Chapter I
Introduction

The Background:

In order to adjudge the contribution of Lakshminath Bezbaroa in the regeneration of Assamese literature, and more especially in romanticising the trend of its expansion, a peep into the socio-literary state of affairs in the age to which he belongs is essential. With this aim in view, a brief survey of events that happened just preceding the emergence of Bezbaroa in the literary arena is made below.

Modern Assamese literature was an offshoot of nineteenth century renaissance which resulted from the intellectual awakening coming in the wake of introduction of Western education through English language and literature. The British consolidated their power at the end of the eighteenth century, and Bengal being the then seat of British power was the first to be under the Western influence; and Calcutta being the capital of British power, became the cradle of profound changes in the first half of the nineteenth century, which were destined to shake the other parts of the country from their age-old traditional roots.

1. Chatterjee, Sumit Kumar: 'The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India', p. 79
The establishment of Hindu College in 1817 at Calcutta marked the beginning of the great changes; and Derosio and 'Young Bengal' formed the first generation of intellectuals who prepared the ground. This period from 1800 to 1850 had been termed as a period of preparation when Raja Ram Mohun Ray and Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar grafted the English language on oriental studies, and through their patriotism and rationalism prepared the ground for freeing the Indian mind of taboos and superstitions.

In Assam we miss very much the first period of renaissance; and the socio-cultural and educational vacuum in Assam was mainly due to the fact that Assam was annexed by the British about seventy years after Bengal. The first English school in Assam was established in 1835; and soon the elite of Assam began to take up with Bengal; and in the second half of the nineteenth century Assam saw the front rank intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gumabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua, who were contemporaries of the leaders of the second generation of renaissance in Bengal, as for example, Michael Madhusudan Dutta and Bankimchandra Chatterjee.

The first generation of the Assamese renaissance writers who formed a counterpart of the second generation of Indian renaissance, had first to regain the lost prestige of

1. Chatterjee, S. K. : op. cit., p. 76 f
the Assamese language and literature.\textsuperscript{1} When Assam was annexed by the British, Bengali was made the official language of Assam in spite of the fact that Assamese had a very rich language and literature experiencing a sort of renaissance during the age of Sankaradeva in the sixteenth century. Referring to the glorious past of the Assamese literature, Acharyya P. C. Ray remarked, "Assamese prose literature developed to a state in the far distant sixteenth century which no other literature of the world reached except the writings of Hooker and Latimer in England."\textsuperscript{2} Grierson also paid a glowing tribute to Assamese language and literature saying, "The Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study in which India, as a rule, is curiously deficient."\textsuperscript{3}

But the alien rulers failed to appreciate the richness of the Assamese language and literature at the beginning of their rule and Bengali was made the official language and medium of instruction in the schools causing much dissatisfaction amongst the native Assamese and obstructing the path of socio-cultural progress.\textsuperscript{4} Though the

\begin{enumerate}
\item Neog, M.: \textit{Assamiya Sahityar Ruprekha}, p. 450
\item Goswami, U.: \textit{Lakshminath Bezbaroa, a Maker of Modern Assamese Prose} in \textit{Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam}, ed., Neog, M., p. 179
\item loc.cit.
\item Gait, Sir Edward: \textit{History of Assam}, p. 332 f
\end{enumerate}
Assamese people had swallowed the bitter pill, it was under a protest, and through persistent efforts in which some English officials stationed in Assam had also sympathised, Assamese was made the official language and medium of instruction in schools in 1873.

The Baptist missionaries laid the foundation of modern Assamese prose. "It was Barkers and then the Browns and Cutters, who came to settle in Sibsagar, and it was due to their efforts that the printing-press was duly established there by 1844. It was in this very year that they printed the first history of Assam compiled by Kasinath Tamuli Phukan and Radhanatha Barberwa, and published two years hence, in January 1846, the first Assamese journal Orunodoi."

The publication of Orunodoi by Nathan-Brown as editor really heralded the dawn of a new era, an age of Renaissance in Assam, and this together with his Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language (1848) and Miles Bronson's Assamese and English Dictionary (1867) virtually affected a veritable revolution in the field of literature in Assam, that was never experienced before; and since then Assamese literature passed through a period of renaissance bringing in its train newer thoughts and ideas through the doors of English literature and windows of the sister literatures and mainly that of Bengali,

and finally this culminated in the national awakening in Assam.

