
**STUDIES
IN THE
LITERATURE
OF
ASSAM**

SURYA KUMAR BHUYAN

These Studies by Dr. Bhuyan represent the fruit of his life-long devotion to the cause of Assam's literature and history, and of his varied experiences and contacts since the period of his Professorship at The Cotton College, Gauhati, to that of his Membership of the Indian Parliament.

Dr. Bhuyan's views, comments and interpretations have been illumined by his deep scholarship, creative talents and enlightened humanism. His first-hand knowledge of the original manuscripts and records of Assam, gained during his association with the Assam Government Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies since its inception in 1928, has enabled him to speak with authority on different aspects of its literature and history.

Shri Sri Prakasa, the eminent patriot, statesman and scholar, say in his Foreword: "The great work that he (Dr. Bhuyan) has done for the resuscitation of the past of Assam, and the books that he has written, both in Assamese and English, deserve to live as standing monuments to his great industry and scholarship, and as an outward expression of the high patriotism that burns within."

"The Literature of Assam", says Dr. Bhuyan, "written and oral, taken together, gives us a glimpse of the mind and soul of its people who have been living for ages under the same sky, breathing the same air, listening to the chirping of the same birds, watching the blossoming of the same flowers, sharing in the same realities of life, and rising and falling together."

The author draws the reader's attention to the volume and variety, and the reciprocal influences of the various offshoots of the literature of Assam, and, as such, the book will be enthusiastically received by all who desire to have an accurate idea of the mind and culture of the people of this strategic eastern frontier of India.

Dr. S.K. Bhuyan hardly needs an introduction. As the Provincial Director of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, as a frequent contributor of original historical articles to numerous learned periodicals, as a scholarly editor and translator of old Assamese chronicles and as an author of numerous original compositions in English and Assamese, his name is a valued in the noted centres of historical studies in India. Some of his historical publications had the honour of being very favourably commented on in the pages of the "Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland," and the "Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies," by such eminent authorities as Sir Edward Gait, Lt. Col. P.R.T. Gurdon, and Lt-Col. Sir Woisely Haig.

Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan was born in January 1894, was educated at Nowgong, Shillong, Gauhati, Calcutta and the School of Oriental Studies in London. He passed M.A. in English Literature, Bachelor of Law Examination, Ph. D. Examination in the field of History, Faculty of Arts, London University, and the Examination for the D.Lit, degree of London University.

WORKS BY DR. S. K. BHUYAN

ENGLISH :

- ANGLO-ASSAMESE RELATIONS. 1771-1826.
LACHIT BARPHUDAN AND HIS TIMES.
ANNALS OF THE DELHI BADSHAHATE.
TUNGKHUNGIA BURANJI. A chronicle of Assam, 1681-1826.
EARLY BRITISH RELATIONS WITH ASSAM.
PRELIMINARY REPORT ON ASSAM SECRETARIAT RECORDS.
ASSAM IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. Serial in *Assam Review*.
AN ASSAMESE NUR JAHAN. Queen Phuleswari Devi.
SOME LITERARY REMINISCENCES.
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE WORKS OF DR. S. K. BHUYAN.
STUDIES IN THE LITERATURE OF ASSAM.
ATAN BURAGOHAIN AND HIS TIMES.
AN ASSAMESE MISCELLANY.

ASSAMESE :

- GOPAL KRISHNA GOKHALE. A short biography.
ANUNDORAM BOROOAH, SANSKRITIST. A biography.
NIRMALI. Poems.
JAIMATI UPAKHYAN. A longer narrative poem.
BARPHUDANAR GIT. A ballad, edited with Introduction.
AHOMAR DIN. The Ahom system of administration.
BURANJIR VANI. Historical essays.
KOWANR BIDROH. Revolt of Assam princes, 1769-80.
PANCHAMI. Short stories.
JONAKI. Life-sketches of eminent men.
CHANEKI. Life-sketches of eminent women.
ASAM JIYARI. Assamese women of history.
BURANJI-MULAK PRAVANDHAVALIR TALIKA.
MIR JUMLAR ASSAM AKRAMAN.
HISTORY OF KING RAJESWAR SINGHA, 1751-69,
ASAMIYA SAHITYA-SAMPARKIYA PRAVANDHAVALI.

