CHAPTER – II
Brief Life-Sketch of Phakirmohana and Lakshminath

a. Life of Phakirmohana
b. Life of Lakshminath
c. A Contrast
PHAKIRMOHANA

History can be looked from two points of view. It is the story of people in ferment and in movement. It is also the story of great men and women who mould and inspire the action of the masses. Phakirmohana Senapaty was one such man no less illustrious than his Bengali or Maharastrian counterparts like a Bankimchandra or a Ranade. Phakirmohana, alongside with Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Rao, both poets and Gaurisankar Ray, the journalist, gave content and shape to the movement to establish Oriya language and literature on a strong footing. Barrister Madhusadan Das floated the Utkala Sammilani in 1903 to fight for the formation of Orissa as a separate province in 1936. The importance of Phakirmohana lies in the fact that modern age in Oriya literature is now universally called the Age of Phakirmohana. Only till the other day this period was known as the Age of Radhanath. This is perhaps due to the stranglehold of poetry on the popular imagination. Modern research has proved the seminal nature of Phakirmohana’s contribution to Oriya language and literature more than any other individual writer. Almost everywhere in India it was the Western-educated elite who orchestrated the transition of their respective literatures from medieval moorings to modern times. If this criterion is applied Phakirmohana will be least qualified to spearhead a movement towards modernity. His more fancied friends – Radhanath and Madhusudan, were infinitely better placed to spearhead this movement with their grounding in Western education and thought. With only a couple of years of schooling Phakirmohana was almost an illiterate by comparison. But he was not the one to be put down by circumstances. He taught himself assiduously and became proficient in four or five languages besides mustering a working knowledge in English. He read the Bible and "Bengal Peasant Life", a novel by Lal Behari Dev. The latter is supposed to have had some bearing on Phakirmohana’s masterpiece...
It was his proficiency in the various languages that stood him in good stead. It helped him come in intimate contact with influential Britishers like Rev. E.C.B. Hallam and John Beames, the collector of Balasore besides others. Phakirmohana’s friendship with Beames in particular proved to be a boon to the former as well as to the Oriya nation at large.

Born in 1843 at Balasore Phakirmohana was christened Brajamohana. A pale, sickly and jaundiced child he lost his parents when he was only three. To save him from certain death his grandmother made a vow, accordingly he was made to dress like a Muslim fakir or pîr and go around with a begging bowl for eight days during Mohurrum. This ritual continued till Brajamohana transformed into Phakirmohana.

Phakirmohana’s forefathers enjoyed considerable fortune during the Maratha dispensation. One of his ancestors Hanumalla was appointed a Dalapati i.e. group leader by the Marathas to guard a frontier post at Phulabāra against Muslim invaders.

The Senāpati surname comes from this martial history of his family. Till the British annexation of Orissa in 1803 there were many ups and downs in the family fortune of the Malla family. When the British occupied Orissa Kuchila Dei, the grandmother of Phakirmohana, was a young widow. It was her folly that cost them their family fortune. The British wanted the people to register their private property at the kâcheri for they had no intention to interfere and antagonize the Oriyas. “People thought this a trick on the part of the British to discover Mārāthā collaborators and sympathizers.” Consequently few of them registered their land. This poor response prompted the British authorities to send troops to escort landowners to the Kâcheri. The sight of the soldiers scared Kuchila Dei out of her wits. She hid her two sons and cried from behind the door, “There are no male children in the house, we have no need of land.” This foolishness cost her the landed property and Phakirmohana had to bear the brunt of poverty because of this.

---

5 Ibid. P-7
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 AtmaJibana Carita, P.1
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid. P.3 (Tr. J.V. Boulton)
Kuśa Malla, the grand father of Phakirmohana, worked as the chief peon at the court of Murshidábād. His two sons Puruśottama and Laxmanacharana, with their enterprising spirit brought back some prosperity. They established themselves as ship chandlers and sail makers, for Bālsaore at that time was an important seaport. Laxmanacharana, the father of Phakirmohana, died at Bhubaneswar while on a pilgrimage to Puri. In later years Phakirmohana wrote a poem titled Bhubaneswar chastising God for being cruel to his father. However Phakirmahana’s mother could not survive the shock for long. It brought the author into the lap of his grandmother when his grand mother Kucilā Dei bestowed upon Phakirmohana makes the grateful author to pay tributes to her in may of his writings. In fact all his virtuous characters, particularly the female characters “had probably been modelled upon the two really virtuous people he had known in life, his grandmother Kucilā Dei and his second wife Krisna Kumāri.”

In spite of the loving care of his grandmother Phakirmohana’s early childhood was not at all a happy one. His father’s elder brother Puruṣottama, according to Phakirmohana’s descriptions of him, had sadistic traits. Puruṣottama’s wife too was not very kindly disposed towards him and considered Phakirmohana an unwanted burden. In a situation like this it was only natural that Phakirmohana was deeply attached to his grandmother. It was at her initiative that Phakirmohana attended school when he was almost nine years of age. She probably expected that Phakirmohana would read to her the Bhāgabata once he was literate enough to do it. Puruṣottama was unwilling to continue Phakirmohaha’s schooling though he sent his wards to school regularly in spite of their poor performance.

Phakirmohana hardly had a couple of years at school. As a student he showed more than usual brilliance. He ran errands for his teacher in the tradition of Čiṅukul and was loved by his teachers in turn.
In a way he was doing quite well at school until the school fees was raised to four annas. His guardian and master of the joint family Purusottama refused to oblige the hike. This brought an end to Phakirmohana’s schooling.

In the chapter title ‘Bidyārambha-1852’ in his autobiography Phakirmohana outlines the educational scenario of his day. The state of education at that time was bleak to say the least. Orissa was at the crossroads. She had not got over her medieval mornings. What passed in the name of education was simply the learning of the three Rs. And that too was confined to the comparably well to do. ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ seemed to be the driving motto of the teaching process. Phakirmohana refers to the various forms of corporeal punishment meted out routinely to the erring and the dunce.¹⁴

During that time Persian played a crucial role since it was the official language and the language of the courts. Those who aspired for a higher station in life acquired this language. There was a Persian school at Balasore and Phakirmohana got himself admitted to the school. The only things taught at the school was writing letters to relatives and formal applications.¹⁵ The fear of losing ones caste prevented pupils from attending schools run by missionaries. Bible was the only printed book available in Oriya¹⁶ and lack of school texts prevented the spread of education in any meaningful way.

During Phakirmohana’s childhood Bālāsore was the most important seaport in the entire eastern India. The sea at Balasore was teeming with ships of various sizes and hues. The thriving salt-making industry was chiefly responsible for the prosperity of Bālāsore though iron foundry and ship making too contributed substantially to its well being. As ship chandlers and sail-makers, the Senāpatis had managed to corner a large portion of the trade and employed hundreds of tailors for sail-making. Phakirmohana started in the office as the accountant’s mate.¹⁷ In fact his uncle Purusottama got Phakirmohana engaged in business to further the family’s business

¹⁴ Āima Ḧibana Carita, P.11
¹⁵ Ibid, P.13
¹⁶ Ibid
¹⁷ Boulton, op. cit., P.101
interests. His proximity and love of the sea, his experience of shipping and ship-life, later left an indelible mark on some of his short stories like ‘Kamalā Prasāda Gorāpa’ and ‘Kālikā Prasāda Gorāpa’ etc.

