Phakirohana bewails the plight of his home province. Particularly through the abject condition of Balasore he portrays what happened to Orissa in general. According to him Balasore enjoyed a preeminent position as a part in Eastern India. Before the Dutch, Portuguese, French and English heard the name of Calcutta these sea-faring peoples established trade posts in Balasore. But due to various reasons this important port of calling lost out of Calcutta. The silting of river Budhabajanga, the introduction of mechanised ships, the abolition of private salt-manufacturing, the coming of the railways are some of the reasons behind Balasore's decline.

The story Bāleswara Rāhājāni brings alive the dangers that besetted travellers between Balasore and Calcutta in the 1860s. Highway robbery made travel an extremely dangerous one. Under the auspices of the British this menace was completely eradicated. Though a critic of the British in many ways Phakirmohana employs a tone of gratefulness towards the British in this story for obvious reasons. The British were welcomed to Orissa in the first place with the expectation that they would restore order and normalcy. They live up to this expectation in the story Maunu Muni as in the preceding one. It has as its theme the depredations of a group of sādhus (mendicants) who roamed all over the country. Many of them were crooks and robbers in disguise. In this story there is a fraudulent couple in the disguise of sādhus. This couple lodge themselves in the caves of Khandagiri after decamping with money and ornaments from Calcutta. The police uses ingenious methods to arrest the cheats. It is the only story of Phakirmohana where the technique of detective fiction has been used. But the author fails to manipulate the story to create suspense till the end.

What M. K. Naik says in another context is equally applicable to Phakirmohana: "His besetting sin is the irritatingly leisurely mode of narration he often indulges in, and his fatal habit of prolonging the story even after the point has been made." The one
characteristic feature that underlies Phakirmohana's later fiction, both short and long, is their comparative inferiority to his earlier works. The obvious explanation is that his creative powers were on the decline. Yet he went on writing for the sake of enriching his language and his literature.
A STUDY OF THE FICTION OF LAKSHMINATH

Lakshmināth Bezbaruā, like his Oriya counterpart, Phakirmohana, chalked out the course of modern Assamese short story. Bezbaroa's short stories can be said to bring alive the multifarious facets of Assamese life and lore. Bezbaroa's stories spawned three provinces of eastern India – Assam, Bengal and Orissa while Phakirmohana was rooted in Orissan soil only. Bezbaroa brought his encyclopedic vision of life to bear on his stories. Some of these stories may not adhere strictly to what is known as the short story, but as products of a pioneering creative forge, they have a distinct flavour of their own and a distinct place in the annals of Assamese literature. He approved on the literary scene in a momentous period of Assam's history. The language and self-identity of the Assamese were in deep peril. He wielded his facile pen to ward off this danger.

The danger to Assamese language and life came as much from without as within. The society of Bezbaroa's time was breaking in to certain alien norms as a result of the opening of the floodgates of Western education and thought. At the same time it was also a society haunted by the dead weight of custom, too weak to break away from the past and too inexperienced to carry the weight of the new. In simple it was at the crossroads. At this crucial juncture Bezbaroa was called upon to play the role of the literary charioteer.

Bezbaroa was not unfamiliar with the form of the short story. His keen interest in the form is revealed in the asides of two of his short stories. He was surely aware of the various aspects of the short story like plot, art and beauty. Yet he does not strictly which can be genuinely accepted as successful ones, in the genre. In spite of the strong impact of Western romanticism on his mind, he remains faithful to his own milieu. He was too self-conscious and too patriotic a being not to highlight the
glorious oral and written tradition of his own literature. It is probable that he tried to evolve a new type of story telling that would assimilate the East and the West.

Bezbaroā wrote stories in order to fill the vacuum in this genre in his own language. While there was this scarcity of short story writers, the readers on the other hand, were expecting stories in contemporary journals. This was one of the reasons that explain the popularity of journals at that time. Yet Bezbaroā did not take the easy path of slavish imitation. Whenever he adapted a story, he always gave it a local habitation and name. But the major part of his stories have their origin in his creative urge and in the flavour of his native earth. The forms of his stories do not come under a neat category. At times they took the shape of a parable; at times they were almost a fable; at times they looked realistic and at times fantastic, at times they were parodic and at other satirical or humorous; at times they are serious in intent and at others a light-hearted banter, and often they turn out to be a poet’s attempts at fiction.

For Bezbaroā writing was not merely a literary activity. The zeal to serve his language, literature and culture was everywhere. Given the critical circumstances it was understandable. Though Assamese was officially reinstated in 1873 in educational and judicial institutions, efforts to replace it with Bengali was still on. Therefore strengthening literature through creative writing seemed to be an effective way to fend off inimical forces against the Assamese language. This aspect needs to be kept in mind while discussing the fiction of Bezbaroā.

Bezbaroā prefers to use the traditional nomenclature Sādhukathā (tale), over its modern form called chuti-galpa (Short-story). By Sādhuh he meant both the traditional folk-tale in one hand and the short story on the other. To Bezbaroā folktales are the unwritten life history of a people. This belief led him to collect a large number of folk-tales, which found their way in to anthologies like Sādhukathā Kuki (1910), Budhiār Sādhuh (1912) and Kokā Deutā Āru Nāti Larā. Hem Baruā, in fact.

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57 “Atleast it will fill the pages of ‘Bānhī’. There are no stories for ‘Bānhī’ etc. B.G.L. P. 761
59 Satyendranarayan Goswami, op. Cit., P-194.
asserts that Bezbaroa’s genius was typically moulded to the folk-tale. In the same breath he also admits that in the hands of Bezbaroa the perspective of the modern short story in Assamese has become steadily clear in outline making him the father of modern short story. The readers that Bezbaroa addressed his stories were not sophisticated or highly educated. They were brought on a staple diet of folk-tales and puranic literature. Bezbaroa feared that the modern genre called the short story might be lost on his readers. Besides he remained faithful to his original conception of the short story (sādhukatha or gulpa as he preferred to call it) as a medium for putting across a message. By the time Bezbaroa started writing stories Rabindranath had already firmly established the genre in Bengali literature. He knew the life of bengal as profoundly as any and dealt with social issues nagging his time. But he never professed, as Bezbaroa did, to put across a morale through them. The therapeutic element in Bezbaroa, therefore, probably a deliberate stratagem given the social reality of his province. By virtue of his marriage into the Tagore family and as an avid reader of Bengali literature he came under the spell of Rabindranāth. Yet the seminal influence on his creative endeavour was Assamese society which he passionately espoused all his life. Because of this faithfulness to his roots he could chalk out an independent course for himself and his literature.

