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Adaptation of Shakespeare's Plays into Assamese Farce: A Study on Historical Perspective

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Abstract

William Shakespeare has always been unanimously the most accepted model to follow for the writers of tragedy, comedy and other types of dramas. He enjoyed a great fascination in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth in India and almost all his works were translated to or adapted into different languages. As the Assamese writers did not lag behind in this respect too, they were inspired to translate and adapt Shakespeare in 1887 starting with *The Comedy of Errors* as *Bhramaranga* in Assamese. In this article, the researcher aims to examine the available Assamese translations and adaptations of Shakespearean comic plays and studied how far they contributed to the growth and development of Assamese comedy in particular and modern Assamese drama in general. With the help of the comparative method of analysis, the researcher found that Assamese comedy specially farces and the complete pre-independent Assamese dramatic literature have been impacted by the dramas of Shakespeare.

Keywords: Assamese drama, comedy, farce, Shakespeare, translation, adaptation

Introduction

Farce or *Prahasana* was a popular dramatic type in ancient Indian literature. It was a "one-act drama intended to excite laughter" (Wilson, 1971, p. 18). The subject was the playwright's invention and dealt basically with the pranks and the tumults of the shallow dramatis personae of every kind. Thus, the Sanskrit *Prahasana* is much like the European farce, but it cannot be said that the former had any influence on our modern farce writers. We have no records of any farce being written in pre-British Assam, either in Sanskrit or in Assamese. Medieval Assamese drama was intended to please and edify, but it does not present a single instance of farce. In other words, Assamese literature does not have any tradition of writing farce. The writing of farces, like other types of drama, was undoubtedly a product of western influence, which came directly through English and also indirectly through Bengali. "During the early years of the growth of modern Bengali stage farces were more powerful and lively than serious drama: the heat and excitement that arose from the conflict between the old and the new in the society are nowhere more in evidence than in these plays" (Ghosh, 1968, p. 471). The Assamese students studying at Calcutta during the latter half of the nineteenth century, who read Bengali plays and also saw many of them performed, and who later became playwrights themselves, undoubtedly imbibed much of the art of farce writing from Bengali. Since the Assamese society of the time presented almost similar phenomena, it was not difficult for them to write farcical pieces like those in Bengali. It is

also noteworthy that even in Shakespearean drama it was the lighter comedies almost verging on the farce that first attracted our earlier playwrights. All this shows that the nineteenth century and the earlier decades of the twentieth were congenial for farces and light satirical comedies rather than serious social drama – the audience wanted them, and the writers not only found the material for such plays but also models to follow.

Shakespeare enjoyed a great vogue in India in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth, and almost all his works were translated to or adapted into different Indian languages during the period. The Indian student of Shakespeare knew quite well that the people, who were experiencing a renaissance in every walk of life, would appreciate the works of Shakespeare with their emphasis on such ideals as belief in the greatness of man, patriotism, nationalism, and the Renaissance craving for a greater and fuller life. So, they undertook the great task of translating Shakespeare into their own languages, and as a result of this, the languages of India abound in translations and adaptations of Shakespeare.

The Assamese writer, too, did not lag behind in this respect, and since 1887 the year the first adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors* was brought out, there has been quite a good number of translations and adaptations of Shakespeare, some of which, unfortunately, have not encountered with the audience till today. The Assamese literature seems to be deficient in the main types of comic dramas. In the period we are dealing with, the type which is predominant is farce. Satyendranath Sarma stated that "the moral decay in the social life of the Assamese during the nineteenth century provided sufficient materials for writing farce and light comedy" (2015, p. 302). There are exceptions no doubt but seem to approximate in tone to farce when we examine its features closely. In this study, an attempt is being made to examine the available translations and adaptations of Shakespearean comic plays and to see how far, if at all, they have contributed to the growth and development of modern Assamese drama. The researcher has endeavoured to find out how much the Assamese dramatists have received from Shakespeare and what the responses of the Assamese dramatists to Shakespeare are.

A systematic and critical study of the subject appeared when Priyaranjan Sen brought out his work, *Western Influence in Bengali Literature*, where the writer has examined the Western impact on different branches of Bengali literature as well as the various channels through which this influence penetrated Bengal. Another work on the subject is Harendra Mohan Das Gupta's *Studies in Western Influence on 19th Century Bengali Poetry (1859 – 1887)*, in which the author examines in detail the historical background of the new influence. Outside Bengali literature, Syad Abdul Latif's work, *Influence of English on Urdu Literature*, deserves special mention. Another important work on the subject is *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, Vol. X, Part II, by R.C. Majumdar deals with the subject of Western influence on Indian thought and culture as well as the Indian people's reaction to it. Dr Satyabrata Rout in his article *Indianizing Shakespeare: Adaptations and Performances* studied that "the socio-cultural milieu of India fusing with the tradition of West, often creates an 'Indianized Shakespeare'" (2016, p. 1). Parvin Sultana in her research article *Indigenising Shakespeare: A Study of Maqbool and Omkara* observed that the literary world of Shakespeare has gone beyond the limits of the time and space and has been predominating the Indian literary sphere for about two centuries now (2014, p. 52). In fact, this subject has attracted diverse critics and historians in recent years, and it is neither possible nor

necessary to mention all the works done so far, nor to speak of such publications in the vernacular languages.

