

A Study of the Growth of Assamese Short Story

PrasannaKhataniar

Research Scholar, Gauhati University

BhanitaNath

Assistant Professor, Deptt. of Assamese, Sonapur College

Introduction

The prevalence of fables in India is very old. The books and scriptures like the Vedas, the Vedangas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas, the Upanisadas, the Panchatantra, the Hitopadesa, the Buddha Jatakas and the Kathasarit-Sagara adduce ample proof of the antiquity of fables or stories. From the earliest times various stories are in circulation orally amongst diverse races and tribes of India. In the initial stages these stories could not be divided as stories from the Puranas, the stories of the animals or the fairy tales. But in course of time the difference between the stories written with the idea of giving moral lessons and the stories signifying nothing to that effect, became explicit. The Mahabharata is full of the episodes from the Puranas and through the episodes, the victory of the virtues and the defeat of the follies were predominantly expressed. The natural atmosphere, the geographical condition, the political atmosphere, the religious allegiance and the way of social life filled the stories, fables or episodes with moral lessons.¹ Yet everybody admits that a type of literature like short story existed in Assamese from the past. It is the fable or the story. From the point of view of technique, however, modern short story does not show any resemblance with the fable. In the growth and development of the short story the contribution of the fables or the stories cannot be ignored. As a result of the western literature Assamese literature gained developments in different directions which were unknown hitherto. Along with other branches of literature the short story made its glorious entrance into Assamese, LakshminathBezbaroa celebrated the birth of the Assamese short story in the pages of the journal Jonaki.²

Growth of Assamese

Short Stories :

In the beginning of the 19th century the short story came to be shaped as a distinct literary form in the western countries. The romantic movement of the west during the 19th century generated a new sensation in the sphere of thought in India. The introductions of western education unhinged the gate of the western culture and thought. Gradually the provincial literature were influenced by the west, the drama, the poetry, the novel were being written under the influence of the west.

Towards the last decade of the 19th century the direct impact of the western literature was felt on Assamese literature as well. The convention of telling stories is not new in our literature. In Assamese, like all other languages, innumerable fables were in vogue before the creation of the written literature. But the form in which these stories were told was verse. This is the characteristic of all types of early literature. Although composed in verse, the ballads which form a part of the early folk literature preponderate with many characteristics of short story. William Henry Hudson has called the ballads, "*short story in verse or story poems*".³ Jana GabharurGit (songs of Jana Gabharu), Kamala KonwarirGit (songs of Kamala Konwari), FulKonwararuMoniKonwararGit (songs of FulKonwar and Mani Konwar) are some of the popular ballads in Assamese. A story has been depicted through each of these songs or ballads. Besides, love, pity hatred and the simple interests of domestic life come under the scope of these songs.⁴

The word 'Cutigalpa' meaning 'short story' is of course, quite a new in Assamese. The word has been adopted from the English word 'short story'. Stories or fables are in vogue in all the countries of the world. Such stories traditionally coming down orally through ages, never become old. Assamese literature is very rich in such fables. It was LakshminathBezbaroa who not only took the initiative in the field of collection of the fables in Assamese, but also gave birth to the Assamese short story. Prior to his endeavour in this direction, Bezbaroa gave literary touch to some of the tales prevailing in the society and collected them in book form. The art or the technique of his short stories in the beginning had some characteristics of the fables. The speciality with Bezbaroa lies in the fact that he initiated the development of the folk-art by way of collecting the tales in the shape of books and at the same time gave birth to the modern Assamese short story.

The oral folk-tales of Assamese literature had its written form during the days of Jonaki. It should however be admitted that a good number of tales adopted from the Bible were published in Orunodoi (1846). Orunodoi was a monthly magazine published by the Baptist Missionaries who came to Assam to propagate Christianity. Besides publishing many fables in Orunodoi, Mrs. Eliza Brown, the wife of Dr, Nathone Brown wrote a story book. This is the first compilation of stories or fables in Assamese language. After this in 1876 Mr. A.K. Garni published a small book of stories under the title KaniBeheruar Sadhu (The story of the egg trader). The story deals with a small episode in the life of a young man in search of birds eggs in the hills of Scotland and in his distress, his initiation at the feet of Jesus christ. A

little perusal at the story books published by the Missionaries will make it clear that the Missionaries did not try to write modern short stories in the sense in which we understand it today. One thing can be definitely pointed out here that the Missionaries took up the plan to propagate the religion of Christ through the medium of Assamese language and that they were so busy in making it effective that their effort in writing the novel, the story merely turned out to be religious tracts or pamphlets of propaganda.⁵ Since they were written as the medium for propagating the Christian religion, these, in truth, remained far away from the touch of modern short story. The Missionaries might have failed to endow the stories written in Assamese with the full status of modern short stories, nevertheless they acquainted Assamese people with the most modern aspect of literature. Further more, the advent of the Orunodoi heralded the dawn of journalism for the first time.