After the commencement of publication of Orumodoi, a number of other Assamese journals appeared; and some intellectuals of the day such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, and Hemchandra Barua wielded the pen and started to publish some books. These three pioneer authors are referred to, with full justification, as the trio.  

When the process of germination of modern Assamese prose was almost complete, these three literary giants prepared the ground for the emergence of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. "Lakshminath Bezbaroa's great predecessors, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua, had not only helped Assamese language and culture establish its identity in the face of heavy odds, but strengthened Assamese social life with a deep-toned and unmistakable humanism." All the three of them started their career as writers in Orumodoi. The reinstatement of the Assamese language was the mission of Anandaram and the missionaries like Bronson for which they waged a ceaseless battle; while through their mighty pen they tried to rouse his fellowmen from self-complacency and fatalism. Anandaram has been likened to Raja Ram Mohun Ray of Bengal, who heralded the dawn of Indian Renaissance in the

2. Barua, L.K.: 'Bezbaroa and the Indian Renaissance' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathli of Assam, p. 19
nineteenth century. (Colonel Hopkison the then Commissioner of Assam, compared Anandaram Dhekial Phukan with Raja Ram Mohum Rai of Bengal and said that considering the peculiar circumstances of Assam in which Anandaram was placed, one is bound to call him even a greater genius than Raja Ram Mohan).  

Gunabhiram Barua became a close associate of Anandaram in the domain of literature, and by editing the periodical, Assam-bandhu from Calcutta, he infused into society new ideas of liberalism and reformation. Assam-bandhu was also instrumental in shaping the writers of the growing generation. In fact, Gunabhiram was profoundly influenced by the Bengal of Vidyasagar's day; and such was the influence that he even used his mighty pen to compose a social drama, Ram-Navami in 1958 in support of widow remarriage.

Of a more serious vein and much idealistic temper were the writings of the last of the trio, Hemchandre Barua, who was more high-strung, sensitive and radical than his two other contemporaries. His endeavour was to cure the society of the manifold moral evils; and as it happens everywhere, his efforts could profoundly inspire the like-minded and charge the youth with high idealism. The greatest achievement of Hemchandra lies in his dictionary, Hemakosha, which had made his name a household word in Assam, an Assamese Johnson.

indeed!

The work of the Baptist Missionaries and Anandaram-Gunabhiram-Hemchandra trio set the stage ready for the emergence of the Jonaki Age or the Age of Bezbaroa, which has been acclaimed by the historians of Assamese literature as the second golden Age or the Second Period of Renaissance, the first being the Age of Sankaradeva.¹

Dimbeswar Neog in his *New Light on History of Assamiya Literature*² has classified the evolution of modern Assamese literature, from the second quarter of the last century till the second half of the present century into two basic periods, viz., the pre-Romantic period (1826-1889) and the Romantic period (1889-1959). He has sub-divided the former into two periods of non-Christian (1826-1846) and Christian era (1846-1889). The latter basic period has been sub-divided into the pre-Romantic (1873-1889), the Romantic (1889-1929) and the post-Romantic periods (1929-1959).

In the preceding pages, the events mainly of the pre-Romantic period from the year of British conquest of Assam (1826) till the year of publication of Jonaki in 1880 have been highlighted and this period was virtually concerned with the restoration of the Assamese language from the temporary

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¹ Neog, M.; *Assamiya Sahityar Ruprekha*, p. 260
² p. 260
eclipse described earlier. In fact, after the first blossoms of renaissance during the age of Sankaradeva, there was a gradual decline of the Assamese literature intercepted by chronicles (buranji) writing during the Ahom rule; and the decay continued till the advent of the British on the land. If the alien rulers were responsible for temporary usurpation of the Assamese language by the Bengali language, the Baptist missionaries were responsible for reinstatement of the Assamese language during the pre-Romantic period, and this period may reasonably be labelled as the Orumodoi Age in the history of Assamese literature.

The Romantic Age began with the publication of Jonaki from Calcutta in the year 1889, and since Lakshminath was the central figure of the Jonaki circle of literary men (to be discussed in the following section under 'Jonaki Age') the age has become popularly known, and rightly so, as the 'Age of Besbaroa'.