Modern Assamese literature, like Bengali or any other literature of modern India, is largely a product of Western influence. This influence has permeated all the branches of this literature, including drama, on which the influence of Shakespeare has been so profound that the new drama that came into being in 1857 with Gunabhiram Barua's *Ram Navami* has hardly any direct link with pre-British Assamese drama which has a four-century old history. Pona Mahanta has undergone his research, *Western Influence on Modern Assamese Drama* (1985) and studied the western influences on Assamese drama, however, he has not centrally focused on William Shakespeare. Maheswar Neog and Satyendranath Sarma have touched on the subject in a general sort of way in their books, *Asamiya Sahityar Ruprekha* (1970) and *Asamiya Natya Sahitya* (1973) respectively, but as the titles indicate, these books are concerned more with the growth and development of Assamese drama than with Shakespearean influence. Karim and Mondal (2019) studied the influence of William Shakespeare over pre-independent Assamese tragedy and the style and technique of Assamese drama. A few articles have also been written on the influence of Western dramaturgy especially Shakespearean over the Assamese dramatic atmosphere by Dr Dayananda Pathak, Dr Rajbongshi, Rajbongshi and Boro, Dr Paramananda Rajbongshi, Smriti Rekha Handique, Sailen Bharali, Basanta Kumar Bhattacharjee, etc. limiting their area of the subject in one or two dramas only. Thus, the question of Shakespearean influence on modern Assamese comedy since 1887 can be a subject of very close and careful study.

As the subject of the study is comparative, usually the method of comparative analysis is observed throughout the investigation. The study is based on both the primary and secondary sources and chiefly the technical devices of pre-independent Assamese dramatists are examined. The importance of the stories and events of the Assamese dramas have been emphasized sometimes and citations to the text of the dramas are drawn up in some cases. The researcher endeavoured to furnish other references to the works of other authors to rationalize the statements and sometimes examples are provided to augment the hypothesis to establish the study more logical and reasonable.

Ratnadhar Barua, Gunjanan Barua, Ghanshyam Barua and Ramakanta Barkakati

The first Shakespearean play to be done in Assamese was *The Comedy of Errors. Bhramaranga* (1887). The Assamese version of the play is rather an adaptation than a translation as the story is wholly recast to an Indianized background. The four students studying at Calcutta, Ratnadhar Barua, Gunjanan Barua, Ghanshyam Barua and Ramakanta Barkakati who did this pioneering work, wrote in their preface:

There are many difficulties in translating Shakespeare into Assamese. In the first place, Shakespeare's language and thought are so difficult that let alone a foreigner even British scholars have not been able to determine their precise meaning. Besides, it is not easy to transfer the thoughts, customs and behavior of an alien people to an adapted version, and so something of these has to be left out. While we have tried all our best to maintain the poet's thoughts and ideas without loss, we have sometimes been constrained to change even some ideas of the great poet in order to fit them into the changed background. We have been very careful to see that the poetic

quality of the piece is not destroyed, yet we do not dare to say that it is not strained since we have undertaken to translate it. (1887, p. 1)

We have seen that farces and light comedies were very popular during the initial years of the Western impact, and it was in keeping with the literary temperament of the time that the first Shakespearean play to be rendered into Assamese was *The Comedy of Errors*. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare does not seem to have any philosophy to propound, nor is he serious in tone or intention. An atmosphere of fun and gaiety pervades the whole play, which does not seem to belong to any particular place or time. What matters most here are the different situations in which confusions are created leading to the hilarious fun, and once the translator is able to create similar situations in the new background that he adopts, the rest of his work becomes easy. This is what our translators have done, or at least tried to do. They have discarded the blank verse in favour of prose in order to make it down-to-earth and appealing to their audience. The names of the dramatis personae are aptly chosen: Solinus, Duke of Ephesus, becomes Ajitsimha, king of Mayapur; Aegeon, merchant of Syracuse, becomes Dhanbar, a merchant of Kamrup, while the two pairs of twins are the two Niranjans (one is Mayapuriya, the other is Kampuriya, meaning from Mayapur and from Kamrup respectively). Ephesus, the scene of the original story, becomes Mayapur in the Assamese version, which is certainly an apt name for a place where such incidents happen. (The word 'Mayapur' literally means 'a city of magic'). Pinch, the school, is transformed into a village quack so that he fits well into the local situation. All the female characters except Luce have been retained, and their names are appropriately chosen: Sumanthira, Malati, Tara, Sonpahi, and all these names sound very Assamese indeed.

