

A man of letters, Benudhar Sharma (1894—1981) distinguished himself in many fields, namely as a stylist, as a writer of children's literature, as a perceptive essayist, a biographer, an autobiographer, a writer of tales, a translator, an uncompromising journalist and a keen historical researcher. For the variety and richness of his output and range of his interest, Benudhar Sharma is considered by some critics as second only to Lakshminath Bezbarua in Assamese literature.

In this monograph Dr Prafulla Kotoky, a university Professor of English, has dwelt upon different aspects of the life, personality, literary and historical writings of Benudhar Sharma and critically analysed the contents, mode of expression, literary and historical values of the works.

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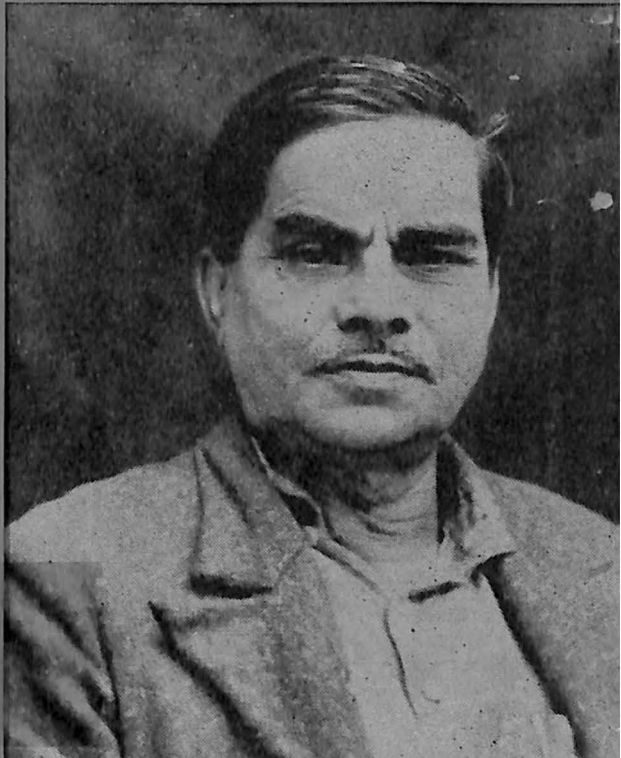


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Benudhar Sharma

Prafulla Kotoky



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BENUDHAR SHARMA

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodhana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From : Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

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BENUDHAR SHARMA

PRAFULLA KOTOKY

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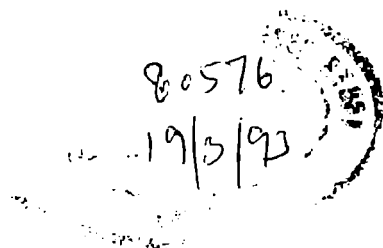
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1

Life and Career

Benudhar Sharma (1894-1981) is one of the celebrated literary personalities in Assamese literature. As a man of letters, he distinguished himself in many fields, viz. as a stylist—he wrote an idiomatic prose-style that is unique and nearly inimitable—, as a writer of children's literature, as a perceptive essayist, a biographer, an autobiographer, a writer of tales, a translator, an uncompromising journalist, and a keen historical researcher. In his early years he tried his hand also at poetry which he published in the school magazine, *Jeuti*, edited by himself and a friend. Above all, however, he is known for his untiring zeal for the preservation and propagation of Assamese literature and culture which was for him a life-long *vrata* (a vow).

Benudhar Sharma was born on 16 November 1894 in a backward village called Gajpuria Kakati at Charing in the upper Assam district of Sibsagar, in an orthodox Brahmin family. His father was Dimbeswar Sharma, and his mother Tulsī Devi.

Born and brought up in rural surroundings, the boy Benudhar was exposed, like any other village boy, to outdoor life and activities. He grew familiar with the world of nature—birds and beasts, trees and flowers, the cyclic changes of the seasons and a host of other manifestations. This by itself formed a part of a very desirable education of which those who grow up in towns and cities do not generally get the advantage. Benudhar also took part with other village boys of his rank in rural games and sports, and healthful exercises. He also grew conversant with the ways of life and living of his people. All this fostered in him a sense of sympathy and community which made itself more evident in his dedication to social service in later years. Much of it is detailed in his autobiography.

Also, thanks to the traditions of the family, young

Benudhar grew acquainted with the habits and ways of Brahmanic culture and some religious works and scriptures which he was required to read and recite.

Benudhar Sharma took pride in his upbringing as a village boy. The stamp of rural culture was an element of his ways and manners and it lent a distinct edge to his personality.

Benudhar was formally initiated to schooling at the age of five by his parents after performing the ritual of 'vidyārambha'. In 1901 he was admitted to the local lower primary school at Chamargaon where he read for four years. He completed the course there with a competitive scholarship. Then he joined the high school at Sibsagar, the district headquarter at that time, for further studies in 1905.

While at school at Sibsagar, Benudhar came under the influence of several distinguished teachers whom he has gratefully remembered in his autobiography. He also got lessons in leadership and moral and spiritual discipline under the auspices of two socio-literary organizations, '*Bālyāshram*' and, after its closure, '*Bimalālaya sabhā*' headed by distinguished personalities of the town. In 1915 Benudhar passed his entrance examination (almost equivalent to high school leaving certificate examination of today) and for a brief while had a stint at teaching before proceeding to Calcutta where he joined Bangabasi College for his intermediate studies which he completed in 1919. In 1920, at the call of Mahatma Gandhi, he abandoned his studies, did not care to sit for his degree examination, and returned home to propagate the message of the leader.

