

## Shakespeare in Comparative Discourse and Influence Studies in the Assamese Language Print Media

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### Abstract

This article is a survey of some essays, articles and other kinds of writings published in Assamese language newspapers, magazines, tabloids and anthologies from 1947 to 2002

**Key words:** Shakespeare, Assamese language, print media

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## Introduction

There is a tendency in Assam, as in the rest of the globe, of comparing great literary works dealing with passions like love, hatred and jealousy with such works by Shakespeare. Again, there is no negligible amount of writing in Assamese tracing the influence of Shakespeare on remarkable Indian literary works. This is quite natural and usual. However, what is unusual - and probably unnatural too - is the innovation of correspondence between the entire spirit of a folk culture of a land with the ruling spirit of a certain kind of work by Shakespeare. Jajneswar Sarma, a great literary savant of the state, has observed that the spirit of the *Bihu* (that is, the spring festival in Assam) and the ruling spirit of the comedies of Shakespeare are indistinguishable.

Materials available in this area can be discussed separately as

- Shakespeare in comparative studies proper; and
- Shakespeare in influence studies.

We will discuss here only such writings as appeared in Assamese language newspapers, magazines, tabloids and souvenirs from 1947 to 2002.

### A. Shakespeare in Comparative Studies

Materials available in this area can be sub-classified as follows:

- Shakespeare in comparative literary studies; and
- Shakespeare in comparative cultural studies.

We will discuss these two separately.

#### (a) Shakespeare in Comparative Literary Studies

The dramatic works of Kalidasa,<sup>i</sup> Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht and also of leading Assamese playwrights of the formative years of modern Assamese drama are often discussed with reference to those of Shakespeare, and the Assamese scholars and critics to have contributed outstandingly in this field are

Satyendranath Sarma, Jajneswar Sarma, Apurba Chandra Barthakuria, Upendranath Sarma, Hiren Gohain, Pona Mahanta, Makhan Prasad Duara and Ananda Barmudoi.

In an article in *Navayug* in 1964, Hiren Gohain declared his opposition to Rabindranath Tagore's view that Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* represents a world of cohesion and unity, whereas Shakespeare's *The Tempest* represents a world of discord and disharmony.<sup>ii</sup> Contradicting Tagore's view that *Sakuntala* represents the spiritual superiority of the East over the West, Gohain argues that Shakespeare's spiritualism was humanism at bottom, and this humanism was integrative and cohesive – a making of different ethos, attitudes and ways of life growing at different times in Europe. Gohain refuses to be in line with Tagore's praise of Kalidasa's device of garbing an uncouth reality of polygamous ancient Indian society with the curse of a Brahmin named Durbasa. The reality garbed is that the women who are hunted (that is, deceitfully married and/or sexually enjoyed) by men are often forgotten by those who hunt them. Gohain says that nothing like the curse of Durbasa – a result of the divisive and discriminatory *barnasram* system of Hinduism – has ever been faced by anybody in *The Tempest*. Avowal of the divine dictum that all men are equal and again justification and retention of the age-old *barnasram* system, as was done by the great *avatar* Krishna – which paradoxically exists in Hinduism even today – has never been acceptable to the West, asserts Gohain. He does not seem impressed by Tagore's observation that nature in the forms of Caliban and Ariel is held in bondage and compelled to serve man as his slave. He, on the other hand, thinks that Caliban represents the untamable beast in man, whereas Ariel stands for man's indomitable urge for sublimity and divinity. Prospero receives no spiritual wisdom, but can pronounce an eternal promise of the human soul: 'It's new to thee' (V.i). He is aware of the transitoriness of things, of the fast paces of time, and yet he can remain an eternal adorer of the new. This renaissance spirit Gohain sees lacking in *Sakuntala*. The garbing

of an uncouth social reality with the curse of an arrogant Brahmin and Tagore's support to it does not appear proper to Gohain.

In this essay of his early youth, Gohain uses sarcasm and banter against all those who are not satisfied with Shakespeare's anthropocentric spiritualism. Without naming Tagore, but meaning him, he says:

Mystics are very fortunate because they are quite sure that they possess a rare insight and a monopolistic right to do away with all the sufferings and agonies of man and eliminate all conflicts, discriminations and injustice from the universe and make them a part of an indivisible infinite. But Shakespeare's humanistic spiritualism was not so sure. (Gohain, 1964: 25)

Apurba Chandra Barthakuria, however, does not see much ideological difference between Kalidasa and Shakespeare at least in their treatment of love. In an article in *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, he writes: 'The ideology of Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* is the same as that of *The Tempest*. These two great dramatists of the world have surprised all by upholding the greatness of love' (Barthakuria, 1973: 33).

Barthakuria has compared some speeches of Dusyanta to Sakuntala with Ferdinand's to Miranda and has attempted to prove that both of them are earnest in love. Barthakuria quotes Dusyanta saying to Anasuya and Priyambada, two female mates of Sakuntala: "Though I have many wives I consider only two – this earth with the sea as her garment and your friend Sakuntala worthy of my lineage."

The earth is just a metaphor for a woman, unfit to occupy the place of a ladylove. Barthakuria, thus, proves that Sakuntala is the only woman the polygamous Dusyanta really loves. All other women he married were simply his wives, not his love. But Sakuntala is an exception, his wife and love in one.