The Jonaki Age:

The Jonaki age was profoundly influenced by English literature on the one hand and the contemporary Bengali literature on the other. Assam could not escape both these influences; she had to allow herself to be immersed in both

1. Neog, M: *Asamiya Sahityar Ruprekha*, p. 267
the tides for recreation, regeneration and coronation of her own language. Under the impact of Western education "An altogether all-consuming emphasis came to fall upon the cultivation of the mother tongue - the vernacular, whether it is Assamese, Bengali or any other language, and this preoccupation was never at the expense of the English language. Literature in the vernacular not only came to engage a closer attention, but it was rapidly acquiring a different character through the English literature and history; new concepts and ideas embodied in new forms in literature modified and reoriented the existing patterns in our cultural life. This encouraged bold departures from tradition in adopting new forms like that of lyrical poetry, the novel and the drama according to existing models in English literature, leading in social sphere to new ideas in personal and collective relationships."1 As Assam was bound to be under the impact of the English influence, so it could not bypass Bengali influence. In fact, "The influence of the 19th century Renaissance in Bengal had been so pervasive that it would be absurd to think that Assam could escape it, more so when we find that many of the operative factors were identical one has to note that the most influential of the earliest Assamese men of letters were nourished by the same liberal education, based on a cultivation of the English language."2

1. Barua, L.K. 'Bezbaroa, and the Indian Renaissance' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam, p. 18
2. op.cit., p. 19
The intrinsic note of the Jonaki Age is deeply poetical, signifying thereby the glorification, expression and expansion of the human soul; and this free play of imagination travelled in diverse directions enriching the entire Assamese literary arena.

Literary Characteristics of the Age of Bezbaroa:

The Age of Bezbaroa found its varied expression in various literary forms, most of which were introduced for the first time and created with artistic embellishments, thereby ushering a new age and period of hectic literary activity unparalleled in other literatures of the time. Consequently, an unprecedented development took place in literature in almost of all the set patterns of Western literature such as poetry, short story, novel, drama, literary criticism, biography and children's literature. Brief descriptions of the various literary forms of the Age are given in the following paragraphs.

I. Poetry: "The essence of Romanticism was, it must be remembered, that literature must reflect all that is spontaneous and unaffected in nature and in man, and be free to follow its own fancy, in its own way."¹ The intellectuals of the early nineteenth century were profoundly influenced by

this spirit of romanticism under the impact of western education and particularly in the twenty-five years from 1850 to 1875. "Bengal, and with her the contiguous provinces of eastern India though to a much lesser extent, produced a galaxy of eminent men, some of them are quite geniuses of international character in different walks of life, intellectually and spiritually particularly. ... ... ... Lakshminath Besbaroa can certainly be reckoned as one of this illustrious band."^1 In fact, during the Jonaki Age Besbaroa was the central figure round which all literary men clustered. His associates, Chandrakumar Agarwala and Hemchandra Goswami virtually effected poetical revolution in Assamese through their poems, "Bankuwari" and "Priyatamar Chithi", referring to which Dibeswar Neog has remarked, "The publication of "Bankuwari" in Jonaki created a widespread feeling that such poems could be composed in the conversational language."^2 Since romanticism finds its best expression in poems, as it was in the Age of Wordsworth, it was only natural that the essentially romantic age of the Assamese Renaissance of the later period of nineteenth and early part of twentieth century should flower into metrical and lyrical forms for which the Age of Besbaroa had become an age of poetry in its principal aspect of literary activity.

1. Chatterjee, S.K. : 'The Nineteenth Century Renaissance in India and Lakshminath Besbaroa of Assam' (1864-1938) in Lakshminath Besbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam, p. 4
"The poem sprang like a flower from the poetic genius." This remark is more than true in the case of the literary men of the Age of Bezbora, whose hearts were torn asunder by the agitations of the soul and turmoil of the niceties of thought and feeling resulting in the currents and cross-currents of the age of transition. Like the Lake poets they were also deeply concerned for the relationship between man and nature and on such occasions the "subconscious (to use a later term) came into its own again, and the untamed in man became a subject for literature."¹ Wordsworth's own expression, "I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject that poetry takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility, so that poetic language should be a selection of real language of man in a state of vivid sensation", found a distant echo and striking resemblance in the minds of Jonaki poets. The English romanticists brought revolutionary changes in the realm of metrical and lyrical literature throughout the world; and the revolutionary changes produced far-reaching consequences in the future generations. "So began the so-called Romantic movement from the town it turned to the country; from satire and moralising to description and songs; from classical legend to supernatural and to Nature itself; from peers to peasants; from an elaborate poetic vocabulary to something like real language