Phakirmohana married Lilābati Devi aged thirteen at the behest of his uncle. It was by all account an incompatible marriage. Lilābati was ‘conceited, inconsiderate, sharp tongued and disobedient’.18 She could not provide the emotional succour he needed so badly. Phakirmohana quotes a Sanskrit adage to highlight the agony of his conjugal life. According to him the man whose wife is harsh and sharp-tongued and whose mother is dead better dwell in the jungle, for home and jungle are the same to him.19 Though Lilābati could not inspire her husband in his literary pursuits she definitely helped shape some of the female characters of Phakirmohana’s fiction. She did not live long. She died of an incurable disease at her parents’ home when Phakirmohana was away at Puri. The passing away of his guardian angel, his grandmother, pained him no end. A grateful Phakirmohana immortalised her as Saantāni in Chhamāna Atthagunthā. Saantāni corresponds to Kucilā Dei as personification of virtue but powerless in the face of evil. The loss of grandmother was fortunately compensated by his second wife Krishna Kumāri who was extremely devoted to her husband and had all that Kucilā Dei had. Phakirmohana speaks of the imperative behind the second marriage (1871). It was the need of a male child as he had a daughter from his first wife, to perpetuate the family line.20 Mayadhara Mānsingha, on the other hand, underlines some other reasons behind the second marriage to set up home independent of this uncle and aunt which he could not do when Kucilā Dei was alive and to bring up his daughter in a more homely atmosphere.21 Besides these he may have been driven to his second marriage since he was only 29 years and it would have been difficult to carry on a lonely life.

According to his own admission Krishna Kumāri was a god-send and some one to be cherished eternally.22 When she died in 1894, leaving behind a son and a

18 Āṭṭha Jihana Carita, P.54
19 Ibid
20 Āṭṭha Jihana Carita, P.55
21 Mānsingha Granthāvṛti. Vol. III. P.25
22 Āṭṭha Jihana Carita, P.55
daughter, the light out of Phakirmohana’s life seems to have gone forever. The scar it has left was never to be healed till the end. In spite of his natural *joie de vivre*, the melancholic note scattered all over his writings probably springs from this loss.

It is not as though Phakirmohana’s life was an unending series of misfortunes. The good and the bad came in turns in his life. His studentship at Bārabāti School is a pointer in this regard. His studentship at the school was long enough to impress the school authorities with his brilliant results. So much so that he was appointed the third master in the same school on a salary of two and a half rupees per month. It was soon enhanced to four rupees giving him some financial stability.

In 1864 Phakirmohana joined the Bālāsore Mission School where he came in contact with some Westerners. The school secretary Rev. A. Miller appointed him the Headmaster on a monthly salary of ten rupees. But Miller, with his bad temper, unpredictable manners and lack of common sense, left a negative impression on Phakirmohana. His impression of Western Christians was changed with the appointment of the American missionary Rev. E.C.B. Hallam in Miller’s place.

Both as a man and intellect Hallam comes in for laudatory references by Phakirmohana. His conciliatory address and good-natured bearing afforded close personal equation with Phakirmohana. Hallam could speak Oriya with the fluency of a native speaker adding depth to their intimacy. The rapport Phakirmohana had with Hallam proved beneficial to both. While Phakirmohana helped Rev. Hallam prepare a grammar in English on the Oriya Language, Hallam helped Phakirmohana in making the latter’s teaching career a success. Under his stewardship the Bālāsore Mission School catapulted to the topmost position in the whole of Orissa. A greatly satisfied Hallam enhanced Phakirmohana’s salary to rupees twenty-five per month. Hallam’s personal equation with Phakirmohana was so good that when –

---

23 J.V. Boulton, op.cit., P.111
24 *Itam Jiban Cirtia*, P.28
25 Ibid
"Inspector of School for South-West Bengal offered the post of second master at the Normal School at Cuttack on a salary of thirty rupees. Hallam raised his (Phakirmohana’s) salary to thirty rupees himself rather than lose him."26

Besides Hallam Phakirmohana enjoyed close proximity with two other Westerners: the officiating collector of Bālāsore Mr. Percy and the joint Magistrate Mr. Mayers. To both these gentlemen Phakirmohana taught Bengali. But by far the most momentous contact was with that of John Beames, who succeeded Mr. Percy as the collector of Bālāsore. Beames at that time was working on his Comparative Grammar of the Indian Languages. He was looking for a man well-versed in Oriya, Bengali and Sanskrit to assist him. Hallam recommended Phakirmohana’s name. His friendship with Beames was to prove a boon to the cause of the Oriya language, for, in the language dispute with Bengal this scholar of the first order put his considerable political clout and intellectual powers firmly behind the Oriya language.

Phakirmohana served Bālāsore Mission School with distinction from 1864 to 1871.27 During that time the scarcity of textbooks in Oriya stood in the way of learning. He tried to fill in the void by writing textbooks on various subjects like Oriya grammar, arithmetic, history of India in two parts and so on. For his efforts Phakirmohana was amply rewarded by the government.28 This period is also remarkable for the multifarious activities that he undertook like establishment of a press ‘Phakirmohana Senapati & Co. Utkala Press’, editing of two journals – ‘Bodhodāyini’ and ‘Bālesvar Sambhāda Bāhi kata’ and fighting for the cause of Oriya language and literature. All these activities were organically related to the self-identity of the Oriya nation.

The career graph of Phakirmohana was clearly on the ascendant. When the Dewanship of the feudatory state of Nilagiri fell vacant the Commissioner of Orissa,
Ravenshaw, recommended Phakirmohana for the job. The commissioner was confident of Phakirmohana's abilities. Suddenly the teacher- writer- editor became a dewan of a feudatory state. This was no mean achievement since only the highly educated could dream of such a position. A man like Romeshchandra Dutta, I.C.S., became the Dewān of the Gaikwād of Barodā after retirement. It is a tribute to Phakirmohana's intellectual ability and administrative skill that he was given such a post of responsibility though luck had played a big role in his good fortune. In fact, Boulton assign Phakirmohana's rising career graph to 'incredible good luck' alone though he had plenty of "native wit and ability."

Phakirmohana's stint at Nilagiri was remarkable in many respects. He took up various developmental activities like construction of roads, establishment of a weekly shopping fair named Nirmālā Hāt and so on. Besides he also introduced the cultivation of cabbages and peas, planted a coconut grove and a mulberry garden to make silk clothes. An interesting bit of information that we get from his autobiography was that he created an experimental tea garden at Nilagiri.

There were some Brāhmin settlements in Nilagiri founded by the rulers of Nilagiri. The rent- free land they enjoyed made the Brāhmins to idle their time in useless gossip. None cared to read the Sanskrit texts. Phakirmohana established a Sanskrit tol for the benefit of Brāhmin children. He levied a small amount of subscription on the Brahmin landholdings. This act of his antagonized the whole Brāhmin community. They were all ranged against him and were on the look out for a chance to wreak vengeance on Phakirmohana. The leasing of stone quarries to a man called Kanheji Misra added to the popular discontent against Phakirmohana. "Phakirmohana's final blunder was in siding with the king's brother against the king on the matter of succession." That was the last straw. He was neither in the good books of the ruler or of the ruled. Working in such a condition was next to impossible and he resigned from the post towards the end of 1875.
After a period of painful penury John Beames again became instrumental in giving Phakirmohana the devanāsīhip of Domapāḍa. The non-payment of rent by peasants for five consecutive years added to the problem. The problem of succession that Phakirmohana faced in Nilagiri complicated the situation in Domapāḍa too. Phakirmohana resorted to trickery to bring the situation under control. He used it when all the other ways to solve the problems were tried out. He was able to collect the rent arrears. He could carry out land survey in the feudatory state and could fix an enhanced rate of rent. The financial position of the state considerably looked up. The grateful king was ready to retain him even after the government removed him from the job. It was a remarkable feat to restore normalcy and Phakirmohana’s administrative skill was in full bloom. Yet it also brought to the fore his manipulative skills under which even the innocent suffered. He was not unaware of this. Before he left Domapāḍa Phakirmohana atoned for the wrongs he perpetrated.

