



THE P. E. N. BOOKS
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No. 1
ASSAMESE LITERATURE

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THE P. • E. N. BOOKS

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Edited By Sophia Wadia

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ASSAMESE LITERATURE

By

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

India is no exception in a world swayed by politics in an extraordinary measure. Her ruling passion is for freedom from foreign domination ; in other countries politics revolves round other ideas and ideals, other hopes and aspirations. India has greater justification for being preoccupied with politics, for her servitude affects her indigenous culture on every plane. This has compelled even a mystic like Gandhiji to experiment with truth in the field of politics.

Mainly because of this preoccupation Indians have undervalued the literary unfoldment of the last few years in the different linguistic areas ; if properly coordinated and helped, this would develop into a renaissance of the first order. Visions of literary creators enshrined in books of today are likely to become objective realities of tomorrow. Moreover, the mystical intimations of the poet, the psychological analyses of the novelist, the philosophical expositions of the essayist, the tendency portrayals and the character delineations of the dramatist—these are related to the very problems which engage the whole consciousness of the politician, the economist and the sociologist. India cannot afford to be neglectful of her literary movement of today.

India's many languages are not a curse, however much her enemies may call them so or her political and

other reformers may wish for a *lingua franca*. Ideas unite people and rule the world; not words. Europe is not suffering because it has many languages, but because conflicting ideas and competing ideas have confused issues and have created chaos. Our many languages are channels of cultural enrichment. Many educated Indians are not familiar with the literary wealth of any Indian language other than their own. How many Bengalis know the beauties of Malayalam literature? How many Tamilians are familiar with the literary efforts of old and modern Assam? And so on. Again, India suffers grievously in the Occident, which is ignorant of the present-day literary achievements in the different Indian languages. No systematic attempt has been made to popularize the story of the Indian literatures or to present gems from their masterpieces to the general public in English translation. This is now being attempted by the Centre for India of the International P. E. N.

The plan of this series of books is a simple one. A volume is devoted to each of the main Indian languages. Each book is divided into three parts:— (1) The history of the literature dealt with; (2) Modern developments; and (3) An anthology. There will be about a dozen volumes in all, and they are to be published in alphabetical order, which arrangement has been responsible for some delay in publishing the series. A list of these publications will be found elsewhere in this volume.

In editing each MS. I have kept to the transliter-

ation of words from the Sanskrit, Arabic and Indian languages selected by the author.

I must thank my colleagues of the P. E. N. Movement and several other friends who have helped with advice and valuable suggestions. And, of course, the P. E. N. All-India Centre and myself are greatly indebted to the friends who have undertaken to write the books which make up this series. Without their co-operation we could not have ventured on the project.

For me this a labour of love. But time, energy and other contributions made bring their own recompense as all are offered on the altar of the Motherland, whose service of humanity will be greatly aided by the literary creations of her sons and daughters.

SOPHIA WADIA

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Editor of *The Indian P. E. N.* invited Dr. Banikanta Kakati to prepare a brochure on Assamese Literature. As Dr. Kakati had to engage himself in other work, the choice fell on me. Nevertheless Dr. Kakati assisted me throughout in the completion of the work. I have to thank him for permitting me to include a few of the Vaisnavite devotional poems translated by him in the *Life of Sankar Deva* (Saints of India Series, G. A. Natesan and Co., Madras) and to Shri Ambikagiri Roy Choudhuri for the songs taken from his unpublished work, the *Songs of the Cell*. I am grateful to Shri Rohinikanta Barua for his help in manifold ways.

I wish to thank Shrimati Sophia Wadia whose earnest efforts have made the appearance of this brochure possible.

Gauhati, Assam.

1940.

B. K. BARUA

DEDICATED

To

Dr. SYAMAPRASAD MOOKERJEE.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. The History of Assamese Literature	1- 42
Chapter I.—Assam—The Land and the Language	3
Chapter II.—Early Assamese : Folk-Songs and Nursery Rhymes	7
Chapter III.—Early Assamese : The Pre-Vaisnavite Period (1200-1450 A. D.)	10
Chapter IV.—The Vaisnavite Period (c. 1450-1650 A. D.)	16
Chapter V.—The Post-Vaisnavite Peri- od: Assamese Literature under Ahom Patronage (c. 1650-1834)	35
II. The Modern Period	43- 57
Chapter VI.—The American Baptist Mission	45
Chapter VII.—Modern Assamese Litera- ture	50
III. Anthology	58-100
i.—Dakar Vachans : Aphorisms of Dak	61
ii.—Folk-Songs	63
iii.—Poems	68,
iv.—Prose	85

THE HISTORY
OF
ASSAMESE LITERATURE

Chapter I

ASSAM—THE LAND AND THE LANGUAGE

The present Province of Assam is situated on the north-east frontier of India. It is surrounded by mountain ranges on the three sides: on the north are the Himalayas shutting it off from the tablelands of Bhutan and Tibet; on the north-east is a range of hills which forms a barrier between the Upper Brahmaputra Valley and China; on the east and on the south lie the hills forming the western boundary of Burma and the State of Tipperah and on the west lies the Province of Bengal. The present province consists mainly of two divisions, the Brahmaputra or Assam Valley and the Surma Valley. The Brahmaputra Valley is Assam proper. The people of the Brahmaputra Valley call themselves Asamiya and their language Assamese.

The province was differently called in different historical periods. Its most ancient name was Prag-jyotisha. By this name it is referred to in the two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In classical Sanskrit literature both Prag-jyotisha and Kamrupa occur as alternative names of the country. Kalidas refers to it by both the designations. In epigraphic records, the name Kamrupa was first mentioned in the

Allahabad inscriptions of Samudra Gupta in the fifth century of the Christian era. Ancient Kamrupa, besides the modern districts of Assam, embraced the whole of North Bengal including Cooch-Bihar, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur. Its permanent western boundary is said to have been the River Karatoya in North Bengal, according to the *Kalika Puran* and the *Yogini-Tantra*, both devoted to geographical accounts of ancient Kamrupa.

The ancient capital of the country was *Prag-Jyotishpur* near modern Gauhati. But during the latter half of the thirteenth century the seat of the government was shifted to Kamatapur, fourteen miles south-east of modern Cooch-Bihar; and in Kamrupa proper certain chiefs known as Bhuyans were established at various places as something like the wardens of the marches in medieval England. These chiefs owed only nominal allegiance to the Kamata Kings. In the sixteenth century the capital was again removed from Kamatapur to Cooch-Bihar by King Naranarayan, who came to the throne in 1540 A. D.

The modern designation Assam is connected with the Shan invaders. Since 1228 A. D. the eastern portion of the Brahmaputra Valley came under the domination of a section of the great Tai or Shan race which had spread eastwards from the borders of Assam over nearly the whole of further India and far into the interior of China. These Shan invaders came to be referred to as Ahom in contemporary literature and the province also took the designation Assam.

The Ahoms consolidated their power in Eastern Assam with their capital at Rangpur (Sibsagar). Dur-

ing the succeeding centuries they pushed on so far to the west as to come into direct conflict with the King of Kamata, who ruled the western part of the Kingdom of Kamrup, and with other independent neighbouring chiefs. The history of Assam in the succeeding centuries is equivalent to the history of Ahom domination. The Ahom rulers assimilated the culture, language and religion of the original inhabitants and completely lost their identity in course of time.

The modern word Assamese is an Anglicised formation. The language of the Province is called *Asamiyā* from the name of the Province Assam. Assamese is a full-fledged modern Indo-Aryan language both in respect of grammatical structure and a large percentage of vocables. The language probably originated from *Māgadhi* or *Gauḍa Apabhramsa*. But it has not yet been determined as to when exactly the Assamese language came to be individualised.

During the first half of the seventh century, on the invitation of Bhaskar Barman, King of Kamrupa, the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang visited the province. Hieun Tsang stayed in Assam as a royal guest and he left invaluable accounts of the province at that time. His records tell us that "the people (Kamrupa) were of honest ways, small stature, and black looking; their speech differed a little from that of Mid-India." ¹

From this account of Hieun Tsang, it can be assumed that by the seventh century the Aryan language had penetrated into Assam and that this Aryan language spoken in the province differed to a certain extent from

¹ Wattens' *Yuan Chwang*, Vol. II, p. 186.

the Maithili or Magadhi dialect then current in Mid-India.

ASSAMESE SCRIPTS :—Like the Bengali, the Assamese script also was derived from old *Devanagari* alphabets. Originally there were several schools of Assamese script, namely, *Gargaya*, *Bamunia*, *Lakhari* and *Kaithali*; but in later years all the different scripts merged into one. After the establishment of the printing-press at Serampore, near Calcutta, Assamese books began to be printed in the Bengali script, and since then the Bengali script has been adopted for Assamese with certain modifications.

Chapter II

EARLY ASSAMESE

FOLK-SONGS AND NURSERY RHYMES

The beginning of distinctive Assamese literature seems to be marked by the composition of folk-songs, commonly known as *Bihugits*, and pastoral ballads, marriage songs and nursery rhymes.

Bihu-songs are connected with the *Bihu* festivals—the national festivals of Assam observed in the beginning of the autumn and the spring seasons. The word *Bihu* is supposed to be a corruption of the Sanskrit word *Visuvat*. There are three such festivals in Assam, in the months of Baisakh, Magh and Kartik. Each *Bihu* synchronises with a distinct phase in the agricultural life of the people. The *Bahag* (Baisakh, about mid-April) marks the advent of the seedtime, the *Kati* (Kartik, about mid-October), the completion of sowing and transplanting, and the *Magh* (about mid-January) the gathering of the harvest.

Of all these *Bihu* festivals, the *Bahag Bihu* ushers in the period of greatest enjoyment and marks the arrival of Spring. The so-called *Bihu* songs are connected with this festival. The *Bahag Bihu* lasts for several

days during which " the young people in the village may be seen moving about in groups gaily dressed or forming circles in the midst of which the prettiest girls dance,"² singing most highly erotic songs. The *Bahag Bihu* corresponds with the season of love and pleasure and probably synchronises with the pairing-time of the primitive people of the province. These songs are very popular amongst all sections of the people.

These songs are not preserved in their old garb. Their language has changed from generation to generation. Yet from their prevailing theme, it may be said that both in matter and manner they are free from learned Sanskrit influences. These songs are composed in couplets, and each couplet depicts a different emotion. Their language is simple and suggestive, and the style is neat and clear.

These popular songs exercised considerable influence upon the literature produced in the succeeding centuries by such poets as Durgabar, Pitambar and Mankar. Even the translator of the great epic *Ramayana* and the great hymn composer Sankar Deva could not escape their influence.

The *Vachan* or aphorism is another type of unwritten literature. Of the *Vachans*, the most celebrated are those of Dak, known as *Dakar Vachans*. These *Dakar Vachans* deal with such subjects as agriculture, the weather, medicine, politics and every aspect of household life. They are composed in rhymed couplets with a few telling words. The aphorisms of Dak are now collected but unfortunately the date of their composi-

² *The History of Human Marriage*. By EDWARD WESTERN-MARCH, p. 323.

tion is not known. These aphorisms reflect great credit on the compiler and most of them have come from a person having wide experience and intimate knowledge of human life and of the living world.

DIFFERENT PERIODS OF ASSAMESE LITERATURE:—
The distinctive period of Assamese literature, to speak from the materials hitherto discovered, begins with the fourteenth century. The history of Assamese literature may for convenience be chronologically divided into three periods :—

1. Early Assamese—This again may be split up into (a) the Pre-Vaisnavite and (b) the Vaisnavite sub-periods. The literature of this period is religious in tone ; in form it consists of translations and adaptations. The literature flourished mainly under the patronage of the Kings of Kamatapur and Cooch-Bihar.

2. Middle Assamese :—From the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth. During this period the centre of learning was shifted to the Ahom Court at Sibsagar and the Assamese literature began to spread out on an infinite variety of subjects.

3. Modern Assamese :—From the beginning of the nineteenth century till the present time. The advent of the British brought the Assamese culture into contact with the vitalizing influence of Western literature and art. The modern Assamese literature is vibrant with many literary activities.

Chapter III

EARLY ASSAMESE

THE PRE-VAISNAVITE PERIOD (1200-1450 A. D)

The recorded literature in Assamese began from the time of Hema Saraswati, who translated the *Prahlad Charitra* from the *Bamana Puran* into Assamese verse. He makes mention of his patron, King Durlabhnarayan of Kamatapur, who is said to have ruled in the latter part of the thirteenth century. Hema Saraswati shows a wonderful command over his language; he seems to have been greatly influenced by the more dignified language of the time, Sanskritised Assamese, and he copiously borrowed from Sanskrit. He did not aspire after a select vocabulary.

He wrote mostly in rhymed couplets of fourteen and ten syllables and also in the *Dulari* metre of ten syllables.

At the time of Indranarayan of Kamatapur, the son of Durlabhnarayan, the two poets Harihar Bipra and Kaviratna Saraswati composed a few books in verse. Harihar's chief work is *Babrubahanar Yuddha*, an incident from the *Aswamedha Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. *Babrubahanar Yuddha* is written in verse and contains

about 600 couplets. Here is the story of the book. It begins with the entrance of the sacrificial horse in the State of Manipur, followed by Arjuna, the third Pandava. Babrubahan the King of Manipur, captured the horse, but learning from his mother Chitrangada, that Arjuna was his father, Babrubahan went to meet Arjuna with the intention of returning the horse with apology. Arjuna in his utter forgetfulness as to his union with Chitrangada, not only disclaimed any relationship with Babrubahan but questioned the chastity of his mother and ascribed his submissiveness to abject fear, which he said was not the characteristic of a Pandava. This enraged Babrubahan so much that he fought a most sanguinary battle in which Arjuna met with his death. Then Sri Krishna appeared on the battlefield, and restored Arjuna to life, and explained to him how Arjuna married Chitrangada during his travels in Manipur on a previous occasion and begot Babrubahan as his son. Then Arjuna remembered his visit to Manipur and acknowledged Babrubahan as his most worthy son and embraced him and went away with his horse. ³

Harihar Bipra wrote not only in *Pada* metre, but also in *Dulari*, *Chabi* and *Jhumura*. *Pada* metre was used in narrating the main theme; *Dulari* in depicting certain picturesque scenes; *Chabi* in describing pathos and *Jhumura* in indicating dramatic action. *Babrubahan Yuddha* is not a literal translation of the original Sanskrit text. The author only borrowed the main story from the *Aswamedha Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, but he has embellished the theme with descriptions and dramatic situations not found in the original. But nowhere in these innovations does he disclose any lack of literary taste. The description of the royal court at Manipur is brilliant and magnificent. The episode of the insult to Babrubahan by Arjuna, and the retort

³ *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*. By HEMA CHANDRA GOSWAMI. (UNIVERSITY OF CALCUTTA, 1930)

given by the former, reveals excellent power of characterisation on the part of the author. Harihar Bipra's work is embellished with a variety of rhetorical figures.