ASSAMESE CHRONICLES, edited with Introductions in English :

- ASSAM BURANJI. By Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin.
KAMRUPAR BURANJI. History of Assam-Mogul conflicts.
DEODHAI ASAM BURANJI. Chronicles of early Ahom history.
TUNGKHUNGIA BURANJI. By Srinath Duara Barbarua.
ASAMAR PADYA-BURANJI. A metrical chronicle by Dutiram and Bisweswar.
PADSHAH-BURANJI. A chronicle of Delhi Badshahs.
KACHARI BURANJI. A chronicle of Cachar.
JAYANTIA BURANJI. A chronicle of Jayantia.
TRIPURA BURANJI. By Ratna Kandali and Arjundas.
ASSAM BURANJI. Obtained from Sukumar Mahanta's family

F238
1107

STUDIES IN THE LITERATURE OF ASSAM

BY

SURYYA KUMAR BHUYAN

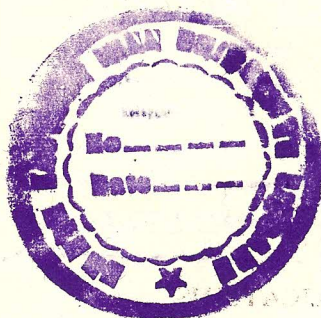
M.A., B.L. (CAL.), PH.D. (LOND.), D.LIT. (LOND.),

*Director of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam ;
formerly, Professor of English and Principal, Cotton College, Gauhati,
and Director of Public Instruction, Assam.*

WITH A FOREWORD BY

SHRI SRI PRAKASA

B.A. (ALLAHABAD), B.A., LL.B. (CANTAB.), BARRISTER-AT-LAW,
GOVERNOR OF MADRAS, FORMERLY GOVERNOR OF ASSAM.



OMSONS PUBLICATIONS
NEW DELHI GAUHATI

Gen
Distributed by :

WESTERN BOOK DEPOT

PANBAZAR GAUHATI - 781 001.

(Assam)

YE
891.4509
BHU:3

Reprinted 1985

All rights reserved by the author.

NEHU LIBRARY
Acc. No. 212836
Acc. by GP
Date 16/7/02
Class by
Sub. Heading by
Enter by
Transcribed by

Published by :

R. KUMAR

OMSONS PUBLICATIONS

T-7, Rajouri Garden, New Delhi.

Printed at :

Pearl Offset press (P) Ltd;

5/33, Kirti Nagar Industrial Area,

New Delhi - 110 015.

COMPUTERISED

FOREWORD

BY SHRI SRI PRAKASA, B.A. (ALLAHABAD), B.A., LL.B. (CANTAB.), BARRISTER-AT-LAW, GOVERNOR OF MADRAS, FORMERLY GOVERNOR OF ASSAM, AND MINISTER IN CHARGE OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA.

It is an honour indeed that Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan has done me in asking me to write a foreword to his learned book on the STUDIES IN THE LITERATURE OF ASSAM. I fear, like most of my countrymen, I had only a very distant idea of the fair land of Assam that nestles in our north-eastern mountain ranges and has, through the ages, lived more or less her own life. As the home of the rhinoceros and the python, the tiger and the elephant, the British planter and the head-hunting Naga, we might have vaguely heard of her. As Kamrup that practises all forms of witchcraft and turns men into animals, we might even have imbibed some prejudices against her. Of her age-old history, her culture, her art, her beauty, her variegated life, her love of liberty, however, we had heard very little. The strange thing about it all is that the Assamese themselves seem never to have been anxious to make themselves known to the outside world, and they appear to have been ever satisfied as they were.

It is not that I had not known friends from Assam. I had a Barua as a fellow-student in the school; I had colleagues from Assam in later public life; but none of them ever spoke anything about their land; and so of Assam as such, I was blissfully ignorant. It was only when Shri C. Rajagopalachariar, as Governor-General, and Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, as Prime Minister, sent me to Assam as Governor early in 1949, that I found a new world opening before me, and myself coming in contact with the thoughts and activities, with the peoples and problems of which I

had no idea before. The fair land of Assam just captivated me ; and though I was privileged to be there only for a brief space of fifteen months, I had opportunities of travelling extensively up-hill and down-dale, on the broad bosom of the Brahmaputra and in the interior of the densest forests ; and it was then that I realised what a variegated life our country presents, and what wonderful Unity in Diversity she stands for: Assam is very dear to my heart, and she always dwells there as a precious memory, as the symbol of a great heritage.

It was during those days that I first met Dr. Bhuyan ; and ever since then we have kept close contacts with each other both by correspondence and occasional meetings. I read his books with great avidity and eagerness while I was in Assam ; and from them I learn something of Assam through the centuries, her legends and her traditions, her history and her personalities, her great adventures in the realms of art, religion and politics. Dr. Bhuyan has an easy style of writing, and presents his figures in the most pleasing manner, narrating his facts with such lucidity and simplicity that one finds oneself reading his last page not very long before he had begun the first. The great work that he has done for the resuscitation of the past of Assam, and the books that he has written both in Assamese and in English, deserve to live as standing monuments to his great industry and scholarship and as an outward expression of the high patriotism that burns within. They should also give much information to those who seek to know ; much food for thought to men and women who ponder over the problems of the country ; and many directives as well, as to how these can be solved.