Benudhar Sharma's life at Calcutta was for him a kind of wise schooling. In his autobiography he has admitted that in the great metropolis his mind was illumined. It is in Calcutta that he came in direct contact with the main stream of Indian thought and ideal then prevailing. It is here that he felt the impact of the West upon Indian thought and sensibility. It is in Calcutta that young Benudhar saw and heard some of the eminent leaders of

the freedom movement including Gandhiji. He has mentioned the names of some of them who impressed him most. They were : Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bepin Chandra Pal, Surendra Nath Banerji, Lala Lajpat Rai, Chittaranjan Das and several others. It is during this time that Benudhar Sharma acquired a distinct cosmopolitan outlook that emboldened him, like many others of his day, to rise above the narrow confines of rigid orthodoxies of caste, creed, and religion.

It is in Calcutta, again, that young Benudhar came in direct contact with several eminent personalities of Assam who were stationed in the city for business or academic purposes. He was inspired by their patriotic concerns for the good of their motherland. He also met in Calcutta, besides, several brilliant youths, his contemporaries, who later distinguished themselves in different walks of life. With some of them Benudhar took up schemes of work for enriching Assamese language and literature which bore positive result in later years. Today Benudhar Sharma must be reckoned as one of the makers of modern Assam.

While in Calcutta it was almost a daily habit of young Benudhar to visit the Imperial Library (now National Library) and avidly read there historical and other records pertaining to Assam. He was ever alert to take up the cudgels against any misrepresentation of the Assamese people and their language and culture. He refuted such unfounded remarks with facts and figures. To do this also, he was required to delve deep into Assam's past. Benudhar Sharma's capacity as an investigative researcher of the history of Assam began to bud forth from this time. The first outcome of this scholarly endeavour is the publication of Wade's *Account of Assam* about which a full statement has been given in this work in due place.

After returning home in April 1921 Benudhar Sharma joined as a teacher in a high school of his neighbourhood, but soon after he gave up the work to be free to

devote all his time and energy to organise the Congress at Charing at the grass root level, and this he did with commendable success despite heavy odds. He walked from door to door, and sometimes rode a borrowed bike to distant villages, to preach the message of freedom among the rural people. For arousing the people against the British rule in India, he was sentenced in 1922 to rigorous imprisonment for three months, and was confined at Jorhat jail. On the death of his father, he was conditionally released a little before the end of the term. But he continued to work as earnestly for the cause of the Congress for the next fifteen years when, in 1937, he left the party for serious differences of opinion in the matter of nomination to fight an election, never to return to the fold again. That was his final break with politics. He did not participate in the Quit India Movement of 1942 on the ground, as he avers in his autobiography, that he would not be an incendiary. In 1942-43 he joined the National War Front, a semi-official organisation, as an organiser for nine months. In his autobiography he has admitted that by doing so he earned the opprobrium of many. Two other eminent literary men of Assam, Dr Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, and Prasannalal Choudhury, also took part in the work of the war front. While visiting the farflung villages for his organisational work, Benudhar's greater interest was in collecting ancient 'puthis' (mss.) and other materials of historical relevance from obscure nooks and corners than in mobilising support for the foreign rulers. That is how he made good of a bad bargain. Benudhar Sharma had, for sometime, joined a 'mahaldar' (a lessee) for capturing wild elephants just to earn some money with which to clear some old debts. He had his stint at journalism also. He was the assistant editor of *Bātorī*, an Assamese daily, for about a year, and also the editor of *Tarun Asam* (Resurgent Assam) for about three years. In this capacity he defended the cause of the Assamese people; in particular, he vehemently criticised the policy of the then provincial government under the premiership of Sir Md. Saadullah of bringing thousands of immigrant Muslims from the

then Bengal district of Mymensingh, (now in Bangladesh) and settling them in Assam. The paper ceased publication during the war years.

After parting with the Congress, Benudhar Sharma took up several schemes of rural uplift for his people in his locality and implemented them well.

In 1951 Banudhar left his village home at Charing and took permanent abode at Guwahati, then rapidly emerging as the commercial and academic centre of North Eastern India.

In 1956 Benudhar Sharma was elected President of Asom Sahitya Sabha, the premier literary organisation of the state. Earlier, he presided over the history session of this organisation held at Shillong in 1953. He had also attended the plenary sessions of the Indian History Congress held in Delhi, Nagpur and Ahmedabad. In 1960 he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi prize for his book, *Kongrecar Kanciali Rodot* (In the Twilight of the Congress). He was awarded literary pensions by the Government of India and the Government of Assam.

Benudhar Sharma breathed his last on 26 February 1981 after a brief illness.

He was posthumously awarded the 'Padmabhushan' in 1983. His works can be classified into six main groups, viz. (1) Children's literature (2) Biography (3) Historical writing (4) Memoir and Autobiography (5) Miscellaneous prose writings, and (6) Translations.

2

Children's Literature

Of children's literature written by Benudhar Sharma, mention should first be made of *Rangpata* (A Tin-Foil ; the justification of the title is perhaps owing to the slenderness of the volume) which is a collection of thirteen tales meant for children. Presented in the author's characteristic idiomatic style, these pieces are intended to inspire patriotic sentiments in young minds. They also try to foster in them a healthy attitude to life and living based on the cherished values and the cultural norms of the Assamese people. Although meant primarily for children, the tales have their appeal for the elderly readers also. Each of the tales has recreated the existing Assamese social ways of the early twentieth century.