Some time after, the centre of learning shifted eastward from Kamatapur to somewhere in the Kapili Valley in the modern District of Nowgong. The Kapili Valley is supposed to have been the seat of government of the Kachari Kings. Here under the patronage of the Kachari King Mahamanikya (about the fourteenth century) the greatest of the pre-Vaisnavite poets, Madhav Kandali, undertook the stupendous task of translating the whole of the *Ramayana* into Assamese verse. Madhav Kandali was the court-poet of the Kachari King Mahamanikya and was known as Kaviraj Kandali (Kandali, the King of Poets) a well-deserved designation. He was a great Sanskrit scholar but unlike other poets of the time he avoided giving any elaborate introduction of himself in his works. Sankar Deva, who gave the greatest impetus to the cause of Assamese literature in the succeeding century, held him in great respect and was charmed with his exquisitely beautiful rendering of the *Ramayana*. It appears that the legacy of rich and beautiful diction which the poet of the Assamese version of the *Ramayana* left behind exercised a tremendous influence upon Sankar Deva and his immediate successors.

Madhav Kandali's *Ramayana* is remarkable for the constant fidelity to the original with which the translation has been executed. Unfortunately the *Adi* and the *Uttara Kanda* of his rendering (the first and the last cantos) were lost during the troubled times of the Ahom-Kachari skirmishes about 1490 A. D.

Devajit is another poetic composition of Madhav Kandali and it is certainly by far the most important book of the period, both as a first-fruit of creative effort in Assamese verse and as foreshadowing the Vaisnavite cult that came into prominence in the next century. In this poem he established the superiority of Krishna and other incarnations of Vishnu to all other Gods.

Like his predecessors he also wrote in the rhymed couplets. His composition is characterised by a full and even flow of words and of thoughts. His great genius for picture-painting found expression wherever the opportunity offered itself in the task of translation. The vivid picture that he has drawn of Lanka may very well be claimed as an Assamese landscape.

POPULAR POETS :—All the above poets were Sanskrit scholars, and their works are more or less translations or adaptations in a standard spoken language. But a few poets of the period endeavoured to popularise the *akhyanas* of the epics and the *Puranas* through songs. Among the eminent poets of this school are Durgabar, Pitambar and Mankar. The respective notable works of these three poets are :—*Giti Ramayana* (the *Ramayana* in songs) *Usha Parinaya* (Marriage of Usha), and *Behula-Lakhindar*, a story from the *Padma-Puran*. All these works are in songs prefixed by notations. Each of them is knitted together into a complete poem and the erotic sentiment prevails in their verses. As these songs are composed for singing, they are even now recited on festive occasions and at social carnivals.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS : The poets of the period may be classified under two heads, namely translators

or adapters of Sanskrit classics and the composers of popular songs.

The substance of the literature is mainly didactic, and in general it lacks vitalising spiritual fervour. The translator of the *Ramayana*, however, in the concluding verses of each chapter has made passionate appeals to the people to devote themselves to Rama, whom the poet depicts as an incarnation of Vishnu. The other poets selected easily manageable episodes of the epics, specially those about heroes and heroines, for treatment in their works.

In the hands of the popular song-writers, the secular note became predominant. They chose the *Pauranic akhyanas* generally connected with the marriage of a hero or a heroine, such as the marriage of Sita, Usha or Behula, for describing the erotic sentiment with a romantic background within domestic surroundings.

The religious poets mostly wrote in rhymed couplets known as *Pada*, *Dulari* and *Chabi*. Each line of the couplet is closed, that is, each line contains a complete thought, stated as precisely as possible. The *Pada* is a rhymed couplet of two lines, each consisting of fourteen syllables, and there is a pause after the eighth syllable. *Dulari* and *Chabi* consist of stanzas of six verses. In *Dulari*, the first, second, fourth and fifth verses contain six syllables, whereas the third and sixth verses are of eight; as the verses are intended to be chanted, the tune makes the adjustment of irregularities in providing for the requisite number of syllables.

Considerable care is taken by the poets to decorate their works with rhetorical figures. Alliterations, similes and metaphors are profusely and skilfully used to en-

hance the beauty of the verses. Madhav Kandali has shown a tendency to artificiality as well as technical ability in his compositions by introducing words and phrases that generally convey more than one meaning (*slesha* or *double entente*). To a certain extent, the poets are conventional in the use of set metaphors and similes. Nevertheless, in places, their originality in selecting appropriate phrases, mainly from their observation of nature, is manifest. Introduction of imagery drawn from common life makes their works extremely popular.

The fact that Madhav Kandali and the religious leaders of the succeeding century belonged to Nowgong leads us to believe that Nowgong was then fast developing into a great centre of scholarship and culture whence scholars and learned men set out to the courts of different kings. It also appears, contrary to popular belief, that the Kachari Kings were great patrons of learning. The creation of a centre of learning is a work of generations, covering, indeed, centuries. And the great religious and literary movement of the fifteenth century that had its origin at Nowgong and that was to stir the whole of ancient Kamrupa under the towering personality of the great Vaisnavite reformer Sankar Deva must have been prepared for by the culture of several generations. It must have struck its roots deep in the past centuries till in the fifteenth the tree burst into splendid flowering.

Chapter IV

THE VAISNAVITE PERIOD

(c. 1450-1650 A. D.)

The next few centuries saw the rise of the Ahom power in the Province. By the end of the fifteenth century the whole province was partitioned between the Ahoms and the Koches. The Ahom rule, however, was not undisturbed by external aggressions. The Mahomedans made frequent inroads and constant hostilities against the Ahoms ensued. The Ahoms on many occasions successfully repelled the Mahomedan attacks and maintained internal tranquillity.

As a result of these disturbances from outside, the Kingdom of Kamrupa was split up into numerous petty principalities and a new line of kings known as the Koches rose to power under Viswa Singha (1515 A. D.). Soon after his accession Viswa Singha removed the capital to Cooch-Bihar.

Viswa Singha died in 1540. At the time of his death, his two sons Malladeva, the heir apparent, and his brother Sukladhaj were studying at Benares. Ascending the throne Malladeva assumed the name of Naranarayan and his brother Sukladhaj took the name Chilarai. In

about 1546 Naranarayan invaded the Ahom kingdom and died in 1584.

Naranarayan was a great patron of learning. He gathered round him at his court at Cooch-Bihar a galaxy of learned men. All the well-known poets and scholars of the Vaisnavite period, Sankar Deva, Madhav Deva, Rama Saraswati, Sarva Bhauma Bhattacharyya and the eminent grammarian Purusottam Vidyabagish went to him. In fact the Golden Age in Assamese literature opened with the reign of Naranarayan.

VAISNAVITE MOVEMENT :—From the days of great antiquity *Saktism* had been the predominant form of worship in Assam. The adherents to this cult base their observances on the *Tantras*. Kamrupa, the seat of the temple of Kamakhya, is generally believed to be a land of magic and of mystery and the place of origin of the later Tantric rituals. The female deity of the temple spread an awful and fascinating influence all over the province. Both the Ahom and the Koch rulers were zealous patrons of the *Sakta* cult.

But the Vaisnavite religious movement of the fourteenth century that came into being as a revolt against "the cold intellectualism of Brahmanic philosophy and the lifeless formalism of mere ceremonial" penetrated into the Province and swept away all other faiths and creeds. Sankar Deva was the originator of this Vaisnavite movement in Assam and he propounded the cult of *Bhakti* or devotion to Krishna, the One God above all gods, by producing a huge popular literature in Assamese.

Sankar Deva (1449-1569 A. D.) is the real founder of Assamese literature. During the reign of the Ahom

King Sunepha in the year 1449 A. D. Sankar Deva was born at Alipukhuri in Bardoa Village in the District of Nowgong. He received a Sanskrit education under Mahendra Kandali, a great Sanskrit scholar of his time.

After the death of his father and of his first wife, Sankar Deva resolved to go out on a long pilgrimage and was accompanied by about seventeen companions, including his former Guru Mahendra Kandali. On his journey he visited all the sacred places of Northern and Southern India. At these various places he came in contact with the Vaisnavite reformers of the day and entered into learned discussions with them. The effect of these discussions and the influence they exercised over his mind are reflected in the voluminous religious literature which he subsequently produced.

After twelve years of such wandering through many sacred places of India, he returned home a much travelled man and settled into family life by marrying a *Kayastha* girl, Kalindri by name, at the request of his kinsmen. The mission of his life now took a definite shape ; he started his religious works. It is said that, whatever doubts he previously had about his mission, his sudden coming across the *Bhagavata* dispelled every vestige of them and he started his missionary work with increasing confidence.

He drew his inspiration from the *Bhagavata*, and the Vaisnavism he now preached with its allegiance to one supreme being, in the form of Krishna, its abhorrence of animal sacrifice, its freedom from rituals and its simple ceremonials consisting of devotions, hymns and prayers greatly appealed to the imagination of the Tantric-ridden masses.

Sankar Deva's chief poetic works are :—*Bhagavata Puran*, Books I, II, VIII, X, XI, XII; *Ramayana*, Canto VII; *Rukminiharan Kavya*; *Nivinava Siddha*; *Vaisnav-amrita*; *Bhakti Ratnakara* (Sanskrit) and *Kirtan Ghosa*. Out of about thirty books that he wrote, one work, *Kirtan-Ghosa*, stands out prominently above the rest. This is not so much an independent work as a compilation from various sources, such as *Srimat Bhagavata*, *Gita*, *Padmapuran*, *Brahmapuran*, etc. The date of its composition is not known ; probably it is not a book that he wrote during one particular period of his life. The composition must have spread over several years. As can be seen from the methodical arrangement of the chapters, the whole work was preconceived and is certainly not a work of his early years. He seems to have composed it after his cult had already been propagated among the people who flocked to him in numbers.

The book contains twenty-three chapters in verse composed in various metres. The metre undergoes a good many variations and responds to the nature of the subjects. Many of his verses jingle with alliteration and assonance.

A work of mature years, it has poise, dignity and charm ; and with a supreme mastery of the language he has elucidated the various subtleties of his cult. It is an epitome of the whole philosophy of his religion. Owing to the superb beauty of its language, its matchless style, its entertaining and wonderful way of story-telling, its presentation of the didactic and worldly maxims through parables and *akhyanas*, the *Kirtan* has an importance in our literature. Like the English version of the Bible.

it may be said that its Assamese “ lives in the ear like music that can never be forgotten. ”

In two other branches of Assamese literature Sankar Deva was a pioneer and made his mark, namely, in drama and in hymns.

Of his many dramas *Rukmini Haran*, *Kaliya Daman Parijat Haran*, *Ram Vijaya* and *Patni Prasad* are best known and these have recently been published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam.⁴

In Assam, as elsewhere, the drama had a distinctly religious origin and was of the nature of mystery and miracle plays, representing scenes from the life of Krishna, the one god worshipped by the Vaisnavite sect of Assam, or stories from the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The drama represents a spectacle and the appeal of the spectacular in an age when printing was unknown was profound. Although first used mainly as a means to further the cause of Assamese Vaisnavism, by their spectacular appeal to the people at large, these plays have come to exercise an abiding influence on our common folk to this day. They were mostly written and often acted by the Vaisnavite leader of the day.

Although the subject-matter of these dramas was borrowed from the epics the author had a free hand in the delineation of individual characters and in introducing various scenes. Besides their value as specimens of dramatic art of the period they are highly interesting as

⁴ Shri Barua has modestly omitted his name as the Editor of these dramas—ED.

containing pictures of contemporary manners and customs.

The language of his dramas is an artificial form of Assamese of the day, being a mixture of Maithili and Assamese. It is difficult to guess why Sankar Deva should have chosen this mixed language as a medium of dramatic expression. He had already written many books in pure Assamese verse. His sudden departure into this mixed language seems to be an enigma. Was his choice of Maithili possibly influenced by his reading of Vidyapati's works, or more probably by his witnessing Maithili performances when he was at Ayodha in the heyday of Vidyapati's fame ?

During his first pilgrimage, lasting twelve years, Sankar Deva stayed long at many centres of religious culture and thus had great opportunities for studying the manners and customs of different sects.

At Vrindaban he found that all the three Vaisnavite sects, the Krishnaite, the Ramayaite and the Radha-Krishnaite, had their religious literature in the Braj Bhasa, the dialect of the Districts of Mathura and Vrindaban and of the surrounding country. During his stay there, he studied that dialect, mastered it and then himself composed hymns (*Bargits*) in a mixed artificial language for the use of his followers. These *Bargits* are remarkable for poetic beauty, tenderness of sentiment and loftiness of thought. At Benares he met some disciples of Kabir and was charmed with Kabir's *Chautisa* verses. The *Chautisa* is an exposition of the religious significance of the consonants of the alphabet. Just as in Chaucer's "A. B. C." the verses begin with the successive letters of the Latin alphabet, the lines in this form of composi-

tion begin with the successive letters of the Indian alphabet. Their reproduction in Assamese—the *Chatihās*—was the result.

The next outstanding figure in the Assamese Vaisnavite movement is Madhav Deva, the famous disciple of Sankar Deva. He was born in 1489 A. D. at Letuphkhuri in the Nowgong District. He was originally a devout Sakta, but when he came in contact with Sankar Deva, the latter completely won him over to his cult. From now on Madhav Deva became his most devout follower. The religious movement had gained a great impetus by his conversion for in him was the stuff of the religious and social reformer. A past master of the traditional learning of the time, he was also a wonderful singer.

Almost against the wishes of Sankar Deva, Madhav Deva remained a celibate throughout his life; and his ideal brought into being a class of disciples called “*Keolias*” or life-celibates. Sankar Deva was a householder and he never encouraged celibacy among his disciples.

Madhav Deva accompanied his *Guru* during his second pilgrimage. After Sankar Deva he rose to the apostolic *gadi*. He died in Cooch-Behar in 1596.