¹. 'Romanticism', The New Caxton Encyclopedia, vol. 17, p. 35
It is needless to mention here that under the impact of Western education the poets of Jonaki Age were under the spell of this nineteenth century English Romanticism. Nevertheless, they had also examples of Indian version of English romanticism as it was readily obtainable to them in the rich variety of poems found in the writings of Nabinchandra Sen, Hemchandra, Michel Madhu Sudan Dutt, Bankimchandra and Bhairilal amongst others. In fact, the Assamese poets of those days, under the force of circumstances as a part of the subject nation, had become associated with Bengali literature and culture because their presence at the capital of British India was inevitable for picking up the alien language and literature, and for educating themselves. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Assamese poems during the formative period of the Jonaki Age owed much to Bengali poems.

It needs be mentioned here that while one literature might be influenced by another, generally growing literatures owe much to matured ones; and the indebtedness of Assamese to Bengali literature needs be acclaimed. But at the same time, it should be remembered that in most cases Bengali literature inspired original writings in Assamese.


The blank verse of Ramakanta Chaudhuri (1846-84) and the verse especially in poems of Baladev Mahanta (1850), Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1853-1936), Bhola Nath Das (1858-1929), Ratneswar Mahanta (1864-93), Mafizuddin Hazarika (1870-1957), Benudhar Rajkhowa (1871-1955), Durgaprasad Majindar (1870-1928) and many others may have occasional resemblance with the renowned poets of Bengal such as Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Nabindra Nath, Iswar Chandra and Hemchandra, but these poets were strikingly original and were successful in developing Assamese poetic diction and variety of metres. In fact the Assamese romantic movement launched by the trinity of Chandrakumar, Lakshminath and Hemchandra had remarkable resemblance with the English romantic movement initiated by Wordsworth-Coleridge - Sothey a century earlier. 1

The Assamese poetry of the Jonaki age is like the English romantic poetry, characterised by simplicity, intense love of Nature, preoccupation with the subject of Man, deep feeling for the life of the poor, and the love of the supernatural. Indeed, the Assamese Romantic movement was the best planned and most successful literary movement after the great tide of Vaisnavism in Assam. 2

In affecting a conscious poetical revolution, there is bound to be a break with the past. However, it need not

1. Neog, D. op. cit., p. 410
be a complete break-away from it. Maheswar Neog has very rightly stated that the tradition of self-exploration in romantic poems is rooted in the past, and this is evidenced in the glorification of human love in the ballads and love ditties of oral tradition of the preceding ages.

II. Drama: The flowing current of traditional literature was obstructed in its even forward course at the end of the eighteenth century when the kingdom was faced with unprecedented crisis resulting from the gathering clouds of uncertainties in the political horizon of Assam. The period further went into decline in socio-cultural aspects for want of literary genius or dramatists worthy of name. In the beginning of the nineteenth century when the kingdom was laid waste by the Burmese invasions, the period of decadence was almost complete and the traditional current dried up. However, the performance of the old traditionally played dramas continued to enjoy popularity though of course in a subdued state.

The break with the tradition was almost complete when with the coming of the British the newly educated Assamese youths moulded by the Western education made a determined effort to recreate the language and literature under foreign influence. Of course, the Bengali literature exercised

tremendous influence on the Assamese youths in this mission, since in the second half of the nineteenth century Calcutta was the only centre of Western education for Eastern India. Under the Western influence which came much earlier in Bengal than in Assam, the newly educated youths of Calcutta established a stage in the Western style and began to stage plays written in the fashion of English dramas.¹ The Assamese youths coming to Calcutta for study were profoundly influenced by the Calcutta stage and Bengali theatrical performances; and it was through their efforts along with other theatre enthusiasts of Assam that temporary stages were set up at the end of the nineteenth century in the growing urban areas of Assam.² At this initial state, the Assamese stage had the plain technique, having only one drop scene, some decorated background screens and three to four wings. Of course, a place was allotted separately for the orchestra.

Before the last decade of the nineteenth century the dramatic stage in modern sense of the term was conspicuous by its absence; and, as such, there was no dramatic activity in the sense as it is understood to-day; only the few dramas that were written were meant for the reading public, and almost all of them had some pioneering zeal for reforming society or curing it of some vices.