Ferdinand, in the same way, came across many women in his life, liked several of them, but liked only one 'with so full soul' and that

woman is Miranda. Barthakuria quotes Ferdinand's words to Miranda in this connection: 'Full many a lady I have ey'd with best regard; and many a time the harmony of their tongues hath into bondage brought my too diligent ear; for several virtues have I liked several women never any with so full soul' (III.i).

From a materialistic point of view, both Dusyanta and Ferdinand are high-placed and wealthy members of society, whereas neither Sakuntala nor Miranda is in good material conditions of existence; yet the difference in wealth and status does not stand in the way of the growth of their love. This, according to Barthakuria, proves the genuineness of their love. Barthakuria points out that, though Sakuntala had seen human beings of both sexes before meeting Dusyanta, the life she led was one of complete austerity. Feeding the deer and watering the plants were all she did before meeting Dusyanta. Her scope of mixing with men – even with Kanva – was very limited. Yet soon after seeing Dusyanta she confesses: 'I can't say why, after having seen the stranger, I have been so overpowered by an unusual sensation – a sensation hitherto unfelt by a *tapoban*<sup>iii</sup>-dweller like me'. Miranda's is a worse case than Sakuntala's, writes Barthakuria. She had not seen any woman except her own reflection in the glass (and, therefore, did not know how other women felt in male contact) before meeting Ferdinand. Yet, as soon as she sees him, the eternal woman in her rushes out and compels her to say to Ferdinand: 'I would not wish any companion in the world but you' (III.i).

Barthakuria is all praise for both Kalidasa and Shakespeare in transforming love at first sight into permanent love. As such, both of them endow their heroines with rare physical beauty, in addition to extraordinary mental resources.

In Assamese literary criticism, there exists no negligible amount of comparison between the characters, themes, ideas, etc. in regional literary productions and those in Shakespeare. The fact that Shakespeare was the most formidable influence on the Assamese

playwrights of the formative period of modern Assamese drama justifies such comparisons, though many of these do not go far. In Padmanath Gohain Baruah's play *Jaimati* (1900), Jaimati, Gadapani's wife, was put to death by the Ahom king Chulikfa, better known as Lora Raja, for no fault of hers. The king, in fact, wanted to kill Gadapani, the absconding prince of the Tungkhung clan, but, failing to nab him, put his pregnant wife, Jaimati, to death under the ill-advice of his ambitious minister, *Rajmantri* Phukan (Atan Buragohain), who was, then, pursuing a ruthless policy of massacring all able-bodied princes, including Gadapani, to have his own path to the throne clear. Gadapani was, thus, instrumental to the fulfilment of his minister's desire, as Macbeth is often supposed to have been instrumental to the fulfilment of the desire of his wife. The Ahom King had some prick of conscience before killing Jaimati, just as Macbeth had a strong mental conflict before killing Duncan. In an article in *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, Dimbeswar Sarma makes this comparison sharp and clear, and while doing that, he does not forget to point out that Shakespeare's device of showing Macbeth's inner conflict was far stronger than Gohain Baruah's and, therefore, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* could retain its structural unity till the end of the drama, whereas Gohain Baruah's *Jaimati* failed to do so. Shakespeare could give a very strong soliloquy to his Macbeth on the eve of killing Duncan, but Gohain Baruah could not endow his King with any such gift simply because he was a lesser genius. Gohain Baruah, therefore, should have shown the King's repentance not before, but after, Jaimati's death, Sarma has suggested (Sarma, 1971: 31). Among the Assamese literary characters to have fascinated a good many Assamese writers is Bapura in Jyotiprasad Agarwala's play *Karengar Ligiri* (*The Slave-Girl of the Palace*) and the Shakespearean character with whom he is usually compared is Falstaff. While Makhan Prasad Duara, who is almost a worshipper of Jyotiprasad, asserts that Bapura is an Assamese out and out, and there cannot be any comparison between Falstaff and him (Duara, 1982: 62), Satyendranath

Sarma and Satyaprasad Baruah discover Shakespeare's influence on Jyotiprasad's depiction of Bapura by looking at the character from a different perspective. Baruah says that, as Shakespeare's treatment of the common man with adequate importance did influence the Assamese playwrights also, Shakespeare must have been in Jyotiprasad's mind as he was sketching the character of Bapura (Baruah, 1999: 42). Sarma, on the other hand, observes that Jyotiprasad's Bapura, like Shakespeare's Fool, is both a clever servant and a faithful companion to his master. He is very witty, though he looks like a fool, as a Fool in Shakespeare is (Sarma, 1875: 765).

*Karengar Ligiri* is a passionate love-story in which Sundar, a prince, is resolute on making Sewali, a slave-girl (*ligiri*), first the princess and then the queen of his palace. He has promised that he will marry Sewali and compel everybody to do obeisance to her. In a society based on intense socio-economic inequality such resolutions hardly materialize. Naturally, Sewali had to be mopped up from the stage as Ophelia had to be. Though the situations of *Hamlet* and *Karengar Ligiri* are entirely different, it was the intention of neither Shakespeare nor Jyotiprasad to resolve the crisis through marriage. In an interesting article on Jyotiprasad, Duara distinguishes between the devices used by Shakespeare and Jyotiprasad for mopping up Ophelia and Sewali respectively. Shakespeare sends Ophelia into madness and lets the current of a river take away her body whereas Sewali is made to disappear in a way unknown to anybody. Though the disappearances of both Ophelia and Sewali are reported on the stage, there is not even an iota of mistiness as to how Ophelia disappears; on the other hand, one might be required to wrestle a lot with his unyielding imagination as to be able to understand how Sewali might disappear. Towards the end of the play, some Naga girls appear on the stage mourning that Sewali has been swept away by the current of a fountain, but sometimes later they say that she has been taken away by some spirits. It is possible, Duara says, that Sewali's disappearance is nothing but her suicide, but

there is an element of mistiness about it, which is not found in Ophelia's case.