Madhav Deva's principal works other than dramas are:—*Namghosa*, *Ramayana Adikanda*; *Bhakti Ratnavali*; *Nam Malika*; *Rajasuya Jajna*; *Vaishnav Kirtan*; *Commentary* on Sankar's *Bhakti Ratnakar*; and dramas:—*Chordhara*, *Piparaguchua*, *Bhumi Letowa*, *Bhojan Byavahar* and *Arjun Bhanjan*.

His highest achievements in pure poetry are his *Namghosa* and *Bhakti Ratnavali*, the one a compilation

of Sanskrit *slokas* rendered into Assamese, the other an Assamese translation of a Sanskrit work by Vishnupuri Sannyasi, itself a work of compilation from various sources.

Out of 1,000 stanzas in the *Namghosa* about 700 are translations from numerous Sanskrit texts. It was written at Bheladuar in Cooch-Bihar during the later years of Madhav Deva's life. It is ethical in its teachings and belongs to the same class of literature as the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* in Sanskrit. Its profundity of thought, unity of outlook and music of expression make it the most precious religious text in our literature. In whatever he wrote Madhav Deva put a strong infusion of his personality; in his writings we find the ideal devotee. His *Namghosa* is the revelation of a great soul.

Bhakti Ratnavali is completed in twelve chapters in verse and in each chapter a different aspect of the *Bhakti* cult has been philosophically elaborated.

But what brought him his lasting fame and made him so outstanding a figure in the Vaisnavite movement was his devotional songs called *Bargits*. His devout nature found expression in his hymns. In their sweetness of expression, their unostentatious display of lofty spiritual ideas, lies their supreme appeal to all classes of men.

The three topics that form the main theme of Madhav Deva's *Bargits* are this enviable human life as affording fullest scope for spiritual realisation, its uncertain nature and the fitful progress through this illusive world, where *Hari Bhakti* alone is the guiding star.

The Bargits have depicted the disportive childhood of Krishna, the cowherd. The conception of Shri Krishna as a child in his manifold solicitations of caresses from his mother is a distinctive feature of Assam Vaisnavism and it has been very poetically depicted in the devotional songs and dramas of Madhav. Each of Madhav Deva's Bargits is a miniature picture of Krishna's child life. Their sweet language and harmonious melody, and Madhav Deva's beautifully musical voice all conspired to make them pre-eminently attractive in the Vaisnavite movement during his lifetime. Written in the so-called Brajabuli dialect they are most valued songs even now.

Ram Saraswati was born in the Barpetta Subdivision of the Kamrup District about the beginning of the sixteenth century. His father, Bhimsen Churamoni, was a pious Brahman Pandit. Sankar Deva introduced Ram Saraswati to King Naranarayan of Cooch-Bihar, who at Sankar Deva's request ordered him to make a translation of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*. The king himself supplied him with the original texts. An idea of the voluminous nature of the task entrusted to him can be gathered from the fact that the original manuscripts alone made a cart-load when taken to Ram Saraswati's place.

Many of the contemporary poets offered him services which he gladly accepted. Sometimes a section had to be divided among two, three or even more persons.

Begun in the reign of King Naranarayan, the work could be completed only in the days of King Dharma Narayan, grandson of Chilarai (Sukladhaj).

The Assamese version of the *Mahabharata* is not a literal translation of the original. Besides lengthy elaboration of the original episodes and descriptions, which was a distinctive characteristic with early translators, Ram Saraswati freely introduced incidents and stories which are not in the original text. Fullest freedom in the delineation of the episodes and the unhampered introduction of adventurous mythical accounts are particularly made in the compilation of the *Bana Parva*. The Assamese version of the *Bana Parva* with its many *upa-parvas* or *svargas* is completed in about 25,000 couplets. In the *Manichandraghosa Parva*, a *svarga* of the *Bana Parva*, Ram Saraswati avows that he has included some episodes from *Yamala Samhita*, *Siva Rahasya* and *Bamana Puran*. The Assamese version of the *Mahabharata* gave a tremendous impetus to the growth and the popularity of Assamese literature. It opened wide the doors of the vast treasure-house of tales, romances and mythological stories.

The other works of Ram Saraswati are *Kulachalbadha*, *Bagasurbadha*, *Khatasurbadha*, all romances in rhymed couplets. They are founded on episodes from the *Mahabharata*. He also made a rendering of Jayadev's *Gita Govinda* at the request of King Naranarayan. Based on an episode of the *Mahabharata* his *Asvakarna Yudha* is a romance in verse.

Two other works of Ram Saraswati which are worthy of notice are *Bhimcharit* and *Vyadhacharit*. *Bhimcharit* is of special interest. Nowhere else possibly in our literature has the popular figure of Bhim been more picturesquely drawn—a big, tall, lumbering person carrying his usual weapon the club, exhibiting prowess and a

keen gluttonous appetite. In this book in which Bhim is pictured as having been employed by Siva to tend his bull, Siva's life is presented in a humorous manner. Siva is portrayed as an ordinary cultivator who is addicted to *ganja*. To this pleasant picture here drawn, the book owes its enormous popularity. Beyond this, however, the book has another merit; it paints simply and clearly the peasant life and domestic scenes of old Assamese society. For its immense exaggerations in character-painting and hyperbolic narration, *Bhim-charit* may be styled a burlesque in Assamese.

Ananta Kandali was a Brahman of Hajo in the Kamrup District. His real name is Haricharan; Ananta Kandali is his scholastic title. But he was more popularly known by his title. A contemporary of Sankar Deva at the court of Narana^{ra}yan, he accepted Sankar Deva as his *Guru* and professed his Vaisnavite creed. As a favour Sankar Deva allowed him to complete the translation of the unfinished half of the tenth *Skandha* of the *Bhagavata Puran*.

Other poetical works of Ananta Kandali are *Mahiravan-badha*, *Harihar yuddha*, *Vrittasur-badha*, *Bharat-savitri*, *Jiva-stuti* and *Kumarharan-kavya*. *Kumarharan* in popularity stands on a level with Sankar Deva's *Rukminiharān-Kavya*. In *Kumarharan*, the author narrates in a beautiful manner the romantic episode of Usha and Aniruddha. He also rendered in excellent verse the fourth, fifth, sixth and ninth Books of the *Bhagavata Puran*.

Sarbabhauma Bhattacharyya (Sarbabhauma) was another great writer of the period. He himself tells us that he resided at Praggyotishpur where he was well

known as a devout Śakta. He entered into a long discussion with Sankar Deva about the merits of the two forms of Vaisnava and Śakta worship and getting defeated in dispute he left for Benares to study the *shastras* under a teacher named Bisweswar Chakravarty. After five years of close study, he became, as he tells us, well-versed in *shastras*. At Benares, he came across a part of the *Padmapuran*, which he afterwards rendered into Assamese verse under the title of *Svarga Khandha Rahasya*. At Benares he made up his mind to become a worshipper of Hari and on his return he at once turned to Sankar Deva and became one of his disciples. Afterwards he wrote a life of his *Guru* Sankar Deva. Part translations of the *Bhagavata Puran* and *Bhabisyat Puran* are two other productions of Sarbabhauma Bhattacharyya.

Sarbabhauma Bhattacharyya's wife also was a very learned scholar and she is said to have earned a warm encomium from Naranarayan on defeating at his court the famous Bengali scholar of the time, Raghunandan Bhattacharyya, in a discourse connected with the different ways of life advocated in the *Vedas* and the *Smritis*.

Sridhar Kandali (Sridhar), a contemporary and a favourite disciple of Sankar Deva, also deserves mention. As a mark of special favour Sankar Deva allowed him to contribute a chapter, *Ghunusa Yatra*, to his famous *Kirtan Ghosa*. But his prime claim to distinction lies in a short poem called *Kankhowa* (*Ear-eater*), describing a curious nursery incident in Krishna's child life. The Child Krishna was one day crying. Mother Jasoda tried to terrify him into silence by singing of the advent

of a fearful demon called *Kankhōwa*. Krishna at once took fright at the mention of this unknown demon and quickly ran to his mother's arms imploring her to tell him what this curious demon looked like ; for as he recalled he had not come across any such demon in all his numerous former incarnations. Jasoda lost her wits and had to confess that she was lying. Even to this day, crying children are hushed into silence by the mention of this fictitious demon who is supposed to bite off the ears of crying children.

The story has become so popular and well-known that it is heard in every Assamese nursery at dusk.

Dvija Kalapchandra :—Dvija Kalapchandra was the son of Ram Saraswati. He translated a portion of the Fourth Book of the *Bhagavata Puran*. But his outstanding contribution is *Radhacharit*. 'The book is not so important for its language and style as for its theme. The amorous Radha-Krishna romance is not to be found in the writings of the Assamese Vaisnavite poets. Kalapchandra in his *Radhacharit* does not depict the popular Radha-Krishna romance with all its sensuous embellishments. The author illustrates the devotional aspect of Radha's character; her dedication—body, soul and heart—to Krishna ; her long suffering and her undying passion for Krishna are described by the author with considerable ability. In short, *Radhacharit* relates the triumph of the selfless devotion of an ideal devotee of Krishna.

The episode of the book is this :—Rukmini, proud of her devotion to Krishna, inquired of him the name of his best devotee. Krishna mentioned the names of many devotees and last of all stated that none could

compare with the *gopis* of Vrindavan and that among them Radha was the best. This aroused a feeling of jealousy in Rukmini. She prayed to Krishna that she might have a glimpse of Radha and Uddhava was sent for the purpose. Uddhava found Radha incessantly chanting the name of Krishna and quite careless of the outer world. He intimated his object and also the desire of Krishna that Radha should come in her former garb in all her youthful beauty and glamour. Radha then turned into an exquisitely handsome damsel, before whose lustre the beauty of Rukmini and of other consorts of Krishna appeared quite pale.

“ Just as a lamp or the moon appears dim before the sun, so the wives of Sri Krishna became pale and insignificant before the indescribable brilliance of Radha, like a lotus in the night, ”

Then Rukmini and others made many rich presents to Radha. She refused them and told them that her only desire was that she might have the privilege of worshipping Krishna in all her lives.

The hour of departure arrived. Radha was loath to leave. Sri Krishna consoled her with the following words:— “ I am pervading the whole universe. I am the middle and I am the end. Know all these objects as my forms. I am in the world and the world is in me. Know thou, Radha, that none can separate thee from me. ”

Ananta Ata ;—Ananta Ata wrote two books, *Prema-lata* and *Ramayana*, known as *Ramakirtan*. The chief popularity of *Ramakirtan* lies in the beauty of its narration and the music of the verses.

Other poets of eminence are Gopaldeva, author of *Devi Bhagavat* and *Sankhasur-badha*; Haridas, author of *Sudhana-badh*; Gopinath Pathak, author of the *Drona* and *Puspa Parvas* of the *Mahabharata*; Aniruddha Kayastha, author of the *Gita* and the fifth Book of the *Bhagavata Puran*; Gopal Misra Kaviratna, author of *Ghosa-ratna*; Gopal Dvija, author of the Assamese version of the *Harivamsa*; and Govinda Misra, author of the metrical version of the *Gita*. This brings us to the close of the Vaisnavite period.

PROSE WRITERS:—Most of the literary works of the period are in verse. Prose first came to be employed in Sankar Deva's dramas. But the author who gave a distinct shape to early Assamese prose style is Bhattadeva. He was born in Bheragaon in Barpeta (Kamrup) about the year 1558 A. D. and died in 1638. Bhattadeva was a renowned Sanskrit scholar of his age. He translated the whole of the *Bhagavata Puran* and the *Gita* into Assamese prose. He may be aptly called the Father of Assamese Prose.

Bhattadeva's prose is of great importance as a first and successful attempt to express subtle scholastic arguments in Assamese prose; his vocabulary is highly Sanskritic. But his work is remarkable as an attempt to make religious and philosophical thoughts accessible to the people in prose.

The prose style which Bhattadeva evolved came to be looked upon as a kind of devotional dialect (*bhakti-ya bhasa*) and even now the religious heads of monasteries employ this style in ceremonial and formal addresses to their disciples.

Many of the prose-works of this period still in manuscript are Raghunath's *Katha Ramayana* (the *Ramayana* in prose), Bhagavat Bhattacharjya's *Katha-sutra*, Krishnananda Dvija's *Sattata Tantra* and Parashurama's *Katha-ghosa*. All these works are modelled on the style of Bhattadeva's prose works.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF VAISNAVITE LITERATURE

The bulk of the literature of the period is made up of translations and it is religious in theme. It consists mostly of prayers, sermons, paraphrases, and adaptations from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Puran*. Almost all the masterpieces of Sanskrit *Pauranic* and epic literature were rendered and made accessible to the Assamese people by the Vaisnavite poets. The zeal for translations was so great that if an author left unfinished the translation of a portion of a Sanskrit text or if a translated portion got lost, a subsequent author was always found to complete the unfinished or the lost portion.

The intensive and wide-spread stimulus given to the translation work was due to the realisation of the fact that knowledge must be rescued from the sibylline leaves of Sanskrit books and delivered to the people in the popular vernacular garb.⁵

Madhav Kandali confesses in his *Ramayana* that though he could easily compose verses in Sanskrit, he composed in Assamese for the benefit of the people at large.

The *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Puran* are the main texts from which the poets drew their

⁵ *Assamese Literature, Ancient and Modern*. By Prof. S. K. Bhuyan. (The Government Press, Shillong)

materials. Some poets chose the poetic episodes from these texts and turned them into beautiful *kavyas*. These episodes from the epics and the *puranas*, under the name of *kavyas*, became very popular. The fortunes and the exploits of a particular hero under the title of *Charitra*, *Vijaya* or *Vadha* became common subject-matter for poetry. The *Vadha kavyas* are something like the romances of chivalry and as such they describe supernatural exploits and marvellous deeds of *daityas* and *danavas*, and their final encounter with some incarnation of Vishnu. In short, the *Vadha kavyas* are allegorical accounts of clashes between righteousness and vice. Other types of *kavyas* describe the elopement and marriage of a heroine under the designations of *Parinaya* and *Haran*. The *Haran kavyas* symbolically illustrate the selfless devotion of the devotee, who pines for the Lord as a bridegroom.