The society in which Tagore unleashed his astounding creativity was comparatively much more awakened and enlightened than either Assamese or Oriya societies. Tagore knew his society to its marrowbones and could not avoid the social scene in many of his stories, his forte was the eternal verities, the unchanging well-springs of human nature. His stories clearly transcended the given socio-temporal context and focussed on things that lived forever. In contrast Assamese and Oriya societies still awaited awakening. The age-old stupor and inertia of these two provinces required a different kind of literature than was written at that time in Bengal. The reason is not far to seek. Assam and Orissa came under British dominion much later than Bengal. As a consequence the middleages lingered on in these two provinces well into the second half of the 19th century. The first priority for Bezbaroa

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60 Lakshmināth Bezbaroā”, P.51
61 Loc. Cit.
was, therefore, the awakening of his people into new consciousness. The moral fervour in his stories was the one effective weapon that came handy. It is easy to see it as defect now, but his creative endeavours transcended the narrow confines of aesthetic considerations.

It is not that every story that Bezbaroa wrote had a 'palpable design' on the reader. There are stories in which the aesthetic aspects reign supreme—stories that demand attention purely on the basis of literary merit. Towards the last phase of his literary career Bezbaroa was moving towards a kind of story that seems to have no conscious morale in them. He feared that he might be faulted for not being faithful to his original conception i.e. pointing a moral. This could have been the impulse behind his inclusion of two asides about the form of the short story in Pātmagī and Swān. 62 These stories, successful as they are in the genre, focussed on the eternal verities—'general truths concerning human nature.' 63 By including the critical asides Bezbaroa undoubtedly mars the final aesthetic appeal of the stories. This also leads him to stretch the story line after the point is made. This affects the oneness of effect that the story form demands. Phakirmohana too follows the same pattern in some of his stories.

For Bezbaroa the short story was not a foreign plant grafted unto the Indian soil but a natural extension of the folk-tale. This very conception has an inbuilt tension. The folk-tale, like the epic, has its roots in the collective consciousness of the community; the short story, in contrast, focuses on the individual in his lonely, solitary moorings. To put it in another way the protagonist's fate in a folk-tale is linked to the community; whereas that of the short story makes his own choice. 64 While the folk-tale's conception of time is cyclic, the short story's is linear.

One problem that the Indian writer of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century faced was to reconcile two sets of values— one obtained by reading an alien literature and the other available in life. The same pattern is easily discernible:

62 Bhuben Barua op. Cit., P-157
63 Ibid
64 Meenakshi Mukherjee. op. Cit., P-4
in Bezbaroa. About Bezbaroa's synthetic vision one can aptly say that "we have both yoga or addition of good things from the outside which we require, and kshema or preservation of all great things in our own culture."65

Besides Somerset Maugham, Bezbaroa was influenced to a large degree by the prolific satiric tradition of Bengal before Rabindranath. Stalwarts like Pearichand Mitra, Kāliprasanna Sinha, Bankimchandra Chātterji and others had their impact on Bezbaroa. One cannot of course forget his illustrious Assamese predecessor Hemachandra Baruā. His renowned works Kāniyār Kirtan and Bāhire Rungsang Bhitare Kowā Bhāturi, pioneered the tradition of satiric writing in Assamese literature. One can not help perceive the echo of Indranath Bose' Bhārat Uddhār in Bezbaroa's hilarious piece Kripābar Barbaruwār Bhārat Uddhār. Both make a mess of Michaell Madhusudan Dutt's blank verse.

The impact of Western education and thought had disconcerting effect on the organic Assamese society. It created a class of educated elite, howsoever small their number may be, who were dazzled by everything Western to the detriment of ago-old native values. This blind imitation was confined largely to the superficial aspects of the West. They missed those positive aspects of Western culture that would have been worthy of imitation in this context Abid Husain's opinion comes to mind. "(T)he intrinsic merit of western culture, apart from the glamour that everything associated with the ruling nation has for a subject people, lay in its modern scientific attitude of mind and practical efficiency".66 There were, of course, people who did imbibe these things, but such people were rather exceptions. The general trend was thoughtless imitation. The insularity and aloofness of the English in India, as a result of their social pride, discounted any opportunity for the native to understand the English character from close quarters. "So the Indian, looking from a respect full distance, tried to see English culture as embodied in the life of the English in India, they only got a glimpse of such superficial phenomenon as their dress, food and general outward way of living, or their unsociability and materialism.67

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65 S. K. Chatterji, op. Cit., P-10
66 S. Abid Husain, op. cit., P-106
67 Ibid.
The resultant clash of values of the East and the West is the focus of some of Bezbaroa's short stories. Ironically Bezbaroa himself was thoroughly westernized in his sartorial taste, food and other such external details, and he might be getting at himself through the satirical sketches of the hyper-westernized. To this category of stories belong Malak Guin Guin, Bhokendra Barnā, Domburudharar Sansār, Bāpirām etc. There are many others in which are scattered Bezbaroa's thinly veiled whiplashes against the 'so called new type of men whose attachment to newly acquired values is more a mockery than reality.' Among the stories in which Bezbaroa holds up to ridicule the follies and hollowness of the anglophile Malak Guin Guin occupies an important place. It can be taken as a metaphor for the schism that appeared in the traditional Assamese society as a result of Western education and thought. Malkhu, the protagonist was apparently a dutiful son. But his stint in a Calcutta College changes his whole perspective. The transformation of his name from Malkhu to fashionable anglicized version of Malak sounds significant. When Sājtola visits his son Malak at the latter's official residence to plead with him to visit his ailing mother Malak's response is lukewarm to say the least. He is not so much worried about his mother's condition as with the condition of the village road, which would surely soil his Western outfit. That his modernism is limited to external details is brought out in his absurd request to his father stretching the point to more absurd limits he adds that he would be really pleased if his father put on a coat and pants. Infect he turns his fathers away and refuses to acknowledge him because the old man was in dirty tatters. What would the Darwān think of him if he acknowledge his father? He orders the Darwān to show Sājtola the gate without harming him. But the truth is he has already inflicted the greatest harm a son could inflict on his father.

Through Malak Bezbaroa contests the colonial legacy of individualism and officialdom by positing precolonial values of community life and moral responsibility. The British wanted to create a class of Indians to act as a conduit of Western thought and ideas. Malak is a caricatured representative of this class.

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68 Hem Barua, op. Cit., P-55
69 B. G. Vol. I, P-599
Though Bezbaroa employs the farcical and caricaturist mode, he succeeds in putting across his point. What pained Bezbaroa was mental colonization. This “is usually attributed to the colonial education they received. In the colonies, as at home (England), English language and literature played a key role in naturalizing British values.” Bezbaroa was perceptive enough to see through this game and through mimicking the colonizer’s moves through Malak and his kind he makes it in to ‘a strategy of resistance’.