Despite the dearth of any serious comparative study between Shakespeare and Tagore in Assamese, there are casual remarks here and there that can be used to construct a comparison between the two. In an article in *Navayug*, Jajneswar Sarma quotes lines from *As You Like It* and says that though Shakespeare crept 'like snail, unwilling to school' (II.vii), he was 'learned'. Both Shakespeare and Tagore were disdainers of customary education and yet were 'gentle' and 'learned' like Shakespeare's Orlando (Sarma, 1964: 27). In another article in the same weekly, Sunil Kumar Barthakur says that Shakespeare's poaching of a deer in Thomas Lucy's garden at Stratford-on-Avon and his subsequent emergence as a dramatist in London is comparable with the bandit Ratnakar's emergence as the epic-poet Valmiki or the fool Kalidasa's becoming a great poet at the blessing of Saraswati. Like Sarma, Barthakur also compares Shakespeare and Tagore from a biographical point of view. He maintains that, when in London, Shakespeare had to depend a lot upon the patronization of the aristocracy and had to remain in deep attachment with them till he was about forty. It took time for him to forgo the comfort he received from the rich men of his time. This was not so in Tagore's case, Barthakur writes. He says: 'In Shakespeare's case, cultivation of art was not a mere pursuit, but a profession, a business. He was not a self-supporting litterateur like Tagore. He could live on his own and write with self-confidence only when he was about forty' (Barthakur, 1964: 46).

Mahendra Bora's editorial of the April 1964 edition of *Monideep* deals with a number of Shakespeare-related topics, including a comparison between Greek tragedy and the tragedies of Shakespeare. He is of the view that Shakespeare has surpassed the Greek tragedians at least in his ability to become closer to the modern man. It is a Shakespearean character, not a character of the Greek tragedy, with whom the modern man would like to identify himself. Desdemona's

death, Bora says, is more significant to the modern man than the death of Antigone. Though the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles acquaint one with the deepest agonies of man, Agamemnon, as compared with Hamlet, is a stranger to the modern man. The love between Romeo and Juliet touches our heart much more than the love episode of Paris and Helen. Shakespearean characters, Bora observes, are not mere puppets in the hands of destiny, though a Shakespearean character as if Gloucester is sometimes heard crying:

As flies to the wanton boys, are we to  
Gods,

They kill us for their sport. (*King Lear*,  
IV.i)

Speeches of this kind, made by other characters also, do not represent the totality of the playwright's attitude to life. Hamlet or Macbeth is more independent of the control of Destiny than Oedipus in Greek tragedy. Having already asserted that Shakespearean characters are not mere puppets in the hands of destiny, Bora neither proclaims that nor are they puppets in the hands of Shakespeare. Shakespeare creates them only once, the rest is done by the characters themselves.

While Bora, obviously influenced by Clifford Leech (1964: 292), gives utmost importance to Shakespeare's characters, Pona Mahanta, in his comparative study of Shakespeare and Brecht, does not forget to point out that Brecht gave little importance to dramatic characters in general and Shakespearean characters in particular. What was important to Brecht was the social conditions that contained these characters, not the characters themselves (Mahanta, 1975: 11-6).

Ananda Barmudoi seems more interested in ventilating Shaw's amusing remarks on Shakespeare than in making any serious comparative study of the two. But there does exist a comparison between the dramatic devices used by Shakespeare and Ibsen in Barmudoi's essay in *Gariyoshi* (February 1994). But this comparison, again, is mainly based on what Shaw thought and what he did not think

about these two great dramatists of the world. Shaw was an admirer of Ibsen, not of Shakespeare. But Ibsen used some of the devices that Shakespeare had already used. Naturally, Shaw is of the opinion that Shakespeare is still surviving not owing to whatever he had in common with Webster but owing to whatever he had in common with Ibsen. Ibsen's plays do not end with a large number of dead bodies on the stage, as the Elizabethan tragedies did. But Shaw thinks that there is an attempt in some plays of Ibsen to glorify death. Barmudoi then raises a very pertinent question: 'Did Oswald, Rosemar, Rebecca and Hedda Gabbler die natural deaths, or were they killed as per the method Shakespeare used?' (Barmudoi, 1994: 36).

It was not possible for Shaw to answer this question; but there was Barmudoi to answer it for him. Barmudoi writes:

Ibsen's dead bodies are the dead bodies of tired and devastated persons. Ibsen did not kill Hilda the way Shakespeare had killed Juliet. ... Had Ibsen written *Hamlet*, only one person would have died in the last scene of the play and that is Horatio. Angry at his incompetence, Fortinbrass, with an open sword in hand, must have removed all the crumbled pieces of Horatio's ethics. (Barmudoi, 1994: 36)

We do not have much feminist – even proto-feminist – approach to Shakespeare studies in Assamese. Yet we cannot ignore Hiranmoyee Devee's contribution in this field through *Oorooli*, women's first Assamese fortnightly, in 1964. In her essay on Desdemona, Hiranmoyee Devi (1964) observes that treating of women (even of those who are chaste and innocent) with cruelty by their suspicious husbands is an eternal and global fact. Devee observes that the absolutely unjust kind of punishment that Desdemona had to suffer is a common experience of the average Indian women. Desdemona, who sacrificed everything to have a peaceful life with Othello, could not have even a peaceful death in his hands. And what about Sita? Sita, who had abandoned the

pleasures of the palace and gone to the forest with Rama, had to seek peace in the bowels of the earth, in the long run. Devee's essay considers Sita and Desdemona to be two pathetic victims of man's suspicion about women.