Five of the tales are drawn from history—two of them present the lively and quick-witted personality of Phulmati, one of the queens of the famous Ahom King, Siva Singha, who is said to have taken the initiative for digging the historic tank of Gaurisagar ; of the three others, one presents the life of Lachit Barphukan, the famous Ahom general, who had defeated the Moghuls at the historic battle of Saraighat in 1670 A.D. and finally stopped the continued Moghul invasion of the kingdom, and the fourth recounts the immortal sacrifices of Jaymati, the famous Ahom princess who embraced inhuman persecution and death to save her husband, Prince Godapani, from the wrath of the king. The fifth is about Maniram Dewan, the famous Assamese martyr of the war of independence. All the tales are lively, and eminently readable, easily catching the imagination of the children. There are also, as always in Benudhar Sharma, titbits of valuable information relating to the history of Assam, particularly of the Ahom days.

On the whole, the tales are pleasing and instructive, and their appeal owes as much to their subject matter

as to the author's admirable way of telling a story. The intense popularity of the work with the children even today is a measure of its success. *Latoomani* (Ornate Beads, 1959) is also a collection of eight lively tales of the traditional type meant for children but even the elderly readers find them equally absorbing. The technique of a successful story teller consists in his ability to grip the young reader's fancy, to whet his suspense and curiosity and maintain them till the end, to make the account full of fun and entertainment with an occasional moral observation unobtrusively set in, and all this in a language that is lucid and simple and homely. The setting of the tales in the present collection is naturally antique and rural, yet their appeal to the young minds of this age of science and technology is unquestioned. The popularity of the tales owes much to the magic of style in which they have been presented.

As a writer of literature for children, Benudhar Sharma ranks second only to Lakshminath Bezbarua. One other name that deserves to be remembered at this point is that of the late Mitraddev Mahanta.

Maramar Kareng (The Well-Beloved Palace, 1969) is a collection of eight tales of the traditional kind (as distinct from modern short stories) each based on a deeply moving situation which is developed by the writer with his characteristic insight into detail and skilful and vivid presentation of characters and their locale. Of these, 'Pratidhwani' (The Echo) is a poignant tale that describes how the mutual love of Rosoi, a Mishng girl, and Bihua, a 'phāndi' (elephant catcher), was nipped in the bud by cruel fate when the lover was accidentally killed while going out to capture a new herd for his master. Set against the riverain background of the Desang and its adjoining forest reserve and the cluster of crowded tribal villages not very far away, the story is remarkable as much for its perfect blending of tone and atmosphere as its abrupt climax of intense pathos which will remind the sensitive reader of the star-crossed lovers in Rajanikanta Bordoloi's classic fiction, *Mirijiyari*. The brief snatches of Bihu songs and the vivid and catching

sketches of nature in spring time have heightened the total effect of the tale. Rosoi in all her youthful charm, grace and vigour, has been impressively drawn. The tale will be remembered as a sympathetic rendering of life's ironies. The title-piece is an account of the silent love of Rongai for Suwagi, set against the natural background of rural Assam, and its ultimate fulfilment. 'Sikshakar Sukh' (A Teacher's Satisfaction) is ironical in that it depicts the grief and repentance of a teacher who beat an innocent pupil mercilessly in the classroom, consequent upon which he grew sick and delirious and breathed his last the same day. 'Aajihe Mor Biya' (Today Only Is My True Wedding) is also a moving tale of Kalindri, a dark girl, and Kanuram, a young man of her own village, who, after long years of frustration, had their moment of fulfilment of their unrequited love for each other. 'Patitotdhwār' (The Fallen Retrieved) is an adaptation of an actual historical event, and the last piece, 'Tiroṭār Mon' (A Woman's Mind) is a translation from Maupassant.

Barring a few, the tales of the collection present the traditional cultural milieu of the Assamese people and their life-style in the early years of this century. Each of them, again, reflects the writer's deep sense of sympathy, mainly for the lowly and the lost.

Written in the writer's characteristic idiomatic style, each of the narratives, straight and simple, shows his skill in telling a tale with a firm grip on the reader's attention. As a teller of tales also, Benudhar Sharma is eminent. In this he may be second to Lakshminath Bezbarua only.

3

Biographies

In 1948 Benudhar Sharma published a brief biography of an eminent man of Assam of his time, Gangagovinda Phukan (1841-1926). Gangagovinda was an astute officer under the British in different capacities. He has been praised by the writer as a man of uncompromising honesty and noble ways who, though serving the colonial lords, yet upheld his own independence of views and uprightness of decision. He belonged to a generation of able officers of the Raj who emulated some of the sterling qualities of the foreign rulers like efficiency and enthusiasm in the discharge of their duties, love of learning, and the like. Popularly hailed as Simhapurush (A Lion of a Man), Gangagovinda, like some other officers of his day, dedicated all his life and thought to the welfare of his people. Outwardly a sahib in dress and deportment, he was in his heart of hearts a man of the people. He has been hailed as one of the early founders of modern Assam. The inner personality of the man and his eventful career, with all its ups and downs, have been fully delineated by the author in his life. It is interspersed with many lively details connected with the subject's life and career, and it also throws much light on the social and political context of the Assamese people in the later part of the nineteenth century. The success of the life lies in its admirable projection of the thoughtful and patriotic personality of the subject. For achieving this effect, the writer has depended upon "the technique of the revealing fact". The aim of the author evidently is as much to commemorate the illustrious man—lest we forget—as to set him as an ideal to the new generation of youth. The style of the piece is, on the whole, that of the plain narrative with a touch of the writer's characteristic idiom.

