Chapter IV

Lakshminath Bezbaroa as a Poet

Introduction:

Lakshminath Bezbaroa seems never to have considered himself as a poet. He found his genius suited well to humorous writings in prose; and rightly, his humorous, witty and satirical sketches had won for him the title of 'Rasaraja' from the Assamese reading public. Nevertheless, he was gifted with such feelings and inspirations, which generally go together to make one a poet. Though Bezbaroa did not take the art of poetry as seriously as his compatriots Chandrakumaran and Hemchandra, yet he wrote quite a few good poems which could be rated as some of the finest pieces in Assamese poetry.

Reviewing his poetic nature the sayings of Socrates may be recalled: "All good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems, not as works of art, but because they are inspired and possessed ... ."

The poetic genius of Bezbaroa has been widely appreciated by the outstanding critics of Assamese literature. Paying glowing tribute to the poems of Bezbaroa, B. K. Barua remarks, "Poetry in the hands of Lakshminath, broke traditional fetters. He not only struck new notes and opened

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2. Campbell, John Shair, Aspects of Poetry, p. 49
new vistas of thought, but introduced fresh forms and diction, love lyrics, nature poems, and narrative verses; and ballads are his outstanding contributions."¹

Thematic Analysis of Bezbaroa's Poetry:

The creative genius of Bezbaroa, revealed in the essays of Kripabor and farcical plays, is mainly satirical or comic in tone, while in the short stories we find him as the first realist of Assamese literature. But besides his realism and satire, there is another aspect of his genius, rather the most remarkable aspect, namely, the romantic aspect which is remarkably and spontaneously revealed in his poems. Indeed, Bezbaroa is one of the trio of the first generation of Assamese romanticists who devoted themselves under the influence of English Romanticism of the nineteenth century to recreate Assamese literature.²

It is, therefore, this romantic consciousness which pervades all through the poems of Bezbaroa. Indeed, the basic inspiration of his poems is romanticism. In his early youth Bezbaroa was profoundly influenced by the lyrical movement of English romanticism. The creative heat, the imaginative

¹. Barua, B.K. : Modern Assamese Literature, p. 12
². Neog, D. : New Light on History of Assamese Literature, p. 400 f
insight, the inspiration which is the soul of his idea was amply manifest in his early poems and the novels he composed during this period. Later on, his romantic consciousness deepened and matured through his association with Tagore and study of English romantic poets. Under these influences Bezbaroa was successful in creating a tradition of lyricism in Assamese literature.1

The poems composed by Bezbaroa fall broadly into two groups: (a) poems and songs inspired by English and Bengali literature, and (b) poems inspired exclusively by Vaishnava literature. There also are some patriotic and satirical poems. We can, however, make a thematic classification of his poems under the heads, (1) Descriptive poems, (2) ballads, (3) patriotic songs, and (4) philosophical poems.

Descriptive poems: The descriptive poems of Bezbaroa are: Priyatama, Priyatamor Saundaryya, Bhram, Prem Kavita and Avaseh. The influence of English romantic poets are very much pronounced here. Some lines of these poems appear to be the translation from poems of Thomas Campion, Andrew Marvell and Robert Herrick. 'Bhram' is the outcome of composite influences of Tagore, classical Sanskrit poetry and Assamese folk songs. A rendering of the poem in English is given below:

1. Neog, D.: Asamiya Sahityer Buranji, p. 634
Who says, it is the flute playing on? No, it is the sylvan Deity that sings;
The garland is knitted not with sewali but with stars.
No flower garden, but gathering princes;
No roses but eyes of beloved I so fixedly gazed.
The fawn at play? Only the inert may say;
No forest deity swing on durva tops.
No tanks, no water but heart of love mad after follow current
A black bee! The soul of the harp that hums;
No butterfly but the flower that adorns the hair knot of my beloved
You call it the Krsna bird that sings 'Krsna', 'Krsna'
The wailing of a milkmaid resounded
Sigh of women in separation: A maina?
The beloved face puffed up; Dusk! 1