### **Shakespearean Sonnets in Comparative Studies**

Do the sonnets of Shakespeare glorify love or express sexual perversion amounting to homosexuality? The Assamese writers and critics would vote for both the answers. While admitting that Shakespeare glorified love in some of his sonnets (e.g. in sonnet no CVI), Upendranath Sarma reminds his readers of such sonnets as contain frank sexual expressions like 'Be anchor'd in the bay where all men ride' (CXXXVII), 'The sea all water, yet receives rain still' (CXXXV) and 'I guess one's angel in another's hell' (CXXXIV) (Sarma, 1980: 66, 68). In his sonnet beginning with 'Two loves I have of comfort and despair' (CXLIV), Sarma, like many other Shakespearean critics, has traced strong homosexual implications. Since the poet's friend was transformed into a man from woman by no other than nature (sonnet no. XX), this homosexuality must have been guided by the principle of love for beauty. There was an undercurrent of this homosexuality in Hellenism as well as in Michaelangelo's life and sonnets. This is the reason why the great grandson of Michaelangelo took care to change the gender of the poet's beloved in the first edition of the poet's sonnets that he published. Shakespeare's sonnets were first published in 1609 by Thomas Thorp, though Shakespeare himself was not in favour of their publication because of these homosexual implications, writes Sarma (Sarma, 1980: 63).

Though Shakespeare was well-aware of the prevalence of an excess of falsehood in love and of his ladylove's habit of lying, neither did he think that he should stop lying with his ladylove<sup>iv</sup> nor did he consider his deceitful ladylove to be less appealing than any other woman in the world:

And yet, by heaven I think my love as rare

As she belied with false compare.  
(CXXX).

This love for the Dark Lady reminds Sarma of Mirabell's love for Millamant in William Congreve's play *The Way of the World*, where the former says, 'for I like her with all her faults; nay, nay like her for her faults' (Act I). Shakespeare's knowledge of falsehood in love was no hindrance to his becoming a great connoisseur of the permanence of love. Observing that Shakespeare was well-aware of both positive and negative, bright and dark sides of love as John Donne was, Sarma points out that there are many lines in Shakespearean sonnets that might remind one of the following lines in John Donne's poem 'The Anniversary':

All other things to their destruction draw,

Only our love hath no decay;

This, no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday,

Running it never runs from us away,

But truly keeps his first, last everlasting day.

While Sarma compares Shakespeare's conception of the permanence of love with that of John Donne, Apurba Chandra Barthakuria compares it with that of Bhavabhuti<sup>v</sup>. Barthakuria quotes lines from Bhavabhuti's *Uttar Ramcharita* and from Shakespeare's sonnet CXVI and shows their thematic proximity (Barthakuria, 1973: 23).

Lines from Bhavabhuti's *Uttar Ramcharita*:

Rama: Happy and fortunate is he that hath perceived through sufferings that huge treasure of love. It doth not alter with the alteration of time. It remains steadfast in weal and woe. It is soothing in all situations. Age cannot stop its shower of bliss.

Lines from Shakespeare's sonnet CXVI:

Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

...

Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickles compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

### (b) Shakespeare in Comparative Cultural Studies

There exists an exciting study by Jajneswar Sarma (1978) in this field.<sup>vi</sup> Sarma points out that both the *Rangali Bihu* (the Assamese spring festival) and Shakespeare's birthday are in April, with only ten days to go between the two. He, then, quotes passage after passage from different comedies (and some tragedies also) of Shakespeare to prove that man's craving for beauty in nature, for a happy conjugal life, for a gratifying sexual relationship, and for the enjoyment of the pleasures of this world are suitably expressed through both Shakespeare and the *Bihu*.<sup>vii</sup> The essay contains original ideas, though the author refrains from citing lines from Bihu songs probably because (i) he was more interested in highlighting the affinity between the spirit of the two than in citing corresponding lines from Bihu songs; and (ii) he thought that lines from some well-known Bihu songs would not be enough to represent the total spirit of the festival.

In late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *Bihu* came under severe puritanical condemnation and was charged with spreading unbridled vulgarism. Kharaiya Bezbaruah's famous line in Assamese '*Ilihi machhat yimanei kaint, tathapi sarah bhag tela'* ('The *hilsa* fish may have bones, but the greater part of it is oily') – this could have been the most appropriate answer of the lovers of the *Bihu* to the charge of obscenity against it, writes Sarma. This brings to Sarma's mind Shakespeare's famous line in *Henry V*: 'There is

a soul of goodness even in things evil' (IV.i). 'Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?'(II.iii)<sup>viii</sup> is an eternal question of all the revellers of this world to the puritans, who oppose revelry. The revellers of the Bihu and those in the *Twelfth Night* have scant respect for puritanical morality. Bihu as a festival defies not only puritanism, but also starvation of any kind – physical or mental. If beauty gets austere united with virginity, posterity will get dissociated from beauty (cf. 'For beauty, starv'd with severity, – /Cuts beauty off from all posterity' – *Romeo and Juliet*, I, i). So, it is not unyielding virginity but liberal beauty that needs to be celebrated and this celebration deserves to be well-supported by feasting, singing and dancing. There is an abundance of such ideas in Shakespeare also and Sarma in Assam feels never fatigued of taking note of that.

