

Western Influence on the Mobile Theatre of Assam

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When Assamese people came in touch with the English, especially after the Treaty of Iandaboo (1826), a new tradition developed in Assam. The tradition that Sankardeva had developed through his Ankiya Bhaona in the 16th Century was gradually occupied by the Western culture and tradition. The influence of the West on Assamese thought was so great that it affected almost all aspects of Assamese life- education, art and literature, religion and moral sense, economic condition and political aspirations. In literature including drama this influence of the West has been so profound that the new drama that came into being in 1857 with Gunabhiram Baruah's Ram Navami has hardly any direct link with the Pre-British Assamese drama, which has a four-century old history.

The conquest of Assam by the British in 1826 was not a mere transfer of political power but a total change in the life of the people, who had so long been groping in ignorance, religious fanaticism and medieval superstitions. The period of modern Assamese literature may be said to have begun from that date, although the first Assamese book in print had come out many years earlier when the Christian Missionaries published an Assamese Bible from Serampor in 1813.¹ But modern Assamese literature really dates after the publication of Arunodoi in 1846 from Sivasagar by the Baptist Missionaries. Although spreading of religion was the chief aim of the Missionaries the Arunodoi almost revolutionized the mind of the Assamese youth in so far as it threw open the flood gates of Western thoughts and ideas. By publishing various articles poems, stories, news, diaries, travel accounts, and letters to the editor, the Arunodoi provides an extra aroma to Assamese literature.

Meanwhile the Assamese students, scholars and businessman who were in Calcutta came in touch with the English developed an abiding love for them and their culture. Western classics and romantic poems by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats especially caught their attention and inspired them towards literary composition. In 1889 three such students namely Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Hemchandra Goswami and Chandra Kumar Agarwala published an Assamese monthly – Jonaki (The Glow Worm). Both Arunodoi and Jonaki played a significant role in the development of modern Assamese language as Assamese was more or less an oral literature confined to the villages, namgharas and Ahom Courts.

The arrival of the British and the Christian Missionaries brought a rapid change in the social life of the Assamese people. The old religious beliefs were replaced by a more rational and sacred one, and there grew up a literature dealing not with mythical world of gods and deities but with the lives of the contemporary

¹ Mahanta, Pona: Western Influence on Modern Assamese Drama, p- 5

society. With the spread of English education, western ideas began to develop in the mind of the natives. As a result, a few intellectual Assamese playwrights got an opportunity to analyze the causes of the downfall of Assamese. At first, they chose a few topics like the use of opium by a large number of Assamese, the absence of widow marriage, influx of Non – Assamese people into Assam and evil effects of their inter marriage with Assamese, and tried to draw the attention of the common Assamese audience.

These intellectual playwrights include Gunabhiram Baruah (1834-1894), Hemchandra Baruah (1835-1896) and Rudraram Bardalai (1836-1899). Coming in touch with the western culture these playwrights not only developed the tradition of dramatic composition but also contributed a lot in writing social plays, highlighting certain social issues. Though the tradition of dramatic composition is quite old in Assam, no drama was composed on a subject that can distinctly be called 'social' before these three playwrights.

Gunabhiram Baruah's *Ram Navami* was written in 1857, when the author was on his way back home from Calcutta.² The same year it was published in Arunodoi after a regular interval, although it did not come out in the shape of a book from until 1870. The play *Ram Navami* deals with widow re-marriage but with a tragic ending. Navami a child widow Brahmin falls in illicit love with Ram. She becomes pregnant and unable to stand up against the social odium. Both Ram and Navami were ex-communicated when the matter became public. The situation became so critical that at last they committed suicide. *Ram Navami* is unquestionably a social tragedy and Gunabhiram Baruah in this play strongly set an example in defiance of the forbidden custom of widow re-marriage.

The drama is in five acts, each subdivided into scenes, called darshanas. Gunabhiram Baruah's *Ram Navami* is considered as the first Assamese tragedy where the death of both the hero and the heroine is seen. In technique *Ram Navami* may be considered as tragedy, as model on the Elizabethan dramatist. The very title of the play *Ram Navami* appears to have a savour of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The suicide of the hero Ram Chandra in *Ram Navami* reminds as *Romeo* in *Romeo and Juliet*. Similarly in dialogue also Shakespeare is quite visible in *Ram Navami*. In Act –III Sc.- V, Navami says to Ram:

‘ Name ki kare? golapak jadi golap nubuli palas bola hai
teo sugandha powa najabane?’

(What does a name do? Will not the rose smell as
sweet if we call it Palash?)