Maniram Dewan (1950) is one of Benudhar Sharma's major works which has rightly earned him universal

praise. It is as much a record of the life of the famous Assamese martyr of the battle for freedom—he was put to the gallows by the British on 24 February 1858—as a historical and social document of the times. It is the result of the author's painstaking research on the subject for over twenty years. Until the time of its appearance, Maniram Dewan was only a legendary figure, known for his courage and sacrifice for the cause of his country. It is Benudhar Sharma who, for the first time, presented his life and activities in minute detail before the people. The work is as much an account of the life of a rebel and a patriot as a penetrating historical document pertaining in chief to the Burmese invasion of the then Ahom kingdom of Assam and its subsequent annexation by the East India Company in 1826 according to the treaty of Yandaboo. This historical background was inevitable, for the life of Maniram Dewan can never be retold in isolation from the political developments of the day in which he was involved. But the author has not allowed his subject to be lost in the maze of historical details. Maniram's personality with all its elements of courage and fortitude, foresight, keen intellect, and, above all, his burning patriotism, has been admirably presented. But the figure of the man emerging in these pages is not a creative reconstruction: it has been built up on a discriminating reading of a host of historical and other documents which the author collected over a number of years with a great deal of effort. The whole gamut of political developments of the region including the hill kingdoms bordering the province and the developments in some parts of the country outside Assam in the wake of the Sepoy Mutiny have been brought in for presenting the proper political perspective of the times. As a result, Maniram Dewan has been rightly exalted as the beacon light of freedom. That is how he is held by his countrymen even today. There may not be universal agreement on the way the writer has construed the history of the period, but his presentation of the image of Maniram has touched the heart of all.

To repeat, the work is a combination of biography and

history. But the character of Maniram is the mainstay of the latter. There is little doubt left in the reader's mind that the author is bent on presenting his character after its popular image as the crusader of freedom. In the process, the work has gained in interest though it may have lost in objectivity as some believe. At this point, the following words of Bertrand Russell sound quite pertinent :

... let us come to the question how history should be written if it is to produce the best possible result in the non-historical reader. Here there is first of all an extremely simple requirement : it must be interesting. I mean that it must be interesting not only to men who for some special reason wish to know some set of historical facts, but to those who are reading in the same spirit in which one reads poetry or a good novel. This requires first and foremost that the historian should have feeling about the events that he is relating and the characters that he is portraying. It is of course imperative that the historian should not distort facts, but it is not imperative that he should not take sides in the clashes and conflicts that fill up his pages. An historian who is impartial, in the sense of not liking one party better than another and not allowing himself to have heroes and villains among the characters, will be a dull writer. If the reader is to be interested, he must be allowed to take sides in the drama. ... Carlyle said about his history of the French Revolution that his book was itself a kind of French Revolution. This is true, and it gives the book a certain abiding merit in spite of its inadequacy as an historical record. ("History as an Art")

It will be easily evident to the reader that Benudhar Sharma in *Maniram Dewan* has closely followed Russell's ideal. He has also reanimated bygone times and brought the past to bear upon the present. His is not a dull work, for he has shown his subject as a remarkable person, and therein lies his success.

Maniram Dewan, the farsighted patriot and man of action, seems to have cast a spell upon the author who, in modern times, was second to none in his love of Assam and the Assamese people, their ancient heritage and independent ways. As already stated, he, too, was a man of action. He, too, had suffered for the cause of the country. No wonder, then, that Maniram Dewan's life and sacrifices could touch a responsive chord in the writer's heart. That is amply illustrated in the first chapter of the book. It will be recalled that Benudhar Sharma had organised the death-anniversary celebrations of Maniram Dewan at his birth place, Charing, and also wrote, apart from the present book, a few elaborate articles on him. In his preface to *Satawan Sal*, the author wrote, "... Maniram knows no death. He is perennially embossed in the casket of the nation's heart, he lives in the innermost sanctuary of our people's being."

The author considered *Maniram Dewan* to be his 'life-blood'. We are told that only a day before his death, he wanted to correct some printing errors in it to facilitate its future editions.

The work contains, besides, brief accounts of the administrative system of the British from 1825-50, of the then situation of the hill areas bordering Assam, the reaction to British administration in Assam, the preparation for the war of independence in Assam and other parts of India, and of quite a few other related matters. The wealth of documentary details and relevant statistics (in thirteen appendices) supplied in such accounts have made the work immensely useful for future researchers. In addition, the book has short biographical accounts of eighteen of Maniram Dewan's associates who, too, variously suffered death and deprivation by the British.

The style of the book is not sustained : depending upon the point of delineation, it is at times effusive (as in Chapter I), or plain and descriptive, his homely and idiomatic manner here being rather thin and subdued.

The popular ballad of Maniram, known for its pathos and lyrical fervour, forms a fitting finale to the work.

Arghyavali (Offerings, 1964) is a collection of memoirs of moderate length of twenty-one eminent persons of Assam of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were all honourable men of their generation. The list includes litterateurs of all hues, educationists, historians, and antiquarians, librarians, journalists, lexicographers, patriots and social workers. Together, they present an inspiring account of the zeal and enthusiasm of those sincere souls for the welfare of their motherland.

