CHAPTER - III

CHARACTERISTICS OF ASSAMESE CHRONICLE PLAYS

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Bengal was in ferment in the wake of the freedom movement. The impact was felt in neighbouring Assam too, where the people came out and joined in the programmes of the movement. Consequently, the tradition of patriotic plays against the backdrop of 'Swadeshi' movement runs parallel in the literature of both the provinces. Like their Bengali counterparts, Assamese playwrights too began to delve into history in order to create plays that would be able to inculcate a feeling of patriotism in the popular psyche, and they largely succeeded in their efforts. Those 'chronicle plays' were a source of inspiration to the people participating in the struggle.

The characteristics of both the Bengal and the Assamese patriotic chronicle plays are almost identical. The principal features of the Assamese chronicle plays of those days were -

i) To cry hosannas for the motherland;

ii) To focus attention of the people on the history of the land;

iii) To base plays on the lives of the heroes and heroines of Ahom history;

iv) To uphold the importance of Hindu-Muslim united stance.

Even though Assamese chronicle plays of early contd.....
twentieth century modelled themselves on the Bengali ones, the tradition of drama in Assamese literature goes back well in time. In the 18th century, Mahapurush Shankardove and Madhav Deva introduced 'Ashta Naat' in Assamese literature. The plays that were written following the tradition in 17th century bordered on the burlesque. The extant plays from eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were mostly 'paranoid' in a content. In the last part of the nineteenth century, some of the newly educated Assamese youngmen who studied in Calcutta were influenced by Bengali drama to such an extent that they themselves began writing plays. These plays put the emphasis on a realistic approach. The West also cast its influence on quite a few plays. This period witnessed advent of proscenium in Assam.

The later part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the 20th twentieth is known as the 'dark age' of the Assamese literature. Development of literature was hindered because of lack of official patronage. Gradually, however, the sponsorship of the missionaries and the popular enthusiasm lifted the language from the quagmire. 'Jonaki' — a monthly magazine provided the first indicator for this emerging hopeful trend. At around this time, talented literatues like Laxminath Benskarooah, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Hem Chandra Gouami, Padmanath Gohain Baruah etc., came contd....
forward to serve the cause of the language. A number of patriotic and inspiring poems and essays etc., were written, of which, mention must be made of Laxminath Bezbaruah's poem 'O Mor Aponar Desh' which later came to be regarded as Assam's national anthem. Another such poet of the era was Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya who had an inspiring influence on his countrymen.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of many significant writers of whom, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Laxminath Bezbaruah, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Paziruddin Ahmed, Janardan Thakur etc., excelled in writing history based patriotic plays. Padmanath Gohain Baruah's 'Joymati' was the first published history play in Assamese literature, which started the whole tradition of such plays. These mostly drew on Ahom history as their source of inspiration. In trying to focus on the provincial history, Gohain Baruah and Bezbaruah wrote different plays on the same theme. As a result, we see the recurrence of Lachit Barphukan, Joymati etc. as main characters in both of their plays. While these two concentrated mainly on Ahom history, playwrights like Atul Chandra Hazarika, Janardan Thakur, Paziruddin Ahmed etc., went beyond the provincial frontier and made history of other states also subject of their writing. Thus, Hazarika wrote a play on 'Shivaji' just
as Jaiadran Thakur had 'Chanakya' as the main character in one of his plays.

Prose has proved to be the best vehicle for patriotic plays. The heroic episodes from history get their natural resonance in prose dialogues. Padmanath Gohain Barooah, in three out of his four published historical plays, used poetic dialogue. This, on the one hand, weakened the patriotic mood, and, on the other, came in the way of the full blooming of his talent. Again, even though Laxminath Gusbarooah uses prose dialogues in his Assamese plays, evocation of patriotism in them is rare indeed. Nationalist ideas have been nicely depicted in Atul Chandra Hazarika's plays. A spirit of dedication to the cause of motherland and a sense of admiration for the national history are among the main features of Assamese history plays. We may also note that these have not only helped in carrying out the message of patriotism, but also had a major share in the all round improvement of the Assamese language and literature.