This is clearly an echo of Juliet-

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.

(*Romeo and Juliet* Act – II, ii)

Hemachandra Baruah's *Kaniyar Kirtan* (The Holy song of Opium Eaters) was published in 1861. the play is a social tragedy deals with the effects of the opium addiction. This was the first modern Assamese play to be

² Bhattacharya, H. (1964): *Origin and Development of Assamese Drama and the Stage*, p-79

performed on a modern stage at Sibasagar.³ The story of the play briefly as follows: Kiriti Kanta the loving son of Bhadreswar Baruah a revenue collecting officer (Mauzadar) is portrait as an opium addicted person. He was so much addicted to opium that one day when his mother advised him to give it up, he said "I may do without you, even without all of you but not without opium". The play ends with the death of the prince of opium eater in the jail in utter repentance.

The play *Kaniyar Kirtan* is purely a social play dealing with a serious social problem. As the author says: '*this little play ---- composed with a view to exposing the mischievous effects of opium eating which had been long been preying upon the very vital of Assam*'⁴. Technically the play is of four acts with three to four scenes to each act and is largely modeled on western dramaturgy with no influence of Sanskrit drama. Prastavana, nandi or sutradhara is not seen in this play.

The third social play *Bangal Bangalini* deals with the un-tightened relationship between Tabhuli and Ram Mohan. Tabhuli, the heroin of this play is a young Assamese girl belongs to Naosalia Baruah family. In the play she is being portrait as a spoiled girl, who concubines many youths belong to different community and at the end came in contact with a Bengali youth Ram Mohan Poddar. The married life of Ram Mohan and Tabhuli was not comfortable. After a few years Ram Mohan left Tabhuli stealing all her personal purse. A few years later Ram Mohan again tried to make a family with her but she directly refused as she was now engaged with somebody else. Ram Mohan died of small pox and his body was thrown into the river Kalang.

Like *Kaniyar Kirtan* this play is also written largely on the model of western drama. Here Rudraram Bardalai tries to lay bare the evils of illicit love, scoundrelism and knavery. The use of colloquial language by different community without any touch of artificiality is another important feature of this play.

It is not far away from truth that modern Assamese social play is a product of western influence. Use of social themes, breaking a play into acts and scenes and making tragic ending are a few significant features of western drama. Gunabhiram Baruah, Hemchandra Baruah and Rudraram Bardalai in a beautiful way followed these features of western drama and employed it successfully.

After *Bangal Bangalini* (1871) no serious play was written, till the publication of *Seuti Kiran* by Benudhar Rajkhowa in 1894. In appearance *Seuti Kiran* is more like a romantic tragedy influenced to some extent by Shakespeare's *Othello*. The play is a tragic love story of Kiran and Seuti who were in love. Surath another character is in love with Seuti make a conspiracy as he was not happy with Kiran Seuti relationship. At the end Kiran became a victim of his rival conspiracy and murdered Seuti. But when the real truth is revealed, he committed suicide. After *Seuti Kiran* no serious social play was written for more than a decade. In 1911 Nabinchandra Bardalai published his play *Griha Lakshmi* and gradually this trend of writing social play in Assamese develop.

³ Mahanta, Pona: Western Influence on Modern Assamese Drama, p- 190

⁴ Preface to the Second Edition of *Kaniyar Kirtan*, 1868 p- 1

While the trend of writing social play was going on a few intellectual Assamese students studying in Calcutta came in touch with the realms of Shakespeare. These students not only read Shakespeare but also saw performances of his plays both in the original and Bengali translation and started a new tradition of translating Shakespearean plays into Assamese.

The tradition of translated Assamese Shakespearean plays was started with the publication of *Bhramranga*, translated from Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* in 1888. It was translated by four young Assamese students namely Ratnadhar Baruah, Ramakanta Barkakati, Gunjanan Baruah and Ghanashyam Baruah.⁵ After that many Shakespearean plays were written in Assamese. Some of these plays were *Chandrawali* translated from *As You like it* by Durgeswar Sarma; *Bhimdarpa* from *Macbeth* by Debananda Bharali, *Amor Leela* from *Romeo and Juliet* by Padmadhar Chaliha, *Ranjit Singh* from *Othello* by Sailadhas Rajkhowa, *Danduri Daman* from *Taming of the Shrew* by Nabin Ch. Bordoloi, *Chandravir* from *Hamlet* by Bodh Nath Patangiya, *Banij Konwar* and *Ashrutirtha* from *Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear* respectively by Atul Ch. Hazarika.⁶