'Priyatamar Saundaryya' is moulded on George Darley's 'The Loveliness of Love', while Shelley's 'Music when soft voices die' vibrates through 'Avasesh'. Shelley's 'Love's philosophy' has been turned into a humorous or mock-romantic poem 'Chums'.2

2. Barua, B. : 'Lakshminath Bezbaroa's contribution to Assamese poetry' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam, p. 12
'Priyatama' bears resemblance to 'Cherry Ripe' of Campion and Herrick's 'Rock of Rubies and the Quarelets of Pearls'. In 'Pren' Besbaroa dives deep into the depths of love and proclaims the glory of all-pervading love and pantheism.

The poetic ideals of Besbaroa has been reflected in his 'Kavita' in the following lines, which seek to define poetry as

The charm and beauty of a maiden,
The half-articulate speech of little children.¹

Indeed, Besbaroa and his associates had this romantic ideal before them only to explore the potentiality of the Assamese language. Nevertheless they were conscious of the social commitments, passion, sentiment and involvement which go together to make genuine poetry. However, the above definition of poetry speaks of the romantic aspect of Besbaroa's poetic genius. His treatment of the episode in the poem 'Devayani and Kacha' reflects Tagore's influence and sentiments.

Ballads: The outstanding ballads of Besbaroa are 'Ratani', 'Bar aru Saru'. 'Nimati Kanya', 'Tilaka', etc. He wrote these ballads in imitation of English folk songs and

ballads. But these are more than imitation, since the poems created a new form of poems in Assamese literature glorifying the Assamese tradition, and Bezbaroa has been hailed as the father of pastoral poetry in Assamese literature. The most popular of his ballads are on Badan Phukan and 'Bar aru Saru'. In the poem on Badan Barphukan, the person mainly responsible for the Burmese invasion of Assam, the poet cries out in remorse, "You have set the robbers in this golden Assam; you have driven elephants into Eden; you have put the ferocious cobra in the floor of the bedroom at the dead of night."

'Bar aru Saru' sings the glory of the tiny riverlet, which has descended from the mountain to low land that embraces it with arms of affection.

**Patriotic Poems:** The chief patriotic verses of Bezbaroa are 'Mor Des', 'Bin-baragi' and 'Assam-sangit'. In 'Bin-baragi' Bezbaroa tries to recreate the past history of Assam following the type of traditional minstrel's songs. The figures of the minstrel is made into a powerful instrument for patriotic inspiration. But the optimist Bezbaroa peeps into the bright future and inspires us with the message of hope and joy as revealed from these concluding lines:


2. Regarding the poem Bezbaroa sweetly remembered in 'Mor Jivan Sowaran' in Bezbaroa Granthavali, vol. I, p. 126
"Into our new hearts
and new pairs of eyes
pour your brilliance
so that we see afresh
the old world
and for that, sing but once, O' lyre!"¹

This optimism rises into strong determination in 'Asam Sangit' to lead Assam to the path of progress as is evident from such lines as "Beat the big drum, blow the conchshells, play the mridanga and khol; Assam is moving up again, call Glory be to Mother Assam."²

Besbaroa was profoundly influenced by the nationalistic feelings of his day;³ and through such poems he wanted to inspire his fellowmen to patriotic feelings so that they merged in the struggle for independence that was striking deep roots in the country.