While still in Domapāḍa the government appointed Phakirmohana the assistant Manager of Dhenkānāl. Here the turn of events put him in the role of the Oriya Vṛṣṇakavi. At Dhenkānāl his second wife Krishnakumāri gave birth to a baby boy, Manmohana, who died six months later. Grief overtook the whole family since he was persuaded to marry for the second time to provide a male progeny to continue the family line. His wife was disconsolate. To humour his grief-stricken wife Phakirmohana undertook the task of translating the original Sanskrit Rāmāyana of Vālmiki into Oriya and read it to his wife. It brought solace to his wife so much so that she considered Phakirmohana’s Rāmāyana to be their son, who will perpetuate the family name. The Bāla or Ādyā-Kāṇḍa (first canto) was published with a dedication to his friend and benefactor John Beames. He was like a saving-angel to Phakirmohana all along. Once he left Orissa trouble started brewing for

\[\text{\textsuperscript{33}} \text{āma Jihanta Carita, P.55}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{34}} \text{ibid. P 90}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{35}} \text{ibid. P 89-90}\]
Phakirmohana. His method of work as Assistant manager must have hurt the vested interests badly. Encouraged by Beames’ transfer anonymous letters started reaching the Commissioner accusing Phakirmohana of graft. The problem was compounded because the new Commissioner Mr. Smith had little faith in Phakirmohana. In spite of this he could come clean out of the graft charges. But later he was made to resign for overwriting a verdict long after it had been decided. The overwriting was not intended at altering the verdict but to make the contents clear and eligible. But on principle he made a mistake and was made to pay for it.

During the interim period between the leaving of Dhenkanal and the acceptance of Dasapalla assignment Phakirmohana was seriously engaged in translation work of the holy scriptures. He completed the translation of the Ramayana and took to translating the Mahabharata into Oriya. At Dasapalla to Phakirmohana incurred the wrath of the king who was as corpulent as he was witless. He had to resign his post at the behest of Mr. Metcalf, the then commissioner of Orissa. He was of course offered another assignment at Palalahada. In the absence of any work here he continued translating the Mahabharata and occasionally played games. It seemed unethical to him that he should draw a salary without really working for it. When he resigned in 1887, the king who took to living Phakirmohana very much rewarded him generously.

Phakirmohana was never careful with money. When his earning was good he would spend without a thought for the future. Many a time it landed him in financial crisis as is evident after his resignation from Palalahada. But fortunately for him the post of manager at the Keonjhar feudatory state fell vacant. He promptly applied for it and with Rāya Nandakishore Das’s recommendation he got the job. He joined the post on 10th December.

Phakirmohana’s stint as Manager of Keonjhar was significant in many respects. He won a couple of legal battles in favour of Keonjhar against neighbouring areas. It saved the king a good deal of embarrassment. He was deputed to Calcutta to

\[^6\] Alma Jihana Carita, P.113
plead for Keunjhar in the High Court against the unlawful occupation of some land by Chotnagpur. This dispute was going on for quite a long time. Senāpati’s able presentation helped the High Court to rule in favour of Keunjhar. It is remarkable for a man who had hardly a couple of years of formal schooling. Though physically frail his presence of mind was remarkable. His wit and courage were quite disproportionate to his physical abilities. An interesting incident, which might as well pass for fiction, stands testimony to all the aforesaid abilities. In his fourth year as manager the Bhuyāns, a fierce, unruly, ancient tribe, rose in revolt against the king. They were on the verge of attaching the palace with a view to looting it and taking the royal inmates hostage. The king fled the palace leaving the queen and his wards to fend for themselves. Phakirmohana collected a band of ragged men and proceeded to defend the palace against the rebels. He knew the ability of his men, who were mostly old and could hardly carry the burden of their ration and armoury. That did not deter him from the objective of saving the lives of the royal inmates. Betrayed by his own scout he unwittingly played into the hands of the rebels in a mountain pass. He would have made good his escape on elephant back if he so desired. But he did not go away for the sake of his men. A man of lesser wit and presence of mind would have fallen prey to the rebels’ ire. He was able to talk the rebel leader into taking him (Senāpati) into confidence with a promise to assist the latter in state affairs. Fortunately for Phakirmohana the rebel leader was an addict of pan and areca nut like the manager himself. With the rebel leader Dharanidhar’s permission was about pān and areca but on a closer reading would suggest soldiers and ammunition. The letter read somewhat like this-

“This is to inform Bholānāth, my agent, that he must somehow dispatch at least one hundred leaves of betel and two hundred pieces of betel nut. He should also have a ditch cut out from the north to irrigate the sugarcane field. Otherwise the sugarcane will be lost forever.”"
This strange letter, closed with thee bits of wire, could not have been taken literally since it came from the missing Assistant Manager. Besides Phakirmohana had no storekeeper by the name Bholanath as mentioned in the letter, nor was there any sugarcane field. It only confirmed the conviction that the letter in fact was a coded message. The authorities rightly decoded the letter. The three bits of wire was interpreted as hint to send three telegrams (wire) – one to the government, one to the superintendent at Cuttack and the third either to Babu Nandakishore or Babu Madhusudana, the famous barrister. Betel leaves was interpreted as soldiers and betel nuts suggested ammunition. And the ditch from the north was interpreted as the direction from which the reinforcement has to be sent.

It is needless to say that the rebellion was duly quelled and Dharanidhara was sentenced to five years rigorous imprisonment. In all fairness it must e said that the under hand means which Phakirmohana employed to put down the rebellion which symbolised the rightful aspiration for the Bhuyan tribe was certainly not the fairest of means. Mayadhar Mansingh sees a boon in the small moral lapse of Phakirmohana. Without it he would have been definitely killed by the rebels and the Oriya nation would have been greatly deprived of the seminal literary contribution of Phakirmohana. In spite of this silver living to the incident, it certainly affected adversely his attitude of benevolence towards the downtrodden and the deprived. He himself was not unaware of this. He was honest enough to admit his lapse. He would have atoned for the wrongs he did to the Bhuyans. But very soon differences between him and the king cropped up. It assumed serious proportion. Phakirmohana had to resign.

Only two things grieved him at having to leave Keunjhar, two unfulfilled projects – one was the dredging of the tanks in the outlying districts to relieve the water shortage during the hot seasons and the other was the building of a brick-built school in Anandapura.

---

38 Mansingh Granthavali, Vol. III, P.129
39 Ibid.
40 Atma Jihana Carita, P.147
Phakirmohana never enjoyed uninterrupted happiness in his life. He bemoans this fact at many places in his autobiography. At the fag end of his stint at Keunjhar Phakirmohana’s woes piled up. Physically he suffered from a nagging fever. He was away from his wife and children who were at Balasore. They were ill treated by Phakirmohana’s relatives. During his captivity the news of Phakirmohana’s death pained his wife no end. All these things only burdened his heart even more.

The one bright spot of Phakirmohana’s Keunjhar assignment was ‘Utkala Vramana’. The major part of this verse poem was written on elephant back while travelling from Anandapura to Bhadraka. It was his first original creation and was an instant hit.