Some of the lives treated are those of Lakshminath Bezbarua, Padmanath Gohain Barua, Kanaklal Barua, Jagannath Barua, Tarun Ram Phookan, Hemchandra Goswami, to name a few. In each of his memoirs, the author has presented his subject in the context of his times. Precisely, he has presented the man and the milieu. Imbued with the spirit of Western humanism in the context of what is today popularly known as the Bengal Renaissance, the persons presented in the work were all active and dedicated pioneers in the task of rebuilding Assam in various fields, and their personality is aglow with an intense love of their land and people. The writer has depended upon the technique of providing insight into his lives through a number of incidents and situations which reveal aspects of character. In the process, he has effected a sense of closeness with his subjects so much so that fact is made more lively than fiction, and the observed details abide in the reader's mind. The writer has brought to clear focus the personality of the subjects, thereby enhancing in a marked degree their appeal to the reader. His technique of presentation has much to do in revealing the subjects. The structure of the lives is expository, and the style presented in the work is descriptive—neat and plain and smooth. The tone is, by and large, sober. The social contexts of the lives have enlarged the canvas. The memoirs present full pictures, not mere sketches. Their impact upon the reader is indelible.

The acute sense of social history on the part of the writer has given the biographical accounts their impress

of authenticity, and, as a whole, the papers present a vivid picture of the social, cultural, and political life of Assam in those days.

Arghyavali occupies a unique place in the long tradition of biographical literature in Assamese for there is no other work of this kind in the language. Its success is owing mainly to the author's spirit of sympathetic understanding of his subjects. As the title signifies, the writer's attitude is one of sincere appreciation and deep-felt reverence. He is full of admiration for their various qualities of head and heart. The love of their land and people seems to serve as a common denominator for all the lives presented in the book. As already observed, the writer himself was imbued with the ideal of selfless service for his people, and thus it is no exaggeration to say that in his subjects he discovered the kindreds of his soul.

The author's interest in the lives of the eminent persons of his time is indicative of his eagerness for Assam's reconstruction on modern lines. These biographical accounts are reminiscential. The author seems to have intended them as inspiring examples to his readers, in particular the younger readers. He must have felt that the lives of these "worthy personages" deserve to be emulated.

Benudhar Sharma also wrote an elaborate biography in book form of Pandit Hemchandra Goswami, the result of much painstaking labour. This is also a revealing work, full of information that will prove useful for any literary historian.

Miscellaneous Prose

Of Benudhar Sharma's miscellaneous prose collections, *Dunori* (A Casket, 1963) is the first. It is a collection of fifteen short essays on diverse subjects. Two of the essays have for their subject-matter the 'Jonāki' and the 'Bānhi' era* of modern Assamese literature. Four of the essays can be classified as literary criticism. In one of them he has examined Lakshminath Bezbarua's immortal persona, Kripabar. In another he has examined the short stories by the same writer. The third of the four essays is a review of the development of Assamese drama and the fourth is on the ballad as a poetic form. One of the remaining essays has examined proverbs in Assamese, and still another has for its subject-matter Assamese manuscript literature. "Assamese Society a Hundred Years Ago", "The Annals of Asam Sahitya Sabha", "A Peep into the Ancient History of Goalpara", "The Tradition of Weaving in Assam", "The Struggle for Freedom in Assam 1930-47" are some of the other essays of the collection.

In the essay last named, the writer has provided a very graphic account of the enthusiastic participation of the Assamese women in the country's struggle for freedom, and the sufferings and deprivation they had quietly embraced—a subject not duly recognised hitherto. The essay on "Trustworthiness" is deeply analytical and reflective in quality.

* The era in Assamese literature from 1889 to 1940 when the two popular literary monthlies, viz. 'The Jonaki' (A Glow-worm; started in Calcutta in the year 1889) and 'The Bānhi' (The Flute; started in Calcutta in 1909) made significant contributions towards the emergence of modern Assamese literature, largely oriented on the ideals of the West. Chandra Kumar Agarwal was the first editor of the former and Lakshminath Bezbarua of the latter.

Underlying all the essays of the collection, there is the writer's deep love of Assam's cultural heritage. The treatment of each is marked by a penetrating insight, objectivity, and lucidity. Written in a style chaste and sober, the essays are widely informative and are extremely readable.

Phool Chandan (Flowers and Sandal Paste, 1968) is a collection of "some tales, speeches, and articles" (twenty-one in number) on a variety of subjects like the growth and development of Assamese prose-style, the 'Arunodoi', the magazine of news and views published by the American Baptist Missionaries from Sibsagar in 1846, King Bhaskaravarman, ancient Assamese clothes, folk culture embedded in figurative expressions and proverbs. Some of the pieces are written in plain and simple prose, others in the writer's typical idiomatic and homely style. The articles are a measure of the author's encyclopaedic knowledge of Assamese history and culture of the bygone days.

5

Historical Writings

As a tireless investigator of Assam's history, Benudhar Sharma is second to none. He was, in a sense, a repository of Assam's history. He was well-versed in the cultural and political history of various communities and dynasties which lived and ruled in Assam, and also knew the historical significances of the names of places and events. He would often take a cue from an apparently trite word or phrase and dig deep into the historical past of a people or a place. He knew all the nooks and corners of the entire length and breadth of the state of Assam from Sadiya in the East to Dhubri in the West. Investigating the past of various indigenous groups of people of the state was his special delight, which lasted till the end of his life. His one aim in life was to arouse his people to their glorious past in contrast to the present plight to which they had sunk, politically and materially. This the author wanted to do by recounting the remarkable love of freedom and the undaunted courage of some great men of Assam's history. For Benudhar Sharma, as to many of his illustrious predecessors, dedication to the pursuit of literature was a way of service to the motherland, and his painstaking historical researches form a part of it. In his autobiography he has stated that about three score years of his life were spent in the pursuit of historical studies.

