Burhi aair sadhu and Lakshminath Bezbarua's logic of nationalism[1]

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Lakshminath Bezbarua (14 October, 1864 - March 26, 1938) was a poet, novelist and playwright of the modern Assamese literature. Commonly known as **the father of Assamese Short story**. He was one of the literary stalwarts of the Jonaki Era, the age of romanticism[1] in Assamese literature. With his essays, plays, fiction, poetry and satires, he gave a new impetus to the then stagnating Assamese literary caravan. He responded to the prevailing social environment through his satirical works to bring and sustain positive changes to the former. His literature reflected the deeper urges of the people of Assam. The Asam Sahitya Sabha annually observes his day of death as the Sahitya Divas.

[1]Romanticism in English literature, a reaction against the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason, championed emotion, individualism, and a deep connection with nature

Some fun facts about him:

1. Bezbaroa married Pragyasundari Devi, a niece of Rabindranath Tagore.

2. In the felicitation letter by Asam Sahitya Sabha, the word *Sahityarathi* (meaning "Charioteer of Literature") was used for the first time for Bezbaroa for his expertise in all branches of literature.

3. “O Mur Apunar Dekh”, a patriotic song composed by him, is the state anthem of Assam.

4. He is also known as “Roxoraj” meaning 'The King of Humour' in Assamese literature for his ever-popular satirical writings under the pen-name "Kripaabor Borbaruah“

5. 

Bezbaroa on a 1968 stamp of India

Burhi Aai'r Xaadhu

Burhi Aai'r Xaadhu (Assamese: বুঢ়ী আইৰ সাধু, literally translated to Old Grandmother's Tales) is a collection of stories or folklore, that have been compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaruah. It is one of the most popular texts in Assamese literature published in October–November 1911, more than 110 years ago.

It consists of 30 folklores. The author collected these stories from the common native people of Assam and then prepared this book. The stories have been notably adapted for screen, stage, and television over the years.

Some of his stories include:

1. Sarabjan (The All-Knowing One)
2. Lokhimi Tiruta (The Woman with a Midas Touch)
3. Dighalthengia (The Long-Legged One)
4. Dui Budhiyok (Two Cunning Fellows)

Tejimola

Tejimola

Tejimola was the only daughter of a merchant's first wife. Her mother died when she was a child, so she grew up under the care of her stepmother. Her stepmother secretly despised Tejimola, but only showed affection out of fear for her husband, who dearly loved his daughter. One day, Tejimola's father had to go away on business for several months. Before leaving, he entrusted Tejimola to the care of his wife, instructing her to care for the child affectionately. Seizing this opportunity, the cruel stepmother decided to rid herself of Tejimola during the father's absence. Shortly after, Tejimola was invited to attend the wedding of her best friend. Pretending kindness, the stepmother gave Tejimola beautiful clothes for the wedding. Secretly, she hid live coals and embers within the garments. When Tejimola opened the bundle on the way to the wedding, the hidden coals fell out, burning holes in the expensive clothes. Frightened and heartbroken, she borrowed clothes from her friend's family and attended the event. But returning home, her stepmother feigned great anger and severely punished the innocent Tejimola. This cruelty didn't satisfy the stepmother. She ordered Tejimola to work the rice husker (traditional Assamese "dheki"). First, she purposefully crushed Tejimola's right hand, then the left, followed by both feet, and finally her head, causing Tejimola's death. Secretly, she buried the child under the dheki-shed. A few days later, a gourd plant grew from that spot, bearing lovely gourds. When a beggar woman tried to pluck a gourd, a voice sang out mournfully, "Don't pluck, for I am Tejimola, betrayed and killed by my stepmother." Scared, the woman informed the stepmother, who then chopped the vine down and threw it away. Soon after, a citrus tree (Jora tenga) sprouted there, heavy with fruits. Some cowherd boys tried to pick the fruits, but again the voice cried, "Don't pick, I am Tejimola!" The frightened boys informed the stepmother, who quickly uprooted and threw the tree into the river. Eventually, a lotus bloomed from that spot in the river. Months later, Tejimola's father returned home by boat, seeing the beautiful lotus flower, he asked a boatman to pluck it. The lotus cried again, identifying herself as Tejimola. Understanding everything, her father said, "If you are indeed my Tejimola, turn into a bird and eat this betel nut from my hand." Instantly, the lotus turned into a bird, flew to her father, and ate the betel nut. Realizing the truth, her father restored Tejimola to human form, and upon learning of the stepmother's cruelty, he punished her severely.