The use of colloquial prose in the dialogue throughout the play, except in the incantation blabbed out by the quack, Takaru Bej, lends more local colour to the story. The language is so nicely colloquized and the sentiments localized that the translated piece reads almost like an original work. One example alone will prove this point. Pinch, thinking that Antipholus of Ephesus, is possessed by the devil, takes hold of his hand utters:

I charge thee, Satan, hous'd within this man.
To yield possession to my holy prayers,
And to thy state of darkness hie thee straight
I conjure thee by all the saints in heaven.
(The Comedy of Errors, Act IV, Scene iv)

In the Assamese version, Pinch becomes a village quack who tries to dispel the evil spirit thus:

namo chakravak utapati bhaila,
tridarsha daityara maya samharibe laila
chausasti joginir ban kati khanda khanda karila
hum hum gir gir sagarar mala
(Bhramaranga, Act IV, Scene iv)

Such a quack and a '*mantra*' or incantation must have been very appealing to the Assamese audience in the 1890s, many of whom actually believed in evil spirits as well as in the ability of a quack to drive them off from a human being. Commenting on *Bhramaranga* (1887), Satyendranath Sarma says that "as the first attempt at translating Shakespeare it is undoubtedly

a successful work". Sarma further opines that "anybody unfamiliar with the Shakespeare play cannot say that it is a translation, so skillfully is the rendering done" (2015, p. 7). Satyanath Bora, who was extremely delighted to witness the performance, made a very significant comment upon it. Bora wrote in *Jonaki*:

I have read the book thoroughly, and I have also witnessed its performance. The book is small in size, but of unique qualities.... The writers have adapted the English thoughts to the needs of the Assamese speech; therefore, while the thoughts are intact, the book is Assamese in spirit. (1890, p. 85)

Bora evidently felt that the Assamese literature was generally deficient in the humour of the type displayed in the Shakespeare's drama, however, exceptions can be made in the case of *Kaniyar Kirtan* (1861) and *Kovabhaturi*, written by Hem Chandra Barua; as in them the laughter is caused through manipulation of ideas, and *Bhramaranga* (1887) introduces a new consciousness in literary circles about the possibility of development of comic literature that is mainly expressed through the manner of speech or style. Evidently, he hinted at the appearance of a new consciousness of comic literature in Assamese in the *Jonaki* period. He particularly drew the attention of the writers and the audience to the role style plays in comedy. One has however to note that he makes no difference between farce or *hā-sya rasa*.

Hemchandra Barua

Hemchandra Barua's *Kaniyar Kirtan* (1861), which the author subtitles in English as a "Play in Assamese on the Evils of Opium-eating", was, of course, "put on the board quite a number of times at Sibsagar and elsewhere. And this was the first modern Assamese play to be performed on a modern stage at Sibsagar" (Hazarika, 1967, p. 92). The story of the play, briefly, is as follows: Bhadreswar Barua, a revenue-collecting officer (*mouzadar*), had a son, Kirtikanta. One day an Assamese preceptor, Padmapani, paid a visit to Bhadreswar's house. Padmapani, who was an opium addict, would not be satisfied unless he was treated with a bit of the drug. Kirtikanta saw him eat the opium and could not help tasting it. This turned him into a regular opium-eater, and the result was that he was soon reduced to a skeleton. In due course, his wife, Chandraprabha, too, became a victim to the evil. Kirtikanta was unable to run the office of his father when it fell to him and took to unfair means even for mere existence. At last, he was arrested and sent to jail. Meanwhile, his wife died. After a few days in prison Kirtikanta also died in utter repentance.

Kaniyar Kirtan thus, is purely a social play, dealing as it does with a very serious contemporary problem. The play was written with a view to revealing the wicked influence of opium-eating that had long been preying upon the very vitals of Assam. Technically as well as stylistically, it is decidedly an improvement upon Gunabhiram Barua's *Ram-Navami* (1857). It has nothing to do with *prastavana nandi* (introductory verse) or *Sutradhara* (anchor), which are integral parts of *Ankiya Nat* (one-act play in Assamese). The technique as well as the style is largely modeled on Shakespearean dramaturgy with no influence at all of Sanskrit drama. No doubt, the playwright has a moral to convey, but it is not delivered through a *Sutradhara* but through the hero himself, who admits repentantly:

Opium is the worst of poisons.