Another story, Bhokendra Bunaii, though less successful, can be clubbed together with Malak Guin Guin in so far as Western education completely disorients the outlook of the protagonist. Bhokendra, the son of a well to do Gondhái Gowál, too pursues his higher studies in Calcutta. Blinded by the dazzle of Western education he fails to channellise his innate intelligence in any constructive direction. His education does not enter into any chemical combination with his life. He too opts for a more respectable sounding name. Bhokendra Barua, from the rustic looking Bhokandái Gowál. Like Malak he too indulges in absurdities like forwarding suggestions to his parents to change their names.

Bezbaroa puts the story of Bhokendra in three parts. The protagonist collects huge donations from the public in the name of Maran Sabha. He takes the money to Calcutta apparently to meet the Viceroy but actually he misappropriates. The story can be interpreted as that of the social climber for whom the community is but a fertile ground to feed his greed on. It can also be seen as Western individualism eating in to the vitals of the organic community life of pre-colonial Assam. But the lighthearted, humorous manner in which the story is told conceals these serious under currents. It is a supreme example of faulty acculturization.

Bāpirám also has elements of the unprincipled social climber who can stoop to any depths to achieve his end. The character of Bhūdhār embodies these traits in the story. He is a young man enamoured deeply of everything English. He would have been well off pursuing his father’s traditional calling but he prefers to work under an

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70 Boehmer, op. Cit., P-170
71 Ibid, P-171
English manager of a teagarden. Bezbaroa comments in the story: Bhūdhar belongs to a class of young men of that time whose heads were full of half-baked ideas of English. He thinks it his great fortune to serve under the English rather than pursue the independent business of his father. Bhūdhar has the same ingredients as Malak and Bhokendra—a preference for servility over independence. This tendency can be called free-bondage. Serving under the colonial dispensation ensures quick social mobility. There were two things that ensured this—sympathy and obsequiousness. Traditional means of livelihood demanded hard work and perseverance which became a casualty to Western education.

Individualism assumes society to be a conglomerate of highly atomised individuals ceaselessly pursuing their selfish ends. He would stoop to any depth to achieve his personal ambition. Bhūdhar epitomises this tendency fully. For monetary gain he was about to barter his older brother’s widowed daughter to satisfy the lasciviousness of the English officer. But for the timely intervention of Bāpirām he would succeeded. Failing to dissuade Bhūdhar from his evil designs Bāpirām carries out a fatal attack on the English officer. This not only saves the hapless girl but brings about a change of heart in Bhūdhar.

Bāpirām’s triumph is in fact the triumph of native values over the amoral social climber’s borrowed ones. It throws light on Lakshmināth’s propogation of the age old values of the native soil.

The exposure to English education in the early stages created a class who thought it below dignity to take up traditional professions. Instead they chose to serve under the colonial masters which invariably turned in to a kind of bondage. Bhudhar is of this category. This trait is called free-bondage since it entails choosing slavery when the option of freedom is available. Bāpirām also highlights the character of some, if not all, Englishmen who behaved as if they were a law unto themselves. The English manager of the estate is just one such example. In contrast Lakshmināth’s attitude towards British justice in India was still positive. Bāpirām comments in the story: “It is the company that rules, not the Mān or the Mārum. There is justice yet in

72 B. G. vol. 1, P-586
the company dispensation". English education also equipped some with a new kind of power to control and manipulate others. This class also acquired an indomitable rapaciousness and acquisitive instinct. Not that Western education brought only negative values. But the native writer dwelt on vices to free his society from these. It was only natural that western education sowed the seeds of skepticism and filled the receiver’s minds with abstract ideas which the native anglophile could not relate to his immediate surrounding. It distorted their perception of life and made them dangle in midair. Though comically presented the words of Dambarudhar in Amar Samsar sounds significant. While wooing his childwife Dambarudhar utters "Oh dear! Who the D-knows whether there is God or not (Originally in English)! I’ll gradually make you understand the ideas of Mill, Hume, Spencer, Waine and you’ll know how much our countrymen are in the dark".

His critical aside about lemonade being a rarity also corroborates his ideas of his own culture and was of life being of inferior quality.

For most part Bezbaroa employs sympathetic humour to portray Dambarudhar’s passionate, if strange and ludicrous, attempts at wooing his childwife. Quite understandably more than anything he frightens his wife out of her wits. Her report to her mother in law that Dambaru might have gone made could be taken as the author’s comment, albeit tongue in cheek, on the scatter-brained young anglophile.

Commenting on the essence of Indian life V. K. Gokak says: "They (Indian people) accepted life in its totality, the temporal and the eternal, the physical and the metaphysical and sought to include them in a luminous and harmonious synthesis." But the wind of change that Western education brought fostered the material at the cost of the spiritual and insensitivity towards others at the cost of human values. In two of his important stories Rachit and Lalit Kikati Bezbaroa explores a whole gamut of issues that came to be associated with English education.

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73 Ibid., P-589
74 B. G. vol. I, P-672
75 India and World Culture, P. 108.
Rachit has two distinct sections, one placed in contradistinction with the other. The first deals with Kamal Lochan's rejection of English education and his subsequent rise in life. His rise is not to be looked at from the perspective of material prosperity. More than anything he represents the best in Assamese life. Independent minded, confident and hardworking as a boy he revolts against the prevailing educational canon- 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. His spirit is not to be 'discipline' or coerced by Angel, the English headmaster. He could not mouth lessons which have no direct bearing on the life around him. His father tries to convince him about the importance of English education—"If you don't learn English and become an amola or moharir (petty clerk) in the kachery you'll not be getting respect these days". Kamal Lochan's answer is that he is confident enough to earn his bread by any riffraff but he 'will not set up in to a place (meaning school) where there is no self respect.' with hard work and perseverance he rises in due degrees to become a leading citizen of the town. Since he rises in life without the blessing of colonial education Bezbaroa seems to posit it as an antidote and alternative to the tendency of the time to attain quick social mobility through English education. But what the author really wants to drive home is the basic human qualities that remain intact in Kamal Lochan. This becomes evident when he resists his mother's proposal that he should marry for the second time since his first marriage did not yield a male issue in two years of married life. He is vindicated when later she mothers three daughters and a son. He curtly tells his mother he would put into practice any command of her's but not this one. "Marriage is only once for me in this world and that too is over". And as always it is his conviction that triumphs.

