

Constructing Theatrical Modernity in Colonial Assam

Print, the Early Plays and Notions of Asomiya Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial Assam, the development of new play and theatrical aesthetics became the source of new conceptualizations of Asomiya language and cultural identity. Modern drama/theatre in colonial Assam was forged out of developments in print modernity, and in relation to pre-existent theatrical aesthetics offered by the popular local Vaishnav theatre aesthetic, Ankiya Bhaona. In this paper, I will discuss three early plays, two of which were social dramas “Litikai” (1889) and “Gaonburah” (1897), and the third a historical play “Jaymati Kunwari” (1915). Through these plays I will illustrate that they were crucial in the creation of a literary vocabulary of Asomiya language implicated in new linguistic hierarchies and new relations between the Asomiya and the less dominant linguistic groups and tribal communities. I will also attempt to examine how the hybrid aesthetics of the early plays created a space for various linguistic and cultural negotiations (including acts of mythologizing), that helped establish new narratives of Asomiya cultural identity.

Keywords: Theatre, Assam, Asomiya, aesthetics, linguistics, cultural, identities

The first modern play in Asomiya, “Ramnabami-Natak” (1858) was serialized in the journal *Orunodoi* (1846-1880), published by the American Baptist missionaries. From that time, modern drama became an important cultural artefact constituted through the new textual practices and forms forged in the discursive spaces created by the new vernacular print media. The introduction of

print enabled interactions between oral forms, new textual models and traditional performance aesthetics, which transformed all these spheres. Modern drama/theatre was shaped out of these transformations embedded in literary forms and practices of traditional Bhakti literature which included the popular Vaishnav theatre aesthetic, Ankiya Bhaona, and in relation with the new textual norms and generic experimentation made available through the new vernacular periodical. The aesthetic praxis of early print culture drew together expressive energies from different sources and modes such as oral narrations, ballads, and dramatic dialogues. Each of these genres was a site of multiple interactions and synergies. The dynamic interaction between these genres produced forms that are suggestive of a parallel with what Francesca Orsini has called “hybrid forms” (2009, p. 6) in the context of nineteenth century commercial publishing in North India. These “hybrid forms” offered older pleasures (oral and performance aesthetics) mixed with new aesthetics (social realism), which helped forge the conventions of modern play in the last decades of the nineteenth century in Colonial Assam.

An important component of this hybrid aesthetics was the creation of a literary vocabulary that was linked to Asomiya as the language of power in the region. At a time when the literary identity of the Asomiya language was not yet a fully resolved question, the newly forged drama became an important site for the consolidation of Asomiya literary identity implicated in the establishment of new linguistic hierarchies and new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The primary site of creation of the literary vocabulary within drama was the re-use and re-invention of the Bhakti corpus of Assam’s fifteenth century Vaishnav reformer, Sankardeb. The new secular drama drew upon the conventions or the expressive resources known as Ankiya Nat or Ankiya Bhaona, to create generically recognizable worlds which combined with newer models such as social realism, making it appropriate for new content and new audiences.

In my paper, I will examine three early plays, Lakshminath Bezbaruua’s “Litikai” (1889) “Jaymati Kunwari” (1915), and Padmanath Gohainbarua’s “Gaonburah” (1897), to identify the aesthetic principles that inaugurated theatrical modernity in colonial Assam. These principles were built on a relationship between early print culture, play development and new notions of linguistic identity against the background of new theatrical contexts—social (interactions with a new colonial world) or performative (new sites of performance, public theatres, etc.).

I will also explore how new language or vocabulary of theatre was created by the aesthetic praxis of the new plays, structured through performance practices and habits of spectatorship which the audience was already familiar with. This theatrical language combined with new aesthetics i.e western proscenium arch

offered a space that could navigate colonial contexts and produce new social meanings. These new social meanings could be understood and interpreted by audiences from their location as participants/spectators within long-held theatrical traditions and systems of performance and cultural meaning-making (Bhaona). A common characteristic of these plays was the practice of meta-theatricality—a self-conscious interest in performance. This was established via a relationship with Bhaona, that generated a theatrical practice which was local, inventive and self-referential, and suitable for all manners of staging (makeshift stage, proscenium arch, *namghar* or traditional space for staging Bhaona) and performance spaces.