In 1894 Phakirmohana received a telegram from Brajendra Kumara Manasingha Bhramarabara, the king of Domapada. Then began his second stint as Dewan of the Domapada feudatory state. The king was a lavish spender. The coffers were almost empty. The royal debt stood at a huge sum. Phakirmohana found a way out of this problem when the king’s first wife died in childbirth. In the teeth of strong opposition from the king’s relatives he arranged the king’s second marriage with the princess of Kanikā. On the promise that the old queen of Kanikā would repay the entire outstanding debt of Domapaḍā. But unfortunately for Phakirmohana Kanikā queen reneged on her promise and only a fraction of the debt could be repaid. Phakirmohana was accused of financial mismanagement leading to mountings debt. He assigns the financial crisis to the crisis to the ostentatious expenditure of the king.

Here at Domapaḍā too Phakirmohana initiated many developmental works for which he was popular among the common people. He made a fresh survey and assessment of the land which brought in additional revenue to the royal coffer. He rebuilt the palace, dug a well in memory of his wife, built a bunglow, which is still called Phakirmohana Bunglow and started construction of a school which remained incomplete at the time of his dismissal.

During his second stint at Domapaḍā Phakirmohana’s second wife Krishna Kumāri fell victim to an incurable disease. Her death seemed to engulf
Phakirmohana’s life in darkness and gloom. After his grandmother’s death Krishna Kumāri was the inspiration behind Phakirmohana’s life. Phakirmohana had to place his son and daughter under the guardianship of Madhusudan Rāo at Cuttack to facilitate their education.

His dismissal from Domapaḍā plunged Phakirmohana into great financial crisis. During this time the king of Domapaḍā volunteered to give a monthly pension of 100 rupees a month. But Phakirmohana, the self respecting man that he was, declined the offer. He could not accept such a huge amount without working for it.

Phakirmohana spent almost a quarter of a century (1871-96) in various feudatory states of Orissa like Nilagiri, Dhenkanāl, Domapaḍā, Dasapallā, Pālalahadā, Keunjhar etc. Though his role in the various feudatory states was none too distinguished it was to have a great bearing on the future author’s writings. In fact this period was to Phakirmohana what Rangon experience was to Saratchandra. Their future greatness as writers was largely due to their proximity to and experience of life at the lowest level.

Phakirmohana had a keen desire to live in Cuttack, the cultural and political nerve centre of Orissa. He settled at Cuttack in 1896 and devoted full time to Oriya literature. He made contributions to ‘Utkāṭa Sāhitya’ on a regular basis. It was in this magazine that his magnum opus “Chhamāna Āṭhagunthar” appeared in serialized form. The amateurism of his earlier writing was replaced by finesse and confidence. That was to herald the beginning of a remarkable literary career.

Phakirmohana’s stay at Cuttack was as eventful as it was productive. The Indian National Congress was to hold it session in 1898 at Madras. It was also to be the venue of the conference of Indian Unitarians. Phakirmohana was chosen by the Balasore National Society as the Congress delegate and the Bālāsore Brāhma Samāj as its representative at the Brahma conference Phakirmohana’s Brāhma affiliation was a known thing but he had never allied himself with any political ideology before. His release from the various political assignments must have given him the freedom to air his views freely. About this experience at the Congress session he writes:

\[ 	ext{AtmaJihana (} ' \text{onto, P. 154} \]
"The discussions in the session was largely political. Though our political aspirations are most unlikely to be fulfilled in the near future, keeping quiet and not ventilating our grievances would not be right." 42

More than political freedom Phakirmohana stressed the need to be self-reliant. His priorities included economic progress and education. It was quite in keeping with the times since Oriya nationalist movement from 1866 to 1903 was largely literary and uncoordinated. 43 At Madras harbour he was pained to see raw materials loaded into ships bound for England. Those raw materials would be returning to India as finished product to be sold at exorbitant price.

One day he ran into Bālagangādhara Tillak. Though what transpired between the two is not known, it can be assumed that their conversation must have touched the state of the nation and the national movement at that time.

Back in Cuttack Phakirmohana renewed his literary activities with great passion. He wrote under the penname ‘Dhurjati’ as suggested by his friend Madhusudan Rao. 44 Though diffident about his own literary abilities, there was a steady flow from his pen with encouragement and coaxing from Biswanātha Kar, the editor of Utkala Sāhitya. 45 He wrote his epoch-making short story Rebati here, which remains till today one of the finest in the Oriya language. His novel Chhamāna Āṭhtagantuṭha too started as a short story and ended up as a novel because of its bulk. ‘Lachhānā’, his historical novel, written under the backdrop of Marāṭhā depredation of 18th century Orissa, was published in Utkala Sāhitya as Apurba Miḷāna. His writings drew considerable popular interest. So much so that when reading about Mangarāj’s trial ( Chhamāna Āṭhtagantuṭha) on the pages of the journal people from the countryside thronged to the Cuttack court room where the trial was supposed to be held.

---

42 J.V. Boulton, op.cit. P.158
43 J.V. Boulton, op.cit. P.503
44 J.V. Boulton, op.cit. P.165
45 J.V. Boulton, op.cit. P.405

Boulton gives the example of one such letter to Viswanātha Kar as below –

"You praise my story, yet whether it be praised or blamed, you are one who is ultimately responsible. I did not take up writing stories voluntarily. It was you who first told me to and then proclaimed in print the fact that I was going to. I was trapped and started writing."
taking place. Such was the popular appeal and immense hold of Serāpati on the mind of the reading public.

When his son Mohinimohan was transferred to Bālāsore from Cuttack in 1905 Phakirmohana too left for Bālāsore. The denouement of Phakirmohana’s life was to be enacted in the serene sylvan surrounding of his country home appropriately named ‘Shānti-Kānān’. Phakirmohana never got the love and care that he so badly needed from his Western educated son. Later he became a Philosophy lecturer at Revenshaw College. He was an atheist to boot. He even dragged his father to court on a dispute regarding property. Phakirmohana had a keen desire to visit Japan and see with his own eyes the Phenomenal progress it had made. To meet the travel expenses he decided to sell part of his property. Mohinimohan would not allow such a thing. The resultant legal wrangle prevented Phakirmohana from visiting Japan.

What he did not get from his near relations was amply compensated by his countrymen. Utkalamani Gopabandhu Dāsh, a respected member of Bihār Orissa Council, visited Phakirmohana at Shānti-kānān. During the two days he realised fully the sad plight of Phakirmohana. His comment that Phakirmohana needed the care of near relations badly is a sad reflection on the attitude of his own people.

Phakirmohana got down to writing his autobiography at the behest of his friends. It is a testament not only of his life and times but eight decades of life of his nations. Without this posterity would have remained in the dark regarding many aspects of Orissan life. In 1916 he was given the title of ‘Saraswati’ by Suratarangini Sāraswata of Bānandā. As a mark of respect and gratitude the Oriya nation selected Phakirmohana to preside over the Utkala Sammilani (the front organization to unite the Oriya speaking regions and the people) at Cuttack in 1917. He was honestly grateful for the honours showered on him by the Oriya nation. When Phakirmohana breathed his last on June 14, 1918 the Oriya nation and its language had been firmly established their inviolable identity. His death brought to a close not an isolated

---

36 Mānsingh Granthāvali, Vol. III, P.255
37 Atma Jihana (‘arita, P.170
individual but an age – the Age of Phakirmohana. He did enough to make his people
utter his name in gratitude and pride.
Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s birth was nothing short of a romantic fairy-tale. It was probably a premonition of things to come. Born in the mighty lap of Brahmaputra, Padmanāth Gohain Baruā alludes to this fact when he comments that Lakshminath’s birth itself is unique, since, instead of touching the floor he touched water at birth. The uniqueness lies in the fact that he was born in a boat on the Brahmaputra.