Champawati

Champawati

There was a wealthy man who had two wives. The elder wife ("Lagi") was favored, and the younger ("Elagi") was neglected. Both had daughters. Champawati was the neglected wife's daughter. One day, Champawati was sent by her father to guard the ripe paddy. As she sang a rhyme to scare away birds, a mysterious voice responded from the nearby forest, saying that he would eat the grain and marry her. Her parents discovered the voice belonged to a large python. Initially horrified, the father eventually married Champawati off to the python, despite protests from her and her mother. Fearing for her life, Champawati prayed sincerely. But when she awoke the next morning, the python was gone, and she was adorned head-to-toe with shining gold jewelry. Seeing this, her stepmother grew jealous and quickly arranged a similar marriage for her own daughter, hoping for the same result. Tragically, her daughter was devoured by the python she had chosen. In anger and revenge, the father and stepmother planned to kill Champawati and her mother. Just then, Champawati's python-husband returned, devoured the cruel father and stepmother, and carried Champawati and her mother away to a beautiful forest home. Eventually, Champawati discovered through a wise old woman's advice that her python husband was actually a divine being who assumed human form at night. She followed the woman's instructions, burning the python skin, which transformed him permanently into a human. The husband's jealous, demoness mother then plotted to kill Champawati. She tricked Champawati into delivering a letter ordering her own murder. Fortunately, her husband intercepted it, realized the treachery, and in rage, killed his demoness mother. Afterwards, the couple left the demon world and built their own peaceful kingdom, living happily ever after.

Lotkon

Lotkon

There once was a poor Brahmin named Lotkon whose wife constantly scolded him for not earning enough money. Frustrated by his wife's harsh words, Lotkon left home, vowing not to return until he earned plenty of money. Hungry and tired, Lotkon reached a sweet shop one afternoon. Seeing the shopkeeper napping and his young son guarding the sweets, Lotkon cleverly told the boy that his name was "Makhi" (meaning 'fly'). As he started eating sweets, the boy cried out, "Makhi is eating the sweets!" The irritated shopkeeper, assuming his son was talking about actual flies, told him to let them eat. Using this misunderstanding, Lotkon ate his fill and stole twenty rupees, then fled. Realizing his mistake, the shopkeeper chased after Lotkon on horseback. Meanwhile, Lotkon rested under a tree where suddenly a wild pig appeared and chased him around. In desperation, Lotkon grabbed the pig's tail tightly. Soon, the shopkeeper arrived and, puzzled, asked Lotkon what he was doing. Quick-witted Lotkon lied, "I am spinning this pig by its tail because it magically creates money when spun." Tempted, the greedy shopkeeper begged to try. Lotkon agreed, quickly mounted the shopkeeper's horse with stolen money, and rode away. The shopkeeper helplessly spun the pig until he collapsed. Further along, Lotkon stayed overnight at a villager's house. Before dawn, he secretly placed ten rupees in the grass in front of his horse. In the morning, he told the astonished villager, "My horse magically produces money every morning." The greedy villager eagerly bought Lotkon's horse for 650 rupees. Lotkon happily took the villager's horse and the money and returned home wealthy. On his way back, Lotkon saw the exhausted sweet-seller still spinning the pig. Lotkon mischievously advised him to spin it a hundred times more for more money, knowing the pig would soon collapse. The pig died shortly after, freeing the shopkeeper from misery. Lotkon reached home and joyfully presented the money to his wife, finally earning her respect and praise.