A short list of Shakespearean plays translated into Assamese is given below:

Sl. No.	Name of the play	Year of Publication	Name of the translator	Name of the Shakespearean play
1.	Bhramaranga	1888.	Ramakanta Barkakati Gunjanan Baruah Ratnadhar Baruah Ghanashyam Baruah.	Comedy of Errors.
2.	Chandrawali	1890	Durgeswar Sarma	As You Like It
3.	Bhimdarpa	---	Debananda Bharali	Macbeth
4.	Tara	1915	Ambika P. Goswami	Cymbeline
5.	Amor Leela	1919	Padmadhar Chaliha	Romeo and Juliet
6.	Danduri Daman	1932	Nabin Ch. Bardaloi	Taming of the Shrew
7.	Tarun Kanchan	1932	Nabin Ch. Bardaloi	Troilus and Cresida.
8.	Bhranti Binod	1932	Nabin Ch. Bardaloi	As You Like It.
9.	Bisad Kahini	1932	Nabin Ch. Bardaloi	King Lear.
10.	Padmawati	---	Durgeswar Sarma	Cymbeline
11.	Chandravir	---	Bodhnath Patangiya	Hamlet
12.	Banij Konwar	1946	Atul Ch. Hazarika	The Merchant of Venice

⁵ Hazarika, Atul Ch.: *Manchalekha*, Section II, p. 95.

⁶ Bharali, Dr. Sailen: '*Asomiya Natak Paschatyar Prabhab*', *Asomiya Sahitya Paschalyar Prabhab*.

13.	Ashrutirtha	---	Atul Ch. Hazarika	King Lear
14.	Ranjit Singh	---	Sailadhar Rajkhowa	Othello
15.	Manar Manuh	---	Sailadhar Rajkhowa	The Twelfth Night
16.	Othello	1974	Satya Prasad Baruah	Othello
17.	Macbeth	1980	Satya Prasad Baruah	Macbeth
18.	Hamlet	---	Kirti Kumar Bhuyan	Hamlet
19.	Julius Caesar	---	Dinesh Sarma	Julius Caesar
20.	Merchant of Venice	---	Dinesh Sarma	The Merchant of Venice
21.	Julius Caesar	1931	Kumudeswar Barthakur	Julius Caesar
22.	Hamlet	---	Amritjyoti Mahanta	Hamlet

After Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen appears to be the most popular western dramatist. It is precisely because, Ibsen turned from writing plays about history and myth to writing about contemporary social problems. And that is why his plays appeal to our writers. Ibsen has been a leavening influence in the world of the drama and like Shakespeare, Ibsen's plays were also translated into different languages of the world and they have a profound effect not only in his contemporaries but also on the course of modern drama. Although a few plays have been translated into Assamese his influence especially in style and technique on modern Assamese drama has been great indeed. The most popular translated Ibsen's plays are *Runumi* (The Warriors at Helgeland), *Putala Ghar* (A Doll's House), *Bana Hansi* (The Wild Duck), *Bhoot* (Ghost), and *Ganasatru* (An Enemy of the People)

Runumi (1946) by Suresh Goswami is translated from Ibsen's *The Warriors at Helgeland*. The play is romantic fantasy, based on a Scandinavian saga. The *Putala Ghar* (1959) was translated from *A Doll's House* by Padma Barkakati. In *A Doll's House* the knowledge that she has remained a helpless child prompts Nora to leave her husband. Padma Barkakati in *Putala Ghar* rendered every character from the eyes of an Assamese and tries to establish the rights of woman through the chief character Trishna Barua (Nora). In *Putala Ghar* Trishna Barua behaves in much the same way and instead of ball dance Nora goes to, she is scheduled to attend a Bihu meet at her aunt's house.

In 1962 Satya Parsad Barua translated Ibsen's *The wild Duck* under the title *Bana Hansi*. The setting and the background are changed into native colour but the plot remains unchanged.

Ibsen's achievements as a playwright also rest upon his two most popular plays *Ghost* (1881) and *An Enemy of the People* (1882). Here Ibsen successfully explored the tragic conflict between personal freedom and social and the moral restrictions of the middle-class society. Both *Ghost* and *An Enemy of the People* were translated into Assamese by Mahendra Bora as *Bhoot* and Sashi Sarma as *Ganasatru* respectively. Mahendra Bora's *Bhoot* is a close rendering from English where no attempt has been made to indianize either the character or the situation.

The translation of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler under the same title by Narayan Bezbarua also contributes the development of the post war dramatic literature of Assam.

