

Children's Literature in Assamese A Brief Account of its Growth

Mayuri Sharma Baruah, Asstt. Professor
Dept. of English, Tinsukia College

If you wish to write for a child, what you need above all is to know the child's mind.

Somerset Maugham

Introduction:

Since literature reflects life, in a way it can be said that life of children is reflected in children's literature. This genre of literature may be considered a requisite for crafting the growing minds. Over the course of time, post several debates on the image of 'child', childhood is acknowledged as a transition phase before attainment of adulthood. That however does neither impede nor wipe out the already existing volume of literature exclusively created for children. Long ago, before the existence of any written form, children's literature survived in oral form. Generations in the past had thus been nourished with folk songs, folk tales, lullabies and rhymes told to them by elders. This bulk of oral literature forms a rich heritage as a whole. This is a common phenomenon for all languages around the world. But records show how the rate of growth varies in respect of different languages. Children's literature in English is amazingly rich in comparison to any other language. The reason is obvious. It has become a global language reaching out to all corners of the world. In the context of Indian languages, notable contribution has been made by Bengali and Malayalam languages toward children's literature. Such development often depends on the factors as linguistic, social and political influence of a particular region and its language. Assamese language too owns a worthy storehouse of this genre.

Objectives of the study:

In this paper, I have made an attempt to present a concise outline of the journey of Assamese children's literature.

- The main objective of the study is to trace the lineage of children's literature in Assamese.
- Besides, the present study will highlight the different trends followed during different phases.

Methodology:

For the present study, descriptive-analytical methodology is applied. Based on the historical data on Assamese children's literature, my study will focus on analysing it for deducing findings.

Sources of the Data:

The present study is based on various books, journals, articles etc. with information about history of Assamese literature in general and children's literature in particular.

Discussion:

Children's literature is any literature which is appropriate for children. Operationally, children's literature comprises those books written and published for young people who are not yet interested in adult literature or who may not possess the reading skills necessary for its perusal. In addition to book form, children's literature also includes materials published in magazine form and intended for pre-adult audiences. The age range embraced by children's literature is from pre-school age, when children can first comprehend stories being read or told to them and can enjoy the picture story books which are now so plentiful, through the stage of early adolescence, which roughly coincides with the chronological ages of 12 through 14.

(Encyclopaedia of Education 1971, Vol. 6)

As the above statement provides a basic concept of children's literature, we refrain from further discussion on it. Our primary objective here will be to sketch out a brief history of children's literature in Assamese. Every region and language has its own history of children's literature. Despite distinctive features, children's literature in general has its origin in oral tradition. Assamese language is no exception. Every culture is enriched with its own myths, fables and tales. The lullabies, rhymes, folklores and myths together constitute the material which aided in shaping the curious young minds of our ancestors. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are still considered as rich resources for developing numerous stories for Indian children in general. The *Hitopadesha* and the *Jataka* Tales also have similar influence. The *Panchatantra*, written in AD 200, along with the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* still remains unparalleled in the history of Indian children's

literature. Translated into almost all Indian languages, these have immensely influenced the moral character of generations.

Keeping this in mind, we have to study the journey of Assamese children's literature. We have to classify each phase with its unique characteristics in order to comprehend its history from the formative phase to the present stage. This will enable us in realizing the trends followed and also to place it in the Indian context to pinpoint the similarities and dissimilarities.

Upendra Borkotoky's classification of the history of Assamese children's literature is somewhat broad. (Borkotoky, p 11-83) He divided it into three phases,

- 1) Beginning with the phase of oral literature to Bezbaroa,
- 2) From Bezbaroa to A.D.1940 and
- 3) From A.D. 1940 to the present time.

However, for the present study I have used a modified classification which is as follows:

1. Beginning
2. Medieval Period
 - i) Pre-*Vaishnava* Era (AD 1300-AD 1500)
 - ii) *Vaishnava* Era (Latter part of AD 1500 – Last Part of AD 1600)
3. Modern Period
 - (i) *Orunodai* Era (1846 – 1889)
 - (ii) Jonaki Era (1889 – 1939)
 - (iii) Post Jonaki Era till the present

Beginning:

Without any specific year of commencement, this phase comprises the oral literature that perpetuated through generations. Long ago, before the existence of any written form, children's literature survived in oral transmission. Generations in the past had thus been nourished with folk songs, folk tales, lullabies and rhymes told to them by elders. This bulk of oral literature forms a rich heritage as a whole. In Assamese we have popular lullabies like

- *Aamare moina xubo e*
- *Xiyalie nahibi rati*

or rhymes as

- *O phul o phul nuphulo kiyo*
- *Irikoti Mirikoti Baahor Xola*

which showcase the imaginative nature of children. Created by anonymous people, these helped in nurturing the child's mind and in preparing it for the adult world. Thus, this phase of oral literature can be taken as the foundation for Assamese children's literature.