The Assamese, curiously enough, are a historical people ; and the Buranjis that tell of their past, are not mere

neglected chronicles, but active factors in their daily life. We, as a race, generally speaking, have little idea of or love for history. In Assam, however, dates are carefully preserved; and they will tell one approximately correctly the time when any particular events took place and particular personalities held sway. The task therefore of the historian and the chronicler becomes comparatively easy. Mahapurusha Shankara Deva, their greatest religious figure, and Lachit Barphukan, the great warrior, statesman and patriot, are remembered and honoured not as vague figures of some remote past, but as actual living human beings who have done great deeds; and the dates of their exploits and achievements are duly recorded. The people's love for freedom has always been intense. Muslim, Burma and British have alike known this, and when there was a talk of Assam going to Pakistan, the great patriot Shri Gopi Nath Bardoloi told Mahatma Gandhi that Assam will fight—and if she goes down, she will go down fighting—but never surrender. The stories of the great migrations from Kanauj or Cambodia are also known; and it is remarkable how very different types of peoples have lived there in comparative peace and amity through the ages without anyone trying to disturb the life and thought of anyone else. India alone, I believe, can present a phenomenon such as this in the world in which we live; and Dr. Bhuyan through his works, helps us to understand the process that has gone to make the Assam that she is at the present moment.

The present work deals with the literatures of Assam. A speciality of it is that it is not about literature *on* Assam nor the literature produced *in* the Assamese tongue. It is a study of literature as evolved in Assam through the centuries in various languages—Assamese, Khasi, Manipuri, Bengali and English. It has given a deservedly honoured

place to the work of Christian missionaries who have made the literature of hill tribes of Assam available to us. A critical study is made of all these and it would certainly help us to enter into the heart of the Assamese people, and strike all the chords of sympathy and affection in our own. It is very essential that the people in the country outside Assam should carefully study Assam and her problems. Let it not be forgotten that it is our most strategic state. A narrow corridor, of only about forty miles, connects it with the rest of the country, while Tibet, Burma and Pakistan surround it on all sides. Between these and the main plateau of Assam, there are high mountains where innumerable strange tribes live their own lives to this day, following their own manners and customs and resenting any interference from anyone. They are our own countrymen and countrywomen, and we must understand them. They are integral parts of our Union and our Republic, and we have to know and realise that.

Nowhere else in the land I believe, does life present us so many facets as it does in Assam. No other State, to my thinking, contains in itself every possible problem that troubles anyone anywhere else in the land. I have a feeling that the way Assam solves her problems is the way that the country as a whole will solve all her own as well. To this great task of understanding and appreciating, as well as overcoming the various difficulties that assail us, Dr. Bhuyan gives a clarion call. His books will also help us to realise that fundamentally the whole country is One because alike in the North and in the South, we are bred up on the same traditions of thought and culture, and worship the self-same heroes of antiquity of legend or of history. That is the great bond between the past and the present, between the North and the South, between the East and the West. We have

indeed a great task before us. We should be thankful that we live at a time when it is our high privilege to devote ourselves to these tasks ; and help in the consolidation of the country, and by precept and example in bettering the world in which we live.

Raj Bhavan, Madras,
November 25, 1955.

SRI PRAKASA
GOVERNOR OF MADRAS.

PREFACE

Essays written by the author on different occasions are brought together in the present book *Studies in the Literature of Assam*. They do not profess to constitute a history of literature which, as a rule, must do justice to every notable author, book, period or movement, and where the omission of an important trend or detail is regarded more or less as a tabu. The writer of an essay enjoys greater freedom inasmuch as he can emphasise on conspicuous landmarks, tendencies and developments in order to justify and support his thesis. Such a study, though not a substitute for literary history, is helpful in interpreting facts and achievements. It is for this reason that the essays in this book, though scattered heretofore, have been read by scholars and students with considerable interest and attention.

As will be seen, the scope of the book transcends the limits of the literature written in the Assamese language. Assam has been the home of diverse cultures: some of them are preserved in written records, while others are represented in orally transmitted folksongs, folktales and legends.

Through the medium of Sanskrit literature and the vast corpus of its translation work, Assam has maintained its cultural and religious contact with the Gangetic Valley, while the Ahom literature of Assam has served as the window through which it has gazed at the pastoral banks of the Chindwin and Irrawady rivers. The Khamptis and Phalials have, in their written records, preserved the message of Tathagata Lord Buddha; they besides possess a secular literature of a realistic character.