Philosophical Poems: Besbaroa was profoundly influenced by Vaishnava literature. He was overwhelmed by the poetic excellence of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva; and he undertook the task of arousing public interest in this rich cultural

¹ Besbaroa Granthavali, vol. I, p. 979
² Ibid., vol. I, p. 994
³ Neog, M. : Lakshminath, p. 12
heritage of Assam. He remarked, "Who have taught us to extend the horizon of our thought and feelings but Sankara and Madhava? Who have taught us to love our country, our people, our language, our religion but these great men of letters? It was they who initiated us to that knowledge of the soul of self-realisation which is the highest mark of human development." Besharoa himself dived deep into the Vaishnava literature in order to enrich the Assamese literature by forging a link with the past heritage; and he chose Assamese prose as the vehicle of our expression for treatises on traditional literature. However, he also wrote some remarkable poems under the traditional influence; and these are: 'Iswar aru Bhakat', 'Bahi', 'Mahaprayanar Jatri'. The moral bias has been strongly reflected in such poems as 'Prakita Jivan', 'Sukhbodh' and 'Man Apaman' while 'Renuka' echoes the philosophy of the Gita.

'Bahi' reflected the metaphysical aspect of the union of the human soul with the universal soul; 'Mahaprayanar Jatri' shows the mysticism of Besharoa at his best. 'Iswar aru Bhakat' is perhaps hinted at the philosophical outlook of life; and in this small poem he champions the cause of Vaishnava ideals more effectively than he could do in his prose works. The English rendering of this exquisite poem of

1. Barua, D.: 'Lakshminath Besharoa the Poet and Romantic ideal' in Lakshminath Besharoa, the Sahityarathi of Assam, p. 106
2. Ibid.
Bezbaroa is given below:

Lord asked from heaven,

'Who's now is the turn to come?'

Said the votaries chanting sweet,

'In your love we are all immersed.'

From the heaven Lord did rule out,

'Come, my fellow band!

Said the votaries chanting sweet,

'Not till we're stronger in faith'

Lord did summon, 'My devotees dear

'Time is here to share the Prasad'

Said the devotees, 'Oh Basudeva, our God,

'Chanting Thy name is food enough'

Call by name then Lord chose,

'Come Narada, Vidura, Udhava'

But all of them in reply said,

'We'll come when chanting over'

'My devotees on earth, your's are the crowns

Of heaven; come as fast as you can'

'No, No, dear God, our Lord,

We trade not in salvation'

If you don't really want to come

I must come to you myself;

I cannot live without your company

A moment will be as long as years. 1

1. Trs. by Barua, D. : 'Lakshminath Bezbaroa the Poet and Romantic Ideal' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa the Sahityarathi
This poem is an unique expression of the devotional cult of Vaishnavism; and poems like 'Iswar aru Bhakat' with unadorned simplicity are rare not only in Assamese but also in any other literature.

**Satirical Poems:** As has been hinted earlier Bezbaroa's genius was mainly satirical and humorous; and his romantic consciousness was only a missionary zeal to enrich Assamese. He was conscious of the fact that there were certain things such as flowers, lower, the fragrant southern breeze, the doves, the lotus, the lilies and the moon which had become poetic on their own strength. To write poems on these romantic subjects did not add much to the credit of the poet. So he cautioned, through Kripabar, "But if you are a true poet, practise your art as Pope did; take up any subject, however unpoeetic, and see if you can make it dip in poetry. Those who create sublimity in simple thoughts are true poets." 1

Bezbaroa's satirical poems are heavier in bulk than any other group of his poems. But neither the critics nor the historians of literature have paid any proper attention to them. But an evaluation of these satirical poems can bring back the popularity they once enjoyed during the days of Bezbaroa. He could parody the most romantic of the romantic

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1. Barua, D.: 'Lakshminath Bezbaroa the Poet and Romantic Ideal' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam, pp. 106-107

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themes such as the exultation of the motherland as is evident in 'Amar Janambhumi', which points out how ridiculous it is to boast everything as patriotic in such lines as:

Where would you get such rice as need only water to boil?
Where would you get such acid fruit from which your teeth recoil?¹

Of course, the poem has another significance since it is conceived as a parody of Dwijendralal Roy’s famous Bengali poem 'Where will you find such a country' (eman desti pabe nako khuji).