The Assamese fable or story took a definite and lasting form at the hands of LakshminathBezbaroa. The stories told by the grandpas and grandmas coming down to us orally were given a written form in his own language by Bezbaroa in the pages of *Jonaki*. Although the short story is a product of the modern age, the collector of old fables in Assamese and the father of the Assamese short story, LakshminathBezbaroa did not make specific difference between the two. Therefore, one will find some of his stories to have been provided with pleasure and gaiety of fables while others seem to have developed out of the cradle of the fables into the modern short stories. It can be said that the sphere of Bezbaroa's short story is in reality an enlarged and refined form of fables and in fact it is like old wine in the new bottle.⁶ One thing should be noted that Bezbaroa has never given the epithet short story (*Cutigalpa*) to his stories. Even he has named one of his story books as *Sadhu KatharKuki* (*Basket of tales, 1910*). In his *Sadhu KatharKuki*, he has included *Gharpata Kaka* (*Match-maker Grand-father*) and *MulaKhowaBurha* (*Radish eater Old man*) two fables of the long past. With an eye to the rich heritage of the story literature in India, Bezbaroa took the initiative to publish the folk-tales. The main reason for calling these stories the tales, according to Bezbaroa, was that through, these charming tales or fables the wise and old people in olden times in Assam imparted moral lessons and sound advices not only to their children but also to others.⁷ Every fable or tale of *Junuka* (*Rattle, 1913*) or *BurhiAair Sadhu* (*Tales of Grandmother, 1912*) written by Bezbaroa is imaginative, A story has been concluded with a line having a moral lesson. The story of the *Bandar aruSiyal* (*Monkey and the Fox*) in *Junuka* can cited here for an illustration, At the end of

the story this moral saying is quoted , “Betrayers achieve such results. One seems to have profited initially but ultimately the deluge comes.”⁸ The moral lessons amply justify the statement of Bezbaroa made in relation to the stories.

Although the short stories of Bezbaroa in the initial stage had some of the characteristics of the tales or fables, Bhadari, Bapiram and some other stories undoubtedly bear the half mark of short stories. Most of the people, however, are of opinion that the short story and the fable do not have any technical similarity. Nevertheless, the two hemispheres have a connecting link between them. In old times people narrated episodes about their own experiences. Literate people while writing, embellished them. This art of embellishment has in modern age been employed in writing a short story. As some writers have put it - "The sage, the mendicant, the businessman, or the expert hunter while narrating their experiences either willfully or through forgetfulness, -adorn them with colour to make them attractive. We too add colour to the narration that we make of our own experiences, to a third person".⁹ The same device is applied to a modern short story based on realism. But the similarity between the short story and the fables or the tales ends there. As a grandfather cannot be traced in a grand-son, so it is difficult to discover a tale or a fable in a short story. It is to assimilate Bezbaroa's sentiments as revealed in one of his poems, "a visualization of the old world with a new vision."¹⁰ The chief aim of the tales is to offer genuine pleasure. Added to this, there is the will of the speaker or the writer to offer moral lessons. In a tale the supernatural elements are given prominence over realism which is the main characteristic of the short story. In the "SilonirJiyekar Sadhu" (The story of the daughter of a Kite) by LakshminathBezbaroa, the kite converses like human beings and rears up a human child on a tree-top. In the fable MekurirJiyekar Sadhu (The story of the daughter of a Cat) by LakshminathBezbaroa the birth of a human child from the womb of a cat and the birth of a kitten from the womb of her mistress being cursed by the cat are incidents which have nothing to do with realism. The short story, on the other hand is intimately connected with real life. The fears and doubts of human beings, the wonderful mystery of human character, the nectar and the hemlock of the river of life and, infact all that we experience in our life are included in it.¹¹ It can, therefore, be said that the advent of short story in Assamese literature is not the result of the gradual development of the fables or tales. The impact of the western literature on Assamese is the root cause of its birth.

The publication of the monthly journal Jonaki is a noteworthy event in the history of the Assamese literature, Jonaki.