Furthermore, I will elucidate that the centrality of Bhakti literature formed an important strand not only in the way traditional Vaishnav theatre aesthetic functioned as a meta-text in the early modern play, but also in the mixing of linguistic registers and the creation of new linguistic hierarchies.

The two social dramas (“Litikai” and “Gaonburah”) offer contrasting examples of linguistic shifts and forms of mixing within the context of late nineteenth century colonial Assam. However, in the historical play “Jaymati Kunwari”, the search for the literary as an important component of fixing linguistic identity became bound to the projection of new forms of cultural consensus about the Asomiya cultural identity. Such projections involved new mythologies and histories implied in the relations between the Asomiya and the less dominant linguistic groups and tribes, which became central to the dominant constructions of the Asomiya cultural identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial Assam.

“Litikai” (The Page) was first serialized in the Asomiya periodical *Jonaki* in 1889 and performed for the first time at an *Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sabha* (Society for Language Improvement) festival in Calcutta 1897. It made a significant intervention in the creation of a literary vocabulary through the construction of disparate generic worlds and linguistic shifts which existed in tension with each other. In “Litikai”, an oral tale is reformulated through generic shifts to embody the subjective experiences of peasants weighed down by displacement and alienation. The characters occupy different generic worlds—Bhaona aesthetics, mock verse dialogues from Bhaona, oral narration, cowherd song (*garakhiyar gaan*), and forms of social realism, which help shape their interiority. These along with a broad sense of the ridiculous, create for the first time, a world of comic estrangement. In the play, six village peasants move around looking for work. While they move around, they simultaneously occupy landscapes of hard social conditions and the grander world of Ankiya Bhaona, a world of mock battles and half-remembered oral tales. The contrast is at the same time amusing and disturbing, allowing the reader to have the familiar experience of watching

a Bhaona performance against a backdrop of uncertainty and hardship for the peasants. When the peasants become enslaved to a Brahmin, the dramatic tension intensifies. The effect is a dark comic critique of peasant alienation and suffering.

The play “Litikai” moves between two different theatrical aesthetics— non-naturalistic and realistic. This combination of aesthetics provides an example of early play development shaped out of the exigencies of theatrical contexts when modern permanent public theatres were still few in number and a play was therefore required to be fit for performance in both traditional and non-traditional spaces. A second important consideration for the use of hybrid aesthetics was the establishment of aesthetic capacities that helped negotiate the problem of accessibility that audiences may encounter while watching a new form such as a social drama in a modern (proscenium arch) theatre. The use of old forms provided legitimacy to the new genre of social drama; it also facilitated the understanding and interpretation of new subjects and experiences through older aesthetics. The repeated enactments of Bhaona in “Litikai” by the peasants, as they perform acts of hard physical labour create a dual focus. This dual focus revealed a gap between the peasants’ mental representation of the world they inhabited and what the audiences saw as their actual material conditions. This is illustrated in a scene where the peasants actually see an endless sea which they have to battle by reciting verses or dialogues from epics dramatized in Bhaona, instead of what the audiences know to be a ploughed field containing large clods of earth. The dialogue with an older tradition generates a meta-theatrical practice even as the combination of non-naturalistic aesthetics and realism enables the play to stage the alienation and displacement experienced by the peasants.

In “Litikai”, the self-conscious interest in performance, repetitions (in mock registers as well) of verse dialogues from epic stories narrated in Bhaona, became the source of the standardized Asomiya language. Rural ditties, linguistic and etymological puns grounded in generic contrasts, enabled negotiation and selection of expressive energies. This oral folk register characterized with rural idioms, ballads and proverbs was rooted in Bezbarua, in the district of Sibsagar in upper Assam. This language also became an expressive resource of Bhakti literature, Vaishnav theatre aesthetics, verse forms and registers of the high literary (Brajabuli) language of Sankardeb. These mobilizations enabled Bezbarua to reproduce and transform older forms and linguistic registers shaping and fixing a particular conception of the literary identity of Asomiya language: aesthetic domains which established new boundaries and new notions of subjectivity.

Drama however, even within the arenas of elite public theatre resisted and provided a counterpoint to such fixing. The play “Gaonburah” (Gohainbarua, 1897/2013)

for example, registers the play of linguistic shifts (as opposed to imagined fixing one may argue) within the changing colonial landscape of migration and social transformation of rural economy in Assam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The play is able to assimilate within its texture, the linguistic registers of a range of mixed social groups such as landless peasants, Bengali migrants, Moriyas (Muslim craftsmen) and court officials. These textures are staged within a self-reflexive structure, as the characters in the play who work as village *gaonburahs* sing a song about *gaonburahs* (a song which highlights their misery) from a Bhaona, which they say they had seen in their local Bhaona hall.