The outlook of the literature of this period is preponderantly religious, and many of the literary productions spring directly from the *bhakti* movement in one or other of its aspects. *Bhakti* in its manifold forms swayed the life of the masses and became the mainstay of the popular literature. "The new *bhakti* was an emotion which impelled the *bhakta*, the devotee, to worship the Lord, to seek him everywhere, to yearn for him, to quarrel with him, to remove the distance which reverence implies, in short, to love him passionately as one would a human lover." ⁶ Krishna was the first to become the centre of this *Bhakti* cult. He fired the imagination of almost every Indian poet since the *Bhagavata Puran* was composed. The Vaisnavite poets of

⁶ *Gujarata and Its Literature*. By K. M. Munshi.

Assam composed popular religious songs, namely, the *Bargits* ⁷ all bearing upon the life and the doings of Lord Krishna, and inculcating the purity of *bhakti*. The poets of this period rendered into music, poetry and drama the entire life story of Krishna.

But unlike the main schools of Northern Vaisnavite thought, Assamese Vaisnavite poets preached the *dasya* and the *batsalya* relations between Krishna and his devotees. According to Sankar Deva the devotee must conceive of God as a servant does of his master. Sankar Deva had foreseen that the *madhura* conception of devotion, however exalted as a personal ideal, could never be fully worked out in this mundane world as a social ideal. Because of its very sublime and transcendent nature it might be carried in actual application to the danger zone of ultra-realism, when it would fall into less enlightened minds. All writers of Sankar Deva's school style themselves "servants unto the Lord" in the closing sections of their books. The note of extreme humility and self-surrender makes itself felt in perfect clarity all through their writings.⁸

The *batsalya* relationship has been greatly emphasised in the writings of Madhav Deva through his *Bargits* and *natakas*. Madhav Deva throws a mystical glamour over the story of the Child Krishna,⁷ and represents him as an eternal child and a sportive incarnation. Krishna may be won over by motherly love and affection as manifested by Jasoda. His pranks and play amused the *gopis* as well as the cowherds. Both

⁷ *Bargits* are similar to the *Prabhatiyas* of Gujarat.

⁸ *Life of Sanhar Deva*. By B. Kakati. (G. A. Natesan and Co., Madras.)

have approached him not by penance and severe austerities but by simple love and sincere affection.

Referring to the nature and the characteristics of the Assamese Vaisnavite literature, Dr. S. K. Bhuyan rightly remarks,

The Vaisnava literature of Assam is idealistic in tone. The characters and surroundings are remote from the immediate experiences of the Assamese, and frequently they transcend the limits of possibility. But the ethical principles which they enunciate, illustrate and uphold are imbued with universal interest. Their quality is, therefore, of a superior order, inasmuch as high ideals are couched in a popular garb, divested of their metaphysical and esoteric intricacies, like Plato explaining the abstruse philosophy of Socrates in the popular exposition of his *Dialogues*. The Assamese translations of the Sanskrit classics and scriptures were of an interpretative character. The translator took up the essence of the original Sanskrit passage and explained it in pure literary Assamese, simplifying those phrases and expressions the ideas of which did not come within the ken of the ordinary Assamese reader. The Assamese translators developed a very simple process of translating long strings of Sanskrit epithets and compounds, by which even the most uncouth ideas could be rendered in simple Assamese.

⁹ *Assamese Literature, Ancient and Modern*. By Prof. S. K. Bhuyan.

Chapter V

THE POST-VAISNAVITE PERIOD

ASSAMESE LITERATURE UNDER AHOM PATRONAGE

(c. 1650-1834)

In the succeeding century, the outlook was changed and Assamese literature began to be composed on a variety of subjects. The Ahoms, who had come in the thirteenth century from the north-east had since consolidated their position with a fortified capital at Rangpur in the modern District of Sibsagar and adopted the Assamese language as a vehicle for court circulars and for diplomatic correspondence with neighbouring kings. In the Ahom Court Assamese literature began to be encouraged and the kings began to court popularity.

Patronised by the kings, the writers composed stories and romances laying greater emphasis upon the secular side of the episodes. Books on astrology, mathematics, veterinary science, rituals, dancing and music were produced.

The Hindu systems of medicine were professionally studied in Assam by numerous families of distinction, and many of the officers in the court of the Ahom kings were professed physicians. Some knowledge of medicine constituted one of the

chief accomplishments of a well-bred Assamese gentleman. The learned physicians translated into plain Assamese almost all the principal Sanskrit works of medicine, as they were known in Assam. The Sanskrit medical dictionary, the *Chikitsarnava*, and *Nidan* have been rendered into Assamese. The Sanskrit text-books of medicine were often translated into Assamese for the use of beginners as a preparatory course for entering into the study of the original works.

The Ahom kings supported several poets and court poetry sprang up in full bloom. Loyalty to the king became a flaming passion with the poets of the new age. It became the fashion for every poet to introduce in his works panegyric verse in praise of the reigning king. *Vamsavalis* or chronicles of royal families were produced in *kavya* style.

BURANJI OR THE AHOM CHRONICLE :—The unique contribution of the Ahoms to the Assamese literature is the historical compositions known as *Buranjis*. The Ahoms brought with them the tradition of writing chronicles or of keeping written records of the chief events during the king's reign. At first these works were recorded in their own tribal language, a derivative of the Tibeto-Burman group, by their own caste men known as *Deodhais* and *Bailungs*. Gradually it was found that a multitude of practical interests arising from the new political consciousness demanded expression not in their own alien tribal tongue but in the language of the people over whom they ruled.

The chroniclers drew their materials from occurrences in life and recorded only facts and thus they had to break away from the style of the religious writers. The chronicles are written in prose and a homely practical prose style came into being.

The earliest *Buranji* written in Assamese hitherto discovered is *Purani Asam Buranji*, the history of the Ahom kings from Sukapha to Godadhar Singha written in prose in the early part of the seventeenth century.

Full of colloquialisms, the writing might almost be taken for what in fact it purports to be, conversations put down in writing, but the style is homely, idiomatic and racy.

During the latter half of the seventeenth and the succeeding centuries, many *Buranjis* were written in prose. Some of these have been published under the auspices of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, and the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, Gauhati. The following is a list of the earliest *Buranjis* written in prose:—*Deodhai Asam Buranji* (written after 1648 A. D.), *Bahgoria Buranji* (written c. 1662–1679), *Padsha Buranji* (c. 1650–1780), *Sarganarayan Devar Akhyan* (c. 1663–1669), *Asam Buranji* (c. 1681), *Kamrupa Buranji* (c. 1700), *Kachari Buranji* (c. 1706), *Jayantia Buranji* (c. 1742), *Tungkhungia Buranji* (c. 1804). Chronicles were also written in verse.

Among the metrical chronicles, mention may be made of *Kali Bharat* and *Belimarar Buranjis*. The last Ahom Prince, Kameswar Singha, in 1806 commissioned a writer named Dutiram Hazarika to compile a history of Assam and as a result Dutiram compiled the *Kali Bharat Buranji*, the epic of the Kali Age, a metrical chronicle dealing with the Ahom kings of the Tungkhungia line. *Kali Bharat* may be regarded as a chronicle of the Ahom rule in Assam from 1679 to 1854, the year of the transfer of the country to the British Crown.

Biseswar Vaidyādhīpa was the author of the metrical chronicle named *Belimārar Buranji* or the History of Sunset. Biseswar wrote the book at the command of King Purandar Singha, who ruled as a feudatory Prince under British protection from 1832 to 1838. The chronicle deals with the declining phase of the Ahom domination.

CHARIT PUTHIS OR BIOGRAPHIES:—Side by side with these *Buranjis*, there grew up a distinct type of literature both in prose and in verse called the *Charit Puthis* or biographies of religious leaders. *Guru Charit* (Life of Sankar Deva) is the earliest biography in prose, written after Sankar Deva's death, probably in the latter half of the seventeenth century. The prose is simple. The writer had no literary ambition; it was only his admiration for the Saint that inspired him to compile the work. He gives an account of the doings of this great man and his writing is full of information about contemporary life.

The most celebrated of the contemporary biographers is Daitari Thākur. His book is in verse and is very popular.

Another biographer, possibly of an earlier period, is Ram Charan Thākur. From what he has described in his *Guru Charit* it appears that he was a contemporary of Sankar Deva. Bhusan Dwija and Anirudha are two other biographers of Sankar Deva. Ramrai is another of the school. He recorded the life of his master Damodar Deva in his *Guru Lila*. Another of Damodar Deva's biographers is Nila Kanta who wrote *Damodar Charit*, but unlike most of the authors of the time he gives us no information about himself.

SCIENTIFIC TREATISES:—Many important scientific and political treatises were compiled during this period. A versified treatise on sex was compiled by a poet named Kabisekhar Bhattacharyya for the entertainment and instruction of Yuvaraj Chau Singha Gohain, son of King Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769) and of the Yuvaraj's consort, Princess Pramoda Sundari Aideo. The *Svapna-dhyaya*, a book on dreams and their interpretation, belongs to this period.

Subhankara Kavi compiled a book on dancing, namely *Hasta Muktavali*. It contains an elaborate process of gestures of hands for the expression of thoughts and ideas.

The most remarkable book of this period is *Hasti Vidyarnava*, a scientific and illustrated treatise on elephants, based on the Sanskrit work *Matanga Lila*. *Hasti Vidyarnava* was written in 1734 by Sukumar Barkath under the orders of King Siva Singha and his consort Queen Madambica. About the year 1806 Suryya Khari Daivagya compiled a book called *Aswanidan* concerning the diseases of horses, their treatment and prevention.

Amongst astronomical works Kaviraj Chakravarty's *Bhaswati* is well known. It begins with the calculation of the various positions of the sun, the moon and the stars, and ends with the description of lunar and solar eclipses.

The earliest versified treatise on arithmetic, land-surveying and book-keeping is Bakul Kayastha's *Kitabat Monjari*, written about 1434. Another arithmetical treatise known as *Lilavati Katha*, based on the

Sanskrit mathematical work of *Lilavati*, was prepared by Kaviraj Dwija, during this period.

OTHER KAVYAS:—Romance writing with the elements of love and gaiety is also brought into our literature. Ram Dwija's *Mrigavati Charit* depicts a love story.¹⁰ It is a versified fairy tale that narrates in an interesting manner how a prince happened to marry a fairy. The hero of the tale had to pass through difficult enterprises in quest of his sweetheart Mrigavati. The prince wins his beloved after a series of struggles with adversaries.

During the reign of the Ahom King Rudra Singha (1695-1714), the court poet Kaviraj Chakravartee translated the Sanskrit work *Gita-Govinda* and his book was illustrated under the orders of the King. *Sakuntala Kavya* is another work of this poet.

Dwija Goswami's *Kavya Sastra* is a book in verse containing many fables from the *Hitopodesha* and some moral observations in rhymed couplets. Another Assamese version of the *Hitopodesha* was executed by Rama Misra, the author of *Putala Charitra*, at the instance of Bhadra Sen Gohain Phukan, an Ahom general.

Kaviraj Misra is another story-teller, who flourished about 1616. He was a vagrant Minstrel, going about reciting his verses about *Sial Gosain* (The Fox-Saint) and thereby obtaining food and raiment.

The story centres round a legendary figure *Sial Gosain* by name, who was thrown away under a *Ketaki* plant soon after his birth through the intrigues of his step-mother, Kundalata. Chandotara, his mother, was blind-

¹⁰ The story of the book bears some resemblance to the sixteenth-century Hindi *Kavya Mrigavati*.

folded at the time of her delivery. The baby was picked up by a newly littered vixen who suckled him and brought him up among her own young ones. The boy grew up among the young cubs and imitated their habits of howling at night and of retreating to their lair at the approach of men.

On his return from pilgrimage, Dharmadeva his father, who traced his origin to the twelve famous Bhuyans, was informed by his wife Kundalata that Chandotara had borne no child, and the *dais* (midwife), already heavily bribed by Kundalata having confirmed the story, he believed it. But happily one day on his way to the bathing ghat, he happened to notice a child retreating into a den at sight of him. This struck him as curious and apprehending foul play somewhere, he vigorously questioned the *dais* on his return and elicited the truth that Chandotara had been delivered of a male child. Next day he had the child, the mother fox and the young cubs all dug out of the hole and taken to his house. The boy when he grew up was known as Sial Gosain.

Ananta Acharya, the court poet of King Siva Singha, is the author of *Ananta Lahari*. The book begins with a hymn to the Goddess Durga, who has been described as the primordial cause of this universe. Then it goes on to describe how, in her infinite mercy, she assumes form to please her devotees and then it dwells on the beauties of her form, gives descriptions of Kailash and of Siva. There are devotional hymns to the Goddess and the poem closes with a eulogy of the royal consort, Queen Phuleswari.

Ruchinath is the author of *Chandi*. There is another Assamese version of the *Chandi* by Madhusudan Misra.

Ramananda Dvija wrote his *Mahamoha Kavya* in 1844. It is an allegorical poem, wherein the poet gives an account of the struggle that is perpetually going on in one's heart between virtue and vice.

Ghanasyam wrote his *Kalki Purana* in verse. The book begins with a description of the people of the *Kali Age* and then it enumerates their irreligious activities.

Suryakhari Daivajnya, author of the *Asvanidan*, compiled the famous *Daranga Raj Vamsavali*, chronicle of the Darrang Kings, in 1806. Among his other contributions to Assamese literature mention may be made of *Kurmabalibadha* and *Khatasur badha*, both adaptations from the *Mahabharata*.

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THE MODERN PERIOD

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Chapter VI

THE AMERICAN BAPTIST MISSION

The Ahoms ruled in Assam from the beginning of the thirteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century (1826). But the closing decades of the Ahom rule were fateful years in the history of Assam. The whole country was torn with internal strife. In the struggle for ascendancy between the two forms of Hindu worship, the Vaishnavite and the Sakta, that had been going on since the fifteenth century, the latter had so far succeeded as to become the court religion of the Ahom Kings, who extended patronage to its adherents on a large scale. This did not matter so much as long as the Kings themselves did not exhibit any partisan spirit and freedom of faith was not interfered with. But during the last days of King Rajeswar Singha's reign, his wife, who exercised immense power, persecuted a section of the Vaishnavas for their religious professions. They rose up in revolt and the revolution gathered such force that it shook his administration to its very foundation. His successor, Laxmi Singha, was not able to improve the situation. The administrative machinery of the state, already none too strong, was showing signs of disintegration.

Due to the Vaisnavite revolt and other political feuds the administration finally broke down during Chandra Kanta Singha's reign, and in 1817, on the invitation of Badan Barphukan, an Ahom General, the Burmese invaded Assam and plundered the country. They revisited it the following year and, encouraged by the wealth of the country, they decided finally to conquer it and took possession of Assam in 1820. In 1826, the Burmese came into conflict with the British in Cachar and, being defeated, they gave over Assam to the East India Company under the Treaty of Yandabu.