heralded the clear stamp of modernism in Assamese literature. Although Orunodoi prepared the ground for the basis of modern Assamese literature, the direct influence of the western literature was not received till the publication of *Jonaki*. Those who paved the way for the birth of *Jonaki* were LakshminathBezbaroa, HemchandraGoswami (1872-1928) and Chandra Kumar Agarwalla (1867-1938) who resided in Calcutta for higher education. As a result of their endeavour a new age came to the history of the Assamese language and literature. It is the age of Romanticism in Assamese literature. It is also named after *Jonaki* because the various ramifications of modern western literature came to Assamese through it and the journal served as a great source of inspiration for the period. The influx of new ideas due to contact with the western education and culture gave Assamese literature a new growth and standard. The reasons that caused romantic movement in England or Europe in the later part of the 18th and the early part of the 19th century were completely absent in Assam. The romantic movement that developed in English literature towards the later part of the 18th century and move particularly after the publication of the *lyrical Ballads* in 1798 by Wordsworth and Coleridge is known as the Romantic Revival. This shows that Romanticism was not a new thing in English literature. It pervaded the works of Shakespeare and Spenser in the 16th century. But the romantic trend that began in Assamese literature with the publication of the journal *Jonaki* was the first of its kind. It had nothing to do either with the political or the philosophical atmosphere of the land. It was a consciously created literary movement initiated by *Jonaki*. It is true that Bezbaroa and others who established *Jonaki* and wrote in it were inspired by the English romantic literature. But the ideals that they kept in view while making literary attempt were the ideals of the Bengali literature of the time. Bezbaroa's first short story *Kanya* (The daughter) appeared in the 3rd issue of *Jonaki* second year. *Kanya* is not only the brain child of Bezbaroa but also the first daughter or maiden in the history of the Assamese short story. The story *PanditMahasay* (The teacher) by Bezbaroa was published in the fourth year of *Jonaki*. In the same year, stories like *MulakhowaBurha* and *GharPata Kaka* by Bezbaroa came to be published. Thus it is through Bezbaroa that the old tales acquired a new literary shape with distinctive characteristics of its own and at the same the social significance of the old tales came to be discovered.¹² *Bhadari*, *Dhowa-khua*, *DaktorBabu*, *RatanMunda*, *BhempuriyaMauzadar* and other short stories which represent Bezbaroa's artistic vision were published in *Jonaki* in its sixth year after which *Jonaki* was published not from Calcutta but from Gauhati. In *Jonaki*. part II edited by Satyanath Borah (1660-1925) and

published from Gauhsti in 1901, appeared Bezbaroa's Arji (The petition), Seni Campa, Keko Kaka (The grand-father Keko), Jayanti, Putravan Pita (The father of a worthy Son), and other short stories of diverse subject-matter and set thus a particular trend in the history of the Assamese short story and this created a new literary consciousness in Assam as a result of which Assamese literature was able to far go ahead in the path of progress.¹³

Conclusion

The influence of the English literature was prominent in the literature of the Jonaki age and its writers. The chief aim of Jonaki was to introduce new trend in Assamese literature in the light of the western romantic ideals. But the writers of the Jonaki age had their originalities too. Although under western influence Bezbaroa started writing short stories, yet his stories in the initial stages leaned heavily on the indigenous folktales of course, except Gharpata kaka, Mulakhowa Burha and some two or three stories all others were of the modern class, Bezbaroa himself did not consider the stories named above as short stories. He has alluded them as fables and stories of the 'Satya Yug.' However, the Assamese writers were leaning heavily on the English literature, yet the seeds of the western romanticism sown in the fertile land of Assam under the leadership of Bezbaroa had their natural growth in Assam.

References

1. *Gangopadhyaya, Narayana, Sahitye Chotogalpa, p,61*
2. *"These fables are the creative efforts of a primitive folk mind at envisioning an atmosphere in which the cold facts of life do not find a place. Despite this fact, that folk-tales as such had a contribution to make to the growth and development of the modern short story there is no doubt."*
- Barua, Hem, *Assamese literature, p,214.*
3. *Hudson, William Henry, An Introduction to the study of literature, pp, 136-138.*
4. *Their themes are commonly furnished by the more elementary aspects of life ; large space is given in them to tales of adventure, fighting, deeds of prowess and valour ; they have frequently a strong infusion of supernaturalism, while love, hatred, pity, and the simpler interests of the domestic lot, receive a full share of attention. - Hudson, William Henry, An Introduction to the study of literature, p,136.*
5. *Neog, Maheswar, Asamiya Sahityar Ruprekha, p,291*

6. Chaliha, Parag,(ed), *BezbaroarSahityaAlocana*, p,117.
7. Bezbaroa, Lakshminath, *Budi Aieroadhu*, *Preface*.
8. Hazarika, Atulchandra, (ed., *Bezbaroa GrantI avuii*,(Vol.1) , p,930.
9. NeogMaheswar, Das, Jogesh, Sarma, Narayan,(ed), *AsamiyaGalpaGuccte*, *preface*.
10. Hazarika, Atulchandra,(ed),*Bezbaroa,Granthavall*,(Vol-II) p,979.
11. Barkataki, Biren (ed),*BezbaroarSahityaAlocaria*, p,13.
12. BorgohainHomen,(ed), *AsamiyaGalpeoahkaian*,*Preface*.
13. Bezbaroa, Lakshminath, *BezbaroarGranthavali*,(Vol-I) p,666.