Many are, however, inclined to believe that notwithstanding his avid interest in Assam's history, Benudhar Sharma cannot claim to be a scientific historian. It has been pointed out that he is not free from contradictions either. He has left behind neither a school of historical studies nor a complete history of Assam. But it cannot be denied that he has left behind a legacy of historical studies of no mean value. It must be conceded to Benudhar Sharma's honour that if there lived till yesterday one single man who knew Assam's past

history and her people, it was none other. The void left by him in the field of historical research in Assam will not be easily filled.

Benudhar Sharma's first enterprise in historical study was in relation to Dr John Peter Wade's historical work called *An Account of Assam*. Dr Peter Wade, a physician by profession, visited Assam in 1792-93 with Captain Welsh who had come with a sizeable force to help the then Ahom King, Swargadeo Gaurinath Singha, suppress the Moamoria uprising.

It was in 1918 that Benudhar Sharma first learnt about the work and its availability in the India Office Library, London, in manuscript form. Despite official opposition, the copy was made available to him at Shillong, the then capital of the province, thanks to the personal good offices of one Mr Chapman, the then librarian of the imperial Library, Calcutta. Benudhar copied the work, edited it, and then got it published in 1927. Not till then did the world have any knowledge of the work. Its publication made Benudhar Sharma familiar to many as an enterprising historical researcher. In his autobiography, the author has recounted (Canto VIII, Chap. I, pp. 492-508) all the odds that he had to face in completing this work. That makes exciting reading, and also tells us at the same time about his keenness and tenacity as a historical researcher. The experiences he gained here were useful as a booster for further work in the field. In the course of his historical pursuits, Benudhar Sharma came in contact with several British historians and scholars like Middleton, Dr Hutton, and a few others, then resident in Assam as government officers or managers in European tea estates.

Satawan Sal ("1857", 1947), later rendered into English as *The Rebellion of 1857 vis a vis Assam* (1958), is, as the title shows, "an account of the war of independence of the year 1857 and the part played by Assam on that historic occasion". In the author's words,

Historians of established repute have not so far referred even a jot or tittle, to the part played by Assam in the war of independence. There are, of

course, plausible grounds for their so doing in as much as their knowledge of the events in Assam, of the achievements and triumphs of the Assamese and their travails and tribulations, was wholly inadequate. And inadequate it cannot but be, as all information necessary for the purpose could reach them only after they had percolated through the strainer in Bengal or Calcutta. The daguerreotype of the Assamese, as reflected in the mirror of the European taskmasters from Bengal, was all that the average Indian, even some of the Assamese themselves, had known about Assam. Hence their knowledge about Assam is the reflex of the copy of a copy—thrice removed from the original.

To rectify this situation, and to dispel certain erroneous impressions in certain sections of the press and the public outside Assam, particularly in Calcutta, Benudhar Sharma wrote the work under consideration. It deserves to be recognised as the first authentic work to view the 19th century history of Assam in the overall context of Indian history.

Doorvin (Telescope, 1961) is a collection of twelve essays—eight of them on as many historical persons of Assam of immense significance, and the remaining four are respectively on (1) 'The Arunodoi', (2) a letter from the Ahom King Swargadeo Chandrakanta Singha to Bodon Barphukan (reproduced), (3) two letters in code from Maniram Dewan (decoded), and (4) elucidation of the meaning of some obscure Assamese terms.

In the essays on the historical personalities, the writer has, as the title of the book implies, tried to present a distant perspective on the eminent historical personalities of Assam. A short gist of what the author wrote in the Introduction to the third edition of the book (1974) reads (in translation) as follows :

Ever since the time when the petty principalities on both sides of the mighty Brahmaputra were integrated to form what was called Asom, and up to

the first quarter-century of British suzerainty over the region, there had emerged quite a few men—each of them a lion of a man—who created a kind of historical transition, and set forth exemplary ideals (of patriotism and self-sacrifice). The spirit of independence that they displayed has now become proverbial. An attempt was made, during the suffocating days of the colonial rule, to see, as if through a telescope, the inner conflict in some of those historical personages, as well as some of the turns of history. All the articles of this book were written in the dim twilight of those distant times.

The history of Assam is like the *Kalpataru* (the mythical wish-yielding tree). One with proper insight will be able to discover in it much material for literature, political wisdom, ways of social development, and national harmony. Although the events of Assam's history are rather limited in scope and significance compared to those of Indian history, yet, the methods of recording this history are far superior to those obtaining in other provinces of India. In the history of Assam you get clues to incidents of all kinds—from epoch-making events of great political significance to incidents and situations of petty domesticity. It is rarely so in the case of the annals of the other provinces.

Since the early part of the fifteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth, the Assamese were the only people (in India) who, despite heavy odds, were truly united in the defence of their country's freedom. With this as their guiding principle, the people of Assam organised afresh their society under the guidance of Momai Tamuly Barbaruah, trounced the Moghuls under the perfect leadership of Lachit Barphukan, walked the razor's edge for preserving their freedom even during those unfortunate days of civil strife resulting from the rivalry between Purnananda and Bodon Chandra, and even supported the illegal rule of the ministers under the

inspiration of Rongili. Swept by the strong wheel of fortune, the very same Assamese people were, it is true, fast asleep under the spell of the British rule in its initial decades. However, they were all promptly awakened by the country's first war of independence. The inherent urge for freedom in the mind of the people once more recovered its unchecked flow like the mighty Brahmaputra. History began to repeat itself. Let the repetition lead to self-awakening—with this hope in mind I have offered this collection to the public. I shall consider my labour amply rewarded if the reader realise its deep significance.