All his satirical poems were written in lighter vein; and the most significant of these poems are 'Chandra', 'Lai aru Kabir Baran', 'Kripabar Baruar Itiking' and 'Chalani aru Beji'. The last one has been considered the best of his satirical poems, for it is in this poem that he answers to attacks on his language and religious views. It will be worthwhile to reproduce in English 'Chalani aru Beji' to show how witty Bezbaroa's genius is:

The Sieve and the Needle

Said the Sieve, "My dear Needle,
Why do you prick?"

¹ Barua, D.: 'Lakshminath Bezbaroa the Poet and Romantic Ideal' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sabityarathi of Assam, p. 110
Isn't it rather funny?
As fun begets fun dear,
Isn't it very funny?
The hexagenerion weds a twelve-year-old
And what could she do but pull all his beard?
He that was old now passes for a youth
Reddens his lips chewing betelnuts,
Calls his young wife, "My darling heart"
He who could be her own grand-dad
Isn't it very funny?
The sapling youth with a shooting beard
with passionate love poems
Thinks none can excel him, none compare
Does it not make me smile, does it not make one scream
Seeing such a tall pretence on one so young?
Isn't it very funny?
Having failed in examinations, writing all rubbish
It one turns out to be an abusive critic
Who would not be irritated, who could check a sneer
On such a mite that whines too near?
His name is widespread, his fame is bright,
You must sing his praise, do you hear that?
Or else he would call you names, hit you from the rear;
If you turn around though, he will shrink in fear.
Isn't it very funny?
The elder gang of officers, he calls them vein,
But when he comes to their ranks, worse does he feign
F.A. (Pluck), B.A. (Pass) that's all for the boast
In moral strength a bamboo tube, hollow utmost
Isn't it very funny?
A crumb of power makes him puffed up like a drum;
If anyone forgets, "My Lord", he boils and burns
When he chances on a nobleman, now poor and needy,
He venges his old grudge rather than pity,
That's the mark of an Assamese gentleman of high authority.
Isn't it very funny?
In fighting for freedom he is number one, - always the patriot superfine.
In the mastery over his tongue, none need he abide;
In prose as well as poetry he has held us stupefied.
In Calcutta he was a reformer; in Assam somewhat crooked;
In keeping blind tradition he was all foolproof
He needs some wine to wet his lips at night
As every morning he has to perform all the rights.
On public occasions he is the master of ceremony
Over his wife he exercises regular tyranny
Like a slice of brinjal in hot oil
His mind simmers in envy,
Isn't it very funny?
And fun begets fun dear,
Isn't it very funny?¹

'Chalani aru Beji' is an exquisite satirical poem of Bezbaroa who looks into the social foibles through the holes

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1. Trs. by Barua, D. : 'Lakshminath Bezbaroa the Poet and the Romantic Ideal' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam, pp. 111-112
of the sieve and a needle and ridicules the hexagon-loving Assam man and ridicules the hexagon-loving Assam
marrying a twelve-year-old girl, the boastful critic of
little learning, the sham and the hollowness of the power-
loving Assam man and such other social lapses.
Besides these poems, Besbaroa as Kripabhar borna also composed
some light poem which has some literary value.

Lyricism of Besbaroa:

The lyricism of Assam folk poetry found a fresh
lease of life in the hands of Besbaroa. This is the outcome
of the romantic consciousness that he brought into Assam
literature. 1 The lyricism of Besbaroa was influenced by not
only the English poets but also by the Indian classical poets
and Tagore. Discussing the contribution of Besbaroa to
Assamese lyricism, Bhachen Barua writes, "For those who are
aware of the sources upon which Besbaroa drew in the creation
of lyrics, it is quite thrilling experience to observe what
he really did in these lyrics. The experience really means
their listening to all the poems of Marvell, Herrick, Burns
or those of Kalidasa, Jaydeva or Vidyapati in the language
and the times of the Assam folk songs. Most of the
successors of Besbaroa in this line of lyricism - Jyotiprasad
Agarwala, Kamalananda Bhattacharya, Parvatiprasad Barua - in