Dinanāth Bezbaroa, Lakshminath’s father, was a high government official moving from one place to another on transfer. He was appointed Munsif in 1861 and sent to Nagaon. He served three years as Munsif and Deputy Collector at Nagaon. Then came the transfer order to move over to Barpeta. Dinanātha set out in a huge country boat down the Brahmaputra, since rivers were the chief means of transport at that time. “Since it was a long and hazardous journey and it took several days to reach the destination, the boat had to be moored against sand banks of the Brahmaputra during night. It was on such an occasion on a sandbank near a place called Āhatguri where Lakshmināth was born in the boat that carried the family to Barpeta.”

Lakshmināth tentatively gives the date as 1868 in his reminiscence. But now it is conclusively settled as sixteenth November, 1864.

It was a custom among the Assamese to herald the birth of a baby boy by blowing of the conch and sounding of gongs. It is not known whether Dinanāth honoured the tradition in that wilderness. It was left to Lakshmināth who was so named since he was born on Lakshmi-Purnimā day, considered auspicious by the Hindus, to announce to the world his arrival through his signal service to Assamese life and letters. “It is as if, he inherited from this mighty river his broad mind,
courageous heart, indomitable spirit, untiring zeal and deep love for Assamese tradition and culture.\textsuperscript{52}

Lakshminath’s early childhood was spent in Barpeta, popularly known as the Vārānasi of Vaishnavite culture. He was literally born in this all-pervading atmosphere. On the impressionable mind of young Lakshminath Barpeta had left an indelible mark. Then came another transfer; this time to Tezpur, a place of quiet scenic grandeur and considerable historical importance. At Barpeta he was still a child, the memories of which were largely hazy. At Tezpur he grew into a young man and its impact was formative. The young man’s mind gleefully responded and recorded the impressions of this delightful surrounding. These impressions stored up well in the inner recesses of his mind, came in handy in the productive years of his manhood.

At Tezpur Lakshminath was fortunate to have come in close contact with some remarkable men. Among them were Rabinath Mazumdar Barua and the Dekā Gosāin of Jarābāri Satra. Both of them left a lasting impression of Lakshminath’s mind. Rabinath joined the Bezbaroā household at Tezpur as what may be called the male version of a governess. Being a distant relative he soon became a member of the Bezbaroā household. This man was sort of a storehouse of the folk-mind of the Assamese people. A man of impeccable moral credentials and strict discipline, his inexhaustible fund of folk-tales, legends, mythological stories was a source of delight and awe for Bezbaroā and other children of the household. Rabināth’s stories were to Lakshminath what Bishop Percy’s ‘Reliques of English Poetry’ was to the English Romantics. “Like Pushkin learning from his old nurse Russian folk-songs and tales, Bezbaroā learnt from this gentleman, besides folk-tales many stories from the epics and other ancient Indian mythologies.”\textsuperscript{53} These stories invariably found their way and formed the care of Bezbaroā’s folk-tale collections like Kakā-dentā Āin Nātt Larā, Sādhū Kathār Kuki and Budhi Āir Sādhū. The Dekā Goswāmi of Jarābāri Satra who used to visit the Bezbaroās, was also a remarkable spinner of tales. There are at least

\textsuperscript{52} P.C. Bhuṣan : 1995 : ‘Lakshminath Bezbaroā – Influence of Tradition on His Writings’ P. 101

\textsuperscript{53} Hem Barua, op.cit., P. 10
two stories in the folk-tale collection Sādhukathār Kuki-Ghar Patā Kakā and Mulākhowa Buṭhā which could be traced to Dekā Gosāin.

Tezpur was also the place where Bezboroa came in direct contact with common people. The potters of Kumārgaon on the outskirts of Tezpur were occasional visitors to the Bezbaroa household. They endeared the children of the household by presentation of playthings made of clay. The attitude of the Bezbaroa household towards servants and their children too a bearing on Lakshminath’s character. Servants were not looked upon as servants but as family member and it was forbidden for the children to call them by their name. It was a touching spirit in an age when feudalism held its away. The Vaisnavite ambience of Barpeta Satra was maintained here too with Lakshminath visiting Nikāmal Satra. This is important since these visits imbied him the spirit of Vaisnavism in him and in later life he was to become one of the faith’s greatest exponents.

From Tezpur the Bezbaroas moved to a small town North Lakhimpur, the civil sub-divisional head quarter, nestled amidst sylvan surroundings. In their neighbourhood lived a goldsmith by the name Siddheswar. His workshop became one of the favourite haunts of Lakshminath. He loved to see Siddheswar at work. Often the felicity with which he turned gold into dazzling shapes of ornaments held Lakshminath wonderstruck. Siddheswar had a young daughter, a little nymph with well-defined, sharp chiselled features. The ripples that this Beatrice of his boyhood created in his heart found poetic expression in his early manhood in a poem titled ‘Mālāti’. Another influence that merits mention was that of the Brahmaputra with her quiet grandeur and varied flora and fauna. Durgeswar Sarmā’s idol-making too fascinated Lakshminath greatly and he occasionally played the apprentice to this man by occasional heading of the earth and application of pigments on the idols. In later life Lakshminath himself could make images when required for religious rites.

Dinanāth Bezbaroa’s house was a hub of religious activity wherever he moved. In fact Vaisnavite rituals pervaded the life of the Bezbaroas including the

---

51 B.G., Vol. 1, P. 36
55 Hem Barua, op.cit., P. 11
young ones.\textsuperscript{56} More than academic accomplishment Dinanath was very particular about this. Lakshminath used to accompany his father to various Sutras. Enactment of Aukiya Bhaona by the Bhaktas was at the Bezbaroas was a common feature. These performances, fascinating and impressive as they were, lift an indelible mark in Lakshminath’s mind.\textsuperscript{57} No wonder Vaišnavite philosophy became the life-breath of Lakshminath and it remained so throughout his life. The conditioning of his childhood had a great bearing on his future role as a front running exponent of Sankarite Vaišnavism.

Rabinath was the first to familiarise Lakshminath with Assamese letters. Formal schooling started at Lakhimpur with a primer Sishu-Siksha, part-I, by one Madanmohana Tarkalankara. Lakshminath probably was a boy of seven or eight years old. The Primer was understandably a Bengali one since Bengali was both the official language and the medium of instruction. For a child learning a foreign tongue in place of the mother tongue is like drawing sustenance from a feeding bottle instead of mother’s milk which is the mother tongue.\textsuperscript{58} Bengal came under Western influence quite early compared to its immediate neighbours. Calcutta became the seat of British power and therefore if become the nerve centre of political and educational activities. The establishment of Fort William College in 1800 and the Serampore Mission Press opened up vistas of European thought and education for the Bengali people. Armed with this power they became logical choices to occupy lucrative government positions. It also provided them the lever to influence government decisions in administration. The advancement of the Bengali people compared to the rest of India was the result of this early contact with English. Lakshminath’s father, though traditional in many ways, was a man of vision. Dinanath’s taste was marked by certain amount of catholicity and he could look beyond the immediate present. He knew the value of English education and encouraged his wards to learn English. In fact he too started to learn English.\textsuperscript{59} To facilitate the learning of English for his children and others he started an English school at Lakhimpur.

\textsuperscript{56} B.G. Vil.I, Pp. 40-41
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. P.10
\textsuperscript{58} B.G. Vol. II. P. 8
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
Lakhimpur did much to enlarge the sensibility of young Lakshminâth. But purely on the academic front he was not and could never be, what we may call a brilliant student. According to his own admission he was a boy of mediocre ability. This was to land him in deep trouble when Dinanâth moves house to Guwahati on transfer.