The different facets which are revealed in the preface to ‘Burhi Aair Sadhu’ testify to the fact that Bezbarua was such an author who was greatly inspired by nationalism. The tales also reveal his sincere efforts to preserve the heritage of Assamese culture at large. Each of the tales bears token of Assamese cultural identity that, in a different way, highlights Bezbarua’s sense of responsibility towards the Assamese society at large. He says:

“As every nation and every country has its own language, in the same way it possesses its own folklores too. As a language sprouts from the very root of the national life of a particular nation, and it justly be regarded as an autobiography of that nation in disguise, in the same way the folklore of a nation may also be regarded as the autobiography in a different disguise. As the footprints of various people, irrespective of educated or uneducated, civilized or uncivilized, wise or fool, get imprinted in the language of a particular nation, in the same way the various traditions, behavioral codes, thought process, speculations of a people, irrespective of caste and creed, get stored in the folklore of a nation. As the study of philology and mythology is important to know the ancient unwritten history of a particular nation, in the same way study of folklore is equally important too.”

He wrote in his autobiography thus:

“During those days Bengali was considered to be the mother tongue of the Assamese language. This language was not an independent one, but was largely subordinate to that of the Bengali language….” (Lakhminath Bezbarua: Mur Jibon Suoron, Page- 37).

It is a fact that the Assamese language was considered to be subordinate to that of the Bangali language those days. In the preface of the Burhi Aair Sadhu, Bezbarua comes up with scathing criticism against this false notion:

“…The Europeans call it ‘folk tales’, the Bengalis call it ‘rupkatha’, or ‘asaare golpo’... The language and the folktales of a nation may be regarded as its bone marrow. Assamese people call language as ‘maat’, or *voice* and they call the folktales as ‘sadhu katha’, still some critics are of the opinion that the Assamese and the Bengali language are one and the same thing.”

Even in the Editorial notes of the celebrated magazine ‘Banhi’, Bezbarua tried his best to defend the Assamese language against such baseless criticism regarding the origin of the Assamese language.

Socio-Critical Commentary & Reflection of Assamese Cultural Identity

In course of the tales he satirizes the religious ills, harmful traditions of that remote Assamese society;

For example ‘Makhi’ in the tale "Lotkon“, he satirically critiques caste pride, social pretension, and hypocrisy, particularly how privileged individuals exploit societal hierarchies for personal gain.

In addition to that ‘Burhi Aair Sadhu’ also portrays the rural agricultural life and society of the rustic folk. For example in the story “Champawati” we may get a life-like picture of an old couple who cultivate edible arum in their agricultural field; marriage customs etc. Through this story and others he criticizes social evils like cruelty, injustice, prejudice against the girl child, and familial exploitation etc.

These tales also give us a view of the contemporary Assamese society at large along with its follies and foibles; the practice of polygamy, negligence towards the girl child, conflicts between the concubines, ruthless behavior of the step mothers, marriages, religious gatherings, festival celebrations, way of dressing of the ladies, their ornaments, their way of doing household chores etc.

Use of Magical Realism:

Bezbarua incorporates magical realism, fantasy, and supernatural elements seamlessly into narratives, as evident from "Tejimola," where a murdered daughter takes successive magical forms (gourd plant, lemon plant, and lotus) to reveal her tragic story. Similarly, in "Champawati," an ordinary snake transforms into a divine being. Such elements elevate the storytelling beyond realism and resonate strongly with both adults and children.

Moral and Didactic Purpose:

Bezbarua consciously embeds moral lessons and teachings within the fabric of his stories. Each tale implicitly teaches about consequences of good versus evil, generosity versus greed, honesty versus deceit. For instance, "Lotkon" humorously illustrates the cleverness of a common man who exploits human greed and gullibility, implicitly cautioning readers against blind avarice and highlighting quick wit.