1. Neog, M. ibid. op. cit., p. 298
2. Ibid.
Indeed, the modern Assamese drama made its appearance in the last part of the later half of the nineteenth century. The Ram-Navami of Gunabhiram was a crusade for widow marriage and the Kaniya-Kirtan of Hemchandra raised a cry against opium addiction, while the Bengal-Bengalani Natak of Rudraram Bardoloi, as the very title indicates, appealed to the people to shake off the vices of Bengali imitation. But all these literary productions can hardly be called dramas in the strict sense of the term.

Attempts, nay, sincere efforts, were made for production of dramatic literature. An obscure dramatic figure wrote two dramas, Hemprabha and Vaidehi-vicched. In 1888 Ratnadhar Baruwa, Ghanasyam Baruwa, Ramakanta Barkakati and Gunjanan Berua put their heads together to render Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors into Assamese, and the translation was staged¹ and published as Bhrama-ranga. Earlier to that, Ramakanta had perhaps published Sita-haren. A few other persons of literature tried their hands on drama, but these did not see the light of the day.

Various influences combined together to shape Lakshminath into a great dramatist in the Jonaki Age. His close association with drama enthusiasts fired his imagination while his intimate association with the Tagore's gave him an unique opportunity to gather practical experience of stage-

¹ Neog, M. : op.cit., p. 209
craft. But his talent was limited by non-existence of an Assamese stage; and as such when he began to write dramas, he could not visualise a stage; he wrote for the reading public and not for the stage. His contribution to Assamese drama comprises of three historical plays and a few farcical comedies. His first play Litikai published in 1890, belongs to the period of his apprenticeship. Long twenty-four years intervened before he set his hand to publication of matured dramas. His farces, Nomal, Rachani and Chikarpati Nikarpati, came out in 1913, and, after two years, his three famous historical plays Jaymati, Chakradhvajasinha and Belimar were published. The farces unfolded the stupidity, incongruous manner, mannerisms and religious hypocrisy in light humorous vein. Bezbaroa emerged through these works as a light comedian. In his chronicle plays Besbaroa succeeded in bringing into focus three distinct epochs of Assam's history by conjuring up an atmosphere of historical milieu. Lakshminath Besbaroa wrote his dramas in prose although he himself considered drama as a poetical expression. But his contemporary Gohain-Barua composed Jaymati, Gadadhar and Sadhani in blank verse, while following Besbaroa he wrote his fourth drama Lachit Barphukan in prose. All these dramas of Gohain-Barua lack dramatic excellence, universal appeal and modern outlook. But he overcomes his defects mostly in the comedy Gaoburha, which is still acknowledged as the finest comedy of Jonaki Age, free from the flaws of excesses. But we miss the heights of excellence in his other comedies such as Teton Tamuli,
Bhut ne Bhram although these are all his mature works.

Bezbaroa was an outstanding dramatist of the Jonaki Age and he along with Gohain-Barua was successful in laying the foundation of dramatic literature on sound footing.

Although Bezbaroa did not try his hand in epical dramas, yet the age saw remarkable productions such as Meghnad-vadh, and Tilottama-Sambhay, but these being in blank verse in imitation of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, failed to capture the imagination of the Assamese readers; and the posterity rejected them down as Bengali imitations. But it needs to be acknowledged that the Meghnad-vadh (1904) set a new style of epic dramas on Assamese literature, and as such, it is regarded by historians of Assamese literature as a milestone in the path of progress of epic dramas in Assamese. Chandradhar Barua, the writer of these dramas, may not be great in his works but he did surely achieve lasting glory by inspiring posterity to write epical dramas.

III. Novel: The literary form of novel originated in England, and it is through acquaintance with English literature that the popular art of novel writing was imported to Assam in the eighteen eighties by Padmawati Devi Phukanani (1853-1927). Her work Sudharmar Upakhyan was published in 1884. It was a domestic novel and she has been compared to Jane Austen especially in her delineation of female characters. Her work has earned for her the glory of the first novelist in Assam.
There were subsequently some attempts especially by missionaries for writing novels; and the most remarkable attempts were: Kamnikanta (1897) by G.S. Gurney and Phulmansi Karuna by Mrs. Mullen. The former deals with some female characters of Chatterji-Banerji families while the latter is an Assamese rendering of Bengali life;¹ and these cannot be termed as novels proper.