This, then, explains the purpose of the articles. As elsewhere, here, too, the awakening of an awareness of the country's past heritage for building up the future on sound footing is the avowed motive of the work.

The several accounts in the book are not, however, dull historical discourses. They are lively as literature. Benudhar Sharma knew, as none else seemed to know, how to give life and meaning to the dry bones of history. The first article, namely, "Barbarua Momai Tamuli" is a lively and perceptive account of Momai, an ordinary citizen, who rose to the elevated rank of Barbarua, his tactful resistance of the Moghul invaders, his introduction of census in the kingdom, and his organisation of Assam's economy in the early 17th century. The account is interspersed with bits of lively dialogues pertaining to historical personages of the time, and entertaining accounts of small incidents and situations. The writer has drawn the following conclusions from this life :

- (a) Organising a kingdom on solid basis is much more difficult a task than conquering one.
- (b) Compared to very great and exceptional capacity resulting from a combination of earnestness, perseverance, and hard work, familial pride is a cipher.

- (c) Given a chance and encouragement, even an ordinary man can prove himself a shrewd statesman.

The writer has established this point by recounting the life of Momai Tamuli Barbarua in both civil and military matters.

The second article, "Bangal Vairi Lachit Barphukan" (Lachit Barphukan—the Arch-enemy of the Moghuls) is on the famous Ahom general who defeated the invading Moghuls led by Ram Singha at the battle of Saraighat, near Guwahati. The writer has recounted the illustrious general's exemplary qualities of courage and determination. Lachit is a house-hold name for the Assamese, famous for his momentous declaration, "desot koi momāi dāngar nohoi"—country above kin—made while beheading his maternal uncle for slackness of duty on the eve of the crucial battle. The writer has eminently succeeded in making alive the entire course of that long struggle of the Assamese people for defending their freedom by highlighting all the ups and downs and crucial turns of situations and many dramatic developments in the whole course of events. The author's credit lies in that while maintaining the historical objectivity of the situation in his pages, he has, at the same time, presented Lachit more as a character in literature than a historical personage.

The account, like all the other accounts in the collection, is expectedly full of historical details but is not too heavily laden to hamper the reader's delight. The article ends with an exhortation of the writer to the reader to emulate Lachit's patriotism, determination, selfless service for the country and other virtues so that Assam could regain her pride of place in the world.

Another remarkable article in the collection, "Asomot Firingee" (The British Advent into Assam) is a perceptive and scholarly account of the subject, supported by rare historical evidence like the *Alamgir Nama* written in Persian by one Mohammad Kazim and translated into English by one Henry Vincetart in 1780 and published in

1790 in "Asiatic Research". From the chapter on Assam in this book, the writer has quoted extensively (in Assamese translation from the English version) the observations on the characteristics as well as the social habits and political ways of the Assamese people. He has also mentioned the visit to Gargaon, the then capital of the Ahom kingdom, of three Frenchmen, Chevalier, Dr Anselme, and Monsieur Belart, during the reign of Swargadeo Kamaleswar Singha. Their aim was to take a map of Assam, but they were driven out of the kingdom as soon as they arrived. The writer has also shown how, from the days of Swargadeo Gaurinath Singha, the stringent rules against foreign visitors were slackened, mainly on commercial considerations, at the intercession of Captain Welsh who had earlier helped the King overcome the Moamoria uprising. Since then, it is argued, the gates of the kingdom were flung open to the foreign intruders from all countries, and Assam began to lose her economic independence, and sometime later, her political independence as well. It was in the early days of the British connexion that opium was introduced into the province, and a large section of the population became addicted to the drug, the ruinous effect of which was evident even after independence when it was totally prohibited.

Of the other historians quoted by the writer, one is Dr W. Nassau Lees, LL.D., who in 1863 wrote thus :

When in the same capacity (private person) I visited my estate in Assam,... none of the headmen of the villages came to pay his respect or to welcome me ; villagers positively refused, not to give, but to sell me a cup of milk ; and it was with considerable difficulty, I procured such means of subsistence, as rice, milk, eggs and fowls for the few days I remained in my estate.

The opinion of another English man, Samuel Baidon, has also been quoted. It reads :

The greater proportion of the population of Assam

are Hindus, although, of course there are some Musalmans. The race is a proud one in a way, specially in the bearing of the people towards Europeans. I think, this may be accounted for by the fact that the province was never taken in conquest by the British, but only annexed from the Burmese.

The ancient heritage of Assam has always been dear to Benudhar Sharma's heart, and he was too quick to miss an opportunity to extol it before the world. Almost all his historical writings are animated by this spirit. He has concluded the present article with these observations :

Intimidation of a foreigner is in the blood of the Assamese people. So is their love and acceptance of those foreigners who are eager to assimilate themselves into Assamese life and culture. One that is weak falls prostrate at the feet of the strong, a lamp pales into insignificance before a torch, the entity of one that is low gets eclipsed by one that is high. Time was when the Assamese people made others submissive, time was when the Assamese people made the lamps of others pale by (the glow of) their own torch, and time was when the soul of an alien people by itself got lost in that of the Assamese. But where's that time now ? Tell me, ye oblivion, where are those golden days gone ? Echo has asked, the scrolls of history have asked, the patriotic-urge has asked, Shall those days of the Assamese, subjugating the foreigners, ever return ?