The opium-eater hasn't the least wisdom.

Alas! Alas! What a terrible misery!
 Opium is at the root of the destruction of Assam.
 (Kaniyar-Kirtan, Act VI, Scene iii)

The play is in four acts with three to four scenes in each act. The playwright shows some skill in dramatic construction. The plot is developed well, and the degradation of the hero as a result of a deep-rooted evil is tellingly shown. The play, despite its serious theme, bristles with bitter satire and biting sarcasm. But the satire and the sarcasm are only on the surface: They should not be allowed to mislead us into believing that *Kaniyar Kirtan* is a farcical piece.

Modern Assamese dramas, as discussed above, are divided into acts and scenes exactly like a Shakespearean drama. This is undoubtedly a result of the Shakespearean influence, for during the latter half of the nineteenth century no dramatist was read and imitated as much as was Shakespeare. *Kaniyar Kirtan* is divided into four acts, though not five, each having separate scenes. Pona Mahanta observes:

Like Gunabhiram Barua, Hemchandra Barua was also from an aristocratic family of Assam, educated in Calcutta, and as such, it was but natural that in technique as well as in theme they were influenced by European, particularly Shakespearean drama, although it has to be admitted that much of this influence came through Bengali. (1985, p. 65)

Padmanath Gohain Barua

Padmanath Gohain Barua has given us three farcical pieces: *Gaobura* (The Village Headman, 1890), *Teton Tamuli* (1908) and *Bhut ne Bhram* (Is it Ghost or Illusion, 1924). *Gaobura*, the earliest yet the best of the three, is rather a light comedy than a farce (Barua, 1964, p. 153). It gives a near realistic picture of the British administration of the time. The contemporary Assamese life and society in the countryside are also nearly truthfully depicted. Its story is as follows: Bhogman, a well-to-do and respectable peasant, is forcibly recruited as a porter by a team consisting of the village headman, the *mandal* (surveyor) and police. These petty government servants are corrupt and accustomed to taking bribes. Bhogman considers this to be an insult and to amend it, he himself decides to become a headman. He believes that this will bring him power and prestige. Through the good offices of the *mouzadar* (Settlement Officer), he gets the honorary job of a headman and is now entitled to prestige and some dues. However, the job being honorary and time-consuming affects his normal domestic and farm work, and he soon finds himself in straitened circumstances. His poverty becomes pronounced and he is even unable to pay his revenue dues. We then find Bhogman collecting rations for the District Magistrate (who is on a tour) forcibly from some villagers gratis, but this does not bring him credit but only maltreatment by the officer's retinue. Misfortunes come to him in quick succession. The *mouzadar* orders attachment of his property for collecting arrears of revenue due in his name. In the fifth Act, attachment of property takes place under humiliating and pitiable circumstances. Then the Magistrate tries him on the charge of the forcible lifting of some hens from a Muslim house. This he had to do in spite of himself, as he was asked to collect rations for the District Magistrate gratis. It is during the trial that the Magistrate comes to know about the actual circumstances under which an honorary *gaobura* (village headman) has to discharge his duties. He takes to remedy the situation, but by then Bhogman is already tired of his job and relinquishes it, heaving a sigh of relief.

In this light comedy, the character of Bhogman is the main object of pity and laughter. There are, however, satirical elements that are directed against the practice of bribery, the inferiority complex of Indians before the Sahibs, greed for money among rural jurors, forcible collection of rations, the peculiar Hindi jargon used by sahibs and administrative ignorance of the part of high officials. But these are secondary elements. In Bhogman's character, we find several situations of laughter. Firstly, Bhogman's false sense of prestige is not becoming a porter and his equally unreal solution is accepting the job of a village headman to save his eroded prestige. This feudal sense of prestige is already anachronistic in the new milieu ushered in by British rule. Secondly, the contradiction between his behaviour and the real social situation is carried in the drama to a comic magnitude in two ways. At home, he faces an economic crisis which ruins his peace of mind and drives him to a state of acute misery. Outside, he is insulted in the most cynical manner by the sahib's menials on the flimsy ground of insufficient supply of ration. His misery reaches an acute tragic proportion from his point of view, but strangely this only evokes mere laughter, though not unmixed with pity. This is so because his moral views are feudal; he does not realize that an honorary job in a capitalist society is useless and only a source of misery.