The literature of Assam, written and oral, taken together, gives us a glimpse of the mind and soul of its people who have been living for ages under the same sky, breathing the same air, listening to the chirping of the same birds, watching the blossoming of the same flowers, sharing in the same realities of life, and rising and falling together. The volume and variety, and the reciprocal influences of the various offshoots of the literature of Assam are awaiting study and scrutiny at the hands of patient and industrious investigators.

The literature of the preliterate tribes of Assam has been formed comparatively recently mainly through the enterprising zeal of Christian Missionaries working in different fields and under different auspices. The folklore of these tribes should be collected, now, when there is time ; it will form the nucleus and foundation of their national literature which will inspire creative and constructive works in future.

The literature of Assam has a bright prospect because the people are patriotic and alert. This trait may not be perceptible in ordinary times, but it comes to the surface very forcefully when national prestige and honour fall in danger of being undermined or destroyed.

I have included in this book the sketches of three modern authors U Soso Tham, Pundit Hemchandra Goswami and Dr. Banikanta Kakati—as they indicate some salient features of the present-day literature of Assam.

I have also added a chapter on the Assamese chronicle *Tripura Buranji*, for I feel that scholars in India and abroad should be acquainted with this monument of Assamese prose and of Assamese historical literature, and with the great purpose lying at the root of its compilation. It is significant that the dream of King Rudra Singha to bring Assam and Tripura nearer each other by ties of friendship is now reflected in the recommendation of the States Reorganisation Commission of the Government of India that the two States should be placed under one administration.

A list of books and articles about Assamese language and literature has been appended with the hope that scholars, students, librarians and publishers will find it convenient to trace the sources of information, to extend their range of study, to form a good collection, and to reprint the valuable and rare ones as the case may be.

I am deeply grateful to Shri Sri Prakasaji, formerly Governor of Assam, and now Governor of Madras, for kindly writing a Foreword to this book and for the encouragement and sympathy he has been pleased to show to me all along. His love for Assam and its people, and for its history and culture, has contributed a great deal towards its proper understanding by our brothers and sisters in India, and this love has not been bedimmed by distance and time.

In conclusion, I embrace this opportunity to acknowledge my indebtedness to the institutions through whose kind instrumentality the studies were first brought to light:—Government of Assam; University of Calcutta; All India Radio, New Delhi and Gauhati Centres; All-India Oriental Conference; Indian History Congress; Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Imphal; Asam Sahitya Sabha; *Assam Review*, Silchar series; and *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Calcutta. The relevant details are embodied in the bibliographical notes appended to the book.

Company Bagan Road,
Gauhati, Assam.
The 1st Dec., 1955.

}

S. K. BHUYAN

CONTENTS

FOREWORD, BY SHRI SRI PRAKASA

PREFACE

ASSAMESE LITERATURE: ANCIENT PERIOD	...	...	1
ASSAMESE LITERATURE: ANCIENT AND MODERN	...	...	10
ASSAMESE HISTORICAL LITERATURE	...	...	25
ASSAMESE MANUSCRIPTS	...	...	47
HEMCHANDRA GOSWAMI	...	...	64
MODERN KHASI LITERATURE	...	...	86
MANIPURI SAHITYA PARISHAD	...	...	92
BANKANTA KAKATI	...	...	103
INDIAN HISTORY CONGRESS	...	...	107
ASAM SAHITYA SABHA	...	...	120
AN ASSAMESE CHRONICLE OF TRIPURA	...	...	131

APPENDICES

A. AIDS TO THE STUDY OF ASSAMESE	...	...	157
B. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON ASSAMESE HISTORICAL LITERATURE	...	...	163
C. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON THE STUDIES INCORPORATED IN THIS BOOK	...	...	167
CORRIGENDA	...	...	170

TO
MY YOUNGEST SON
SRIMAN BHOY KUMAR BHUYAN
WITH
AFFECTION AND LOVE

SURYA KUMAR BHUYAN

January, 1956.

STUDIES IN THE LITERATURE OF ASSAM

ASSAMESE LITERATURE: ANCIENT PERIOD

The ancient period of Assamese literature represents the output from the earliest times down to the occupation of the country by the British in 1826, since when it came in contact with western ideas and western methods of literary treatment.

It is generally accepted that Aryan culture had taken its root in Assam since very early times, and that Assamese is a Sanskritic language directly connected with Prachya Magadhi Apabhramsa. The ancient kingdom of Kamarupa or Assam has accordingly been swept by a wave of Hindu civilization which has maintained its cultural homogeneity with the rest of India; and physically remote, Assam was not outside the cultural hegemony of Aryavarta. The literature produced by a people like the Assamese is thus essentially Indian in spirit, and its individuality is derived from the impact of local circumstances, physical and political.