Kamal Lachan also sets an ideal example of fatherhood. He gives good education to all his children. In difference to the wishes of his wife he gives his youngest daughter in marriage to J. R. Baruā (E. A. C.). J. R. Baruā's story stands in diametric opposition to that of his father in law's. Originally Jina Rām Gāyan, he changes the name to first Jina Rām Baruā, then to Jina. R. Baruā and finally to J. R. Baruā, E. A. C. Obedient at first the downslide in his Character starts with Western
education. He carries his English manners to an absurd length. He tries to turn up in Western outfit in the most traditional of situations like marriage. Instead of touching his inlaws’ feet he wants to shake hands with them. Bezbaroa uses a striking metaphor to describe such people—"When the tadpole loses its tail, it hops about like a frog." S Abid Husain writes—

"The spoken English of the native sahibs is no more less, perhaps even more, ridiculous than their written English. In writing their mistakes were confined to grammar and style. But in speech the additional errors of pronunciation and accent heightened the comic effect. Specially in vain attempt to bring out the precise English tone they strained their native organs of speech curious sounds were produced which sometimes baffled the comprehension of the listener. Their English dress was often made of showy material, ill-designed and ill-fitting, and had very little in common with English clothes which are well-known for their fine cut and easy fit." 78

If his sartorial taste and manners made the native brown sahib look ridiculous, his willful negligence of human values turned him unsocial and unsociable. This later aspect is brought out in J R. Baruā’s inhuman treatment of his wife Brindā under the impact of wine and women. The hapless Brinda had to flee to save her life. Kamal Lochan receives his daughter and grand child happily and dashes off an acknowledgement letter to his son in law :- Received in full my daughter Srimati Brindeswari Devi back (for sometime in possession of J. R. Baruā, Esq. E A. C.) with interest (his grandson)." 79

The apparently humorous looking acknowledgement letter (Receipt – Rachit) has more to it than meets the casual eye. The advent of British brought about a shift “from a pastoral, largely oral world to a world of bureaucracy and writing” 80. The act of writing emphasises the physical, the material, the formal, the letter rather than the spirit behind the letter is emphasised. For J. R. Baruā marriage is a formal tie which can be snapped anytime he wants. The Indian concept of marriage as a sacred, lifelong

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78 National Culture of India, P-116
79 Rachit, B. G. I. P-753
80 J. K. Nayak and H. S. Mahapatro. op.cit. P-32
commitment is blissfully marginalised turning it into a contract of convenience. Through Kamal Lochan’s acknowledgement letter Bezbaroa attacks the Western concept of marriage that neglected social imperatives.

Another aspect of the story which is not expressly presented but remains as a sort of understatement is Bezbaroa’s offer of a third option to counter the unhealthy impact of the West even while imbibing its positive ingredients. Kamal Lochan, though spurns Western education, is not deprived of its positive aspects. He does not simply mouth platitudes like so many of those who came under the blinding impact of the West.

Srikanta Hazarika of Laliti Kākati manifests the same vice as J. R. Baruā. But the focus of the story shifts in a big way to the question of emancipation of women. Srikānta’s education and his becoming an official under the British uproots him from his native environment. The dehumanised ethos of colonial education manifests in his attitude towards marriage. His wife Laliti is the daughter of one Sundar Kākati, a rich and pious man. He showers all his affection on his only child Laliti. Inspite of his reservations he yields to his wife’s desire to see the daughter married to a hakim (officer). After marriage Laliti is tortured to no end and Sundar’s worst fears come to pass. When Laliti returns to her parents Sundar dies broken-hearted and his wife is bed-ridden.

For Srikanta, like it was for J. R. Baruā, the institution of marriage is rather like a laboratory where one tries all sorts of experiments.81 He marries two more times after divorcing Laliti but he contrives the same sort of ending for his wives. To this extent there is not much of difference between this story and Rachit. But what makes this one different and in some ways significant is that the writer seems to champion the cause of women’s emancipation. In the form of Laliti’s long letter to her estranged husband Bezbaroa introduces issues that were clearly ahead of his times Laliti questions the very basis of the social custom which enjoins parents to marry off their daughters. Why should she be married off or should marry simply because she is a

81 B. G. I, P-755
woman - she seems to question. In the traditional Hindu society an unmarried girl is a taboo. Laliti also dares to question the very ideas of virtue, chastity and fidelity the husband values in his wife. There is no social rule that enjoins the man to cultivate the same code of conduct that the wife is expected to confirm to. To Laliti this seems patently unjust. The plight of women in a patriarchal society is therefore understandable. The male dominates every lever of social machinery: the rules they make can hardly do justice to the other half of mankind. This applied to English law-makers in India as well. Despite their erudition they could not understand the condition of native women and consequently the rules they legislated failed to do justice to Indian women.

By using her maiden name after her divorce Laliti attempts a revolt of sorts. But her revolt is not carried to its logical conclusion. Bezbaroa’s Vaishnavite upbringing interferes with it. Laliti declares herself to be a free bird but by promising to devote her life to the service of suffering humanity and more importantly to piety she seems to compensate for her revolt and ensure her social acceptability. A young, independent-minded divorced woman is a threat to social morality. By assigning her life to social service and religiosity Bezbaroa in a way has downplayed the radical implications of Laliti’s story. “In a strictly structured, role-oriented society the widow’s position was an uneasy one. The unharnessed sexual energy of a young woman without a proprietor posed a threat to the stable order of society. The severe rules of conduct and affaire imposed on them on spiritual and religious pretexts could be seen as attempts at desexualising them so that the potential danger is minimised.” Bezbaroa in fact calls Laliti a jīvā hāri, meaning a virtual widow.

For Laliti there were other options than the ascetic – cum – social worker she turns, though in itself the path she chooses is not wrong. Remarriage, in spite of Vidyāsāgar’s spirited movement for widow marriage, was not the option that Bezbaroa allowed his heroine. He may have felt that the time was not ripe for this. Saratchandra in spite his strong advocacy of women’s emancipation fails to grant any one of his innumerable widows in his novels lead a happy married life.

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82 Meenakshi Mukherjee, op. cit., P-105
83 Ibid.
Saratandra Bezboroa may have "typified the ambivalence of the educated Indian middle class which has compassion for the exploited, but is reluctant to disturb the social order in which it has a vested interest".84

However Bezboroa's compassion for and understanding of the need to look at his women characters as individuals, separate and inviolable, is a clear break from the traditional feminine stereotype.

_Bhempuria Maujadar_ is yet another story dealing with the new individualistic ethic. For this sort of individual money-making becomes the be all and end all of life. In capitalist economy, a gift that came with British rule, the individual puts self before society and competition superceded cooperation. "Money leads to the dissolution of all bonds among men by giving rise to a Darwinian competition for its acquisition. The individual discovers through money a new form of mastery, a new way of manipulating other human beings who can now be bought and sold"85. This self-centric, narcissistic credo manifests itself in the educated as well as the half educated. Phakirmohana's protagonist Natabara from _Māmu_ is a manifestation of this capitalist ethic who swindles his widowed sister's money and estate for personal gain. While the educated cornered plum jobs under the British, the lesser educated compensated their lack of education by sycophancy of the meanest kind. Bhempuria Maujadar belongs to this class.