The English were strangers to the land and had no knowledge of the native tongue. So natives from other Provinces of India began to come over into Assam as interpreters and clerks of the Englishmen to carry on the newly established administration. Under the influence of these men, recruited mostly from Bengal, the English officers in charge made Bengali the language of the court and a medium of instruction in schools.

It was in 1836 that Assamese was thrown out of the law courts and schools and Bengali was installed in its place. The same year that Assamese thus lost its official position two remarkable members of the American Baptist Mission, the Rev. N. Brown and O. T. Cotter, with their families, first set foot on Assamese soil. Among other things a printing-machine was part of their missionary equipment.

Realising at once that to instil the love of Christ in the heart of the people they must approach them through the medium of their mother tongue, the missionaries immediately set about learning it and within three months of their arrival in Assam, they produced

the first Assamese primer for use in the schools which they had established.

Even before their arrival, the English missionaries had started work in this direction from Serampore near Calcutta, and in collaboration with an Assamese Pandit, Atmaram Sarma of Kaliabar (Nowgong District) they had translated the whole Bible into Assamese and published it from Serampore in 1813. This was the first Assamese book in print.

The study of our language by foreigners had advanced so far that W. Robinson published an Assamese grammar from Serampore in 1840, the first book of its kind in Assamese. In the following year, he published a short sketch in English of the history of Assam.

In 1846 the American missionaries published a monthly magazine *Orunadai* in Assamese from Sibsagar. Its pages were filled with articles on various subjects, literature, history, science, etc., and they contained light touches of wit and humour. Many of the illustrations were adapted from the *Illustrated London News*; the blocks were locally produced. In 1884 the Rev. N. Brown published his *Grammatical Notice of the Assamese Language*. The Rev. Mr. Bronson in 1868 published his *Assamese English Dictionary*, which had for its basis a Bengali-Assamese dictionary in manuscript by Jaduram Borua, or possibly the manuscript of Ruchiram Kamrupi prepared in 1810 and now preserved in the India Office Library, London. The dictionary, as the first ambitious attempt towards the compilation of an Assamese lexicon, is extremely valuable. It was the result of twelve years' continuous hard labour and it contains 14,000 words. Each word has an English as

well as Assamese equivalent. This is certainly a great work for a foreigner to accomplish and Bronson is worthy of honour.

In 1845, the Rev. Mr. Brown published Bakul Kayastha's *Kitabat Manjari* in two parts. Of our old manuscript literature, this was the first to come out in print.

Between 1840 and 1850, Brown had succeeded in collecting about forty old Assamese manuscripts.

Through their study of the language and their communion with the common people, these missionaries were convinced that an injustice had been done to the people in depriving them of their natural right to the use of their mother tongue in the schools and in the courts. They advocated the immediate introduction of Assamese into these institutions. One of them wrote at the time:—

We might as well think of creating a love of knowledge in the mind of a stupid English boy by attempting to teach him French before he knew anything of the rudiments of English. To my mind, this feature of the educational policy pursued in Assam is not only absurd, but destructive of the highest motives of education, and must necessarily cripple the advancement of the schools, as well as separate them from the sympathies of the people. (A. H. Danforth, Missionary, Gowahatty. 1853)

The ceaseless and vigorous efforts by these missionaries, supported by the opinion of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, at last bore fruit. The Government realised their mistake and Assamese was restored to its rightful place in 1882.

The missionaries' work did not stop here; they continued to add to literature in their own way. About the literary production of the Assam Baptist Mission,

Mr. P. H. Moor, a missionary and a linguistic scholar, observed as early as 1907 :—

The modern literature in Assamese, whether Christian or non-Christian, may be said to be the product of the last sixty years of the nineteenth century. Brown, Bronson, and Nidhi Levi are the trio of names that stand out pre-eminently as the founders of Assamese Christian Literature.¹¹

The names of William Ward, the poet and the translator of the psalms, and of A. K. Gurney, the translator of the Old Testament into Assamese, are also worthy of mention as builders of modern Assamese literature.

Through the missionaries came to us directly the light of Western civilization and culture. Through the pages of the *Orunadai*, through their teachings in the schools, we came in direct contact with Western thoughts, learning, science and habits of mind. A new and rich world burst upon our view. This renaissance is, however, modern history.

¹¹ *Baptists in Assam.* By V. H. Sword. (Conference Press, Chicago, Illinois. 1935)

Chapter VII

MODERN ASSAMESE LITERATURE

As already stated, the modern period in Assamese literature was ushered in by the establishment of the printing-press by the American Baptist Mission at Sibsagar. The Mission started a school and made arrangements to impart English education. One of the earliest students was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Phukan got his education in the Mission school and afterwards prosecuted his studies at the Hindu College, Calcutta (1841-1844). Phukan's learning was very extensive; he was conversant with English and with Sanskrit, and he learned the Persian and the Arabic languages also.

The English education and the language offered to the local people not only the treasures found in English literature but it also gave them new models and fresh sources of inspiration. The impact with Western culture brought into our literature a profound and far-reaching change, and gave it a much needed impetus. The influence was greatly felt in our poetry. In subject-matter, technique and metre, modern Assamese poetry startlingly departed from the traditional path. The lyric became popular; the poet instead of expressing

the religious emotions like the poets of the previous generations, looks into his own heart, and sings of his own joy and sorrow. He tries to visualise the inner feelings and emotions and portrays the fleeting thoughts in all their sincerity, delicacy and subtlety. Varieties of poems, reflective, descriptive, historical, didactic and political began to appear in the language.

Among those who first seized the opportunity and introduced new subjects and metrical forms, Laxminath Bezboroa stands unrivalled. Bezboroa began his literary career as a journalist and has tried many forms in literature, fiction, the satirical essay, the short story, drama and poetry. He is a well-known humorist, finding inspiration from varieties of comic situations in individual and in social life. He is the first and foremost short-story writer in Assamese, and shows acute observation of Assamese life and manners. He is very original and artistic in depicting situations and giving a real Assamese touch. He has acquired fame as a pungent and outspoken critic. He handles Assamese prose with marvelous skill.

Many of Bezboroa's poems contain elements of national interest. He has evinced keen patriotism by composing stirring poems on the historic greatness and the lost glory of Assam. His song *Mor-des* (My Country) has now been recognised as a national anthem in Assam.

Raghunath Chowdhury's poems also reveal the new spirit. Many of his compositions have their roots in a love of the open. Nature, which up till now had served only as a decorative background, has been chosen as a subject of poetry for its own sake. Raghunath loves

the birds and the brooks and the flowers that blossom on the hills. He combines in himself the eye of a naturalist with the heart of a poet. Other prominent poets of the older group are Chandrakumar Agarwalla, Hema Chandra Goswami, Durgeswar Sarma, Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury, Kamala Kanta Bhattacharyya, Ratnakanta Barkakati, Nilmani Phukan and Jatindranath Duara. Kamala Kanta Bhattacharyya and Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury have composed many stirring political poems; pride and delight in their country's past have become to them a religious faith. Besides his lyrical poems, Jatindranath Duara rendered the immortal *Rubaiyat* of Omar into Assamese verse. Duara is the most sensitive poet of the time with something like a feminine temperament. A deep touch of melancholy and a brooding sadness are the characteristics of his poems.

Amongst the younger group Dimbeswar Neog, Binanda Chandra Barua, Sailadhar Rajkhowa, Atulchandra Hazarika and Devakanta Barua, have shown great freedom and variety of form; their verses are full of vitality and of vivid imagination.

Chandradhar Barua and Dandinath Kalita are prominent satirical poets. Their satires are mainly social in theme. Bholanath Das and Hiteswar Barbarua have made splendid use of blank verse in their *Kavyas*.

Assamese dramas of the day can be grouped into two classes: originals and translations. Translations and adaptations are either from the Sanskrit or from English. The plots of the dramas are mainly chosen from the *Puranas* and the folk-tales. Dramas of real life and portraying social evils are also popular. One

of these is Hemachandra Barua's *Kaniyar Kirtan* (The Gospel of the Opium-Eater) on the evils of opium-eating. It is composed with view to expressing the mischievous effects of opium-eating which has long been preying upon the very vitals of Assam. *Kaniyar Kirtan* was first published in 1861 and it is frankly a propaganda play written with a definite purpose.

Gunabhiram Barua's *Ram Navami Natak* also deserves mention as a problem play. In it the author advocated the cause of widow remarriage. Gunabhiram Barua rendered considerable service to the development of Assamese prose style also through his numerous contributions to the monthly journals, the *Asam Bandha* (1885), of which he was the founder-editor, and the *Bijuli* (1890).

In his two farces, *Tini Ghaini* (Three Wives) and *Asikshita Ghaini* (Illiterate Wife), Benudhar Rajkhowa has ridiculed and laughed over the ignorance and the conservatism of our housewives. In these plays, he has introduced many comic and farcical situations from the daily life of our illiterate women. *Kuri Satikar Sabhyata* (Twentieth Century Civilization) is another important farce of Benudhar Rajkhowa, wherein the author satirises the Western mode of life adopted by so-called educated young men of Assam.

Padmanath Gohain Barua published his *Gaoburah* (The Village Headman) wherein he describes the cruelties and tortures which the village headman had to undergo to please his Civilian Magistrate.

Padmanath, Laxminath and Durgaprasad Barua have composed a number of farces:—*Teton Tamuli*, *Pacani*, *Nomal*, *Litikai*, *Mahari*.

For serious dramas, the authors turned to Shakespeare and some of the latter's plays such as *Comedy of Errors*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, have been beautifully rendered into Assamese to suit the modern Assamese stage. But the translations do not seem to thrive well on the local stage, and so modern writers are exploring the Ahom *Buranjis* for plots.

Laxminath and Padmanath each composed as many as ten historical plays whose plots were borrowed from the *Buranjis*. They are expressions of the achievements and aspirations of the Assamese people.

In a previous chapter (Chapter III) it has been stated that *Pauranic* stories as well as romances were current in our old literature. Side by side with these *akhyanas*, folk-tales also grew up. They are of extraordinary diversity and parallel Grimm's fairy tales.

The most remarkable collections are those of Laxminath Bezboroa under the titles *Buri Air Sadhu Katha* (Grandmother's Tales) and *Kakadenta aru Nati Lora* (Grandfather's Tales).

Regular novels appeared in our literature in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the credit of first authorship goes to Hemachandra Barua. His novel *Bahire rong-song khitare-koa-bhaturi* (All That Glitters Is Not Gold) is written in a satirical vein. Though himself a high-class Brahman, Hemachandra satirises Hindu orthodoxy with its hypocrisies and its hide-bound conventions. He mercilessly exposes the immoral practices of Gobardhan Satradhikar, a Hindu pontiff, who professes to be religious, but secretly indulges in all sorts of immoral *liaisons*, and even goes so far as to seduce the wife of a disciple, a man of low caste.

Rajanikanta Bardaloi occupies a prominent place in modern Assamese fiction. His first romantic novel, *Miri-Jiyari*, came out in 1895 and in the succeeding decades he has published several novels, all works of great brilliance. He is absorbed in the history of his land, and he has produced historical novels like *Manomati*, *Rangili*, *Rahdai Ligiri*, *Dandua-droha*, *Tamreswari Mandir* and *Nirmal-bhakat*. The interest of Rajanikanta's novels centres round dialogues rather than in descriptions and action. Daivya Chandra Talukdar has also enriched our literature with several novels.

The output of such fiction in Assamese, however, is not great and its place has now been taken by short stories. The growth of the short story is a distinguished phenomenon as in all other modern Indian literatures. It begins with the adaptation and the translation of English, Russian and French stories. As we have said, Laxminath is the pioneer in this field and he has popularised this form with a masterly blending of pathos and humour. He has been followed by Saratchandra Goswami, Nakul Chandra Bhuyan, Laxminath Phukan and many others with varying success. In recent years, Mahichandra Bora has published a few short stories, and he is now recognised as a good humorist. In his stories, Mahichandra mirrors Assamese daily life with all its foibles and incongruities and presents it in a homely, racy and colloquial style.

The Freudian theory has lately shaken the old literary convention which excluded the discussion of sex. Today sex has become predominant in short stories published in the Assamese periodicals. Laxmidhar Sharma, Beena Barua, Rama Das and Troilokya Nath Goswami

are the writers who first broke away from the convention. Modern journalism has greatly contributed towards the development of the short story. The popular monthly magazine *Awahon* and the fortnightly *Jayanti* have given the greatest impetus to this kind of literary production, and no less than fifty short stories a month are appearing in Assamese journals and periodicals.

In essays and in criticism, Assamese has not made much progress. Pandit Hema Chandra Goswami, Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan and Benudhar Sharma have enriched Assamese prose literature with well-written and critical historical dissertations. Satyanath Bora's essays, written in an aphoristic style and now embodied in his two books *Sarathi* and *Cintakali*, deserve special mention. In the reviews of a few Assamese works Dr. Banikanta Kakati presents in original and concise form all that is significant in the old and contemporary Assamese literature.

Biographies of prominent persons, both Indian and European, are also available in Assamese. We have biographies of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Booker T. Washington, Kemal Pasha, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Hitler, Mussolini, Subhaschandra Bose and many others. Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography has also been translated into Assamese. Well written and up-to-date biographies of Assamese saints, scholars, patriots and literary men are also available.

Women have also been contributing towards the development of Assamese literature. Padmavati Phukanani was the earliest woman-writer of fiction. Jamuneswari Khatoniar's poems are characterised by simpli-

city ; but her life was cut short before she was twenty-four. Nalinibala Devi and Dharmeswari Devi are two mystic poetesses in our literature. Like other mystics, Nalinibala Devi attempts to explore the unity in which all life is one and all life is divine. In everything in the universe, Nalinibala Devi perceives the spark of divine life and she sings of the liberation of the imprisoned soul. It seems that Nalinibala's affinities are more with the sixteenth-century Vaisnavite poets than with those of her own time.

Snehalata Bhattacharyya and Chandraprabha Shaikia have written a number of short stories and novels.

Many publishing agencies and institutions have come into existence during recent years which have greatly contributed to the progress and the diffusion of Assamese literature. The two largest of these institutions are, the Assam Sahitya Sabha, and the Assam Government's Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, with their offices at Jorhat and Gauhati respectively.