Medieval Period:

i) Pre-Vaishnava Era (AD 1300-AD 1500):

Assamese literature belonging to the early and the middle age was mainly built upon the translation works and adaptations from the bulk of Sanskrit literature. Interestingly, children's literature in Assamese also has its roots that date back to the Pre-Vaishnava era (A.D. 1300 – A.D. 1490) with translations of scriptures and related literature. Madhava Kandali translated five cantos of the *Mahabharata*. Madhava Kandali's translation of Valmiki's Ramayana in "a colloquial language depicting Rama legend in Assamese homely atmosphere" highlights the translator's target audience oriented approach. (Jamuna, 3) These adaptations and translations have notable contribution to the growth of children's literature in Assamese. Composed in the 14th century, Hem Saraswati's *Prahlad Charit* (translated from *Vamana Purana*) is considered as the first known poem comprising 100 couplets illustrating child psychology. (Neog, 68) During this period we have works like *Vabrubahanar Yuddha*, *Lavakushar Yuddha* and *Tamradhwajar Yuddha* authored by Harihar Vipra.

ii) Vaishnava Era (Last part of AD 1500 – Last Part of AD 1600):

During the 15th century Assam witnessed a fresh wave of Vaishnavism. Sankardeva, the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism and his disciple Madhabdeva were the two guiding forces of this movement. With his translation of several cantos of the *Bhagavata Purana*, Sankardeva (1449- 1568) joined the brigade of translators in Assamese. But the originality of Sankardeva lies in his unique creation of *Ankiya Nats* (one act plays), mainly based on the *Puranas*, the *Bhagavata*, Ramayana and similar mythological texts. Although written for religious purpose, these plays had been tremendously popular among children. Assamese Children's literature of the medieval period was thus inspired by religious

motivation blended with moral education. As such *Sisulila*, *Bali-Chalana*, *Shyamantaka-Harana* from Sankardeva's *Kirtana Ghosa* are fine examples of children's literature. Child Krishna's mischievous image finds brilliant expression in the hands of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva. For example, *jhumuras* (a form of dramatic art) like *Chordhara and Pimpora Gusowa*, authored by Madhabdeva has universal appeal. His image of Child Krishna represents eternal and universal childhood. (Adhikari, 39) Though based on religious texts like *Puranas*, in portrayal of Krishna's character in *Chordhora*, *Pimpora Gusowa*, *Bhojana Vihara*, *Bhumi Letowa* etc Madhabdeva excels to a great extent that these may be taken as equivalent to original composition.

During this period, Rama Saraswati translated the Mahabharata into Assamese. However, his fame rests more on the fact that he had introduced a new kind of poetry into Assamese, known as *Badha Kavyas* (Adventurous/Heroic Tales of Killing). These *kavyas* narrate the various incidents wherein the heroes (Arjuna, Bhima etc.) risk their lives and kill demons. Echoing the concept of victory of virtue over evil, these *kavyas* can be seen at par with the Greek legends/ballads. "It seems that Rama Saraswati has written his work keeping in mind the taste of children" –this observation by Indira Goswami referring to his *Bhima Charit*, clearly shows that even in earlier days Assamese writers honoured the taste of children.

Another contemporary work is Sridhar Kandali's poem *Kankhowa*. It is an original work of considerable length. In fact, Indira Goswami terms it as "an important secular creative work for children". This work differs from the rest because the theme is an original one, though characters are common. This poem is about Yashoda's efforts to lull little Krishna to sleep. She terrifies Krishna by referring to an imaginative demon named *Kankhowa* who eats ears of naughty kids. It may be noted that a popular lullaby in Assamese contains an almost similar theme. It goes thus, "*Siyali e nahibi raati/ tore kanekati logaame bat*" which by indirectly warning the fox warns the child to immediately fall asleep.

Thus the medieval period in Assamese literature had witnessed the beginning of children's literature. It was a mixed bag of writings, both translations and original works. Popularity of mythical adaptations is a notable feature. Though not large in numbers, these writings are of a high excellence. Abundance of child images, particularly of Krishna, Bhima and Hanuman in the literature of this period is another remarkable feature. Till 16th and 17th centuries, classical sources happened to be the base for Assamese children's literature.