In the early twentieth century, formulations of linguistic identity became bound with genealogical moves and retellings of history that consolidated the boundaries and hierarchies between the Asomiya-speaking upper castes and tribal communities in the region. Jayeeta Sharma (2011, p. 222), offered the argument that within “the sphere of cultural representations” in early twentieth century Assam, events from Ahom history (the Tai-Ahom group came to Assam from Southeast Asia in the thirteenth century and ruled Assam for nearly six hundred years) were re-imagined to fit into a narrative that sought to establish a link between the Asomiya and the Indo-Aryan. This in turn consolidated hierarchies between the Asomiya and the other linguistic groups and tribal communities in the region.

In the historical play “Jaymati Kunwari” (Bezbarua, 1915/1970), an oral tale is transformed to create an iconography which became the site of a crucial retelling of history and an act of mythologizing made available within the gendered logic of a nationalist discourse. Set in the seventeenth century during the tyrannical rule of the Ahom ruler Lora Raja, Bezbarua’s play was a critical celebration of the Ahom past. However, several scenes could be considered as references to the colonial rule in Assam. In the play, Lora Raja tries to kill Gadapani, one of his Ahom rivals, but the latter escapes to the Naga Hills. Jaymati, Gadapani’s wife is imprisoned and tortured but she refuses to divulge any information about her husband. Gadapani returns in Naga guise and seeing her suffer, asks her to surrender. Jaymati refuses and dies in the end.

Jaymati leads the resistance against an authoritarian ruler but her resistance is inscribed within the construct of a devoted wife and mother. An Ahom princess, Jaymati sings a *bargeet* (devotional song composed by Sankardeb) to express her *birah* (pain) at the separation from her husband. In a verse “*Sakhi he! Ki kom dukhar katha*” (Bezbarua, 1970, p. 1143) sung by Jaymati in the play, classical images are fused with local folk idioms. Here is a translation of the verse:

My friend! How can I speak of my sorrow
I churn the ocean of life
and discover
the nectar has turned to poison
I put on the Malati flower
on my hair
The petals fall apart,
I kept the bird in a golden cage
But the bird flew away
A Tagar flower blossomed there
touched by the evening breeze
No one saw, nobody smelt its fragrance
But it slowly wilted (Bezbarua).

In the play, two iconographies, Ahom's assertiveness (Tai-Ahom ethnicity) and Vaishnav's devotion are fused together to create, to borrow a term offered by Sudipto Chatterjee (2007, p. 224), an "imagined unity"—a particular reinvention of Assam's past as well as a particular vision for its future. The aim of the "national-cultural project" as Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 75), suggested "was not only to define a distinct cultural identity for the nation and to assert its claim to modernity, it was also to find a viable cultural basis for the convergence of the national and the popular". The re-presentation of Jaymati in theatre staged a particular "national-cultural project"; the Jaymati myth became a central text in the new reconfigurations of a woman's question within nationalist discourse. Outside this construct of Ahom-Vaishnav unity, Dalimi the Naga girl who becomes Gadapani's companion in the Naga Hills provides a counterpoint to the gendered modernity which underwrites the representation of Jaymati. Unlike her parents who speak the Naga language, Dalimi speaks Asomiya, making her simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. She is rooted in the hills, nearly undifferentiated from nature and unlike Jaymati's literary (high) language, she sings pastoral verses using simple idioms. Dalimi's relationship with Gadapani ends tragically when Gadapani returns to the Ahom kingdom. Her delicately textured but simple songs and speech (however different it may have been from an actual Naga girl) resonates but her final erasure keeps her outside the imagined frame of modern Assam.

To conclude, early play development in colonial Assam provided intersections between print, the institutionalization of public theatre, linguistic identity and forms of religiosity, which marked out a new language of theatrical modernity. This new language offered a space for various kinds of linguistic and cultural negotiations including new acts of mythologizing that helped create new definitions of Asomiya language and in relation to it an imagined community.

[Translations of all quotations from Asomiya sources to English by Maitri Baruah.]

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