Lambodar's (the later _Maujadar_) education never goes beyond the one year he spent at school. Yet he succeeds in getting a job at the _kachery_. This gives him ample scope to display his immense talents for sycophancy by virtue of which he rises to become the _Maujadar_ of a particular area. The major portion of the revenue he collects from the poor peasants ends up in his personal coffer. Needless to say this swindling ensures his phenomenal rise in the social ladder.

Bezbaroa savagely lampoons such money-spinning lumpenism. Infact the name Lambodar chosen for the protagonist must have been deliberate. This stands for

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84 Ibid.
85 R. K. Nayak & H. S. Mohapatra : op. cit. P. - 33
misappropriation of public property for personal gain. The author is critical of the generosity showed to such sycophantic individuals by the British regime.

Lampooning of a lesser intensity is found in Nāṅgaluchandra Dās. Nāṅgalu makes a mess of the English romantic love tradition. He reads his love poems to his landlord’s eight-year old daughter, gets caught and ejected from the house. But that does not dampen his romance-stricken heart a bit. In Calcutta, where he lands for his higher studies, he keeps up his rendezvous with love poetry. Circumstances so turnout that his hostel mates think Nāṅgalu to be in love with the cleaning woman of the hostel. He is shuttled out of one lodging after another till he completes his graduation, returns to Assam and becomes a respectable hākim.

This story is a critique of the British regime which offered jobs to all who are familiar with the English language. It did not matter whether they imbibed the positive aspects of the education or not.

Most of Bezbaroa’s good characters show a healthy balance between the East and the West. They believe in the wisdom and sanctity of the scriptures and at the same time are not averse to learning good things from their contact with the English. Those who throw to the winds native tradition, wisdom and way of life and go all out after acquiring alien traits turn out to be denationalised and dehumanised individuals. Very often the acquired traits did take the shape of the grotesque. But for the newly rising class there was an aura of glamour around these traits. Sometimes even the simple rustic was charmed in to them. The hilarity of its effect can be seen in the story of Jagara of ‘Jagara Mandalar Premābhīnay’. Jagara got to understand from the educated youth of his neighbourhood that to enjoy most love has to be chewed slowly and not gulped down in haste. Since he did the latter all his life he tries to infuse new meaning in to it by courting his unlettered wife in a romantic vein. This naturally creates a most ludicrous situation giving rise to side-splitting laughter.

B. G. I. P. 705
Jagārā’s excuse for trying such novelty is that it is associated with social mobility. After getting the respectable job of a Mandal it becomes an imperative to keep pace with the changing times. “We are counted among the respectable in the king’s court and among the laity. It will not do if we do not change our old way of life now,”87 he tells his wife. Under lying this comment is the assumption that a rise in social status demands a concomitant change in one’s way of life. But life style cannot be changed overnight. It must be acquired and internalised over a period of time. Sudden change is likely to expose one to hilarious incongruity as is the case with Jagārā. While such traits are savaged in Malak, Srikānt and others, Jagārā is only comically treated since he is past his prime and unlikely to fall a prey to alien tendencies. Prathama Darshanat Opajē Prem is more or less in the same vein. The story enacts the concept ‘love at first sight’. Girindra is a byproduct of the new education. Supervising the reaping of corn one day he is bewitched by the beauty of a reaper girl. He makes up his mind to get her in spite of the differences of caste and social position. He sends a man to gather information about the girl and her family. The man botches up his mission by mistaking another girl. His comments earlier about the native customs regarding marriage is no different from those of the Western educated of the time. “I am a young educated man of the new system (of education) I have set aside the old rusty custom and shyness and started meeting and talking with the girl to better acquaint myself with her”88

The author does not say anything overtly against courtship. The physical description of the girl says it all. The description of her breasts, buttocks and thighs is unmistakably sexual bringing out the sensual nature of the attraction. It is not love as such but infatuation. Bezbaroā’s own marriage stands in stark contrast to this. Leave alone courting he never saw Prajnā Sundari even once before marriage. But that did no come in the way of marital bliss. By not conferring happiness on Girindra Bezbaroa may be sympathetic with the age-old native tradition of marriage.

If Bezbaroā took up cudgels against alien tendencies making inroads into the native life he also took to task certain obduracies ingrained in the social fabric of

87 Ibid. P. 706
88 B. G. Vol. I P-504
Assam. In a few stories he comes down heavily against casteism. Assam has always been a liberal society. Its unique geographical condition made liberalism a historical necessity. “The manifestation of the liberalism of the Assamese folk-mind is to be found in the attitude taken in regard to the caste system. Not that the caste system does not operate in Assam; but caste rigidity has never been a feature of the Assamese society. Untouchability has been practically unknown and caste-based disabilities have been minimum.”

In spite of this in-built liberalism, caste inhibitions could not be entirely banished from certain sections. With certain castes like “Brahmins and other one or two ‘higher’ castes,” it was severe. The impetus to fight this necessarily came with the spread of Western education.

To this category belong stories like *Lambodar Dekā, Jātrāmar Jāti, Dharmadevi Phaisalānabīs, Phātemā Bibi* etc. In these stories Bezbaroa brings alive the evils of casteism and orthodoxy, particularly the obscurantism of the Brahmins. In *Lambodar Dekā*, the protagonist of the same name, falls sick on his way to Guwahati on a hired boat. Circumstances compel him to eat out of the hands of the lower caste boatmen leading to his ostracism by his caste brethren. The narrator is obviously the author’s voice who pleads with the *Phaisalānabīs* who took the lead in the ostracization of Lambodar. Cut off from all sources of community life Lambodar’s life turns pitiable. This story shows the cruel face of entrenched orthodoxies. The people who reap the dividends of caste superiority quote scripture and *Samhitas* like that of Manu to perpetual inhuman acts on fellow human beings. The authorial voice in the form of the narrator is acutely aware of what such people made of Hinduism. “Hinduism”, says the narrator, “is one of the most liberal of religions. It is you people (the *phaisalānabīs*) who made it illiberal without comprehending its spirit.”

For Brahmins like *Phaisalānabīs* caste turns into a weapon to reinforce their superiority, to control and manipulate the lives of others. In a story discussed earlier Bezbaroa hints at the instinct to enjoy power over others. *Jātrāmar Jāti* too is a...
severe indictment of caste prejudices. The news spreads that the Brahmin Minadhara's son, pursuing his higher studies at Calcutta, ate out of the hands of a Bengali Brahmin and lost his caste. The man behind the rumour was Jatiram who goes to the extent of breaking up the proposed marriage ties between Minadhara's son and Sadarāmin's daughter. It can be strictly classified as a short story but a scholarly exploration of the origins of the caste system, its evolution and degeneration. Bezbaroa is convinced that assertion of caste and even race purity are made only by ignoramuses since intermingling and intermarriage of races is a historical fact in India. The author also rejects the notion of the divine origin of castes. Employing all his rationalistic power and scholarship he proves the evolutionary nature of the caste hierarchy. He throws in to focus how such rigidities were not prevalent even in the Vedic times. "Jāt" is a clear and unequivocal attack on the rigidities of the caste system from the point of view of a Hindu rationalist.