Modern Period

(i) *Orunodai* Era (1846 – 1889):

The year 1826 marks a new beginning in the history of Assam. The Treaty of Yandaboo ushered in radical changes in the history of Assam as a whole. Consequently, the arrival of the American Baptist Missionaries in 1836 heralded the modern period of Assamese literature too. This also marked the influx of western culture into literature. It all began with the publication of *Orunodai*(1846), the first literary magazine in Assamese. This magazine provided platform for a distinct variety of children's literature in Assamese. Stories from the Bible were especially published for the children. After all, the basic goal of the missionaries was propagation of Christianity. Many stories from different countries were translated to cater to the needs of Assamese children. During this period, emphasis was put on translation resulting in publication of several translated story books for this readership. *America Aviskar* (Discovery of America), *Bibelor Xadhu* (Stories from Bible), *Jatrikor Jatra* (Pilgrim's Progress), *Africar Konwar* (Prince of Africa) are some of them. *Orunodoi* had another popular feature for children, titled Journal of Events wherein interesting facts were documented for updating knowledge as well as for enjoyment.

Missionaries like Rev. Nathan Brown, Rev. Dr. Miles Bronson, Mrs. S.R. Ward, Mr. O.T. Cutter, Mrs. Harriet Cutter, Rev. Garni, Mrs. Garni and Mrs. Eliza Brown have made outstanding contribution in this regard. Assamese children's literature flourished under the patronage of these dedicated missionaries.

Another noble endeavour of the missionaries was publication of text books for children. *Ujupath* (1884) by Baladev Mahanta, *Asamiya Lorar Vyakaran* (1886) by Hem Ch. Barua are to name a few of them. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan's *Asomiya Lorar Mitrais* another notable creation of this time.

It is worth mentioning here that Assamese magazines have been vital in popularising children's literature since 1888. This was the year when under the editorship of Karunabhiram Baruah, '*Lora Bondhu*', the first children's magazine in Assamese was published. Exactly 100 years back the first English Children's magazine 'Children Magazine' (1789) was published in America. Some more prominent Assamese magazines like *Jonaki* (1889), *Bijuli* (1890), *Banhi* (1910), *Usa* (1907), *Awahon* (1929) also contributed toward the growth of children's literature.

ii) Jonaki Era (1889 – 1939):

In the field of children's literature Lakshminath Bezbaroa(1864-1938), a stalwart in the annals of Assamese literature, made a unique contribution in the form of his collection of stories entitled *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (1912). Collected from different media and rewritten in Bezbaroa's own style, this collection of 31 tales carves a niche in Assamese literary history. *Kokadeuta aru Natilora* (1912) and *Junuka* are the two collections of short stories written by him. His stories are mostly steeped with moral values. The unique feature of Bezbaroa's writing is his typical use of colloquial Assamese language. His emphasis on promoting language through literature can be seen as a dominant agenda.

Several other collections of short stories were published during this period. By collecting stories from various sources and reproducing them in a new way, writers like Sarat Chandra Goswami (*Asamiya Sadhu Katha*), Kumudeshwar Borthakur (*Sadhur Bhoral*), Dr. Banikanta Kakati (*Pakhila*) etc. had contributed greatly toward documenting a segment of Assamese oral literature. All these collections had a common motive of amusement for their readers. However, some tried to impart moral education through their stories.

Another outstanding literary artist was Atul Chandra Hazarika whose fame rests largely on his works including poems, drama, novel, story etc. written for children. *Nila Chorai* (1948), *Rani Himani* (1962) and *Jalakunwari* (1968) are children novels authored by him. Interestingly, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, a contemporary of Bezbaroa laid stress on preparation of textbooks for children. He believed that a strong foundation is utmost necessary for sustainability of Assamese literature.

Vishnupriya Devi (*Sadhukatha*) and Troilokeswari Baruani (*Sondhiyar Sadhu*) were eminent women writers of that period of time.

This period appeared to be a fertile ground for translation work. Work from almost every literary genre was selected either for translation or for adaptation. As a result, foreign and regional literature found access into Assamese surmounting the linguistic barrier. The objective was to introduce world literature to the Assamese children and thus to widen their perspective. Hem Baruah's *Cupid and Psyche*, Pravina Saikia's *Ojan Dexot Alice*, Dr. Mahendra Bora's *Gulliver's Travels*, Kirti Nath Hazarika's *Ehejar Enixar Xadhu*, Nirupama Borgohain's *Okonmani Konwar* etc. are some of the Assamese titles

translated for children. Gyanadabhiram Baruah is noted for his *Dodair Poja*(1930)a translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Several children's magazines were published during this period but for some unknown reason, these magazines failed to survive for long.

(iii) Post Jonaki Era till the present:

Biographies have remained another area of interest explored since 1940s. Eventually a large number of biographies were written and published for child readers. Titles as Dr. Bhabananda Dutta's *Rabindra Pratibha*, Binanda Barua's *Lorar Bezbaroa*, Satyavati Goswami's *Eleneor Roosevelt*, Gajendra Chahariya's *Swaheed Kanaklata* illustrate the wide range selected by the biographers.