1. Neog, D. : New Light on History of Assamia Literature,
p. 437
fact owed a lot to Bezbaroa's examples and they did not bring to it any significant foreign elements like those found in these lyrics. Those lyrics of Bezbaroa are however not to be called translations - and it appears that even the term imitation is not applicable to many of them. They are mostly recreations in many of which more than one poem or more than one source has been fused together. For instance, the poem which bears the title Priyastama is a synthesis of three particular sources: Herrick's The rock of rubies and quarlets of pearls, Campion's Cherry ripe and Assamese folk songs. The process of synthesis is characteristic of most of these lyrics, which in consequence are to be considered as new creations in which the original sources have undergone a sea of change.  

The poem 'Malati' is a unique example of the process of assimilation. Here Bezbaroa drew upon Burn's 'Jean', Wordsworth's 'She dwelt among untrodden ways', Vidyapati's 'Lakha lakha yuga hiya hiya rakhanu', Rabindranath's 'Visho sudha' and Assamese folk songs. Besides 'Bhram' and 'Malati', Bezbaroa was directly influenced by Tagore's 'olo ke bajay' and 'Mari lo mari amay bashite dekeche ke' to compose two beautiful lyrics 'Sakhi kone bajay' and 'Koneno bajsiche bahi'.

1. Barua, B.: 'Lakshminath Bezbaroa's contribution to Assamese poetry' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam, p. 117.

2. Ibid.
Traditional Influence on Bezbaroa:

A crusader for the cause of Assam's survival in his youthful days, Bezbaroa was deeply devoted to the classical literature and writings of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva; and it is no wonder that he was profoundly influenced by the traditional literature in his poems as well as in other forms where he lay his hands on.

The inspiration of Sanskrit poetry can be felt in some of his poems while there is clear echo of Vidyapati in 'Malati' when the poet pours out sweet lyrical outburst to make the poem melodious and appealing.

Some of his poems were directly inspired by Sanskrit poetry. In the lyric 'Golden-coloured ketaki beautiful', where the bumble-bee gets imprisoned inside the Ketaki (a kind of flower), mistaking it for a 'padum' (lotus), we hear the distant echo of the Sanskrit lines from Shringararasatilaka of Kalidasa.

andhibhuto kusumarajasa kantakoiloornopakshyah
sthatong gantung dwaimopi sakhe!
naibo shakto dwinaphoh

1. Barua, B. : 'Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Contribution to Assamese Poetry' in Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam, p. 124
In 'Nikunjalata sapon-magan', the creeper lost in dream is roused to consciousness by the mild breeze, which causes her buds to bloom, is also reminiscent of the classical poetry of Kalidasa.

nishinohamadhobling lakshming lotang kounding cha nartoyn/ 
anodhakshinyawirjyoyyst kambio protiyati me/ ¹

When Besbaroa in "Parbatar Dhekiya" sings of in which way the cranes fly over the black sky, he reminds one of Jayadeva's Gita-Govinda, while the famous lines of Vidyapati finds beautiful expression in 'Malati' when the poet rhymes in sadness, home built for happiness is burnt up, bathing in the river of nectar swallowed poison. The Vaishnava-padavali of Jnanadasa inspires Besbaroa to write a beautiful lyric on the futility of life when the poison, not ambrosia, is sucked up, the beautiful flower in the hair-knot dries up, the bird in gold cage flies away and the tagar (a kind of flower) withers away unsmelt and unseen. The influence of folk songs pervades in most of the poems; and some of the lyrics catch the atmosphere of folk songs in the right spirit.²

Poetic Style of Besbaroa:

"A poem is like a picture, so a picture ought to try to be like a poem ... ... a picture is often called