It is difficult to correctly estimate the time from when books in the Assamese language first came to be written, because a complete and exhaustive search for such writings has not yet been made. No state archives has been maintained in Assam in a continuous manner as there has been no unbroken succession of a single line or dynasty of rulers. Political upheavals have effaced the traces of any archives that might have been in existence before. In spite of the loss and damage to which Assamese manuscripts have been subjected through the ages past, we believe that some fortunate antiquarian in Assam may come upon a manuscript as momentous as the *Arthasastra* of Kautilya, the dramas of Bhasa and the *Samarangana* of King Bhoja.

Besides, the creation and growth of Assamese literature were hampered by the prevailing notion that all ideas and thoughts are to be written in Sanskrit, and it is believed that learning was mainly confined to the Brahmans. It was only during the period of Vaisnava revival and the centuries immediately preceding it that books were written in Assamese for the enlightenment and edification of the com-

mon people. The realization of the utility of the vernacular medium thus opened the flood-gate of learning and we are amazed at the sight of the immense quantity of Assamese books which have come down to us. It is a tragedy that a conception of the wealth and variety of ancient Assamese literature has not yet been fully brought home to the people of Assam, and to our brothers and sisters in India, though efforts are in progress under the auspices of individuals and institutions to resuscitate the literary treasures.

The absence of early specimens of the vernacular literature of Assam is redeemed by the fact that its people were a highly intellectual and enlightened race, always in search of truth, and anxious to disseminate it in all possible ways. There were learned Pandits in the country; and owing to the encouragement given by the monarchs, scholars flocked to Assam from different places. The account of the Chinese pilgrim Hieun-Tsang and the copper-plate inscriptions of the period bear testimony to the scholarship and patronage of the Assamese monarchs and the presence of learned men in Assam. "The king", wrote Hiuen-Tsang, "is fond of learning, and the people are so in imitation of him. Men of ability come from afar to study here". A similar statement is made in the copper-plate grants of King Vanamaladeva and King Ratnapala alluding to the presence of learned men, religious preceptors and poets in their respective capitals Harupeswar and Durjaya.

Now the question is: were there no books written by the vast congregation of scholars and poets in the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa? The literary remains of the great Pandits of Assam have been lost altogether, though in the field of Smritis we get occasional glimpses of the views they held, different from those expounded by the Smritikars of other parts of India. The literary genius and attainments of the Assamese people of yore are preserved in the texts of the copper-plates, for they were compiled with great care, in a sonorous and reminiscent style, in keeping with the dignity of the donor-sovereigns and the erudition of the scholarly composers. A few extracts are given below:

The spread of King Bhaskaravarma's warlike fame is thus eulogized in the Nidhanpur copper-plate: "As the portrait of the sun (Bhaskara) is seen simultaneously in numerous pots of water, the king's portrait, owing to his abundance of prowess, was seen uninterupted in the palaces of his vassal chieftains".

In Harjaravarma's copper-plate, King Harshadeva is described as "a monarch who was endowed with numerous qualities, and who governed his subjects as if they were his own sons, and who desisted from ever oppressing them".

King Ratnapala is described in his copper-plate as "an Arjuna in fame, a Bhimasena in war, a Kritanta (god of death) in wrath, a forest conflagration in destroying his plant-like enemies, who is the moon in the sky of learning, the sweet jasmine of the Malaya mountain in the midst of the jasmine-like men of good birth".

The description of Ratnapala's capital Durjaya summarizes in a sense all the equipments of an ideal state, in profundity of learning, in steadiness of the mind, and in military strength. "The boundaries of Durjaya", runs the inscription, "were encompassed by a rampart, furnished with a fence strong like that used for the game birds of the Cakas, fit to cause chagrin to the king of Gurjara, to give fever to the heads of the untameable elephants of the chief of Gauda, to act like bitumen in the earth to the lord of Kerala, to strike awe into the Bahikas and Taikas, to cause discomfiture to the master of the Deccan country; and generally to serve for the purpose of discomfiting the king's enemies".

About the inhabitants of Durjaya it is recorded in the copper-plate: "Here dullness might be observed in necklaces, but not in the senses of the inhabitants; fickleness in apes, but not in their minds; changefulness in the motions of the eyebrows, but not in promises, accidents happening to things, but not to the subjects".

The above passages are sufficient to give an idea of the existence of the intellect and humanism which lead to the production of literary masterpieces.

The plenitude of book-production in ancient Assam is borne out by the fact that several volumes of fine writing were presented by Bhaskaravarma to his friend and ally Emperor Harshavardhana of Kanauj. The presents also included a book of aphorisms, which was probably a collection of the proverbs and sayings in vogue in Assam.