It is interesting to note how Bezbaroa applies the evolutionary principle to explain caste formation. And the same principle applies to traditions and customs. Traditions and customs are, to use a common metaphor, like running water which creates its own internal mechanism to purify itself and remain life sustaining and vibrant. To obstruct this flow is to stagnate and petrify the flow of life. The deep entrenched orthodoxies among Brahmins was so strong that the first generation educated elite from Assam like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Bezbaroa's elder brothers used to take with them a retinue of Brahmin cooks to Calcutta since food cooked by Bengali Brahmins would effect their caste purity. Yet caste prejudices were not as disabling in Assam as it were in Bengal and Orissa. Bezbaroa knew Bengal and Orissa from inside which might have led him to write serious articles on the subject in the Šāhīn.
These caste prejudices created and enforced by the self-styled godheads of Hinduism were also responsible for the conversion of Hindus in to other religions that offered them the dignity of a human being. *Nistārinī Devī Bā Phatemā Bibi* is the story of a Brahmin girl transforming into Phatema Bibi for partaking in the holy Eid feast. Bezbaroa’s catholicity, in spite of his being a practising Hindu, is remarkably brought out in the story. He lauds Islam generously for treating all its faithful as equals. In contrast Hindu orthodoxy is shown not only as conservative but inhuman in its degenerate *avatar*. For the same reason Jayachandra of *Dharmadwaja Phaisalānabīs* converts to Islam with his entire family. While conversion of Hindus in to other religions is a sad commentary of Hinduism for people like Phaisalānabīs it is considered as a personal triumph.

Stringent caste laws were made by Brahmins to establish caste superiority. Caste, which initially came to be associated with work, later came to be associated with birth later. Therefore Brahmins could claim the top slot in the caste hierarchy solely on the basis of birth even if they are totally unfamiliar with the scriptures. *Bhomkerolā* seems to be a story that bursts the myth of Brahmin superiority, albeit as an understatement. Here a lower caste, good looking young man passes off for a Brahmin because of his uncanny knack at reciting Sanskrit *stokas*. So much so that he succeeds in getting the two daughters of the Vidyaratna for his wife. But once his knavery is discovered one of his wives sets the house on fire to save the family name as it were. But Bhomkerolā (the young man) makes his escape good with minor burn injuries only to resurface as Sitanath Sarma Vidyaratna, a Sanskrit *Pundit* after hoodwinking the Brahmins at Nabadwīp.

The story has more to it than meets the eye. In spite of the general liberal attitude towards caste distinctions “the Assamese folk-mind has not taken kindly to the privilege enjoyed by the Brahmins. This attitude manifests, like in the present one, in many “folktales in which the lowcaste attendant gets the better of his highcaste master. The Brahmin priest is also the butt of the lampooning type.” Brahmins as superior beings should possess the power to differentiate cheese from chalk. The lack

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*Lakshminath’s Fiction – Chapter - V*

*98* Ibid, op. cit., p 47

*99* Ibid.
of this power is exposed in *Bhomkerolô*. The author also makes an understatement in the story about the distorted meaning of a Brahmin – someone who could parrot scriptures without imbuing their spirit in personal life.

If caste inhibitions are detrimental to the good health of society, some vices like opium posed no less threat. Yet while orthodox obduracies come in for severe treatment opium addiction is treated by Bezbaroa with certain indulgent good humour. His illustrious predecessor and arguably the foremost satirist in Assamese Hemachandra was murderously brutal in his treatment of opium addiction in *Kânyâr Kirtan*. The publication of the book in 1861 coincided with the Phulguri Revolt spurred by the government ban on poppy. Hemachandra has shown in this book how “opium penetrated into the heart of society and made it weak, poor, degenerate, immoral and mean” In the three decades that elapse between the publication of *Kânyâr Kirtan* and the start of Bezbaroa’s creative career the menace of opium must have or at least thought to have slackened its hold to the extent that the diehard opium-addict was an object of amused pity rather than scorn. “Bezabaroa looked upon the opium addict as a dying generation and could afford to portray them good humouredly as objects of pity rather than contempt.” In stories like *Milârâma Atmajatfhiun*, *Chemchampa*, *Kekokakâ*, *Årji*, *Åmar Kânyâ Sabhâr I&k Adhibeshani* etc. “the satiric tone almost shades off into a sense of pure humour.” The unifying thread among these stories is the protagonist Milaram, the genial opium addict. One can not help liking this garrulous character. The diehard opium addict loses all sense of reality and lives in a world of hazy, unreal world of daydreams. Milârâm himself sums up the condition of people like him “I do not know what my mind is, when it sees water it likes to become fish, when it sees the sky it wants to turn in to bird, when it sees flower it wishes to become a black-bee (*bhonorâ*)”

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100 Satyendranath Sarma, *op. Cit.* P. 302
101 Nagcn Saikia, *op. Cit.* P. 218
102 Ibid.
103 T. Misra, *op. Cit.* P. 125
104 Bhuban Barua, *op. Cit.* P. 158
105 B. G. Vol. I. P. 678
Narcotic addiction of all sorts deprives the hapless Victim his capacity for action and thought. Like the proverbial fish that nibbles at every bait, the hemp addict too is doomed. Though there are some references to the use of opium for medicinal purposes, it turns out to be rather an excuse to hide their abject surrender to narcotic substance of various shades. Even when it is used for medicinal purposes, the user without his being aware of it, becomes an addict, he is compelled to take it even after its medicinal use stops. This is called the 'rebound effect'.

Though the newly educated class hated opium, wine became a favourite pastime of this section. In fact it became a symbol of upward mobility. In Erábāri the protagonist alludes to the defeat of Kuni (opium) by Western liquor. In Kakāyek Pako Dukāyek Bhado the young Saikiā prefers brandy over country liquor.

Women occupy a special place in Bezbaruā’s writings, particularly in his short stories and in his only novel Padum Kūwari. The novel’s interest centres round Padum Kūwari and Phul Āideo and the protagonist Suryakumār serves only as a link between the two. In quite a few stories women hog the limelight. Bezbaruā the romantic showers his tenderness on them. While delineating women Bezbaruā the poet triumphs over Bezabroa, the prose writer. “Woman,” says Bhaben Baruā, “comes in for a specially tender understanding in some of the stories...” Besides Nistaruti Devi, Laliti Kākati, Racit etc., which have already been discussed, there are others like Lāokholā, Bhadari, Senti, Pātmukhi, Mādhai Mālāti, Kanaklātā, Erā Bāri etc. which have an array of memorable female Characters.