The early attempts were literary exercises in prose, and should be more properly reckoned as efforts towards perfection of the Assamese prose; and these attempts revealed that successful novels in Assamese could be written only when the vehicle of expression was carried to perfection. The Jonaki age had carried forward this movement for development of Assamese language and literature; and when Lakshminath wrote, rather attempted to write, a novel named Padum Kuwari (1905), he not only initiated the historical novel in Assamese, but also showed how the language could be carried to heights of excellence and creation of atmosphere of artistic beauty in such narrative art. Rajanikanta Bardoloi (1867-1939) was the only successful novelist of the Jonaki period; and it was he who gave this new art form a good shape in Assamese. His first novel Miri-jiyari is a romantic novel published in 1895; and thereafter a series of historical novels flowed from his masterly pen; and these are: Danduwa-droh (1909), Manomoti.

¹ Neog, D. : New Light on History of Assamia Literature, p. 387
(1900), **Rangili** (1925), **Radha-Rukminir Ran** (1926), **Nirmal Bhakat** (1928) and **Radhai Ljgiri** (1930); the first two deals with different phases of history of Assam, while the last four are simply accounts of Burmese invasion of Assam. As a creator of the Assamese historical novel Rajanikanta has been called "the Scott of Assam" who has very faithfully recreated the past of Assam through his narratives in novel form.¹

Rajanikanta's novels reveal a natural spontaneity as the tales and stories appear to have been taken from legends that move from lip to lip to generations, and the characters like Dalimi, Panei, Manowati, Pamili, Rangili, Radhai are all lovely creations who live long in our memory once we come in contact with them through the pages of Rajanikanta.² The most striking feature of his novels is his strong moral basis, for which neither his villains bad men nor his lovelorn maidens molested.

IV. Short story: Like novel, the short story also owed its origin to English literature.³ It was Lakshminath Bezbaroa who first brought this new form to Assamese literature, which soon became fast popular; and its popularity increased with increased publication of journals and magazines. Bezbaroa

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collected and edited folktales. The preservation and publicity of folktales formed a part of the renaissance movement. He wielded his pen for a long period for writing beautiful short stories, most of which were published in Bahl and other local magazines. His two volumes of short stories Sadhu-Kathar Kuki and Surabhi were very popular and won the hearts of Assamese readers, besides setting examples for others to emulate. His stories are characterised by careful observation; his characters are lively; his treatment of situation is psychological; and a broad human sympathy and a deep moral tone characterise his short stories. The success of Lakshminath inspired others to tread the realm of short stories and explore the underlying truth, beauty and good of life and nature for the Assamese readers.

Amongst the contemporaries of Lakshminath it was Saratchandra Goswami who could make a name as a writer of short stories. His two volumes, Galpanjali and Mayna were published in 1914 and 1920 respectively; and these collections of short stories opened up new dimensions in the sphere of short stories. There is a strike of mellow tone in these stories; and the writer's sympathy for domestic animals and deep concern for families in distress have impregnated them with a sense of universality.¹

¹ Neog, M. : Assamiya Sahityar Ruprekha, p. 319
V. Essays, Criticism, Biographical and Philosophical writings: Essays, literary criticism and philosophical treatises in Assamese first made their appearance in Orumdoi, a monthly magazine "devoted to religion, science and general intelligence" published in 1846. The examples of Baptist missionaries inspired the Assamese intellectuals such as Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua, Lambodhar Bora and Ratneswar Mahanta to set their hands on essay writing according to their tastes and temperaments. As a result of their efforts these literary giants of the pre-Jonaki period were successful to a great extent in developing a true prose, clear, simple and restrained, a fit vehicle for instruction and satisfaction of reason.

The posterity followed suit, and wrote volumes of essays, a form of literature best suited to the free expression of an expanding soul, and thereby perfecting Assamese prose and raising it to higher status through freshness and vigour. In the Jonaki Age the literary men who made lasting contributions to this branch of literature were Lakshminath Bazaroda, Satyanath Bora, Benudhar Sarma, Banikanta Kakati, Surjya Kumar Bhuyan, and Nilmani Phukan amongst others. The contribution of these essayists were confined mainly to literature, language and literary history.