His eccentricity is highlighted by the fact that he remains unaware and unrepentant till the end. This leads to the development of the comic situation which we all enjoy, but not without some compassion for him in his misery. In many ways, Bhogman is an authentic comic character. He is comic without appearing to be so. But it is the humour of a different kind. There is sadness in it. Bhogman makes himself a butt of ridicule because he knows no English and also because he is ignorant of the ways of a British officer. Allardyce Nicoll observes, "Humour, we shall find, is often related to the melancholy of a peculiar kind, not a fierce melancholy, but a melancholy that arises out of pensive thoughts and broodings on the ways of mankind" (1998, p. 199). The humour of *Gaobura* is certainly of such nature because, despite the fact that much of it appears in words, manners and situations which are apparently ludicrous, it is as a whole tinged with thoughtful broodings over the ways of the world. This is clear in the conversations between Bhogman and his wife as well as between him and another village headman. These are full of concern about their own lot. It is only the way they talk and their mannerisms that often make us laugh.

Teton Tamuli (1909) and *Bhut ne Bhrum* (1924) are two other dramas by Padmanath which are called comical. Among these two dramas, the latter cannot be called comical in the true sense. The author himself was aware of this when he said, "It is true that the drama may not be fit to be called comic; but if this can remove the illusory belief in ghosts among men even to a limit extent, the author would be gratified" (Gohain Barua, 1971, p. 313).

Gohain Barua further says, "the play is a series of scenes drawn with a view to removing the popular superstitions about ghosts" (1971, p. 313). Considering the advanced age of the author, Gohain Barua additionally observes, "the play, it is true, may not deserve to be called a farce, but he (the author) would consider his labour rewarded if only it helps in removing, at least partly, the superstitions concerning ghosts in which the society is steeped" (1971, p. 313). The way in which the educated members of a "reforms Committee" try to prove the unreality and non-existence of ghosts, their initial doubts and hesitations, the dialogue of the rustic folk concerning spirits, are sure to rouse laughter even in the most reserved among the audience.

Teton Tamuli, on the other hand like Bezbarua's *Litikai*, is a farce based on a folk story. Teton, according to Dr P.D. Gosvami, is "a picaro or picaroon of Assamese oral literature. The story is still popular among Assamese villages" (1947, p. XXIII). Teton is a witty plebeian. Driven out of his home for his sharp witty tongue, he goes out into the wide world as a needy and hungry man. However, he is soon involved in deeds of crime such as theft, cow-killing and cheating a woman fruit-seller. Charges are brought against him in the King's court. He argues his case well but cunningly and proves that he did not commit those offences. The defence is witty in nature. Later on, he makes himself eligible to marry the daughter of a court official by a clever device and this helps him in becoming an official of the court. The drama retains the absurd atmosphere of a folk story.

His paradoxical replies are as witty as his literal interpretation of a few sentences uttered by the tiller and the fruit-seller. This is what the tiller says: *sou baghar bukuloi yova garuto mar eta mari rakhi diyagoi*. Literally interpreted, this would mean that Teton should go and beat the bull that is fit to be devoured by a tiger to death. Teton actually goes and kills the bull. But this is not what the tiller meant. He spoke in a figurative manner and simply asked Teton to help him in stopping the running wily bull so that he could take him to the field. He used idiomatic expressions instead of plain speech. *Baghar bukuloi yoa* means 'wily' or 'damned' whereas, *mari rakhi diyagoi* means 'to control and stop the bull' (Gosvami, 1947, pp. 292-293).

In the King's court, Teton argues cunningly that he acts as he has been instructed and got acquitted. This is a travesty of justice, but a concession to the incongruity of words. The paradoxical utterances that create verbal misunderstandings among two ridiculous characters here give rise to laughter. Exaggerated situations, ludicrous characters and humorous dialogue are the stuff of which this farcical piece is made.

All the three plays are in five acts divided into scenes. The matter in the plays is so thin and light that hardly any of them needs a five-act structure. This only shows how fast the tradition of the five-act play was held in Gohain Barua even in the third decade of the twentieth century.

Durgaprasad Majindar Barua

Mahari (The Tea Garden Clerk) by Durgaprasad Majindar Barua was written in 1893 though it came out in print in 1896, which was a "roaring success on the stage for several decades" (Neog, 1975, p. 22). The play in three acts with a few scenes to each act depicts how a young man, with the help of the European manager's native mistress, succeeds in getting a clerical post in a tea garden and how his own ignorance together with the jealous head clerk's conspiracy ultimately compels him to leave the job. There is much in the play to rouse laughter: the eccentric Mr Fox, the English manager of the garden; the fisherwoman, Makari, who is the manager's mistress; and Bhabiram, the newly-appointed young clerk, provide most of the fun. In fact, the characters, the situations and the dialogue are all contrived in such a way as to create mirth. Bhabiram's ignorance of English, Mr Fox's smattering of Assamese, and Makari's often unrefined and biting language are the sources of much of the fun which is so characteristic of the piece. *Mahari*, indeed, was so popular on the stage that the eccentric Mr Fox and his fisherwoman mistress, Makari, "become by-words for hilarious comedy, and several good actors of Assam became widely known by these roles" (Neog, 1975, p. 22). Of his other farces, *Negra*(?) which is not available now, ridicules the

blindly Westernized people of Assam, while *Kaliyug* (1904), written in collaboration with Benudhar Rajkhowa, satirizes the hypocrisies of preceptors and priests (Mahanta, 1985, p. 208).