The ancient records bear testimony to the musical aptitudes and talents of the Assamese people. In the Apsad inscription of King Adityasena, a reference is made to songs sung on the bank of the Brahmaputra. Bhaskaravarma asked Hieun-Tsang about the signifi-

gance of a Chinese song sung in Assam describing the exploits of the Chinese prince Chin Wang Shihmin.

Such a musically-minded people like the Assamese could **not but** depict their feelings, experiences and traditions in a musical garb. **We** have in Assam a large mass of popular songs coming down from generation to generation, composed by unlettered rustic bards, mostly extempore, and sung by the people belonging to all sections of society. These songs are sung on occasions like marriages and spring festivals. for the appeasement of irate gods and goddesses, and for the inculcation of the evanescent character of human existence ; and they are known as Biya Nams, Bihu Nams, Ai Nams and Dehabicharar Gits. There are also songs describing the different seasons, and the woes of boatmen whose profession keeps them constantly away from their dear ones. The stories of princes and nobles are also represented in these folksongs of Assam. Curiously enough, some sentiments recorded in these songs find an echo in Buddhist literature. In an Assamese song about a prince named Phul Kowanr, his disconsolate sweetheart goes to the extent of threatening her mother that should she be disappointed in her love she will play the role of a co-wife with her mother. This novel, though repulsive, sentiment finds an expression in the Pali Therigatha, in the song attributed to Bhikshuni Utpalavarna. These songs are regarded as specimens of Assamese composition of the period of which we do not possess any recorded remains.

The most outstanding figure in the dark non-literary period of Assam is the natural philosopher Dak whose sayings are still held in high veneration like Vedic utterances—'Dakar bachan Vedar vani'. Aphorisms like Dak's sayings are in vogue in Bengal and Bihar. The Assamese claim him to be an inhabitant of Lehidangara village in Barpeta Subdivision in the district of Kamrup. Almost every Assamese family used to possess a manuscript containing the aphorisms of Dak, known popularly as *Dak-Bhanita* and *Dak-Charit*. Some of the sayings of Dak bear a striking resemblance to the literature of Buddhism. Like Aushadhikumar of *Maha-unmarga Jataka*, **Dak** at the moment of his birth, prescribes remedies for relief from **the** pains of child-birth. Dak also enjoins upon the observance of **Dharma**, as manifested in the construction of tanks and temples, centres of food-distribution, and the plantation of trees. He also dilates upon the futility of **man power, wealth** and decorations as man's life is uncertain and short. He glorifies charity and gifts to which nothing

else is superior. The methods of attraction mentioned by Dak as resorted to by women in alluring men find as echo in Buddhist literature.

Kamarupa is still believed to be the home of spells and charms, of magic and witchcraft—"Tantra-Mantrar Desh"; and stories are circulated all over India attributing to Assamese women the supernatural power of converting a man into a lamb. The charms and spells are still used, not to produce any thaumaturgic effect, but to cure certain ailments, and avert certain calamities, very frequently as a supplement to medicinal specifics. The language of the mantras is extremely archaic and the thoughts cryptic and mystic. The mantras embody specimens of the pre-formative period of Assamese literary diction of the age of which we have no recorded examples.

A book of songs and aphorisms written by a number of Tantric Buddhists between the eighth and twelfth centuries was discovered in Nepal by the late Pandit Haraprasad Sastri, and it has been published under the title "Baudha-gan-o-doha". We get there the names of twenty-three poets, some of whom are believed to be men of Kamarupa, where the Vajrayana and Sahajayana forms of Buddhism were developed to some extent. The peculiar diction of the songs appears to bear some resemblance to the forms of Assamese poetic style in vogue till his day. Books of this kind may still be discovered throwing light on the very dark period of Assamese literature, when there was the needed scholarship and talent, but no visible performance in the direction of written Assamese literature.

As far as is known at present, Assamese literature in the strict sense of the term came into existence in the thirteenth century. The old Hindu kingdom of Kamarupa was dismembered about the twelfth century, and a new kingdom, known as Kamata, came into being with its capital at Kamatapur, at a distance of some eighteen miles from Cooch Behar. Kamata extended from the river Karatowa on the west to Barnadi, opposite Gauhati, on the east; and it comprised the present districts of Rungpure, Cooch Behar, Goalpara and Kamrup. Eastern Assam was still then in a state of flux, being ruled at different places by the Chutiyas, the Bhuyans, the Kacharis and the Borahis and the Morans. The Shan conquerors from Northern Burma, generally known as the Ahoms, had established their domination in a portion of eastern Assam in the year 1228.