Kamalakanta Bhattacharya wrote some reflective essays such as Gutidiyek Chintar Dhau, Kah Pathah, Astavakra Sambita, Astavakrar Atmajivani, Tupir Dokan, Mor Manat Para.
Katha, and these are embellished with a beauty of expression and illumined with a clarity of thought. The moralising tone was struck by Padmanath Gohain-Barua in Niti-siksha, Buranjibodh and Assambar Samkshipta Buranjii which are characterised by lucidity, clarity of reasoning and flowing movement of events. The essays of Hemchandra Goswami were successful in drawing the attention of the government and the people to the prime need for preservation of historical antiquities in Assam, while those of Satyanath laid the foundation of Baconian style in Assamese. Kanaklal Barua raised the level of essays to learned philosophical treatises in his writings. Inspired by the elders, the younger generation also came forward and made lasting contributions in the sphere of essays and literary criticism.

The contribution of Lakshminath Bezbaroa in the field of essay is quite distinct from others, since his essays are, truly speaking, personal essays, somewhat different from essays proper. He wrote in light vein; and his humorous sketches occasionally drifted to satire in such personal essays as Kripabar Baruwar Kakator Topola, Kripabar Baruwar Kakator Obhatani and Barbaruwar Bhavar Burbureni; but these writings brought new things in literature,¹ and enriched and embellished it.

Bezbaroa and His Associates:

The publication of Jonaki ushered in an era of renaissance and modernism in Assamese literature; and as such it is worthwhile to study the history of Jonaki and the literary men that clustered around the periodical for a long period to convey the message of the new awakening to their fellowmen in Assam.

Giving a brief resume of the origin of Jonaki, Bezbaroa himself has said, the Assamese students of Calcutta had a tea club, called Tea Party, having its sittings on every Saturday in the lodge of any of the members with the object primarily to create mutual fellow feeling amongst themselves. Soon, out of the tea party Asamiya-Bhasa-Unnati-Sadhini Sabha sprouted which was destined to spread out its foliage to cover a hundred yojanas. It was on a sitting of the tea party on August 25, 1888, the historic resolution was passed with a great optimistic heart. The object of this Sabha was improvement of Assamese language and that is why the Sabha was christened Asamiya-Bhasa-Unnati-Sadhini Sabha (Assamese Language Improvement Society), having its primary aim to illumine its glorious rays the face of Assam and also to see how it might attain a state of strength and vivacity in place of present weak sickly and decayed condition.

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1. 'The Jonaki and Asamiya-Bhasa-Unnati-Sadhini-Sabha' (translated from Mor Jivan-Sovaran by B.P. Chaliha) in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahitya Rathi of Assam, pp. 70-71
The Calcutta-based Assamese youths were so much inspired that to infuse strength and vivacity to the deplorable, weak, sickly and decayed condition of their mother tongue, prepared the ground for publication of an all purposeful literary magazine; and Chandrakumar Agarwala proposed to bring out an Assamese monthly, Jonaki, to which Bezbaroe and his other associates readily agreed. It was in February 1889 that the first issue of the magazine saw the light of the day bringing smiles not only to the enthusiasts but to a great body of reading public in Assam. The Jonaki soon became the torch bearer of Assamese literature illumining hundreds of souls that came under its focus and helping to light many a lamp in the field of Assamese literature; indeed, it was Jonaki that laid the foundation of creative efforts of regular literary writing in Assamese, and for that matter it contributed profoundly in the growth of Assamese literature as a whole.¹

Chandrakumar Agarwala (1867-1938), Hemchandra Goswami (1872-1928) and Lakshminath Bezbaroe (1868-1938) were the three literary giants of Assam who put their heads together and worked hand in hand for keeping up the high literary stand of Jonaki, and they became popularly known as Jonaki circle of literary men. Referring to their contribution to the growth

¹ Neog, D. I New Light on History of Assamiya Literature, p. 391, remarked about that Jonaki, that it is re-corporation of Assamese after her restoration.
of Assamese literature, Dimbeswar Neog in his *New Light on History of Assamiya Literature* has remarked that "they by themselves form into a trio of Assamese literature even from their university life when they first published *Jonaki* in 1889. They may aptly be compared with the Lake poets of English romanticism."¹

Chandrakumar was the leader of the group and he was the real founder of *Jonaki*. Actually his literary productions are few, and all that he wrote was bound in two volumes, *Pratima* and *Bin-Baragi*. These are small volumes but the few pages these have are so rich in poetical excellence that we tell of him that these two volumes deserve to be bound in gold; because these reveal rare Wordsworthian simplicity, glorification of Man, sympathy for the underdog and lastly, genuine love of experiment for newer techniques.