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ANTHOLOGY

- i — DAKAR VACHANS : APHORISMS OF DAK
- ii — FOLK-SONGS
- iii — POEMS
- iv — PROSE

DAKAR VACHANS : APHORISMS OF DAK

Even a good bullock becomes spoilt if it is kept in another man's house ; a good crop is spoilt by allowing a by-way over it.

Purchase bullocks with a long tail. It is not bent in harrowing land.

Do not purchase bullocks from a barber, a washerman or an oilman.

Laxmi says, " I live in that house the roof of which is covered with the leaves of the gourd. "

The household where the son consults the father in all matters is like a well-governed kingdom.

His life is useless who has to gather fuel every day, who has been taken away by creditors, who has to depend for his livelihood upon others and who lives away from home.

Laxmi dwells in that wife whose voice is not heard by neighbours, who spins fine thread and who first weaves and then speaks about it.

An astrologer is of no use if he cannot properly interpret the rising of the stars. What is the use of wealth if it is not enjoyed and given in charity ?

There is no hope in the transitory body. Then what hope is there in men, money and garments ?

Death does not play with that man who opens charitable stalls to dispense food and drink.

Do not fill the stomach all at once. It will injure your health.

Take Ginger along with your food and after each meal eat myrobalan. This will increase your longevity.

FOLK-SONGS

ON LOVE

God first created the Universe,
With millions of teeming beings.
He himself is Love Incarnate,
And kindles the fire within.
How can we then escape the flame ?

Love is indestructible, imperishable
and unchangeable.
Once woven, the magic fabric of love
entwines us more and more.

Stay, stay, let us play !
Come, let us love and sing
Lest life should take wing !

YOUTH'S SONG

My mind turns from the field, O darling !
Of my home I grow weary.
With the buoyant fleece I strive to fly,
For without thee my life is dreary.
Bright is the day with the sunbeam,
The night with the mellow moonbeam;
Brighter still is my darling's face,
Shining in the full moon's gleam.

The stream shines with golden bees,
Flowers dazzle in beauteous colours,
My beloved gleams in glow and grace,
With a sprightful smile on her lips.

The bracelets adorn her delicate wrists ;
The *Riha* entwines her tender waist ;
How lovely my darling looks,
With the braids embracing her shoulders fair !

I climb over hills and mountains
But how hard to climb a creeper !
I tame down furious elephants ;
How difficult to woo your love !

I lost my elephant in the river reeds.
My steed vanished in the golden meadow.
I won my maiden dear but to lose her
In the hedgerow's shadow.

I shall take wings,
Fly into the pond you fish,
And shall be a catch in your net.
I shall be your perspiration
 rolling down your face :
As a fly I flutter,
 and kiss your gay cheeks.

My pitcher is full with wine,
My heart is trodden by love,
Maddened I am with fire of passion ;
Even *Yama* fears to place his icy hand on me.

MAIDEN'S SONG

Boatmen's oars move in the river ;
The pestle pounds the grain ;
My heart aches in passion,
Since I am born a woman.

When yonder you blow the pipe,
 And your fingers pass over the tune,
 My eyes I cast for a passing glance,
 outside the gate.
 My hands quiver, the shuttle drops,
 Though I sit beside my loom.

BOAT SONGS

[These songs are translated by Major John Butler, Principal Assistant Agent to the Governor-General, N. E. Frontier of Assam, and are included in his *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam*, published by Smith, Elder and Co., 65 Cornhill, London, in 1855. As an appendix to these songs, Major John Butler writes, " Assam is so intersected by rivers, that the Assamese prefer moving about in their little canoes to travelling by land...the watermen seem greatly to enjoy these boat trips, for they are always singing songs as they paddle along. "

I

- " Keep the boithas cheerly going;
 Rough and fierce the river's flowing,
 Ram bal, Hurry bal, Hurry bal Aee.
- " See! the sun is fast declining,
 To the moon his charge resigning,
 Ram bal, Hurry bal, Hurry bal Aee.
- " Pull away, boys, nothing fearing,
 Though the rapids we are nearing,
 Ram bal, Hurry bal, Hurry bal Aee.

“ In the well-plied oar confiding,
Safely o'er them we are gliding,
Ram bal, Hurry bal, Hurry bal Aee.

“ Keep her clear that granite block there,
See, she nears the sunken rock there,
Ram bal, Hurry bal, Hurry bal Aee.

“ Now the threatened danger's over,
Nothing from her course shall move her,
Ram bal, Hurry bal, Hurry bal Aee.

“ Soon we'll make the ghat, my hearties !
Spend the night in jovial parties,
Ram bal, Hurry bal, Hurry bal Aee. ”

2.

“ Shades of night are falling fast—pull away, eh, hey ;
All our toil will soon be past—pull away, eh, hey.

“ Round Thambya's point we stress—pull away, eh, hey ;
See the Puckah Ghat appear—pull away, eh, hey.

“ Strike together for your lives—pull away, eh, hey ;
Towards our sweethearts and our wives—pull away,
eh, hey.

“ First we smoke the fragrant weed—pull away, eh, hey ;
Morpheus then will slumbers speed—pull away, eh, hey.

“ We must work if we would live—pull away, eh, hey ;
Sahib will our baksish give—pull away, eh, hey.

3.

- “ Come and join this merry round,
Tripping over Cupid's ground,
Ram, Krishna, Hurry.
- “ Dance and sing we all night long,
This shall be the only song,
Ram, Krishna, Hurry.
- “ Love and music all the theme,
Till the ruddy morning beam,
Ram, Krishna, Hurry.
- “ Let the ruddy morn arrive,
It shall but our song revive,
Ram, Krishna, Hurry.
- “ Aided by the solar ray,
Blithe we'll sing throughout the day,
Ram, Krishna, Hurry.
- “ Let the shadow upwards tend;
Let the weary sun descend;
Still our song shall find no end!
Ram, Krishna, Hurry. ”

POEMS

SAVE MY SOUL

O my Lord, prostrate at Thy feet, I lay myself down
and with a contrite heart beseech Thee to save my soul.
My soul is on the point of perishing through the poison
of the venomous serpent of worldly things.

On this earth all is transitory and uncertain, wealth,
kinsmen, life, youth, and even the world itself,
Children, family, all are uncertain. On what shall I
place reliance ?

Like a drop of water on the lotus leaf, the mind is
unsteady.

There is no firmness in it.

There is nothing uncertain in Thy grace and no cause
for fear

Under the shadow of Thy feet.

I, Sankara, pray to Thee, O Hrishikesh, the dweller in
my heart,

To pilot me across this world of trouble.

Turn my heart to Thee and lead me to Thyself, O Lord
of all blessing and all grace.

Vouchsafe unto me the truth, the right path, and Thy
kindly guidance.

Thou art my mind, Thou art my destiny, Thou art my
spiritual guide.

Saith Sankar, guide me across the vale of sorrows.

SANKAR DEVA

MY MIND

Rest, my mind, rest on the feet of Rama :
 Seest Thou not the great end approaching ?
 My mind, every moment life is shortening,
 Just heed, any moment it might flit off.
 My mind, the serpent of time is swallowing :
 Know'st thou death is creeping on by inches ?
 My mind, surely this body will drop down,
 So break through illusion and resort to Ram.
 Oh mind, thou art blind;
 Thou seest this vanity of things,
 Yet thou seest not.
 Why art thou, oh mind, slumbering at ease ?
 Awake and think of Govinda.
 Oh mind, Saṅkar knows it and says,
 Except through Rama, there is no hope.

SANKAR DEVA

THOU PHYSICIAN OF THE SOUL

Thou physician of the soul, thou hast not seen the
 easiest remedy.

Thou hast done a thousand works, still thou hast not
 attained to the Lord and comest to the world again and
 once again.

Thou spendest thy years in meditation and in penance,
 in pilgrimage, in dwelling in Gaya and Kashi.

Thou knowest the arguments of Yoga but the mind is
 clouded.

Know thou this : except through, supreme devotion,
 there is no liberation.

Entire virtue remains hidden within the name of Rama ;
 this is the final message of all the Shastras.
 The name of the Lord devoutly taken is the sole religion
 of the Kāli era.

We know of it but grasp not the essence.
 Says Śāṅkara, transient is this body ;
 never again wilt thou gain this ;
 cast off all pride of action and think of the feet of Hari
 with the sole devotion of thy heart.

SANKAR DEVA

SELF-SURRENDER

Thou guidest, Oh Lord, the inner workings of my heart.
 In Thee I am possessed of a Lord.
 Remove my delusion by offering me protection under
 Thy feet; be kind unto me, Oh Lord.
 Thou art the inner controller of my soul ; I have turned
 a servant unto Thee; know this and be kind.
 I take up a straw between my teeth and bow unto
 Thee; show me how I may remain in Thy service.
 A sinner like me in the three worlds, there is none :
 Like Thee too there is none, who purgest sins.
 Know Thou this, O Goviṇḍa, and do unto me as Thou
 thinkest fit.
 This is my prayer at Thy feet.
 Thousands of sins day and night I commit, being wrapt
 in delusion.
 Know me as Thy slave, Thou container of the world,
 and forgive.

I know what is righteousness, still I do not cleave to it ;
From unrighteousness, I do not turn away.

I do not, as dwelling in my heart Thou biddest me do.
I know not how to worship Thee nor how to propitiate
Thee.

I know naught of invocation or prayer,
Hence, O Lord, I fall a servant at Thy feet.
Mayest Thou steer my course !

I fall at Thy feet, O Hari, and offer Thee humble
prayers to save my soul.

Languishing with the poison of the serpent of the
world, my life is threatened every moment.

Unstable are men and wealth, unstable are youth and
the world;

Wife and son are unstable; to whom should I turn
as eternal and lasting ?

My heart is fickle like water on the lotus leaf ;

It does not settle for a moment ; it owns no fear in
enjoyment of the world of the senses.

MADHAV DEVA

TRIFLING IS LIFE

Be careful, brother,

Till life pass away :

The providence of Govinda

Soon will grant you grace.

Trifling is life, trifling, youth.

All is illusory; have no care.

Sorrows, throw them off !

And fasten thy mind at Hari's feet.

Desires, cast them off !
 Break the trap of illusion,
 Saith Madhava, pin thy hope to the feet of the Lord.

MADHAV DEVA

I BOW TO THEE

I bow to Thee, O Madhava, Thou art the lawgiver to him
 who creates the laws. Thou art the parent of the world.
 Thou art the mind of the world, Thou art the destiny
 of the world.

Thou art the supreme soul of the universe,
 Thou art the one Lord of the universe.
 Nothing exists in the universe except in Thee.

Thou art the creation, Thou art the cause;
 static and dynamic, Thou art all,
 like as gold is unto ornaments of gold.
 Thou art the plants and the trees,
 Thou art the birds and the beasts,
 Thou art the gods and the non-gods.

The ignorant, for want of illumination,
 think of Thee as different.

Infatuated every moment with Thy illusion,
 none knoweth Thee for the Soul.
 Thou residest in the heart of all beings,
 but people search Thee without, not understanding
 Thee.

Thou art the only truth; all the rest is false.
 The wise know this and contemplate Thee in their hearts.

I crave not for enjoyment of beatitude,
 I long not for salvation,
 only let there be devotion at Thy feet.

MADHAV DEVA

MY BELOVED

“ I have yet to see a necklace of pearls
 although I have heard of it very often. ”

I called my beloved and smiled at her.
 She smiled back and a necklace of pearls was revealed.

“ The beauty of the red coral is yet unseen of me. ”

I pointed out the coral reefs which are the red lips of
 my beloved.

“ It is said that there are no roses without thorns.”
 I silently gazed at the cheeks of my sweetheart.

“ Where is that wonderful lotus
 which blooms both day and night ? ”
 I do not speak, but show my beloved.

“ Who is the sculptor that has made
 this exquisite statue of love ? ”

I do not care;
 I only know that she adorns my heart.

LAXMINATH BEZBOROA

THE ROSE,

Whose touch made you blossom,
O my beloved rose ?
At whom did you smile, removing the green veil ?

How did you illumine that Paradise wherein
Apsaras and *Bulbuls* danced
Like fallen angels maddened
with wine of love !

Did your touch quench the thirst
of the moon pining for reunion
In the dreamy night sweetened with
Hashnahana's fragrance ?

You have soothed the radiant
face of the Princess of *Bosra*,
The beloved of Arabia.

In the wave of your beauty
vibrates the melody of the nightingale.

The day you blossomed in the desert grove,
your odours spread throughout the world.
The sky-kissing Colossus drank your beauty deep.

Were you there the queen of flowers
in the beautiful garden of *Babylon* ?
Did you make the *Nandan* bowers in the air
And give the poet eternal songs ?

You conquered the whole of *Hindusthan*
by your fragrance, love and glow

And flooded the hearts of Badshah's Begums
with eternal flow.

You poured forth streams of love
and charmed the world with your beauty.
Were you the heart's delight
of Begum Nurjahan of Delhi?

Who was that fair queen
whose ruddy cheeks you did adorn ?
Who inspired Shahjahan
to raise a sepulchre for eternity ?

You are the living emblem
of love unfettered,
The treasure-house of songs
and sweet memories of the past.

In your soft bosom are hidden
A thousand sighs of lovelorn lovers.
Would you blossom in my mind's bower,
O my dearest flower ?

RAGHUNATH CHOWDHURY

THE WEDDING OF BAHAGI ¹²

All are beaming with joy,
For today is the wedding of Bahagi,
the lovely maiden, Nature's child.

When the black bee
hummed the news,

¹² Spring is personified in *Bahagi*, the month of Baisakh.

The trees and creepers
pulsated with life.

Salmali, Palash, Asok and *Mandar*
changed their old raiment
and dressed themselves
in colourful attire.

The *Malaya* wind—the carrier of perfumes—
knows no rest;
He sprinkles sweet pollen of flowers
from his odorous basket.

The diamond-set canopy is hanging
in the sky.
Mother Earth spreads the green carpet below.

The Princess of Dawn
impressed the red spot of vermilion,
Painted the smooth cheeks of the bride
with shades of various flowers.

Cupid in Vasanta is coming
as the bridegroom,
And the diverse tunes of love
in the air are ringing.

The young shoots shake their leafy fans
And invite the nightingale to sing the wedding
songs.

Fulness of joy pervades
all through the universe,
in the world of life, in the world of matter.

· RAGHUNATH CHOWDHURY

SILENCE

In silence I come, and in silence I go;
In silence I receive the gift you bestow.
In silence I gaze at the evening star,
In silence my tears mingle with the universe.