Benudhar Rajkhowa

Benudhar Rajkhowa gained vast admiration as a farceur with his *Kurisaritar Sabhyata* (The Civilization of the Twentieth Century, 1908), *Tini Ghaini* (Three Wives, 1928), *Asikshita Ghaini* (The Uneducated Wife), *Chorar Shristi* (The Creation of Thieves, 1931) and *Topanir Parinam* (The Consequence of Sleep, 1932). In the first, the playwright exposes the hypocrisy of the Westernized youths of Assam. They are contemptuous of the older and time-honoured faiths of their own land but are not prepared to accept whole-heartedly the Western faiths either. They profess to be atheists and non-believers in the caste system, whereas, in reality, they follow all the older customs for fear of society. *Tini Ghaini* and *Asikshita Ghaini* show how co-wives and uneducated wives can make a husband's life miserable. In *Topanir Parinam*, laughter is created through a play on the word '*topani*' meaning 'sleep'. A young man, called Topani, seduces a young girl and is compelled to marry her. *Chorar Shristi* appears to be patterned after Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Two husbands, Dhumuha and Mauram, lead unhappy lives with their wives because of temperamental incompatibility. Dhumuha, a quarrelsome and excitable young man, is married to a simple and amiable woman; while Mauram, a peaceable youth, is married to a termagant. One night a clever and well-meaning thief comes to know of this unhappiness, and with the help of a charm that he knows gets the wives exchanged. The shrew, who was making Mauram's life miserable with her fiery temperament, is completely tamed by the stormy Dhumuha.

These little plays of Rajkhowa may be called light comedies of situations. The mirth is created not so much through characters and dialogue as through shrewdly contrived situations. But beneath the laughter lies the playwright's corrective motives. In all these plays he not only exposes the hypocrisies of the educated class but also pleads for a rational approach to life.

Lakshminath Bezbarua

Lakshminath Bezbarua wrote four comic dramas, *Litikai* (1890), *Nomal* (1913), *Pachani* (1913) and *Chikarpati Nikarpati* (1913). All these pieces depend on their theatrical effects on exaggerated situations, incongruous characters, malapropisms, and other deviations from the normal. Satyendranath Sarma points out that "the dramas are deficient in dramatic action and based mostly on the laughter of situations and incongruity of words" (1973, p. 300). The author amended the elements of the stories derived from the folk stories to match his requirements.

In *Litikai* (1890), we found that there are seven orphaned arch fools, who work in a home of Brahmin family. These fellows have strange manners of executing things and they kill their master's mother in one of their brainless acts. This provokes the master to execute them in revenge. However, one of the fools managed to escape his end, and in return, out of revenge married the master's sister-in-law by cheating. The seven orphaned arch fools as characters in the play, however, did not imprint any mark with their verbosity. Their plebeian personalities are highlighted in the humorous way of speech and naivete. They are unlettered, mostly indolent, credulous, superstitious, and parasitic. They talk in a strange manner and do ridiculous acts frankly and one would surely get the conviction that they live in a mock world.

The seven arch fools sometimes observe the straightforward meaning of the expression and act seriously which generates laughter. The word *ekatha* signifies either a 'measure of rice' or 'a measure of land'. In one occasion, all the fools are asked by the master to hoe a *katha* of land, however, each fool evades the allotted work and they hoe a piece of earth weighing a *katha*.

A similar act is done by the fools, which ensues in killing the master's mother, Subhadra –

Satotai – ai ai, dangari kot thom? Kan cigi ahiche tenei, kouk begai, kot thom? Kouk, kouk.

Subhadra – (khongere) thoboloi thai pova nai yadi mor murar operate tha.
(Litikai, Scene III, Act IV)

[The seven fool brothers – o mother, where will we place these bunches of paddy? It is hurting our shoulders, quickly tell where will put these? Tell, tell.

Subhadra – (Angrily) If you don't find any place to put those bundles, keep those bundles on my head.]

And to our surprise, they do so in reality and as a result, the mother of the master dies.

The master now realizes that the fools are mere burdens to him, therefore, he makes up his mind to do away with them. He succeeds to kill six of them, but the seventh one manages to escape from his master's grudge. Interestingly, the living fool abruptly acts like a very clever fellow and successfully manipulates to espouse the master's sister-in-law by way of cheating. The end, as Satyendranath Sarma points out, is somewhat improbable and there the fifth Act appears to be rather out of tune with the spirit of the whole drama. Sarma further says, "There is plenty of horseplay in the drama and it emanates from the improbable incongruities and most trivial incidents. It is a short play with a weak plot and indifferent characterization" (1973, p. 301). It is a pure farce.