Blooming flowers and singing birds are two great treasures of spring. Sometimes they become one, even in names. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, there is a song in which the cuckoo *bird* and the cuckoo-*bud* occur simultaneously and intensify the glory of spring:

When daisies pied and violets  
blue  
And lady-smocks all silver-white  
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue  
Do paint the meadows with  
delight,  
The cuckoo then on every tree  
Mocks married men.... (V, ii)

Sarma notes that birds and flowers having common names and capable of increasing joy and merriment are not uncommon in Assam also. Bihu songs are replete with the names of birds and flowers and some of them are common names for both birds and flowers, e.g. *keteki* and *kapou*.

Spring in Assam and spring in England bring the same joy to the lovers' minds. It unites the youth in man and the youth in woman with a youthful bond of love, while there is youth in

outer nature also. When 'a lover and his lass' – a *deka* and the *gabharu* of his heart – get united in the celebration of spring on the painted meadows of this earth, shouting *reba, reba* – a 'hey' and a 'ho', it remains no more difficult for Sarma to understand why 'Sweet lovers love the spring'. 'Love is crowned with the prime/ In the springtime', Sarma quotes from *As you Like It* and says that crowning of love is the object of the Bihu also.

## B. Shakespeare in Influence Studies

No history-based study of modern Assamese drama is possible without reference to Shakespeare, say hosts of Assamese scholars, critics and theatre experts. Jogen Chetia writes:

The influence of Shakespeare's drama on modern Assamese drama – especially when it was at its formative stage – is immense and long-lasting. The works of no other foreign playwright have been translated or approximated as much as Shakespeare's have been. The structure of Shakespearean drama was imitated by the modern Assamese playwrights. The division of Assamese historical and mythological plays into five acts, and then the division of each act into six or seven scenes, were made under the influence of Shakespearean drama. Shakespeare was responsible for the origin of Assamese romantic comedy. Making of dialogues in both prose and verse, setting of light or comic situations immediately after serious ones, intermingling of ordinary men and women with high personalities and setting of short scenes after long ones and, thereby, demonstrate the acceleration of action, running of sub-plots parallel or opposite to the main plots for intensifying the effect of the



main story – these and such other devices used in Shakespearean drama were used in Assamese drama also. Assamese dramatists including even Lakshminath Bezbaroa introduced Fools in their plays in imitation of Shakespeare. There were soliloquies in Sanskrit drama, but they were used to reveal some motives, intentions etc., not to acquaint the audience with the inner questions, self-analysis, emotional experiences and philosophical perceptions of the characters, as they were done in western drama. The device of unfolding characters by making them pass through external turmoil and inner agonies was borrowed into the Assamese drama from the West. Shakespeare continued to be the foremost influence on the Assamese drama till social and realistic drama in the language could attain maturity. (Chetia, 1979: 31-2)

Chetia's observation does not differ remarkably from Satyendranath Sarma's. Though (i) Sanskrit playwrights showed no special fascination for dividing a drama into five acts, and (ii) Elizabethan playwrights other than Shakespeare did also use five acts, it was mainly Shakespeare whom Sarma holds responsible for the supposed indispensability of five acts in the formative period of modern Assamese drama, because the Assamese playwrights of this period were more exposed to the plays of Shakespeare (through school and college curricula etc.) than those of any other British playwright. Sarma notes that this tendency of the Assamese playwrights (particularly during the formative years of modern Assamese drama) was so strong and incurable that even farces were made unnecessarily lengthy so that they could become five-act farces. As regards the

juxtaposition of light scenes with serious ones in Assamese drama, Sarma says that it might happen under the influence of Shakespeare, because even Ben Jonson did not use this device. The light and rustic characters – mainly from the lower orders of society – that abound in Shakespeare's plays are the modifications of the porters, the grave-diggers and the watchmen in Shakespeare. Sarma, however, maintains that most of these devices and characteristics were borrowed into Assamese *via* Bengali (Sarma, 1881 SE: 197).

In this article of the mid-twentieth century, Sarma expresses dissatisfaction over the abundance of sentimentality and the use of soliloquy and aside in Assamese historical and mythological plays till that time. Sarma does not consider these devices and characteristics to be natural and holds mainly Shakespeare responsible for these, maintaining, at the same time, that they were borrowed from Shakespeare *via* Bengali (Sarma, 1874 SE: 397).

While evaluating Shakespeare's influence on Bezbaroa, Pona Mahanta quotes lines from Bezbaroa's autobiography (*Mor Jivan Sonwaran*) to show that Shakespeare had been a great inspiration to him (Bezbaroa) right from his student life: 'I had Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *King John*, *Henry IV* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the list of my college textbooks. I started dreaming of enriching Assamese literature by writing two or four plays like them' (Mahanta, 1975:12).