Being virtually a continuation of the old Kamarupa kingdom,

though in a truncated form, Kamata became an asylum for the scholars and poets of Eastern India. The earliest Assamese poets on record, Hema Saraswati and Haribar Bipra, enjoyed the patronage of the Kamata ruler Durlabhanarayan, who has been immortalised in the colophons of their poems *Prahlad-charit*, *Lava-Kusar Yuddha* and *Babrubahanar Yuddha*. A third poet Kaviratna Saraswati wrote *Jayadrath-badh* under the patronage of the same enlightened sovereign Durlabhanarayan, and probably of his son Indranarayan as well. These four books are believed to be the earliest available specimens of Assamese poetry, though the perfection of the verses and the method of treatment presuppose several preceding generations of poetical endeavour.

The greatest figure in the firmament of Assamese poetry of this twilight was Madhab Kandali, who wrote under the patronage of Mahamanikya Raja who has not yet been definitely identified, though in all probability he was a non-Aryan ruler brought under the influence of Hinduism. Madhab Kandali translated the *Ramayana*, but only five out of the seven cantos are now extant. Another poem entitled *Devajit* is commonly attributed to Madhab Kandali. The diction of Madhab Kandali's poetry is elegant and refined, and difficult Sanskrit words have been rendered in mellifluous Assamese.

These early works bear definite traces of Vaisnavism in their attempt to glorify the heroes of the Vaisnava pantheon, Prahlad and Ramchandra. They however lack the insistence and emphasis on the worship of Vishnu which are predominant factors in the writings of the great Vaishnava reformer and poet Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, 1449-1568 A.D. In a way they were precursors of the Vaisnava revival, and they paved the path for ushering in the great outburst of devotion, music and poetry of the age of Sankardeva, who, in humility, paid compliments to this preceding band of 'unerring poets', *purva kavi apramadi*, and compared himself to a rabbit in the presence of an elephant.

The full efflorescence of Assamese poetry came however with Sankardeva and his devoted disciples and kindred spirits. The saint lived up to the age of one hundred and twenty years, and during his long span of life he gave to Assam a treasure-house of literary gems, all aiming at the glorification of Vishnu and his several manifestations. He based his teachings on the *Bhagavata-purana*, and hence his creed is known as Bhagavati Dharma. In his two pilgrim-

ages to Aryavarta and the Deccan, Sankardeva contacted the saints of the age, acquainted himself with the various schools of thought, different media of literary expression and diverse melodies, dance-forms and song-patterns, and subsequently adapted them to the Assamese soil for the edification of his own countrymen. He himself translated several cantos of the Ramayana and the Bhagavata, compiled a number of episodes and wrote plays and songs. To perpetuate the recital of Vaisnava classics and the performance of dramas, and the spread of Vaisnava teachings, he established monasteries in Western Assam, and his disciples carried the torch of Sankardeva's gospel to different parts of Assam by the processes initiated by their master. The devotional routine of a monastery was also repeated in every Vaisnava village and household, with the result that Assam began to resound from one end to another with *nama* and *kirtan*, conferring upon the people the blessings of refinement, singlemindedness and a capacity for united action. Assam's religious fame reached far-off Rajputana, and the Rajput invader of Assam, Raja Ram Singha of Amber, received repeated warnings from his mother and his wife against the consequences of disturbing the peace of a country where there was universal *nama-kirtan* and where Brahmans and Vaisnavas were living in peace and happiness. The Satras or monasteries, are still in existence, and age has not staled their sanctity and popularity.

Poetry was not the only medium of propagating the Vaisnava cult. Brajabuli prose was introduced in the dramas, or *Ankiya Nats* as they were called. A saint named Bhattadeva, coming after Sankardeva, translated the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata* into elegant and lucid Assamese prose, and the great scientist Dr. Prafulla Chandra Roy, after reading the *Katha-Gita*, the *Gita* in prose, admitted the development of Assamese prose literature in the far distant sixteenth century which no other literature of the world reached except the writings of Hooker and Latimer in England.

Sankardeva's cult became extremely popular in Assam on account of the equality which it preached, and the simplicity it enjoined upon in devotional matters. It did away with the barriers of caste by placing the highest and the lowest ranks of society in the same category provided the men were devoted, righteous and refined in manners. It made it easy for tribesmen to enter into the fold of Hinduism if they complied with some simple requirements after their initiation.