In *Nomal* (1913), the mirth is created through a series of situations in which a rickety old man is constantly humiliated and mortified because of his foolishness and malapropisms. The brief story of the play is as follows: Naharphutuka approaches to spiritual master in Athiyabari sattrā to request him to give a suitable name for his newborn baby. The guru of the Athiyabari sattrā, then, is introduced to us. He leads a life of pompous manner by earning money in a dishonest way. He gave a name for Naharphutuka's son, 'Nomal'. As he has some problems with pronunciation, he uttered the name as 'Nemel' (which means 'do not sail'). As he fears forgetting the name, he starts repeating the name 'Nemel' on his way home. A trader who is about to start his voyage on a boat hears Naharphutuka uttering 'Nemel' and on hearing this the merchant becomes angry and beats him. Naharphutuka then ruefully says, '*nohowabor hol ou*' (happened something unusual). And he utters these words as he proceeds on. A rich Ahom is passing that road in a palanquin in a ceremonial and glamorous way, misunderstanding the utterings to be really meant an inauspicious remark on his noble rank. On being angry, the merchant beats him again. Then, Naharphutuka cries out in torment and says, 'one is more oppressive than the other'. This very uttering again offends two diseased travellers. One is suffering from elephantiasis and the other is suffering from goitre. Then, they act with him very roughly too. Being traumatized and disheartened, Naharphutuka, arrives home and he realizes that he has forgotten the name. However, he remembers the name 'Nemel' when his wife is almost opening his bag. (The term

'Nemel' also means 'do not open). The consortium of words with the action of the unfolding of bag helped him remember the name. It is, therefore, oral and incidental misconception that creates this farcical story to progress on. The element of satire present in the play is incidental and there is much entertainment in the word 'Nomal'. A sort of punning impact is articulated while Naharphutuka utters it in the rural fashion. The incidents of beating Naharphutuka are brief and merely ridiculous. These ridiculous fancies are hilarious and comical.

Bezbarua gives a slightly better account of himself in *Pachani* (1913). It is comparatively a graceful farce and there are juxtapositions of contrasting ideas and intertwinings of fun and satire. The play is segregated into five scenes. As the play opens up, we see that Dharmai Pachani, a childless man, who is religiously devoted, has developed a habit of having guests every night. That night, he returns home without any guests after a vain search for them. Then we see that he is busy making a 'dheki-thora' (grinding stick of a 'dekhi' or a pounding machine), and at this moment two guests have turned up. Then, he, being overjoyed having the guests, goes shopping. His wife, on the other hand, does not like this attitude of her husband and she used to drive out the guests. She holds the grinding stick of the pounding machine and tells them that she is going to beat them up with the stick. On hearing this, the guests flee and at this very moment, Pachani arrives from shopping. He feels disappointed with the departure of the guests. His clever wife informs him that the guests are greedy and that on being refused to hand over to them the 'dheki-thora' (grinding stick), they took offence and left. Then, Pachani gets the grinding stick in his hand and follows the guests with the intention to give it to them. When the guests see that Pachani is following them with the dreaded piece of wood in his hand; they speed and run out of that place. The husband returns back unhappy with a small pet animal (a domestic cat) as a guest and as a substitute. It is full of zest and laughter, especially the scene in which Pachani follows the panicked guests with the piece of wood in hand.

In *Chikarpati-Nikarpati* (1913) also, there is full of fun. It arouses laughter through the two thieves' display of methods used by them in larceny as well as of corruption in the court. Pona Mahanta observes, "these plays are nothing but purely farcical pieces which undoubtedly appealed to the rustic audience of the time" (1985, p. 205). *Chikarpati-Nikarpati* starts with a scene where a trial is going on. In the trial, Chikarpati is adjudicated for a charge of theft of a brass pot. It comes to an end in his liberation from the charges. The adjudications are convened in the modern court, however, as Chikarpati's state is governed by a king, the adjudication scenes are old-fashioned and traditional. To see the capability of the acclaimed thief, the king employs him to steal a ring from him when he is sleeping in the bedroom. And in this mission, Chikarpati successfully steals the ring from the king. Then, the king employs him to get him a man for his daughter's bridegroom. And in this also, he becomes successful. Later, when the bridegroom becomes the king, he announces the thief to be his minister.