Indeed, Chandrakumar was out and out a worshipper of beauty like Keats, upholding that the worship of the beautiful is the prime thing of life. "Niyar", one of his representative poems, testifies to the fact that Chandrakumar could create beauty with simple words, while "Madhuri" dances with play of verses with exquisite lines.

From a worshipper of beauty and humanitarian he could occasionally rise to metaphysical heights also, and in his

¹ Neog, D. *op.cit.*, p. 401
poem 'Mai' in Pratima he saw in the whole world a reflection of his own self and invited his readers to merge in his self. The metaphysical personality in him sometimes revolted against external restraints of the society and became mad for freedom like Shelley. "Bin Baragi" is an example in this point.

Chandrakumar is thus a romantic like Keats, a metaphysical like Donne, a revolutionary like Shelley all in one; and for his varied moods, depth of thought and occasional high seriousness, he finds difficulty in expressing himself in proper verse by observing the rules of prosody and rhyme.

Hemchandra had his early training in literary career at Nagao under the able guidance of Gunabhiram; but he could not become a prolific writer. His contributions to Jonaki and Asam Bandhu were few and far between; but the scanty production did not detract the merit of these poems such as "Kako Aru Hiya Nibilao", a love poem and "Priyatamar Chithi", 'a letter from a beloved', in sonnet form. Hemchandra excelled in metrical form; and his "Priyatamar Chithi"1 had secured for him a permanent place in Assamese literature as the first sonnet in the language.

Hemchandra's association with Chandrakumar and Lakshminath was short lived, since he had to be away from them for earning his livelihood. However, his links continued,

and his love for literature persisted. In the later part of his career, he was instrumental in establishing the Assam Research Society and the Assam Literary Association. He also compiled and edited some immortal works such as Typical Selections of Assamese Literature, Katha Gita, Katha Bhagawata, and Purani Assam Buranji.

It was, however, left to Lakshminath Bezbaroa to embellish the Assamese literature with a totality and uniformity. The attempts of his contemporaries, in spite of their occasionally rare brilliance, were piecemeal and superficial, incapable of holding up mirror to nature. But in Bezbaroa the literary aspirations of the Assamese found fullest expression. The Assamese language and style of expression were greatly improved to a high degree of excellence in the hands of Bezbaroa. In fact, there is hardly any branch of literature which he did not adore. His achievements have remained unparalleled even to-day. Indeed, there is no other litterateur in Assam, except Bezbaroa, who could give and all comprehensive view of the Assamese life as we all understand it to be. Various influences shaped his literary genius; but he assimilated them all in his own inimitable way and made Assamese language the fit vehicle to give artistic expression to various facets of Assamese life with its customs, sentiments, emotions, spiritual aspirations and trials and

tribulations of life. His short stories are, as if, pages from the lives of the Assamese people. They are so near to life that we are reminded of Tagore. His dramas are also significant with depth of thought and singleness of purpose; the character of Dalimi in *Jaymati Kuwari Natak* is an ideorealistic representation of the youthfully joyous nature of Assam, although resembling outwardly the Shakespearean heroine Miranda. This shows that had he been absorbed in production of drama alone, he might have achieved, and left for us, what Dwijendralal had achieved and left for Bengal. He also set his hands to literary criticism. When Haribilas Agarwala, Madhavchandra Bardalai and later on Sivanath Bhattacharjee published some old religions works, the gate of literary criticism were opened for the first time; among these literary critics Bezbaroa held the front rank, although from modern point of view he is lacking in fine literary judgement and enunciation of literary principles. His main contribution lies in initiating a new branch of literature, namely, criticism; and through his pioneering works he was successful in inspiring a group of eminent literary critics.

Bezbaroa, thus, by his many-sided genius and multifaceted personality, dominated his age and inspired the oncoming generation to carry forward the light of literary activity kindled by him; and as such the Jonaki Age has been

rightly and in fitness of things, been labelled as the Age of Bezboroa. S. K. Chatterjee has very aptly remarked that "Lakshminath Bezboroa was one of the most versatile writers with an all embracing genius and a wide knowledge of and sympathy for men and their ways. He was a poet, an essayist, a novelist, a dramatist, a critic, a humorous and satirical writer and what not. He is easily one of the most comprehensive spirits in Modern Indian literature." 1

1. Ibid., p. 80