Though many plays of Ibsen were translated into Assamese no one successfully present Ibsenian depth and momentum to modern Assamese drama before the publication of Jyoti Prasad agarwala's Karengar Ligiri (The Palace Maid). Birinchi Kr. Barua writes: *His second drama Karengar Ligiri is his masterpiece and is a marvelous specimen of its kind in Assamese. The dramatist is no longer in the supernatural world of myths. He is among his own kind. he deals with the conflict between man and environment, old tradition and new outlook, man and destiny and assails the way in which the ghost of the past doggedly haunts the present.*⁷ Here the most important innovations are to be found in the introduction of setting and elaborate stage direction and the adaptation of the Assamese folk music to stage modeled on the western fashion.⁸

Just after the Second World War a new dramatic movement called Absurd movement had started in Europe. It was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the traumatic experience of the harasses of the Second World war, which showed the total impermanence of any value and highlighted the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness. The term the theatre of Absurd was coined by the critic Martin Esslin for the works of a number of playwrights mostly written in the 1950s to 1960s. Esslin borrowed the term Absurd from the book the Myth of Sisyphus by the French philosopher Albert Camus. It should be mentioned that the major playwrights associated with these theatres Brecht, Ionesco, Adamov and Genet did not make an organized movement, it is by virtue of creation common fundamental features in their works that they came close together⁹. The sweet stream of Absurd theatre entered into the stage of Indian theatre through a Bengali play *Evan Indrajit* (And Indrajit 1965) by Badal Sarkar.

It was in the late sixties that theatre of the Absurd began to have some impact on Assamese drama. The first Assamese play under the category of Absurd was *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* (1967) by Arun Sarma. This play shows the tragedy of an artist who fails to convey a message to the people as nobody comes to see his play.

In his next play *Ahar* Arun Sarma successfully employs many elements of absurd drama: static situation, lack of communication, lack of boundary line between fact and fantasy and a total rejection of all rationality. In writing this play, Arun Sarma unquestionably influenced by Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. As in *Waiting for Godot* in *Ahar* too one of the characters (Nabin) says that waiting is very boring and yet they wait because so many other people – Ahalya, Urmila, Buddha, Vladimir and Estargon have waited.

Another playwright Basanta Saikiya may also be placed into this group. Three of his plays namely, *Mrigtrishna* (1973), *Manuh* (1977) and *Asur* (1977) have shared many elements of Absurd drama.

⁷ Barua, Birinchi Kr.: *History of Assamese Literature* pp-159,160.

⁸ Sarma, Satyendra Nath: *Asomiya Naya Sahitya*, p- 157

⁹ Esslin Martin: *The Theatre of Absurd*, p-10

In Assam Absurd theatre could not flourish in a proper way. It is precisely because of the test of the audience of Assam. Pona mahanta in this regard says: 'and except perhaps a small segment living in the urban areas the audience in Assam generally is far from being such, so that a drama modeled on the theatre of the Absurd is unlikely to cause a stir among them. Consequently, such a work, if written at all, is bound to be a closet drama rather than a play to be performed in a public theatre'.¹⁰

As in composition of modern Assamese drama owes much to the west the concept of modern theatre halls, stage, lighting, or music are also in reality a product of the west. Earlier Sankardeva's bhaonas were performed in an open space inside a namghar. During that time people were totally innocent about modern theatre halls and techniques. The arrival of the British gives a new shape not only to the theatre halls but also to stage performance.

The theatre halls, stage, lighting or musical orchestra that are in vogue in mobile theatres of Assam now a days are a direct contribution of the west. It has to be mentioned that though the tradition of translation or adaptation of western classics has started in the latter half of the 19th century no mobile theatre of Assam has performed any such play till 1982, when Kohinoor Theatre performed *Cleopatra* on stage. So Kohinoor Theatre is the first mobile theater of Assam to perform a western classic on stage. The play *Cleopatra* was written by Padma Barkataki, while the role of the beauty queen *Cleopatra* was performed by the well-known Assamese film actress Runu Devi. After *Cleopatra* Kohinoor Theatre performed many western classics successfully on stage. These include *Iliad Odyssey*, *Ben-hur*, *Othello*, *Titanic*, *Tarzan* etc.

Meanwhile other theatre parties like Indradhanu Theatre, Rupkonwar Theatre, Apsara Theatre, Awahan Theatre also performed western plays like *Othello Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* etc. on stage. Gradually western culture fused with Assamese culture and formed a new epoch in the wide field of mobile theatre of Assam.

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¹⁰ Mahanta, Pona: *Western Influence on Modern Assamese Drama*, p- 255