As for children's drama, we notice a slower pace of growth during this phase. Nevertheless, the plays written for adults were enjoyed by young adults (age group 12-14). It is interesting to know that plays based on historical characters and events were received with much enthusiasm. Thus, plays like *Maniram Dewan* (1948) by Pravin Phukan or *Kushal Konwar* (1949) by Surendra Nath Saikia or *Tikendrajit* (1959) by Atul Chandra Hazarika succeed in gaining popularity among young and old alike.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala is another iconic figure in Assamese literature. His outstanding contribution toward art and literature is in the making of the first Assamese film *Joymoti* in 1935. Jyotiprasad Agarwala's keen interest on study of child psychology is well expressed in poems like *Akanir Xopun*, *Kumpur Xopun*, *Okonmanir Prarthana*. Similarly, his excellence as playwright is displayed in *Nimati Koina* and *Sonpakhili* written exclusively for children. Lyrical form of drama for children was also popularised by him. Kirtinath Bordoloi, Saujanyaamayee Devi etc. were among followers of this tradition.

There was no looking back since then onwards. Unlike the earlier phases, children's literature witnessed manifold growth; producing poetry, fiction, drama, science fiction, adventure stories, biographies, travelogues, novels etc.

Children's poetry in Assamese has developed a lot since the later part of 20th century and the first part of 21st century. The beauty of poems written by Dr. Nirmalprova Bordoloi and published in collections titled *Omola Geet*, *Xuwodi Maat*, *Notun Omola Geet* etc. have never faded away. Likewise, we have Lila Gogoi's *Khora Xiyalor Biya*, Eli Ahmed's *Dokmokalir Geet* and many more.

Nabakanta Baruah, Nirmalprova Bordoloi, Premadhar Dutta, Bhabendranath Saikia, Lakhyahira Das, Gagan Chandra Adhikari, Eli Ahmed are some milestones on this path. Each of them has rendered huge support in strengthening Assamese children's literature. The list continues but it is difficult to offer a detailed discussion here.

Translation still continues to be popular among readers. Toshaprova Kalita's Assamese translation of Tetsuko Kuryonagi's *Tottochandeserves* special mention as it still continues to win hearts of young people. Reputed publishing houses like National Book Trust has been publishing children's books translated into Assamese, a remarkable initiative under the banner of Nehru Bal Pustakalaya.

The gradual emergence of children's novel, scientific fictions and detective stories indicate a healthy growth rate for this genre. Though slow in comparison to literature in some other Indian language, Assamese children's literature is maintaining a steady pace of development.

Unlike the magazines of former times, children's magazines like *Sofura* (1983) and *Mouchaq*(1984) have completed 30 years of their existence. This certainly is a remarkable and rare achievement for the publishers as well as the readers.

Findings of the study:

- From the above study, we infer that Assamese children's literature has come a long way since its beginning. Like literature in other languages, here too prior to written language, the literature was preserved in oral tradition. Efforts made by later writers as Lakshminath Bezbaroa to document and restore some parts of the oral literature in written texts are definitely commendable. That is how we are connected to the beginning of our literary history.
- Poetry dominates the initial part of written tradition. Then comes drama succeeded by prose literature. This however, is a common feature in the history of any literature.
- The predominance of male writers in the early years is representative of a universal trend. The present scenario is different and we see women writers more in number.
- The significance of children's magazines is vital in the growth of Assamese children's literature. Since the first publication of '*Lora Bondhu*' (edited by

Karunabhiram Baruah) the first Assamese children's magazine in the year 1888 till today, many such magazines appeared and disappeared in between. Nevertheless, children's magazines in Assamese never lost readers as a whole.

- As compared to fictions, children's drama is developing at a slower pace. We have a good number of playwrights for children who have made remarkable contribution. However, dramas are primarily meant for enactment. Therefore, survival of drama is greatly dependent on its performance on stage.
- Finally, we have to acknowledge the contribution of translation to Assamese children's literature. Beginning in the pre-Vaishnava age with translation from Sanskrit, there has been continuity in this process. Thus we are enriched with translation not only from Indian regional languages, but also from other foreign languages. As a whole, children's literature translation plays a vital role in the growth of children's literature in Assamese.

Works cited:

Adhikari, Gagan. *Sishu Sahityar Oitijya aru Asamiya Sishu Sahityar Gati-Pragati* in Anuradha Sharma Pujari ed. *Satsori*. Guwahati: Vol No. 12, Issue No. 5, December 2016

Borkotoky, U. *Asamiya Sishu Sahityar Sankhpta Itihas*. Guwahati: Student's Stores, 2002
Goswami, I. 'Assamese' in Jamuna, K. A. (ed.) *Children's Literature in Indian Languages*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, 1982, p 4

Neog, Maheswar. *Asomiya Sahityar Ruprekha*. Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, 2008 1st published in 1964