For a sensitive and imaginative boy like Lakshminâth the harsh learning condition of school naturally seemed to be nightmare. Memories of school brought to his mind images of penal servitude. His nieces were way ahead in mastering Bengali verse. They left no opportunity in showing off their ‘learning’ to taunt Lakshminâth. The solemn-looking form of the cane-wielding teacher was enough to frighten the wits out of him. He developed a deep aversion for school but could not possibly bank classes against the strict order of his father. Two of his elder brothers were at Calcutta pursuing higher education. He awaited their visit home with much enthusiasm. Sadly that enthusiasm did not last long. They started grilling him about his academic progress the moment they saw him. And that was enough to make him avoid their contact as long as they stayed home. This incident coupled with the unimaginative and soulless educational system prevalent at that time forms the core of one of his better known short stories called ‘Mukti’.

If learning was an agonising thing at Guwahati, its scenic splendour dotted with temples, sacred spots, hills and the Brahmaputra was enough to put Lakshminâth into raptures. He fondly visited sacred sites like Aswakranta, Umânanda, Târbashî, Nabagraha, Sukreswar, Bâisisthâshram etc. But he could not make it to Kâmâkhya and Hajo, two of the most sacred places in Assam. These places find their way in glorified form in his only novel Paucum Kaâwar. Besides being a visual treat Guwahati and its hallowed shrines must have ‘kindled an interest in his mind in mythical lore and theological ideas.\(^{60}\)

Lakshminâth spent the major part of his life outside Assam. Particularly his entire creative life was spent in Bengal and Orissa. Yet one can hardly
miss the smell of native earth in his writings. It can not simply be explained away as the imaginative recreation of an undoubted genius. The Assamese ambience of his writings owes its origin to the experiences of childhood and youth. In fact Assameseness, its way of life and faith, its convictions and inhibitions - all were built into his consciousness. The occasional foray into Assam only refreshed his memory by removing whatever little haze that might have come over his memory.

Dinanath Bezbaroa's superannuating came in 1873. He was advised by one of his friends to settle down at Guwahati. But the oldman would have none of it. His heart was else where. He was determined to lead his last years at Sibsagar with the pious rigour of a religious man. Thus the journey upstream Brahmaputra began from Guwahati to Sibsagar. Lakshminath enjoyed the sights and sounds of the journey with the passion of a romantic poet. The vagaries of the river with its turbulent current, its quicksands, whirlpools; the quirk of nature like sudden storms, accompanied by thunder lightning and rain; the flora and fauna, all come out with great vividness.\(^{61}\)

For Lakshminath Sibsagar was a stark contrast to Guwahati. Sibsagar turned virtually into ānandasagar, a place of limitless joy, according to his own admission. The beauty of the place enchanted him. The harshness and rigour of Guwahati School was conspicuous by its absence at Sibsagar. He was able to silence the taunts of his playmates by mouthing an adequate number of Bengali verse. He became a sort of leader among his peer group. Fun and frolic occupied a considerable part of his life, particularly traditional games and swimming. In fact his swimming prowess turns out to be considerable. He could swim across the Mahānadi at Sambalpur\(^{62}\) just as he used to do it with Dikhau at Sibsagar. Here Dinanath settles in to routine of religious piety and rigour. And Lakshminath too was passionately involves in religious discourses, scripture recitals and traditional festivities.

---

\(^{61}\) B.G. Vol. I. pp. 14-18
\(^{62}\) A.O. Mukherji as quoted in J.N. Goswami. P 26

"He was a good swimmer always, and even in his oldage, he swam across the Mahanadi in Sambalpur........."
At Sibsagar High School Chandra Mohan Goswami, the Headmaster, fills Lakshminath with awe and admiration. Padmanath Gohain Barua too admires this Bengali gentleman so much so that when the Headmaster was transferred to Kohima Government High School the former too joins that schoil. Nothing could be a greater tribute to a teacher.

Lakshminath was a freedom-loving spirit. He despised fetters of all kind. This explains his deep dislike of formal schooling. As a result he could clear the Entrance Examination only in the second attempt. That was in 1886. This paves the way for his passage to Calcutta. His leaving Assam proves momentous since he would not be returning to Assam to settle here.

Dinanath opposed the idea that Lakshminath should pursue his higher studies in faraway Calcutta. Gobinda and Binanda, Lakshminath’s elder brothers prevailed upon their father. Lakshminath was admitted to Rippon College (Presently known as Surendranath Bannerjee College) when the academic session was halfway through. He could not surmount the difficulties of alien surrounding and unpalatable food to catch up with the course. His health was on the downslide. A worried father, Dinanath called him back to Assam. Back home Lakshminath had only to eat and roam about to while away the time. Very soon he was fed up by this insipid routine. He returns to Calcutta with greater determination to prove his worth. His resolution paid off when he cleared the F.A. class in 1886 from City College. It enabled him to secure a scholarship from Assam Government for further studies. Later he pursued his B.A. course at General Assembly College (the present Scottish Church College). While doing his B.A. course at Ripon College Lakshminath was ushered in to the ‘golden realm’ of Byron, Keats, Shelley and other poets of the English romantic age. It was facilitated by Palgrave’s Golden Treasury of lyrics which formed part of the syllabus. Besides the English Romantic poets Shakespeare too had a mesmerising impact on Lakshminath. This infatuation was perhaps the reason behind his decision to pursue English literature in his M.A. Course even though he had already made up his mind to don the mantle of a lawyer as a profession. With his power of reported, knack for

---

61 J N Goswami, op cit., P 34
62 Hem Barua, op cit., P 15
logical thinking, gift of gab, he had all the makings of meritorious pleader. He wanted to be one with all his heart. For him the Calcutta High Court became a sort of pilgrim center. He frequently visited the High Court to witness and imbibe the legal arguments of the famous pleaders of the time like W.C. Bannerjee, Manmohan Ghosh, Rāsbehāri Ghosh, Gurudās Bāneerjee, Āshutosh Choudhury and so on. Unfortunately that was not to be. The University Syndicate raised the pass mark after the examinations were over. Lakshmināth fell to this hurdle in his law examination. He was one among the seventy odd students who fell victim to the unethical decision of the University syndicate. And it must be said to Lakshmināth’s credit that he alone had the conviction and moral courage to drag the university to court. That he failed to get justice done is another story. The same misfortune awaited him in the M.A. examination. Divided between law and literature at the same time he could do justice to none.

In spite of his failure to secure an M.A. degree in English literature Lakshminath’s Calcutta University days did not go waste. Fashioned on the line of London University, this University had on its Faculty scholars of considerable eminence like C.H. Tawney, W.T. Webb, J.C. Bose, M.M. Percival, Gurudās Bāneerjee, F.T. Rowe etc. Of the lot Charless Tawney seemed to have left a lasting imprint as a Shakespearean scholar in Lakshmināth’s mind. Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the Vice-chancellor too impressed Lakshmināth by his intellectual brilliance.

Calcutta deepened Lakshmināth’s sensibilities and widened his intellectual horizon. Besides being the seat of imperial power it was also the nerve-centre of intellectual and nationalistic stirrings. Western education and thought were proving instrumental in creating a new consciousness. Krishna Kripalani’s words sum up the Western impact on the Indian mind –

"Intellectually it shook the intelligentsia out of a mental torpor which had well nigh paralysed all initiative and spirit of inquiry. The intelligentsia fostered
under this regime took to English readily, impressed by the wonderland of scientific knowledge and technique which it revealed, and charmed by a literature that seemed the more stimulating because it was so different from their own. 68

Lakshmināth too came under the spell of this ferment. He came in contact with the educated elite from all over India who were in Calcutta for their higher studies. This elite was trying to reestablish their selfidentity through the development of their respective language and literatures. The age old stupor and ignominy engulfing these was the reason behind the backwardness of the concerned regions. Lakshmināth and his dedicated band of friends like Chandrakumār Agarwālā, Hemachandra Goswāmi and many others took unto themselves the responsibility of raising Assamese Language and literature. To channelize their collective energy towards this goal they needed a forum.