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1. Ibid., p. 125
2. Ibid., pp. 124-126
silent poetry and poetry a speaking picture."¹ Indeed the appeal to imagination is one of the qualities which distinguishes poetry from prose. For any vivid sense of beauty and sweetness spread in the widest commonality in the world, for any translation into words of pleasure they give us we have to turn to the poet who by his imaginative handling of the subject catches the meaning that it has for us, and expresses with absolute fidelity and stimulating power the feelings to which it gives birth in ourselves. "The imagination operate so that it becomes the magic formula which can also unlock the treasure of poetic creativeness and artistic beauty."²³

Gifted with imagination and intensely romantic by nature, Besbaroa in his poems was able to create an atmosphere of ecstasy and sense of wonder, which at once appeal to the imagination of the reader. Some of his poetry were written best and invoke the finest feelings in one's heart. A romantic poem shows the capability of the poet to add strangeness to beauty; 'Bhram' is an example of Besbaroa's poetic style at its best since it imparts to readers the joy that the strange beauty can give.³ 'Kavita' vibrates with

². Thomas and Kelley: Keats (A critical analysis of his work), p. 89
fineness of feelings and beauty of expression. Of similar
nature is 'Avasesh' and both these poems reflect the
aspirations of the human heart as well as morbidity. In fact,
the following lines of 'Avasesh' strike the key-note of
Besbaroa's poetry:

The lyre is broken, the string torn asunder
And there only lingers the nectarine vibration.

We may talk of Besbaroa as Campbell has said of
Wordswoth, "He fashioned for himself a style, as unlike as
possible to the rapid poetic diction which he denounced, but
akin to whatever is manliest, noblest, and best in the
English poetry of all ages."¹ Like Wordsworth Besbaroa
effected a virtual revolution in Assamese poetry by giving a
fresh lease of life to Assamese folklore in 'Dhanbar aru
Ratani'. The imaginative treatment of the traditional songs
regarding 'Badan Barphukan', 'Ratani', 'Bejar', 'Tilaka' and
'Nimati Kanya' has an universal appeal, which reminds us of
Hazlitt's remark, "Genius is some strong quality in the mind
aiming at and bringing out some new and striking quality in
nature."² The patriotic poem 'Bin-baragi' has still remained
unsurpassed in Assamese literature.

The total impression of Besbaroa's poetry is unique
and unforgettable. He is like a genius who "differs from a

¹. Shairp John Campbell : Aspects of poetry, p. 143
². Ibid., p. 95
good understanding as a magician from a good architect ... hence Genius has ever been supposed to partake of something divine. True poetic imitation is the intercourse of aspiring poets with the master spirits of the past."

The poetic style of Besbaroa is shaped by the romantic consciousness to catch the noblest, best and most exquisite moods of the past through his communication with the master minds of the past, and this divine gift makes him truly sublime. His stylistic excellence is not to be sought in technical perfection. As he himself admitted, Besbaroa was not a poet. Indeed, he had not the perfect knowledge of meter and rhyme as with as rules of prosody. The art of writing poetry is intricate and full of niceties. During the Age of Besbaroa poetry was just in the making; and elaborate rules of prosody and technique of poetry were yet to be evolved for which not only Besbaroa but also his contemporaries suffer from lack of technical perfection. The first volume of Besbaroa's poems, Kadam Kali, appeared in 1913, a dozen poems which fall in the category of "if poems, let them be poems." Without being a "poet" in strict sense

1. Young, William K. Wimsatt, Jr & Cleanth Brooks: *Literary Criticism*, p. 289
3. Ibid., p. 95
4. John Campbell Shairp in his book *Aspects of Poetry* (p. 97) defines that the poet's highest office either to be a
of the term, Bezbaroa wrote some of the finest poems in Assamese literature, and these best poems can be bound in a few pages, and these should be bound in gold since these heralded the dawn of a new era in the poetic literature of Assam.

reveller of new truth, or an unreveller of truths forgotten or hidden from common eyes. There is another function which poets fulfill, - that of setting forth in appropriate form the beauty which all see, and giving to thoughts and sentiments in which all shows beautiful and attractive expression. This last is the poet's artistic function and that which some would assign to him as his only one.