In silence my hopes rise and sink,
In silence my heart doth sing.
In silence Nature clings to me anon,
In silence I receive her adoration.
In silence I find life's delight,
In silence I walk through eternal night
In silence I bear my defeat and triumph
In silence I die and in silence I am born.

JAMUNESWARI KHATANIYAR

MINE IS NOT A SONG OF LAUGHTER

Mine is not a song of laughter and revelry,
cooling weary limbs;
Mine is a stroke on the harp of fire
that unifies the dead and the quick.

My song is an endless heat
coming out of a hundred burning losses, insults, humili-
ations ;
It is the fiery vapour
Oozing out from the imprisoned energy of the soul.

Mine is a song of gods and demons
sung over the churning of the ocean for nectar .

It is a song over the drinking of *Kalakuta* Poison
to attain the position of a death-conqueror.

It is the outpouring of the generous blood
towards the worshipping of the Mother's feet ;
It is the healing word
that unites quarrelling brothers at a breath.

It is the self-denying sentiment
that blows away meanness, cowardice, helplessness ;
It is the common seal
that impresses with one form, one colour, one expression.

It is the voice of humanity withered
under a mountain load of insults ;
It is the voice of pride incarnate
that contemns the vanity of oppressors.

It is the deep grave stroke
that awakens the sleeping life ;
It is the song of the ordered march
to reclaim the lost possession of humanity.

It is the terrible history
of the humiliation of God in men ;
It is the heart-swelling desire
to die for the rescue of life.

It is the weight of pain
wrung out when free life is enchained ;
It is the haunting determination
that laughs to scorn the humiliators of mankind.

It is the great flood of, *Shravana*
washing away the blood of a hundred wounds ;
It is the voice of the mother calling children
to immolate their lives to realise the vastness of life.

AMBIKAGIRI ROY CHOWDHURY

MARCH FORWARD

Torpid through two hundred years
the soul of India wakens
throbbing with new vitality.
The days of tyranny are numbered,
of fear, trepidation, hatred, jealousy.

March forward, O child of India,
the paths are cleared of barriers.
There are a hundred thunders
on the enemy's side
flashing through the clay-pots of flesh ;
on our side there's one tiny rod of defence
charged with the forces of the soul.

Come it will, let it come,
the avalanche of oppressions.
We shall meet them, make them harmless,
fronting them with expanded chests.

Then shall become painted
the forehead of Mother India
with the *Tilak*-mark of *Swaraj*.

AMBIKAGIRI ROY CHOWDHURY

 WHOSE BIDDING IS IT ? ¹³

Whose bidding is it
 that the whole of India has emptied itself here to-day ?
 There's light and colour, there's gaiety and frolic,
 not a trace of sadness is to be seen anywhere.
 There is gentle laughter on every face.
 Is it a festival in honour of some God ?
 Or is it a Roman triumph after victory in some battle ?
 Or is it to celebrate the liberation of your life
 that such grand preparations have been made ?
 Have the shadows vanished
 from your walls of serfs and slaves ?
 Has the mark of bondage disappeared from your person ?
 Is your body pure and clean ?
 Does life flow on in your limbs ?
 Is the foundation of your freedom well laid ?
 If so, why is there amongst you
 So much faction and split ?
 Where are embracing and kissing among brothers ?
 Or are all feelings crushed by bondage ?
 Let go all divisions, all vanities ;
 sing, thirty crores of brothers,
 sing victory to Mother India !
 Let heaven and earth resound with the cry of her
 liberation
 or what is the use of your holding on to life ?

AMBIKAGIRI ROY CHOWDHURY

¹³ This was sung as the Opening Song in the Gauhati Session of the Indian National Congress, held at Pandu-Nagar in 1926: ---

THE UNINVITED

I have not searched Thee in that celestial moment,
 the dawn of my life,
 Nor did I tender my devotion with fairest flowers
 watered with morning dews.
 Never did I offer Thee my purest oblations
 adorned with dawn's radiance.
 But Thou with bountiful hands
 hast showered Thy blessings.
 I made with care a garland of pearl-like lotus,
 that blossomed in the dawn,
 Lighted the fragrant lamp on the altar of Love,
 fed with the blood of my own bosom.
 I have not chosen Thee
 to sit on that golden throne ;
 Nor did I bow down at Thy feet, O Lord !
 But Thou didst sprinkle Thy kindness,
 behind the veil and without a word.
 Unasked didst Thou bestow the sweet fragrance
 with Thine unseen hand.

NALINIBALA DEVI

THE EARTH

Who was the *Apsara*, whose one glance
 disturbed the meditations of the sage
 in that golden hour of some distant age,
 now forgotten of history ?

Does the same lightning flash in thy eyes,
 O my beloved ?

Do the flowers smile and the forests quiver
because of thy love ?

Do the million stars shine in the hem
of thy garment ?

Does it waft away the fragrance of the spring
that is not yet come,
and does it make the river overflow with joy ?
Art thou the lotus I have been so long looking for
in the beautiful tanks and dirty gutters ?

The stars are put out, spring withers,
and the lotus petals droop,
The earth glows with the exquisite radiance
of laughter and slaughter.

Thou shalt also die, dearest,
and this rambling dream of our life will end.
Alas ! the time shall come
when these poems of today
which are radiant with thy love
will become mere dressing of words.

Thou fair creature of an hour !
Thou shalt adorn this land of Death
only for a while.
O my love ! this is the cruel riddle
of this meaningless life
of which thou art the only solution.

This life of ours is coloured with the tint of truth
and the false hue of dreams.

Why dost thou want to paint it
with the futile colour of immortality ?

O utter helplessness !
The blue melancholy of the heavens
Overshadows the glory of the earth
and the world of love that you and I have built
is circumscribed by Death.

DEVAKANTA BARUA

FORGET NOT THE PAST

My request of you, dearest friend,—
forget not the past,
when, playing my life's tune,
I shall drift to dust.

My life is enveloped by clouds of sorrow,
and not a ray of light to be seen ;
slowly and stealthily I pace my steps
towards the gloomy and unknown realm.

Darkness of night confuses my way
And in me lies the crematory of memories.
O how many a vision of love has melted
into a song of doleful music !

JATINDRANATH DUARA

THE END

The lively green leaf grew tired of dancing,
and, slowly descending, kissed the earth.

The pair of swans diving and sporting
embraced each other with joyous hearts.
But the evening came ; their play ended ;
they had sung the song of life.
The falling leaf below withered ;
The star shone and burnt out ;
The swans' last strain rose and fell ;
Nature, blow now the conch of death !

JATINDRANATH DUARA

PROSE

SARABJAN

OR

THE ALL-KNOWING ONE¹⁴

There dwelt in a certain village a farmer by the name of Foring (Grasshopper). His wife was rather of a selfish disposition. The family consisted of the man and his wife—they were without any issue. On rising from bed on a certain rainy morning in the month of *Magh* (January and February) the farmer told his wife “Look here, wife, it is a nice and rainy morning, I don’t feel inclined to take our stereotyped rice to-day. I am just in the mood to have a few cakes. Go and make me some.” The wife replied “Well, where is *Baradhan* (a special sort of rice for cakes and pastries) to make the cakes with? There is not a grain in the house.” The husband then was about to give up the idea of indulging in a few cakes that rainy morning—but the wife suggested that he might just as well go and see if any of the neighbours had any ground *Baradhan* ready for making cakes with and he might ask them to be accommodated with a little. This suggestion made the husband think a while and having determined upon something he sallied forth with his *Endi* (a sort of thick silk made in Assam much worn as wraps by the people in winter) wrap round him.

¹⁴ From *Buri Air Sadhu*. Translated by Mr. J. Barua, Bar-at-Law, and incorporated in *Folk Tales of Assam*. (The Timber and Stores Agency, Howrah. 1915)

Not far from his cottage a neighbour was having his grains trodden out by cattle. Seeing this he sat near the place where it was being done and started a conversation with his neighbour on the weather, the crops and the usual topic of the daily meal in vogue among the people. He sat for a long time talking to him and when all the grains were separated from the chaff his neighbour removed them away from the straw. When he was thus engaged our friend the farmer complained of an acute pain in his stomach. It was so intense that he writhed with pain and started rolling on the ground and as the grains were scattered he started rolling on them. He recovered after a while and when he returned home he found that there were at least five seers of the grain stuck on to his *Endi* wrap. It need hardly be said that the pain was shammed with the intention which he carried out so successfully. His wife congratulated him on his successful mission and joyfully started getting the rice ready for the cakes. She sunned and dried them and made them into powder. After she had seen to her husband's meal in the evening she started baking the cakes. Foring feeling very sleepy after his meal retired to bed. The wife after baking twelve *buri* (score) cakes arranged them on a platter of cane. She then satisfied her hunger with most of them herself leaving just a few for her husband on a plate covered over for the next morning. When she went to bed she woke her husband up and said "I have finished baking the cakes, but let us come to an understanding—whoever of us will wake and leave the bed first tomorrow morning will get one-third of the cakes and the other will get the

rest." Forging as a good docile husband agreed to her proposal.

Next morning neither of them would leave the bed. The sun was up and it was getting near noon—yet would they not stir. They pretended to snore and sleep on. The husband being mindful of his duties of looking after his fields at last made up his mind to forgo the pleasure of having two-thirds of the cakes and rose. When the wife saw this she said to him that as he had got up first he would get one-third only. The husband said, "All right, you are welcome to the two-thirds." But when he went to eat the cakes he found to his great surprise that there were but a few on the plate and on inquiring from his wife where the rest of the cakes were, she replied, "How could there be more? All that I baked are on the plate there. You had better take your share and leave me the rest." The husband was astonished—"Could there be, he thought, only these few cakes of the five seers of rice? Impossible." Then his eyes happened to light on the cane platter hung on the wall and there were just the tell-tale marks of as many cakes as were baked. He counted the marks and saying nothing to his wife had his share of the cakes without a word. Then when his wife came to give him his usual morning betel, taking it in his hand he made up a cryptic rhyme for the occasion and gave her to understand that he knew all about her doings of the night before. When he mentioned the actual number of cakes she was quite flabbergasted.

She was very much ashamed of herself on being found out like this. When she went to fetch water from the river, woman-like, she told the other women who were

there that her husband was a marvel and could divine other people's thoughts and know what they did. The whole village then was apprised of this fact and he got the sobriquet of *Sarabjan* attached to his name in less than no time. And his fame reached far and wide.

Just about this time a villager happened to miss his black cow. After searching for her five long days fruitlessly, on learning of the great gifts of Foring he approached him and begged of him to find out where his cow was. As luck would have it Foring had seen the animal grazing just that very morning in the *ulu* field behind his house. He therefore without any hesitation directed him to look for her behind his house. The man accordingly went as directed and was awarded by the sight of his cow. After this it spread far and wide that Foring was really a *Sarabjan* and there was ample proof of it. This news in course of time reached the king.

At about this time a gold necklace worth a lac of rupees was missing in the palace, and when the king came to know of Foring's power he sent for him after every effort to find it out had proved unsuccessful. When the king's officers informed him of the king's command he was thunder-struck. What was he to do? If he did not obey he would be killed, the same would overtake him if he could not find the lost article, and it would mean the same thing if he were to give the truth out and say that he was not really *Sarabjan*. He was completely at a loss as to what he was to do. Leaving it to fate and after praying to God he approached the king. When he was informed of the *Sarabjan's* arrival the king received him cordially and with outstretched arms invited him to take a seat near

the throne. He was then taken to the inner apartments and was entertained with dainties, one of the items being curdled milk (*Doy*).

Now the king had two queens. Their names were Madoy and Hadoy. It was Hadoy the junior queen who had stolen the necklace. And when she knew that the *Sarabjan* was requisitioned for the purpose she was all in a flutter. She peeped through an aperture in the wall to see what the man was like. Forging himself however was also quaking with fear and as he saw the plate of *Doy* (curdled milk) before him he muttered aloud "*Ha doy* (meaning Alas, *Doy*! It was the name of the queen also), let me taste of you today, no one knows how the king will decide tomorrow." The Queen Hadoy heard this and she thought the *Sarabjan* was referring to her. She began to say to herself "I am done for now, the *Sarabjan* has found me out." And she then came out, casting aside her modesty, and said to him "*Sarabjan*, pray do not give me away, I can assure you I will make it worth your while for you." *Sarabjan* then had no difficulty in finding out how the matter stood and he at once discovered that the thief was no other than the Queen Hadoy herself. He, assuming his most serious demeanour said, "Your Majesty may rest assured that I shall not divulge your Majesty's secret—but my advice to you is that the necklace should forthwith be replaced in His Majesty's cash box as it was before." She did as she was told.

The next day when the king held his court he requested the *Sarabjan* to tell the assembly who it was that had stolen the necklace. In reply, making his obeisance,

he said, "Your Majesty's humble subject as I am my calculations do not tell me that your necklace is stolen at all. I find that it is still in Your Majesty's cash box." The cash box was sent for immediately and it was found that the *Sarabjan* was quite correct: the necklace was in its usual place. This was indeed too much for the public, and their faith in him was more than confirmed. The king awarded him free grants of land and other estates and found for him an office in His Majesty's household.

One day the king just to test the *Sarabjan's* knowledge held a grasshopper in his grasp and asked him what it was that he had in his hand. He was at his wits' end and as was his wont he muttered aloud to himself in rhyme to this effect "Once I counted up and was right and on one occasion I saw it with my own eyes and was correct; the necklace made its appearance when I but called out Ha doy; but now I find that poor Foring's (grasshopper, his own name) end is near."

The king was not aware of his name; he just knew him as the *Sarabjan*. When, therefore, he had heard "the poor grasshopper's end is near," he thought that the man was alluding to the grasshopper in his grasp. He let the grasshopper off and as a reward for his marvellous powers he then and there presented Foring with the gorgeous suit of clothes he was then wearing.

Our clothes had to be sent to the wash and we returned home. ¹⁵

¹⁵ All Assamese narrators of tales wind up with some such words to give the tale a semblance of truth, that is to say, to show that they were present during the incidents narrated in the tale.