As a result of the **spread of Vaisnavism**, there was an enormous output of literature in **Assam**. The epics, *Puranas* and the classics were translated into **Assamese**, either in their entirety, or in the form of selected episodes **therefrom**. Dramas were also composed in large numbers, and they were **staged on sacred occasions** in *namghars* or congregation halls, in **Satras and villages**, and also in secular functions like marriages and the **receptions of distinguished guests**. There were two main impulses which led to this output:

First, it was realised very early that the high ideals and thoughts enshrined in Sanskrit books were not accessible to the general public. It was therefore necessary to translate them into the language commonly spoken by the **people**. This realisation comes out distinctly in the advice given by **King Naranarayana** of Cooch Behar, 1540-1581 A.D., when he commissioned the scholars, assembled in his court, to write popular treatises on grammar, astronomy and arithmetic, and translate the epics and the *Puranas*, "so that the books will be read by women and **Sudras** in the present age, and by Brahmins in latter times." "It is only by this means", said Naranarayana, "that the scriptures can be **protected from loss** in this Kali-Yuga". Ananta **Kandali**, a contemporary of Sankardeva, adopted the Assamese medium in preference to Sanskrit because he hoped "that women, Sudras and others will learn the true significance, and rejoice by listening to the books". Madhabdeva, the chief disciple of Sankardeva, said that the river of the nectar of love, which had shone forth formerly in Vaikuntha, has flooded the entire world, his master having broken open the banks.

Secondly, Assam being an independent kingdom there were a large number of princes and nobles in the country who could afford to give patronage to scholars and poets. This patronage emanated principally from the **Ahom court** in Eastern Assam and the courts of the ruling **Narayani families** in Western Assam situated in Cooch Behar, Kamrup and Darrang. Rama Saraswati, in his *Puspa-haran Vana-parva*, alluded to the gift of books, money and attendants to enable him to devote himself wholeheartedly to carry out the orders of King Naranarayana to **translate the Mahabharata** into Assamese.

Royal patronage in **Eastern Assam** became copious from the middle of the seventeenth century when the Ahom kings were converted into Hinduism. This patronage reached a highwater-mark during the reigns of King Rudra Singha and his two sons, Siva Singha,

1714-44, and Rajeswar Singha, 1751-69 A.D. The most outstanding figure of the period was the court-poet Kaviraj Chakravarty who translated *Brahmavaivarta-purana* and Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*. King Rudra Singha and his son Siva Singha were themselves song-writers of no mean order; and Rajeswar Singha wrote a drama entitled *Kichak-badh*. A poet named Kavisekhar Bhattacharyya wrote a book named *Hari-vamsa* dealing with sexology for the entertainment and education of King Rajeswar Singha's son Yuvaraj Charu Singha and the latter's consort Princess Premada Sundari. Many manuscripts of the period are profusely illustrated in colour, the notable examples being *Gita-Govinda*, *Hasti-Vidyarnava*, *Sankhachura-badh* and *Dharma-puran*. The death of Rajeswar Singha was followed by convulsions and strifes till the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and literary patronage began to dwindle in consequence.

Vigilance is the prince of freedom, and Assam being an independent state it had to remain perpetually alert in order to ensure the efficiency of its internal administration and its immunity from foreign aggression. All useful information was therefore recorded, and precedents and past events were enscrolled in chronicles or Buranjis, which throw light on the past history of Assam and also of India, and on the customs, manners and the economic condition of the people. The Buranjis of Assam have imparted a unique distinction to its literature in view of their practical absence in the vernacular literatures of other parts of India.

Besides the Buranjis, treatises were also compiled, under the auspices of the government, on the art of warfare, on the construction of forts and ramparts, royal palaces and on the ailments of elephants, horses and hawks and on all subjects, mastery over which was necessary for efficient administration.

April 27, 1955.

New Delhi Centre, Talk broadcast from All India Radio.

OUR PUBLICATIONS

1.	Studies in the History of Assam <i>by S. K. Bhuyan</i>	Rs. 105
2.	History of Medieval Assam <i>by N. N. Acharyya</i>	150
3.	Assam and Neighbouring States <i>by N. N. Acharyya</i>	105
4.	North East as Viewed by Foreigners <i>by N. N. Acharyya</i>	125
5.	Garo Hills-Land and the People <i>by L. S. Gassah</i>	125
6.	A Dictionary in Assamese and English <i>by M. Bronson</i>	175
7.	Dairy Microbiology <i>by K. C. Mahanta</i>	125
8.	New Horizons of North East <i>by J. D. Baveja</i>	100
9.	Twenty Years in Assam <i>by P. H. Moore</i>	96
10.	Frontiers <i>by George Dunbar</i>	180
11.	Marketing in North East India <i>by J. B. Ganguly</i>	105
12.	Folklore in North East India <i>by S. Sen</i>	125
13.	Planning in North-East India <i>by K. Alam</i>	180
14.	Revenue Administration in Assam <i>by D. D. Mali</i>	165
15.	Basic Issues on Centre-State Relations Ed. Naorem Sanajaoba	195

Distributed by :

WESTERN BOOK DEPOT

Pan Bazar, GAUHATI
(Assam)