The Assamese elite of Calcutta, particularly the students going there for higher studies, had devised an effective way of getting together in a forum called ‘Tea Party’ to keep themselves ahead intellectually. They used to assemble at a place twice weekly, on Wednesday to discuss the reformation of Assamese society and its problems and Saturday meetings to the development of Assamese Language. It was the latter that was to prove momentous. It was in such a meeting that the idea of forming a society for the development of Assamese language was discussed and given shape. The result was the Calcutta Society for the Development of the Assamese Language. Which transformed into Assamīyā Bhāṣār Umrati Sādhīmi Sabhā. Later this Sabhā played a historic role in the national resurgence of Assam. Besides others Lakshmināth and Gunābhirām Baruā were in the forefront in the formation of the Assamese Language. Which transformed into Assamīyā Bhāṣār Umrati Sādhīmi Sabhā. To give shape to the agenda of the Sabha the journal Jonaki was brought out. Its epochal importance can be gauged from the fact that the creative exuberance of the early romantic period is popularly referred to as the Jonaki Yug (i.e. the Jonaki era). The resurgence of Assam to a large measure can be assigned to these

68 “Modern Literature” in A.L. Basham (ed) ‘Cultural History of India’. P 408
two institutions. They became important fronts for nationalistic mobilization in Assam.

The impact of *A.Bhā.U.Sā Sabhā* and *Jonaki* spread around in concentric circles. Journals with the same ideals started appearing. Mention can be made of *Bijuli* which came out in 1890 from Calcutta by the joint endeavour of Padmanāth Gohāinbarua and Krishna Prasād Duwarā. When *Jonāki* and *Bijuli* met with premature death the void was later filled by Goharbarua’s *Ushā* and Lakshmināth’s *Bānhi*. What *Jonāki* did to the sprouting of journals *A.Bhā.U.Sā Sabhā* did to associations. In Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Tezpur and in faraway Kohima associations sprang up bearing the *Sabhā*’s name. These associations of course had no organizational link with the original. Yet the ideals were the same. These were small but significant steps towards the creation of national consciousness in Assam. *A.Bhā.U.Sā Sabhā* was also the main inspiration behind the formation of the Assam students’ Association. Incidentally Lakshmināth Bezbaroa presided over its first session at Guwahati in 1916. The Assam Students’ Association in turn inspired the formation of the *Assam Sāhitya Sabhā*. It survives to this day and remains close to the heart of the people. The *A.Bhā.U.Sā Sabhā* therefore is instrumental in releasing historical forces of far reaching consequences. Lakshmināth, who presided over the 7th session of the Sāhitya Sabhā at Guwahati in 1924, was quite aware of this. Delivering his keynote address he used a rhetorical question –

"Who would have thought that a handful of Assamese students in Calcutta who planted the seed of *A.Bhā.U.Sā Sabhā* would one day transform it to a huge tree and take under its peace-giving shade the whole of Assam."

Lakshmināth married into the famous Thākur family of Jorasanko in 1891. His wife Prajñāsundari Devi was the daughter of Hemendranath Thākur and the grand

---

Bhuyan comments on the *Assam Sāhitya Sabhā*’s origin: “The success of Assam Students’ Association inspired some literatures of Assam to plan the founding of *Assam Sāhitya Sabhā* and discussion to that effect was held at Gauhati during the plenary session of the Assam Students’ Association.”

daughter of Maharshi Debendranāth Thākur. Khitindranāth Thākur, the elder brother of Prajnāsundari, was Lakshmināth's classmate and friend. This marriage was consummated in accordance with Brahmo rites. Lakshmināth's father had actually arranged an Assamese girl for him. The news that his son would marry a Bengali Brahmo girl pained him very much.

Before marriage the Maharshi sent a messenger to inquire about the amount of dowry that the latter would like to demand. Lakshmināth sent word that the custom was conspicuous by its absence among the Assamese and he would not lower himself by taking dowry. He was badly short of money at that time and the dowry, customarily considerable would have helped him tide over his financial crisis. But for Lakshmināth no amount of money would have made up his loss of self-respect. If he so liked he would have led a comfortable life style by accepting the post of A.E.C. he was offered twice by the British. He rejected government service twice because he considered slavery worse than death. After marriage the couple visited the Maharshi to get his blessing. Devendranāth Thākur gave a golden pen as a gift with the wish that good writing would emanate from his pen. This wish proved prophetic in Lakshmināth's later life.

Another interesting episode before marriage highlights Lakshmināth's pride in his being an Assamese. While the marriage proposal was on some numbers of the Thakur family cast doubts regarding Lakshmināth being Brahmin. In their considered opinion Assam was a land of barbaric tribes and there were no Brahmins. Maharshi Devendranāth admonished his ignorant relatives. After marriage Lakshmināth wrote a long article on the passage of Brahmins from Kanauj to Assam. This article appeared in serial form in the Jonāki. Marrying into the most famous family in Bengal had its fallouts. His wife's relatives expected to turn Bezbaroa into a cent percent Bengali. This would have been proved facile if they could destroy his Assameseness by casting aspersions on the Assamese language and proving it to be a mere provincial Potois of Bengali. In spite of himself Lakshmināth was drawn into the unsavoury arguments:

71 B.G. Vol.1, P.64
72 Ibid. P.106
73 Ibid. P.67
initiated by the Thākur family members. Even an enlightened soul like Rabindranāth Thakur too joined issue with Lakshmināth. Since arguments with Lakshmināth seemed unbecoming Rabindranāth wrote an anonymous article. The main thrust of the letter published in the Bhāratī was to prove Assamese as a corrupted form of Bengali and not an independent language. Lakshmināth sent a fitting rejoinder to the same journal. Later the same article appeared in the pages of Puṇya edited by Prājñāsundari Devi. It was doubtful whether the article succeeded in removing doubts about the Assamese language. But it certainly succeeded in silencing them. Any slighting remark on things Assamese only strengthened his resolve to assert himself with greater force. In this regard his meeting with Chadra Mohan Goswāmi in Calcutta was significant. He told Lakshmināth to hold his head high and guard his family honour at all costs. In his hour of embarrassment these words must have proved quite helpful. Little wonder that all attempts to 'Bengalize' him proved futile. In his own words "they have caught a tartar in me." A lesser mortal in his place would have been swept off his feet by the grandeur of Jorasāŋko; Lakshmināth was made of sterner stuff.

"The alien surrounding of his manhood did not remain alien to him for long and yet then he never got submerged in them. On the one hand, this contact produced for him a double-edged effect: it sharpened his intellect and understanding, and it added a new dimension to his natural urge to serve the Assamese people through literature." Serving under the colonial dispensation would have definitely stood in the way of these ideals. Besides the life of Gangā Gobind Phukan from Lakshmināth's Sibsāgar days may have influenced his decision to spurn government service. Phukan resigned his post as E.A.C. to start independent business of his own and to ally himself with the nationalistic upsurge of the time. Tall, handsome and fair Phukan had

74 B.G. Vol. I, P. 67
75 Ibid. P. 69
76 Ibid. P. 67
77 Hem Bama. op. cit., P. 17
an intellect to match. His European life-style must have added an aura around his personality.