THE AHOM KING RUDRA SINGHA
AT GAUHATI ¹⁶,

With the object of invading Bengal, the Swargadeo went down to Saraighat in the month of *Bahag*, and pitched his camp near the rampart of Raja Parikshit. A few days after a Changtalia Hari, or sweeper who used to work under the *chang* or platform, entered the house of the dancing girls adjoining the main hall of the King. The sentinels saw him when coming out and said, " Who is there ?" There was a great commotion. The King was startled in his sleep, and stood up with his sword and called in Ghanasyam of Cheregua, headman of the attendants, from the gate-house to whom he said,—“ Well, Ghanasyam, enquire into what is afoot. ” He accordingly enquired into the matter after pacifying the hubbub. He was told that the commotion was due to the sudden appearance of a man there. The men then examined the place with torches. There was rain before and footprints were left on the soil. The footmarks indicated a toe detached from the remaining toes. Enquiries were made as to who was the trespasser, and every one denied. The King, on hearing this, ordered that the man with parted toes should be found out by an identification of his footmarks. The Pachani-Bara or chief steward investigated into the matter and came upon such a man in the wood, and his footprints bore evidence to his being the culprit. The

¹⁶ From the English version of the *Tungkhungia Buranji*, compiled during the latter half of the eighteenth century and translated by Rai Bahadur Dr. S. K. Bhuyan. (The Oxford University Press. 1933)

matter was reported to the King who ordered him to be imprisoned. In the morning, after a prolonged enquiry into the matter, some three of the suspects were killed in the vicinity of the rampart of Raja Parikshit by having their chests ripped open with axes. A few others, who served in the inner chambers of the King's residence, were turned out after having their noses and ears clipped, and the Haris or sweepers who had served outside were admitted for inner service.

While at North Gauhati, the King once started for a deer-hunting excursion to the Dirgheswari Hill. On the way a buffalo issued out of the woods and dispersed the procession of elephants and horses as well as that of the archers and shieldsmen. The brute further rushed through the line of palanquin-bearers and stood between the palanquins of the King and of his two sons. The buffalo had, after killing a man, come alongside the Dirgheswari Hill from north to south. A deer-slayer pierced him with a spear, and the buffalo ran up to the Dirgheswari Hill. The King after entering Khajikhowa went out again and ascended the raised platform erected for the purpose of shooting deer, and busied himself in killing deer. Then a large number of monkeys assailed the hunting loft and perched on the royal canopy as well. They could not be driven by any means. The King alighted from the *mackang* and ordered his men to open fire at the monkeys. On the return journey, at the Kanai-barasi-bowa rampart, the elephant Prabalsing attacked a palanquin-bearer who was on the point of being gored with the tusks, but his body was not penetrated through. The man stood between the tusks. The man being released was running for his life, when

the elephant again caught hold of him by a sudden move, snatched away his head-apron and chewed it. The elephant became infuriated and rolled down from the rampart, head downwards, into the ditch. The Buragohain of the Pukhuriparia family was serving as the *Mahut* or elephant-driver; he also rolled down but he firmly clung himself to the head of the animal, and managed not to have a fall. The King placed two elephants and a few men in charge of the mad elephant and forbade them to lift him till he came to his senses. Thus saying the King came away.

BHADARI

A SCENE FROM ASSAMESE VILLAGE LIFE

Sishuram was just returning from the field. He placed the plough in the courtyard and after a hurried bath changed his loin-cloth and hastened to the kitchen, where Bhadari, his wife, was preparing the midday meal. Sishuram became indignant when he found that the rice had not yet been cooked and that the curry also was not in preparation. He saw that the vegetable leaves, *dhekiya* (a kind of edible fern), had not even been dressed for cooking; the *maidā* (a curved knife with a wooden handle) was lying on a plantain leaf like a dead peacock, and the *kai* fish lying on the floor looked like ash-besmeared¹⁷ fakirs intoxicated with puffs of hemp. On the other side, near the oven he saw Bhadari, blinded with smoke, blowing the fire.

¹⁷ So that it may not slip away, the *kai* fish, before dressing, is besmeared with ashes.

Sishuram was fretting and foaming with anger when he found that the meal was not ready. From early morning a disputatious mood had possessed him. His anger had been steadily mounting to a climax for very many reasons. The day before, he had had to stop ploughing as it was a *Krishna Ekadasi*, a day forbidden for ploughing; this morning the bullocks had given him a lot of trouble in the field; besides, Sishuram had had a quarrel, this same morning, with his neighbour Bahua over an encroachment on land. The quarrel had swollen in size and would have certainly exploded but Bahua had been able to foresee the danger and had fled before the bubble burst. It is an age-old maxim that whenever one is angry one's rage is to be borne by one's wife. On a previous occasion also, when Sishuram had been vexed to a degree by that redoubtable Bahua, he had extinguished his anger by beating Bhadari on the plea that she failed to feed the bullocks on time.

Bhadari, like Mother Earth, patiently bore these onslaughts of her husband without a groan or a grumble. In fact, Bhadari had a firm conviction that these occasional beatings and chastisements were as natural as sleep and hunger—indispensable corollaries of married life. She sought her salvation through devotion to Sishuram.

But there is a limit to everything. Even Mother Earth, the embodiment of forbearance, sometimes gives a tremor. Would it therefore be unnatural if poor Bhadari should rise up in revolt when things became intolerable ?

Bhadari was exhausted with her efforts at blowing the smoky fire. Sishuram looked at her with a curse and from a distance cried out excitedly, " Daughter of So and so, why have you not prepared the meal, late as it is ? " His face and his eyes were flushed red with anger.

Turning round from the smoke, Bhadari replied dryly, " Should I cook the food with my head ? There is not a single log in the house. I am blowing myself out to kindle the fire with wet logs. Is it right simply to flare up without giving a bit of consideration ? " Her tired eyelids were weighted down with drops of perspiration.

" What do you say, you daughter of a bitch ? " roared Sishuram, and with a shrug of his shoulders, he rushed towards Bhadari and struck her on the back with the *maida* that was lying on the floor. Before a second blow could be given, hearing Bhadari's heart-piercing shrieks, Kinaram, Sishuram's brother, came running and immediately caught hold of his brother and dragged him outside. Poor Bhadari swooned, lying in a pool of blood.

Later on, Bhadari was sent to the hospital. On the third day, in the hospital, recovering her senses she turned her eyes about in the room, as if expecting some one beside the bed. The attendant came near and glanced at her; Bhadari in a low voice wistfully enquired, " Where is he ? "

" Whom do you want ? " asked the attendant.

A little nonplussed, Bhadari said, " My husband, Sir. "

" Oh, that scoundrel ? He is now in the lockup. "

" Let him come here, Sir ! " Bhadari entreated piteously.

“How can he come? He is now in the *hajat*. Don't think of him. If you think of him, you may get worse.”

Bhadari's eyes narrowed as she listened to the attendant and within a few seconds she again became unconscious. The doctor was informed, and the attendant related the matter to him. The doctor realised that unless Sishuram was brought near, the patient might sink. He made arrangements to keep Sishuram near Bhadari's bed, so that immediately on regaining consciousness Bhadari might see her husband.

Next morning, on coming to her senses, Bhadari saw Sishuram caressing her head and gently passing his fingers through her hair. At the sight, her expression showed great relief, as if her husband's presence dissolved all her troubles. She smiled slowly and enquired: “How are you? Have you been taking your meals regularly? I am sure you are finding it hard to prepare your meals. Never mind, I shall be all right in a day or two. Kindly fix it up to take me home; I'll come to your help.” Two streams of tears gushed from Sishuram's eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

Bhadari, seeing the doctor coming near her bed, entreated, “My God! My father, he is not to be blamed! He is innocent, guiltless; spare him; forgive him; I beseech you, forgive my husband. It was I who stumbled over the *maida* and got myself hurt.” Her eyes brimmed over with tears.

The doctor, the attendant and Sishuram all were struck dumb at these words of Bhadari's. Sishuram could no longer suppress his surging sorrow. He broke into a fit of anguish and wept like a child.

“ It isn't true, Sir !, It is I who struck her with the *maida*, and it is right that I should be hanged. My Lord, I am a sinner, I who stabbed my poor devoted wife, ” he added hastily and passionately.

Within a few weeks Bhadari's wounds healed and she was discharged from the hospital. But though she tried to shield Sishuram from the process of the law by attempting to prove his innocence, the law took its own course and Sishuram was sentenced to three months' hard labour. Sishuram went smiling to jail to atone for his sin.

Bhadari cursed her own unworthy self for the tragedy brought upon the life of her dear husband. No one could condemn her as severely as she condemned herself.

LAXMINATH BEZBOROA

PADUM-KUMARI

[*Padum-Kumari* is a semi-historical novel by Laxminath Bezboroa. The following extracts, from the first chapter of the book, are translated to show the writer's power of detail painting.]

Gauhati, the heart of the Kingdom of Kamarupa, the darling place of Nature, guarded by a garland of sky-embracing mountains, consecrated by the sacred water of the mighty Brahmaputra and strewn with innumerable places of pilgrimage, was known all over the world as the befitting abode of the eminent astronomers. Its King Narakasur, the son of Mother Earth, was the lord of sixteen thousand lovely-faced brides. Bhagadatta, who as a warrior attained far-reaching glory in the

Mahabharata war, belonged to, this splendid city of Gauhati. In its neighbourhood stand the Nilachal Hills with the sacred shrine of Kamakhya, the residence of Mahamaya Bhagavati. To the south-west, enhancing the glory and splendour of the place, stands a ring of hills known as Narakasur. The holy hermitage of the illustrious sage Vasistha, where three sacred currents of the same rivulet are making eternal tunes of murmuring song, lies to the south-east of it. Here, at a place named Beltala, the great sage Galvava, always served by sixty thousand devotees, used to fill the sky with the sound of recitations of the Vedas, and the ears of the Hayagriva Madhava (a temple) were regaled with the songs of the Samaveda sung by the revered sage Gokarna. At the Gauhati of such description lived, in 1771 of the Saka Era, a rich and powerful nobleman, Haradatta by name. His family consisted of a virtuous wife, a son, a daughter and a brother named Viradatta.

Haradatta was fifty-six years of age by this time. Youthful brilliance in eyes, high ambition on broad white forehead, firmness in rounded hands and feet, courage in mind, unbounded enthusiasm, indomitable valour and unparalleled practical wisdom could always be seen in him. A short and sudden meeting with him was quite sufficient to create a profound impression even on the mind of a stranger, who had never seen or heard anything of him before. He was a man of commanding voice, tall and massive in stature, measured and appealing in conversation, and of wonderful deeds and action. These traits of Haradatta were further glorified by such delicate sentiments as conjugal love, parental affection, devotion to friends and love of his

motherland. At times harshness and obstinacy crept into his conduct as he had to engage in military strife against the Mowamarias, to protect his beloved city of Gauhati. War is a terrible thing and it makes a man hard-hearted. Warfare hampers the growth of noble and sublime impulses. However, to be frank, virtues like ambition and self-reliance were strong in Haradatta, and when he was guided by them he used to neglect the advice and the instructions of others, even the humble prayers of his beloved wife and their daughter Padum-Kumari. ¹⁸

Padum had reached the age of bashful fifteen. Up to then she could not even have dreamt of anything except the sweet affection of her parents; but her mind was now unconsciously agitated with some novel emotions. Nowadays she could not work attentively for a couple of hours together. Padum, who had been able even to forget food and drink in reading the *Namghosa* and to dedicate her mind and soul to weaving, spinning, playing or keeping house, now had lost all her concentration of mind. A great change had come upon her. Padum now felt too shy to speak freely before her parents and would often change colour when called upon to meet her uncles and other elderly relations. Now she could express only a bit of her mind to her friends.

But we are not to imagine that Padum's heart, which was pure and simple, had been visited by sin. Ever now her face beamed with the spotless lustre of virtue and sweetness; still she was an emblem of loveliness, piety and simplicity. This change in mood was natural

¹⁸ *Padum* (Lotus); *Kumari* (Princess).

for her. It was due to her first entrance into the enchanting garden of youth, which was redolent with the rose, the *ketāki*, the *seuti*, the *malati* and other odorous flowers, resounded with the melodious songs of the cuckoo and the sweet hummings of the bees and was adorned with beauteous groves of mango trees. This change spread vermilion on her milk-white cheek, gave a charming look to her lotus-eyes, bestowed the warmth of love on her cream-soft heart, added distinction and grace to her symmetrical limbs and made her every feature an abode of the god of love.

LAXMINATH BEZBOROA

SUMARAN

(THE RECOLLECTION)

[This is an extract from Satyanath Bora's essay on " Sumaran " included in his *Cintakali*. In it the writer wants to show that everything of the earth, its splendour and its beauty, is fast disappearing, casting only a shadow behind for our recollection.]

The sun is just sinking on a golden disc. What a radiance of beauty ! What a marvellous spread of glowing colour ! Did any emperor ever sit on so fair a throne of such magnificent decorations ? The glorious sun now illumines the western horizon, seated on this throne engraved with rich gems and jewels. Curly clouds saunter round the King. Birds with diverse

tunes fill the air with matchless melody. The musing Brahmaputra with dancing waves offers his evening oblations to the Golden King of the sky. What a sight ! I gaze spell-bound, sitting on a solitary rock.

My eyes, wandering about, rest on the ruins of an old temple lying near-by. I plunge in reverie : " Oh, how gorgeous this temple once was ! What a festivity it once saw on the day of its first consecration ! Who can now recollect the joy of the people on that ceremonious opening day ? More than five hundred years have passed away, but it appears to me that the festivity has just ended. I now clearly see the King in a mirthful procession proceeding towards the temple with his ministers and other high dignitaries. I behold the drum-beaters, the dancers and the delighted throng of men and maidens with their gay attire. I see the Brahmanas with rows of offerings. I see the sacred fire burning on the altar and smell the fragrance of incense and flowers. I hear the songs of the singers, the music of the players. I see the holy Brahmaputra triumphantly flowing by. Who can say, since when this mighty river has been running towards infinity ? On its bank rose and fell the kingdom of Asur Naraka. Here on this bank the King Bhagadatta, the best-wielder of the elephant hook, displayed his mighty prowess. "

All this vanished history appears before my mind's eye. I look up. The sun is not on the throne ; he is making his descent to the nether world. The wool-pack clouds sail out of the sky. Now darkness shrouds the vermilion-coloured western sky and the ruins of the temple are disappearing from my sight.

I hear a voice above, as if somebody addressed me. I look upward and trace a lonely swan plunging through the darkness crying for his lost mate. I turn around and find the circle of mountains and the river, all disappearing, casting a mysterious shadow and leaving a new world around me. —

SATYANATH BORA

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