The plight of women in patriarchal society is quite understandable Erábāri deals with tragic love affair of a young widow. When the affair with the neighbourhood youngman called Bhāgadatta comes to light she kills herself by drowning in a pond. While the inhumanity of society rejects her, it is nature that gives her refuge and succour. Bezbaruā condones the young widow’s misadventure by assigning it to largely external forces. Despite of his sympathy for the hapless

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107 Ibid., P. 161
108 B. G. Vol. I. P. 731
woman, the use of words like *sattwa* (chastity), *pāpa* (sin), *abādha* (illicit) etc.
to label her passion leave enough scope to nullify that sympathy. These words may have
been an index, though not overtly, of the author’s unconscious attachment to the
feudal values. The child-widow of *Lāokholā* too faces the same tragic consequences
of seeking, in spite of herself her, unfulfilled passions (her husband dies while she was
still a child). While in *Lāokholā* the woman commits suicide, in *Lāokholā* she is killed
by her husband’s elder brother with whom she has had sexual relationship. When she
gets pregnant her lover, to save his name being sullied, murders and throws her in to
the family pond. Years later the “skull discovered in the daytime... assumes in the
night the full form of a woman who tells the guest of the family how she became a
fallen woman, falling a victim to man’s wiles”109 The perpetrator of the crime like this
man succeeds in getting back the respect and confidence of the society. He could do
this by suitably bribing those who counted. Bezbaroa here by succeeds in showing
how two entirely different yardsticks are applied in judging man and woman. In most
patriarchal societies it is common to assign a large part of guilt to woman in any
sexual liaison, whatever the extenuating situation may be. The male’s depravity is
justified by concocting rationale which assume woman to be an inferior species or just
a commodity. Social injustices meted out to women, severe and unremitting as they
were in Bengal, were not exactly unknown to Assamese society in spite of its liberal
attitude towards the fair sex and towards life in general. “Bezbaroa shows in other
stories that the social cruelty perpetrated on women was not a feature of Bengali
society alone, but it was very much a part of the upper caste Hindu society.”110 *Seuti*
is an instance of a woman falling victim to patriarchal value system. The girl once
married become an exclusive property of the husband. “We’ll have to train the girl
property; you have no right over the girl any more,” tells the mother in law of *Seuti* in
response to her father’s pleadings to take the girl to his house.111 Inspite of the
barbaric treatment of her mother in law and sister in law Seuti could not seek succour
in her parents’. The concept of marriage in Hindu society is something sacred and
hence inviolable whatever the circumstances may be. Seuti submits meekly to this
concept only to be poisoned to death by her husbands’ mother and sister. Bezbaroa

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109 Bhaben Barua, op. Cit., P. 162
110 T. Misra, op. Cit., P.126
111 B. G. Vol. 1, P. 664
may have been critical of the Shakti cult being a devout Vaishnavite. The mother in law pledges a buffalo to goddess Kālī with whose blessings she plans to eliminate Seuti.\textsuperscript{112}

Jayanti Stands in stark contrast to those stories where the women characters are meek, submissive and docile. It is the story of the heroic exploits of the woman of the title. It has the Burmese invasion as its background. Jayanti uses her cunning and courage to free herself and her husband from their Burmese captors. But the fact of her own heroism proves too much for her to lead a normal life. Possessed by the very moments of her heroic action where she kills her captors, she loses her mental equilibrium and dies in that state. Perhaps a man in her place would have survived to enjoy the fruits of his heroism.

Among the stories of Lakshminath Bezbaroa Bhadari and Pātmukhi stand out for their fine execution Bhadari can be taken as a metaphor for ideal Indian womanhood. In a sudden fit of rage Bhadari is fatally wounded by her husband. While she is being hospitalised her husband flees the place with the mistaken notion that his wife is dead. In the ensuing police inquiry Bhadari blames her injury to an accidental fall and thereby saves her husband who owns up the responsibility and confesses to his guilt.

Pātmukhi occupies a pride of place among Bezbaroa’s stories for its fine characterisation and psychological insight. While in Bhomkerolā a low caste young man marries two Brahmin sisters and inconsequence suffers nagging guilt, here a low caste potter’s daughter marries a Brahmin boy. This marriage being the outcome of infatuation rather than love it ends in failure. To what extent Pātmukhi is impelled by the consideration to move higher in the caste hierarchy by marrying a Brahmin is a moot point. Her husband leaves her to marry a girl from his own community after purifying himself for his earlier ‘vice’, Pātmukhi’s efforts at getting the help of law against her Brahmin husband fails since the instruments of justice are all in the hands of men. Her cynicism with the world of men is further compounded by the momentary

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. P. 666
infatuation of her elderly benefactor whom she called uncle. This in fact is the last straw in her faith in the male-dominated social order. Completely disillusioned with the world. She renounces it for a life of social service and religious piety.

Pātmukhi's war cry against an unjust and unequal social order had the possibilities of a revolt but these were frittered away under the weight of the writer's inhibitions. Bezbaroā the Vaishnavite propounder interferes with Bezbaroā the fiction writer. Pātmukhi's jehad transforms into religious devotion. By inference she resigns herself to the social order that she opposed so fervently.

The universal human passion called love appears in a number of stories. In most of these love do not culminate in happiness. Bezbaroā is largely a romantic while dealing with his theme. And for a romantic fructification of love renders it mundane. In Kanyā (a river in Orissa) there is a pair of young tribal lovers 'who knew each other only through the language of their eyes but never came to any other contact...'\(^{113}\) The mournful river's murmuring sound drops ominous hints about their unfulfilled passion. In Jalkōwari too we find love of a different kind. A girl's deep attachment for a river symbolise not only an affinity with nature but the freedom associated with this love. On the other hand marriage is considered a shackle. At least this is what she means when she utters- "I am a mynāh. Take me away and put me in a cage."\(^{114}\) The cage no doubt is the shackles of marriage. Ratan Mundā like Jalkōwari is based on Bezbaroā's Orissan experience. Ratan Mundā, the tribal youth, accidentally drowns in the river leaving his beloved disconsolate. Nature's sympathy for the beloved reminds one of Wordsworthian concept of Nature's sympathy for suffering humanity.

In Mōthai Mālati a young girl elopes with the man she loves against the wishes of her father. The writer's sympathies obviously lay with the call of the heart. Such sympathy can be found in another story Nakaum. Here also a pair of lovers in elopement take refuge in a forest. In these stories the benignity as well as the vagaries of nature are in focus. In Erā Bāri, Which has been discussed earlier, the discussion

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\(^{113}\) Bhābōn Banaa, op. Cit., P. 160
\(^{114}\) B. G. Vol. I, P. 672
among the trees about the sad plight of the woman is Wordsworthian in nature. When
the human society outcasts her it is the pond, an element nature, which invites her
with open arms. In all these stories death by drowning is a recurring motif.