The year 1895 was quite eventful in the life of Lakshmināth Bezbaroa. His father breathed his last and his first daughter Surabhi was born. The same year also saw Lakshmināth enter into business in partnership with Bholānāth Baruā. The former’s ceaseless hard work and dedication combined with the business acumen of Bholānāth Baruā soon transformed their enterprise into a success story. Metaphorically their timber business touches the Calcutta skyline and becomes a symbol of what can be achieved if people pull their resources together. In a span of ten years their assets, according to Bezbaroa, was worth about 12 lakhs. Around 1903 differences surfaced between the partners which affected their prospects adversely. Ultimately they part company formally in 1911. A man of considerable innate resourcefulness Lakshmināth tried his hand in timber business and sundry other activities to eke out a living. His diary dated 27th Aug., 1912, records an interesting bit of information. He had concocted a head massaging oil called Jayanti for which he ordered posters from England. With the active help of his friend Chandra Kumār Agarwālā he also retails Assam tea for some time at Howrah besides acting as an agent of the city of Glasgow Insurance Company.

However Lakshmināth independent business went on the downslide during the First World War. He had to take up a job with a European concern, Bird & Co. The job required supervision of work in the forests of Assam and Sambalpur of Orissa. The idyllic beauty of the Mahānādi at Sambalpur and the friendly climate made him to buy a house there. His reminiscences testify to his successful stint with the company. When his body could take no more rigour he resigned his post in 1928. He settled permanently at Sambalpur and started anew what he was familiar with timber business. He was at that time 64, a time when people think in terms of leading a life of retirement.

---

79 B.G. Vol. I, P. 106
80 J.N. Goswami, op.cit., P. 62
81 Ibid.
While still an employee of Bird & Co, Lakshminath presided over the first *Assam Chhalra Sammilani* in 1916 held at Guwahati. He was a leading citizen of Sambalpur and served its municipality twice as a member. He was the only Assamese there and such honour seems to be significant.

Bezbaroa's life is a profile in courage. He was not the one to be put down by circumstances. Although his life, in fortune and in poverty, the thought of his people, his language and literature were his constant concern. He never missed a chance to highlight the problems of his province. Though he was never in active politics he represented Assam thrice in the Indian National Congress, in 1903, 1904 and 1907. He is the first Assamese to have spoken at an all India forum like the Congress. He is also the first man to have initiated Assam into a pan-Indian outlook. A man of moderate temperament he disliked violence of all kinds even for the sake of freedom. Speaking at the first *Assam Chhalra Sammilani*, Bezbaroa exhorted the youth of Assam not to take to the extremist line which the youth of Bengal resorted to after the partition of Bengal in 1905. This attitude perhaps was the reason behind his association with Congress which strode the moderate line till then. Yet it is apparent that politics was not one of his priorities. His heart was with Assamese life and letters.

Even during his busiest days, when he was constantly on the move, Bezbaroa could still find time to edit a literary magazine, *Bāhi* write articles and essays, short stories, plays and not to speak of the position of Vaishnavite Philosophy in various ways. He was instrumental in taking Assamese Vaishnavite philosophy to faraway places like Baroda and Ahmedabad. He delivered two lectures on Vaishnavism in 1933 at Baroda at the request of Sāyājīrāo Gāikwād, the ruler of Barodā. These lectures are as lucidly simple in language as they are profound in thought. He also delivered a lecture on the "Cowherd of Brindāvan" at Ahmedabad at the behest of the All India Oratorical Association. The Barodā lectures in particular is a great honour since his predecessors were people of the highest eminence like Dr. S. Rādhākrishnan, C.V. Raman, R.G. Bhāndārkar and Nobel laureate Rabindranāth Tāgore.  

---

92 Jnanadabhiram Barua, as quoted by J.N. Goswami, P. 98
93 Ibid, P. 100
94 P.C. Bhuyan, op. cit., P. 143
Bezbaroa’s phenomenal career culminated in the universal acceptance in his home province as the chief voice of Assamese resurgence. Honours and homages poured from all and sundry. The grateful people of Assam invited him to preside over the Assam Sāhitya Sabha session of 1924. He exhorted his people again to enhance their language and literature to be counted among civilized nations. He also attended the Dhubri session of the Sabha in 1926 when this border district stood the danger of being turned into a Bengal territory. The Assam Sāhitya Sabha conferred on him the sobriquet ‘Rasaraj’ in a specially convened sitting in 1931 at Sibsagar. Curtain came down on Lakshmināth’s life on 26th March 1938 significantly on the banks of Brahmaputra, the river in whose mighty lap he was born. In difference to his wishes his last remains were immersed in the Brahmaputra.
Bezbaroa, as a pioneer and luminary of the great upsurge called Indian Renaissance, stands as tall as any mother India has produced. "The legacy bequeathed by great pioneers like Lakshmināth Bezbaroa is for all of us to share and glory in."

In spite of the contrasting circumstances of their birth, upbringing and education there are many points of affinity in the life of Phakirmohana and Bezbaroa. Both laid much emphasis on native way of life. Their attitudes towards Western impact were the same. While protecting the native value system from alien onslaught they took progressive elements from the West. They both used satire, sarcasm, understatement, irony to lash out at those elements that were supposed to weaken and degenerate the fabric of native life.

Both Bezbaroā and Senāpati were associated with the Brāhma Samaj movement though they were never converted to Brāhmaism. Even while remaining loyal to the Vaishnavite tradition of their native cultures, they had enough catholicity to assert all religious paths to be essentially true. They both took up cudgels against obscurantist elements built in to their religious traditions. In his youthful days Phakirmohana’s disillusionment with Hinduism made him contemplate conversion to Christianity, though ultimately he abandons the idea. The youngest daughter of Bezbaroā actually converts into Christianity and becomes a nun.

Both tried to translate the value system of the Sanskrit texts of yore in their writings. Phakirmohana translated the whole of Mahābhārata, Ramāyaṇa and part of the Upanishads into easily intelligible Oriya. For his stupendous work he was fondly referred to as Ṭyāsakavi. Lakshminath’s exposition of the Vaishnavite tradition of Assam was equally commendable. In fact he in acknowledged as the greatest expositor of ethico-religious tradition of Assam of modern times. Their political sympathies lay with the congress. They attended Congress sessions at different times.

---

Yet they assiduously kept away from active politics. Instead they choose literature as an effective medium to further the cause of their respective provinces.

They both were called on to play crucial roles in the resurgence of their provinces. The language controversy agitated their minds. They took militant stands against Bengal on the language question. Yet both were indebted to Bengal. They both loved Bengali literature and could write in that language with felicity. While Phakirmohana’s son married a Bengali girl, Lakshminath himself married in the Tagore family.

Lakshminath lived the major portion of life outside Assam in Bengal and Orissa. Therefore a portion of his creative endeavour delineates life outside Assam. Phakirmohana lived nearly three decades away from native home in various princely states of Orissa which helped him gather experience of life at the lowest level. Of course, he spent nearly six months in Andhra Pradesh on an assignment and tried to learn Telegu there. But his literature is entirely a faithful portrayal of Orissan life.

Lakshminath left no masterpiece behind him. In a way he is like Rabindranath on a lesser scale, who tried out every literary genre and contributed to them in a significant way. Phakirmohana’s literary fame largely rests on his fictional work among which the novel “Chhamänya Āṭhagunṭha” is universally acknowledged as his masterpiece. In fact Senāpati is considered as the greatest master of Oriya fiction. Lakshminath’s fame as a writer rests chiefly on his short-stories, historical dramas and belles lettres. It is the belles lettres that made him the Rasarāj of Assamese literature.

This is only one aspect of his colourful personality. More than this his many splendoured genius not only gave a sense of unity to modern Assamese literature, he also gave it a sense of direction. For this epic endeavour his grateful countrymen fondly honoured him with the epithet-Suhityarāthu, which means ‘the Charioteer in the realm of letters’.