B.K. Bhattacharyya (1982) opines that –

The drama is not only loose in structure, but full of improbable incongruities. A thief who steals a brass-pot is introduced as the great thief. Then the king uses his services for procuring for his daughter a bridegroom, who again promises him to make him his minister. All these are very amusing, as the identical appearances of the two thieves, Chikarpati and Nikarpati create a comic situation based on chance. (pp. 193-194)

The atmosphere of the play is, however, farcical. The trial scenes and the scene of the conversation between the pleaders of opposite parties in the Chikarpati case are a reflection of manners of Bezbarua's time and the former is full of plebian laughter. But the scene of a heart-to-heart talk between the pair of lovers, Rongdoi and Chikarpati is improbable, extremely light and farcical. According to Birinchi Kumar Barua (1964):

The exaggerated situation, irony of thought and words, malapropisms and humorous dialogues – these are the characteristics of these farces. There is hardly any development of plot. The humour is low because it is invariably one of situations. Exaggeration is the very breath of these farces and hence they are often unreal. (p. 150)

Of the many other farces published before the thirties, mention may be made of Chandradhar Barua's *Bhagya-Pariksha* (Fate Decided, 1916). Based on the tale of Khaza Hosen in the *Arabian Nights*, this little play in a lighter vein dramatizes the relative merits of fate and affluence. Padmadhar Chaliha in his *Nimantran* (Invitation, 1915) creates laughter by exploiting the lack of common sense on the part of four 'foolish wise men'. Mitradev Mahanta, a leading actor and playwright, has published quite a good number of farcical pieces of which *Biya Biparyaya* (The Marriage Debacle, 1924) and *Kukurikanar Athmangala* (The Reception of the Night-blind son-in-law, 1927) were at one time 'warmly received at every theatre in Assam'. In the former piece, mirth is created through incongruous situations and behaviour. He also ridicules through dramatic exaggeration such evils of contemporary society as child marriage, dowry and superstition. The source of laughter in the latter play is mainly the incongruous behaviour of the son-in-law, who, in his vain attempts to conceal his night-blindness, only exposes himself and makes himself ridiculous. Mahanta has published a few more farces such as *Eta Curat* (One Cigarette), *Tengar Bhengar* (The Clever Rogoue), *Checha Jyar* (Cold Fever), *Achin Kathar Thora* (The Bluff Giver) and others. All these pieces are meant for mirth which the playwright creates through exaggerated situations, spicy dialogue and ludicrous characters.

Farcical pieces and low comedies continued to be written even after the thirties of the twentieth century, but gradually their place came to be taken by serious social plays. Of those who wrote such plays after 1930, mention may be made of Lakshminadhar Sarma, Surendranath Saikia, Kumudchandra Barua, Karunadhar Barua, Binandacchandra Barua, Prabin Phukan, Premnarayan Datta and a few others. In most cases, the light dramatic pieces written by these writers were like sugar-coated pills because, although their apparent aim was to arouse laughter, they also aimed at exploring the follies and hypocrisies of a society still in transition. But after the Second World War, the farce as a dramatic type almost ceased to be a living force, its place being taken by plays on serious social as well as psychological themes. The effects of the War, the disillusionment that immediately followed the attainment of Independence, the rapid spread of scientific and technological knowledge, and the popularity of such thinkers as Marx and Freud – all came to have their impact on literature including drama. Pona Mahanta (1985) stated:

The audience no longer looked for boisterous comedy created through exaggeration of all kinds; instead, they wanted to see flesh and blood human being in real human situations. The playwright was ready to give them this, and as a result drama became almost entirely social and inward in place of farcical and mythological (p. 210).

Conclusion

Although the new drama in Assamese began with plays of a social-realistic type, the latter years of the nineteenth century and the initial ones of the twentieth were largely a period of farces, as well as translations and adaptations. Shakespeare was naturally the first and the greatest favourite to be translated, adapted and imitated. But while several of the Shakespearean adaptations seem to have been successful as stage plays, their influence on the Assamese drama is not obvious. The writers of the plays draw their subject matter from indigenous sources. But, the themes apart, all these plays were modelled on Western dramatic methods, particularly those of Shakespeare. And with the plays of Bezbarua and Gohain Barua, Shakespeare, whose influence had been felt as early as 1857, became the dominant influence on pre-independent Assamese comedy and all types of Assamese dramas. Of all the fields of literature, dramatic piece of art is unquestionably responsive to societal transformation. The pre-independent Assamese dramatic literature is in debt for its progress to its exposure to the West. It is also greatly responsible for the phenomenal transformation of our society, which in every facet, has gone through in the course of the period. Thus, it can be concluded that this influence has been continuously operating in various ways and it is found that the entire pre-independent Assamese dramatic literature has been affected by the plays of Shakespeare. Though the content of the plays is native, the style and technique are purely modelled on the dramas of William Shakespeare.

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