Some stories of Bezbaroa, have an unmistakable echo of Rabindranath. Like
the Kabiguru, Bezbaroa too seems to be a poet in the guise of a story-teller. It is
particularly so while delineating the mystical aspects of nature, the relationship of
man and nature, and portraying the elemental passions of the human heart. The
illusive aspects of nature is portrayed with a deftness that can hardly be faulted.
Tagore’s impact is particularly evident in Mūkii. It is a replica of Tagore’s story
Chhuti. It both the prevailing educational system is severely taken to task. Here the
native instinct of freedom is stilled with tragic consequences in the name of modern
education. The impact of Tāgore’s Stree Pratā (the wife’s letter) can be seen in
Bezbaroa’s Lalit Kākati. The Western concept of New Woman reverberates in both
these stories. In Tagore the protagonist, who manifests the New Woman, declares her
arrival thus : “I have known my real self now. The old wife is dead.”115 There is also
an uncanny resemblance between Tagore’s Shāsti and Bezbaroa’s Bhadari. “Chandra
(of Shāsti) and Bhadari are unsophisticated rural women. Both writers had laid stress
on characterisation and there are similarities in their theme, plot, development of
characters and narration of the subject matter against almost similar background.”116
In both the husband strikes at the wife killing the wife in one and fatally wounding in
another. This incident sets the story in motion. In Shāsti Dukhirām’s crime is forced
upon his younger brother’s wife Chandarā. After some initial self-assertion and
resistance she agrees to own up the crime she did not commit. Even when all
circumstantial evidence point to the real culprit Dukhirām Chandarā sticks to her
earlier confession. It is her own way of taking revenge upon her callous husband. In
this regard Bezbaroa’s story takes a different trajectory where Bhadari does her best to
save her husband from the clutches of the law. Of course Sisurām, the husband, could
not escape the inevitable. The self-sacrificing woman succeeds in bringing about a
change of heart in her husband.

116 P. C. Bhuyan. op. Cit., PP. 245-246
Inspite of these similarities the stories differ widely in their fundamental thrust. Chandarā characterise the New Woman in her refusal to play the puppet to male machinations. Her’s is not a self-effacing sacrifice. Her action is impelled by her desire to take revenge upon her husband and his elder brother. In contrast Bhadari comes out as a veritable metaphor, an epitome of self-affacing, self-sacrificing Indian womanhood. Rabindranāth makes his intention clear in the title Shāsti which means punishment. Had Bhadari been in the same mould it would have been an attractive motive. But Assam being largely an agrarian community the idea of New Woman would have been out of place. Both the stories of course highlight the dehumanising impact of poverty and hunger like Prenchand’s Kafan, perhaps less intense in Bhadari than in Shāsti. In another story like Lāokholā the impact of Tagore’s Manihāra and Khudhita Pāshān seems most likely.

There are stories in which the plot is then and is often absent. What makes up for this deficiency is Bezbaroa’s deft character sketch. Problems of all shades—personal, familial and social are not denied. What endures in these stories is the essential humanity shorn of all frills. The bitterness one comes across in his stories is always qualified by compassion. Dhōwā Khowā is an example in this regard. It is a story in which the habit of hookah (tobacco smoking in a pipe), a sign of aristocracy, ruins a well to do family. The understated sarcasm is drowned by the poignancy of the tragic consequence. A symbol of vanity for the higher stratum of society the hookah sets in motion the gradual pauperisation of two generations of a family. Gangaram the father and Rameswar the son try to live up to a false sense of respectability and status. And the consequences could not but be ruinous.

Stories like Dasamantar, Bārichowā, Bhairā etc. are but life-like character sketches of people Bezbaroa knew intimately. Some stories like Maṣganār Buṭhā and Putrabān Pītā are tales of suffering touched by the author’s sympathetic treatment. To this can also be added stories like Mr. Phipson, Bāpirām, Bhuruki Bau and Dāktarbādhur Sādhru, basically character sketches portrayed with sympathy and understanding. “In

117 Bhaben Barua op. Cit., p. 162
118 Ibid
most of these stories Bezbaroa’s humour is engaged in the task of revealing the essential humanity of man, the pathos and significance of man’s existence. 

*Pandit Mahishy:* is the only story in the detective genre. The author succeeds in withholding the information (the suspense) till the end. A missing child is discovered buried in the kitchen floor of a Brahmin cook. *Jene Chor Tene Taïgon* is a story with a different taste. It deals with story of a peasant woman’s revenge upon her callous and wayward husband who used to beat her with one pretext or the other. The husband is revenged upon with the active connivance of a fish-selling woman. Phakirmohana’s *Phul Medisin* too deals with the same theme. There is of course the difference of class between Bezbaroa’s woman and that of Phakirmohan. The former concerns people at the lower wrungs of society while the latter that of the upper strata. In a tradition in order to bring him on the right track. In a tradition-bound patriarchal society the very idea of these stories is daring enough. Phakirmohan’s story can be traced to a popular Japanese play *Za Zen,* whose Bengali adaptation by Satyendranâth in 1913 as *Nidhidhyanasan* was quite popular. Both Phakirmohan’s and Bezbaroa’s story, though resembles the Japanese story in overall conception, is successfully localised and can be called original creations.

One of the more successful short stories of Bezbaroa titled *Mukti* clearly bears the impress of Tagore’s *Chimt.* In both the boy protagonist succumbs to the apparatus of modern education which stifle the innate freedom of the child with fatal consequence. The regimentation the so-called modern education demands can not but have an adverse impact on the natural freedom of the child. Tagore’s *Parrot’s Training* too may have been another impact on *Mukti.* In the words of Iyengar: “The Râjâ is determined to teach the bird and the whole apparatus of an expensive modern system of education is assembled as a consequence. Buildings are raised, books are accumulated, instruments are imported... But how about the bird itself? Well, it is safely dead.” In *Mukti* the Râjâ is transformed into Debkumar, the elder brother and the parrot into Sukumar.

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119 Bhaben Barua, op. Cit., P. 162
120 Sudhakar Chattopadhyay : 1368 (Bangabazar : ‘Amar Amôdak Satyendranâth’, P. 132
121 Rabindranath Tagore : *a critical introduction* P. 78
Bezbaroa wrote about seventy odd short stories. The thematic arrangement of these is rather a matter of convenience for this writer since these categories shade into each other. But there is no denying the fact that whatever he borrowed he infused it with the smell of his native earth. Like his Oriya counterpart Phakirmohana, Bezbaroa too gave substance and direction to Assamese literature and gave it an inviolable identity. His short stories in particular helped in no small measure towards this end.