Bezbaroa attempted to write two plays after Shakespeare in his early youth, namely *Hemchandra* (after *Hamlet*) and *Dinar Sapon* (after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), but completed none. He, then, wrote some farces and satires to expose the weaknesses of the Assamese race; but, in his mature age, he switched over to writing serious dramas after Shakespeare with a view to infusing moral and cultural resilience in the race. He wrote three historical plays, namely *Belimar* (Sunset), *Chakradhvaj Simha* and *Jaimati Kunwari* (*Jaimati the Princess*) with Shakespeare as his ideal and the historical plays of Shakespeare as his model (Mahanta 1975: 11-6).

1671 is an important year in the history of Assam. Aurangzeb's army advancing towards the Ahom Kingdom then ruled by Chakradhvaj Simha was strongly resisted by the Ahom force at Saraighat in Assam. There is an interesting play titled *Chakradhvaj Simha* by Laksminath Bezbaroa on this subject. Chakradhvaj Simha is the Ahom king whose soldiers have to fight back the aggressive Mughals under the generalship of Lachit Barphukan at Saraighat (1671). But there are cowards and drunkards among the defenders of the land who are aptly represented in the drama by Gajapurua and his friends – Takou, Tokora, Japara and Siddhiram – who loathe fighting. Satyendranath Sarma, Pona Mahanta, Satyaprasad Baruah and hosts of other scholars observe that Gajapurua and his friends externally resemble Shakespeare's Falstaff and his drunken comrades. In Bezbaroa's play *Mistress Quickly* has been presented as Gajapuriani, i.e. Gajapurua's wife, though in *Henry IV*, *Mistress Quickly* is not Falstaff's wife, but the owner of a tavern. There were no taverns in seventeenth-century Assam as there were in seventeenth-century England, and Gajapuriani, therefore, is seen supplying drinks and smokes to the frequenters of her house for these things. Gajapurua, just like Falstaff, pretends to have died in the battlefield by lying motionless among dead soldiers. He, again, falsely claims to have killed Rasid Khan with his own hands just as Falstaff had falsely claimed to have killed Hotspur and Henry Percy in the battle. Sarma maintains that there is a character named Mahabharata in Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Rukmini-Haran*, whose behaviour resembles that of Falstaff on the battlefield. With a view to saving his own life he remains lying motionless with dead soldiers on the battlefield, but claims later on that he fought valiantly in the battle, killed hundreds of enemies and proved to be a terror to them. Priyaram in *Chakradhvaj Simha* resembles Prince Hall in *Henry IV*. The only son of the legendary Ahom general Lachit Barphukan,<sup>x</sup> he got spoilt by joining the drunken company of Gajapurua just as Prince Hall had been spoilt through his friendship with Falstaff. And the common friends of Hall and Falstaff (namely

Poins, Peto, Gadshill and Bardolph) have become the common friends of Priyaram and Gajapurua (namely Takou, Tokora, Japara and Siddhiram) in Bezbaroa's *Chakradhvaj Simha*. Like Falstaff, Gajapurua also is corpulent, eloquent, bacchic, ready-witted and a coward. Satyendranath Sarma and Pona Mahanta have discussed such similarities and dissimilarities in detail.

Pona Mahanta discovers a stronger affinity between Gajapurua and Falstaff. Both of them make their maiden appearance on the stage in the second scene of the First Act. And the places where they make their maiden appearances are the political capitals of their respective kingdoms: Falstaff at London and Gajapurua at Gargaon. Though there are altogether eighteen scenes in the first part of *Henry IV* and twenty-four in *Chakradhvaj Simha*, the two groups of drunkards – one comprising Prince Hall, Falstaff and their friends, and the other comprising Priyaram, Gajapurua and their companions – appear in equal number of scenes: six, Mahanta has noted (Mahanta, 1975: 12-3).

All these resemblances, however, do not make one an exact counterpart of the other. Falstaff is inimitable, observe both Sarma and Mahanta.

Scholars and critics, including these two, have competently dealt with the fact that Bezbaroa created many other characters also under the influence of Shakespearean characters. They have traced shadows of Shakespeare's Ophelia, Miranda and Ferdinand on Bezbaroa's Pijou, Dalimi and Gadapani respectively. The similarity between Miranda and Dalimi has inspired Maheswar Neog to look upon Dalimi as Miranda's sister (Mahanta, 1975: 14).

A woman disguised as a man is something unusual in Sanskrit drama. This, however, is quite usual in Shakespeare. On the basis of this study, Sarma points out that the disguising women in Padmanath Gohain Baruah's *Lachit Barphukan*, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya's *Nagakonwar* and Sailadhar Rajkhowa's *Pratap Simha* bring to one's mind the disguising women in Shakespearean plays like *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *Cymbeline*. In some

Assamese plays also, we see some women characters getting their missions fulfilled by disguising themselves as male servants (Sarma, 1881: 197).

Sarma has discussed Shakespeare's influence on some other Assamese playwrights also in some of his writings in *Ramdhenu* (Sarma, 1874 SE) and *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika* (Sarma, 1881 SE). Prominent among them are Jyotiprasad Agarwalah and Indreswar Barthakur. The mob scene in *Julius Caesar* has a great appeal to every educated Assamese. In Indreswar Barthakur's play *Sribatsa Chinta*, there is a character named Shani who induces the mob to violence, something that Antony does in Rome after Caesar's death. In a scene in Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Sonit Kunwari*, Chitrleka brings Aniruddha from Dvaraka under the hypnotic spell of her music just as Ariel brings Ferdinand to Miranda mesmerizing him with his song: 'Come unto these yellow sands,/And then take hands' (I, ii). Most of these views of Sarma are shared by many critics and scholars of Assam, including Satyaprasad Baruah, Ram Goswami and Pona Mahanta, though each of them has his own share of contribution in this field.

In an article on Shakespeare, Satyaprasad Baruah (1999) writes that Sundar Kunwar, the hero of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's play *Karengar Ligiri (The Slave-girl of the Palace)* is a highly individualized character, with a fatal flaw, like any great Shakespearean hero. He becomes a tragic victim of his own obstinacy, which, according to Baruah, is his fatal flaw. Piyali Phukan, a great patriot of nineteenth-century Assam, fought heroically against the British, ignoring the reality that he was physically crippled. Baruah traces the shadow of Shakespeare's Richard III, who disregarding his physical disability, fought for his country, on this Piyali, the hero of *Piyali Phukan* (Goswami, 1999: ka & kha). Again, in the Assamese playwrights' tendency to give importance to the common person in drama, Baruah discovers a silent inspiration from Shakespeare. Bapura in *Karengar Ligiri* and Narayan in *Piyali Phukan* are two finest specimens of lower-class people

receiving importance in the drama of this language.

In an article, Satyendranath Sarma (1881 SE) writes that Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Ashrutirtha*, though in blank verse, is a huge departure from the original Shakespeare. In this play, King Lear is approximated as Pratap Simha, king of Kamrup; the Duke of Albany for *Darangiraja*, king of Darrang; and the Duke of Kent for Kundilpati, ruler of Kundil. Dukes, barons, etc. do not fit into the Indian situation and, naturally, such substitutions were inevitable, Sarma asserts. A widow making amoral advances towards her sister's husband is not unusual in any part of the globe; but in a typical Assamese society it is never made as brazenly as Regan does in *King Lear*. Hazarika, therefore, refused to accommodate the barefaced amoral advances of the widowed Regan towards her sister's husband in his adaptation of *King Lear*. According to Sarma, one would be able to trace nothing but the bare outline of the original Shakespearean story in Hazarika's *Ashrutirtha*. A person who is not getting honey has to be satisfied with molasses; and the average Assamese reader incapable of understanding Shakespeare's *King Lear* has to be satisfied with Hazarika's *Ashrutirtha*, Sarma observes.

In an article in *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, Dimbeswar Sarma (1976) traces Shakespeare's influence on many parts of *Kamatapur Dvansa*, a long poem, written in 1899 by Hiteswar Barbaruah. There is a profound influence of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* on this poem. After Golapi's suicide at the very presence of Nilambar, the poet himself says that Golapi's death is comparable with the deaths of Juliet and Ophelia.

Shakespeare influenced not only Assamese drama, but also Assamese poetry and fiction. In an article in *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, Nanda Talukdar traces Shakespeare's influence on the rhyme-pattern of some sonnets of Padmanath Gohain Baruah (Talukdar, 1971: 58-63). Though Gohain Baruah employed different rhyme schemes in different sonnets, sometimes he used Shakespeare's rhyme scheme also, either thoroughly or with minor modifications. For

example, the rhyme-scheme used by Gohain Baruah in his sonnets 'Kavita', 'Sonor Sansar', 'Harinath Gogoidev' etc. is fully Shakespearean (abab cdcd efef gg), whereas the rhyme-scheme in his sonnet 'Aideo Aikan' (abab cdcd efef ef) is a modification of the Shakespearean rhyme-scheme.

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### A Biographical Note

Jyotirmay Jana (b. 1953). M. A. and LL. B. from Calcutta University; Ph.D. from Rabindra Bharati University. Subject of Ph.D. thesis: Images of Marginal Workers in Nineteenth-Century Britain and Colonial India: A Study in Contemporaneous Literary Culture and Journalism of East and West. Dr Jana has to his credit a large number of articles published in respectable English, Assamese and Bengali journals, newspapers and periodicals and two published books in Assamese, viz. *Devasur aru Dui Jati* (Devas, Asuras and Two Nations) and *Rudraram Bordoloi Bangal Bangaloni Natak: Mool Natak aru Alochana* (Rudraram Bordoloi's *Bangal Bangaloni Natak: The Main Drama with Critical Comments on It*). With Dr Manju Laskar as his collaborator, he has also edited an Assamese book on women's education, titled *Sunil Akash and Sonali Diganta* (The Blue Sky and the Golden Horizon). Though he retired as an Associate Professor of English, Nowgong Girls' College in 2013, he is still serving the college as a guest teacher in the post-graduate section of its Department of Assamese. Dr Jana has proved his mettle as a journalist also by winning the prestigious M.L. Kathbaruah Award for Rural Reporting for 2 consecutive years, 1991 and 1992.

### Declaration

The writer of this paper is the translator of all the passages cited in English from Assamese and Bengali.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Kalidasa flourished in c. fifth century AD. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 6, 1990: 692)

<sup>2</sup>In his essay '*Sakuntala*', Tagore wrote:

Nature, in *The Tempest*, appears as Ariel in human form. This Ariel does not build up any relationship with man; rather he keeps a distance from him. He is reluctant to be a slave to man. He is held in bondage and compelled to serve man as his slave, though he wants to be free. There is no love in his heart and no tears in

his eyes. ... In *The Tempest* there are oppression, domination and subjugation; in *Sakuntala*, there are love, peace and goodwill...

In *The Tempest* there is no attempt by man to achieve greatness by spreading himself throughout the universe with love and goodwill. He tries there to rule the universe by dominating it and subjecting it to its rule. He tries to reduce its strength. At the heart of *The Tempest* there is a strong passion for power that leads to conflict. Deprived of his kingdom, but armed with his magic, Prospero emerges there as a ruler of nature. Ferocious nature is a mute sufferer there like the tortured and leisure-denied Caliban from whose teeth and nails poison never goes...The title of the play *The Tempest* is perfectly in keeping with its subject-matter. There are conflicts between man and nature as well as between man and man. Acquisition of power is the root cause of all conflicts in *The Tempest*. There is unrest all over *The Tempest*. ... Human nature, when unruly, does also raise a tempest. It can be domesticated, as a ferocious animal can be, by means of suppression, domination and torture. But prevention of force by force is just an *ad hoc* policy. Our spiritualism does not consider it to be the ultimate policy. The goal of our spiritualism is the complete annihilation of vice with love, sense of beauty and goodwill...

[In *Sakuntala*] Kalidasa extinguishes the indomitable fire of the impulses with tearful repentance of the human heart. He does not discuss the disease much. He gives a hint of it and lays a cover over it. What could have happened in usual course has been made to happen there with Durbasa's curse ... (Tagore, 1407 BS: 726-8)

<sup>3</sup> A *tapovan* is a secluded place in a forest for meditation and study; a hermitage. In Indian mythology stories of love affairs are sometimes associated with some *tapobans*.

<sup>4</sup> Making pun of the word 'lie' he wrote: 'Therefore I lied with her as she with me' (CXXXVIII).

<sup>5</sup> According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Bhavabhuti flourished in AD 700 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2, 1990: 187).

<sup>6</sup>Sarma's essay is titled '*Bihu aru Chhekspiyer: "Bachhare Bachhare Barhi Ya"*'. '*Bachhare Bachhare Barhi Ya*' is part of the sentence '*Lau kha, bengena kha bachhare bachhare barhi ya*' ('Eat pumpkin, eat brinjal and have a sound growth every year'), which is chanted every year on the day of *Goru-Bihu*, i.e. the day on which cows are bathed and given turmeric, vegetables etc. to eat, wishing their growth and well-being. Sarma sees no difference between the spirit of the *Bihu* and the spirit of the Shakespearean comedies and, hence, he desires the growth of both the spirits.

<sup>7</sup>Sarma quotes passage after passage from Shakespeare to show how these ideas occur in his writings. We give below only some examples from his writing, though the list of the examples cited by him is much longer:

Do nothing but eat, and make good cheer,  
And praise God for the merry year;  
When flesh is cheap and females dear,  
And lusty lads roam here and there  
So merrily.

(Silence in *Henry IV: Part II*, V. iii)

When daffodils begin to peer,  
With heigh! The doxy over the dale,  
Why, then comes in the sweet o' the year;  
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale,  
The white sheet bleaching on the hedge,  
With heigh! The sweet birds, of how they sing!  
Doth set my pugging tooth on edge;  
For a quart of ale is a dish for a king,  
The lark, that tirra-lirra chants,  
With, heigh! With, heigh! The thrush and the jay,  
Are summer songs for me and my aunts,  
While we lie tumbling in the hay.

(*The Winter's Tale*, IV. ii)

Though Sarma does not cite lines from Bihu songs to show correspondence between the spirit of the Bihu and the spirit of some parts of Shakespearean comedies (and of some of his tragedies also), we can cite some lines from *Bihugeet aru Banghosa: A Collection and Compilation of Assamese Bihu songs*, edited by Gogoi, (Dr) Leela, Delhi: Ajanta Prakashan, 1985:

*Kukura katilon, lahe lahe kari chapi ahan nachani,*  
*Nachanir jeuti charil, lahe lahe kari chapi ahan nachani,*  
*Nachanir jeuti charil, lahe lahe kari chapi ahan nachani,*  
*Anagoi bichani*  
*Kaloino karichha laaj* (Gogoi, ed., 1985: 74)

– We have killed a cock. So, come dancing to us slowly. Now you are flashing with delight; come dancing to us, my dame. Come slowly, but dancing and dancing and dancing. Do fetch a fan (because I am getting excited). Why do you feel so shy?

*Eta batit naharu eta batit panaru*  
*Eta batit khuturia shak;*  
*Moorar chuli chhingi ashirbad karichhon*  
*Chenai toi kushale thak.* (Gogoi, ed., 1985: 63)

– With garlic in this cup and onion in that  
And cress in yet another;  
I bless you, I bless you and bless you heartily  
Be happy, my *chenai*, my dear.

*Rangali madarar pat oi nachani*  
*Rangali madarar pat;*  
*Kankal ghurai ghurai naach oi nachani*  
*Lagaichon naamare jaat.* (Gogoi, ed., 1985: 62)

– Red and red and red are they all –  
The leaves of coral tree are red;  
We'll be singing and you'll be dancing,  
Twisting your waist, my loved.

<sup>8</sup> Sarma has misquoted the sentence as 'Because there is virtue in the world there should be no cakes ale?' (Sarma, 1978: 81)

<sup>9</sup> Lachit Barphukan is an icon of patriotism like Rana Pratap, who fought against Akbar, or like Sivaji, who fought against Aurangzeb.