"Rongili Kunwari" is a biographical sketch of a historical character of the same name who was given in marriage to a Burmese king, and who later played a crucial role in Assam's history, by helping Badan Barphukan procure a section of the Burmese army to invade Assam. The account of Rongili's reception at the

Burmese capital when she had first set her foot there is marked by vividness and a wealth of detail. To the critic, Rangili's case provides another instance that shows the hand of an apparently innocuous woman in shaping the turns of history.

The article, "Who Be the Traitor—Badan or Purnananda?", is a controversial one, for it refutes the popular belief that holds Badan Barphukan primarily responsible for the repeated Burmese invasions of Assam, and shifts the blame upon Purnananda, popularly acclaimed as a wise and farsighted minister. In its first appearance, the article caused a sort of mild flutter among the readers.

The writer has begun the essay with the observation that the downfall of a kingdom is preceded by pride and waywardness on the part of its rulers, and has asserted that the rivalry for power between Purnananda and Badan Chandra was responsible for the subjugation of the mighty Ahom power first by the Burmese and then the British. It is a perceptive historical account interspersed by accounts of revealing situations drawn from history.

Of the remaining essays, those, respectively, on the first war of independence in Assam, on Tularam, the hero of the Kacharis, and on the Manipuri General Prince Trikendrajit Sinha, are all historical, and full of revealing details of Assam's history. The few other articles also have their historical value. The essays on "Arunodoi" and on the obscure words can be classified as literary also.

Each of the articles is an impressive reading, and the writer's manner of organising his material to build up his argument shows clarity of thought and perspective.

Dakshinpat Sattr (1966), one of the monumental works of Benudhar Sharma, is "a historical account of the Dakshinpat Sattr—one of the four principal monastic religious institutions of Assam" founded in 1662 at the instance of the Ahom King, Jayadhwaja Singha. It is situated in Majuli, a river island, the world's biggest, in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra.

Majuli, now an administrative subdivision, is included in the present district of Jorhat in upper Assam. The work is the result of much painstaking research over a number of years—the writer has drawn his material from a host of sources like old histories and 'charit puthis' (biographical accounts of the Vaishnavite 'gurus'), ancient Assamese literature, and scriptures like some of the Puranas, records of land-grants, copper plates, royal proclamations, official administrative records, district gazetteers, literary journals, personal reports from knowledgeable people, and the like. It is a scholarly work the like of which is rare not only in Assam but perhaps also in the other languages of India. In this exhaustive account of the 'sattra', divided into three parts plus appendices, the author has dealt with the 'sattra's' present location, the significance of the name 'Dakshinpat', the characteristics of the 'sattra', the 'sattra' as an institution, the rules and regulations governing its religious aspects and the secular ways, the various forms of rituals and worship, the anniversaries of the deceased heads of the 'sattra', the observance of various festivals like 'Ras' and 'Holi', and the worship of goddess Lakshmi, the branches of the 'sattra' scattered in various parts of Assam, the "sattra's" sources of revenue, its 'sevaks' (disciples), their classifications and duties and many other minor details.

A long account of the founder of the 'sattra', His Holiness Banamalideva, his spiritual powers, and of the fourteen of his successors has been presented in the third part of the work. The work is illustrated with thirty-nine photographs of holy men, and scenes of devotional art and worship.

Dakshinpat Sattra is, however, much more than a dull record of a centre of Vaishnavite religion and culture. In a sense, it is history and literature rolled into one. In the context of the account relating to the circumstances leading to the foundation of the 'sattra', the writer has, of necessity, brought in much of the political history of the time. The work is also to be reckoned as an important contribution to the Vaishnavite studies of Assam.

The accounts of the fifteen "satradhikars" (heads of the 'sattras') are biographical. They are immensely readable for they have been made spicy with many occasional references to anecdotes, popular beliefs and superstitions, and the like. The writer has brought out the spiritual lives of the 'satradhikars'. The treatment is always deeply reverential. As a whole, these accounts provide much insight into the religious outlook of the people of those days. In all these, and more particularly in his account of the location of the 'sattra' (pp. 1-4) the writer has given ample proof of his descriptive style, neat and plain, with an occasional flair for the poetic.

The prefatorial observations are valuable in that they show the author's deep spiritual insight, hardly evident in any of his other writings.

Reading this work is an experience. It is just like entering into the inner recess of Assamese Vaishnavite culture. It will also be prized as an important lore of the same.

6

Memoir and Autobiography

Kongrecar Kanciali Rodot (In the Twilight of the Congress, 1959) is a lively and sensitive account of the popular participation of the Assamese people in the Non-co-operation Movement of 1921. It is not a history of the activities of the Indian National Congress in Assam in those eventful days but a vivid account of the nearly spontaneous response of the vast majority of the people, particularly in the rural areas, to the call of the country. The opposition, on the part of a few, has also been admirably told. In one word, the magic influence of non-violence and non-co-operation of the Mahatma has been feelingly told. The author has presented here the short and simple annals of many a sincere soul, to fortune and fame unknown, who will ever remain green in the reader's mind for their acts of courage and sacrifice for the cause of the country. The author has rightly observed that had not lakhs and lakhs of people in various parts of the country come out at that time, as in Charing, with courage and determination to join the struggle, freedom in 1947 would yet have remained a dream. The work, based on the writer's own personal experience, is, however, not an autobiography in the strictest sense of the term : to call it a memoir would be more appropriate.

Remarkable as a human and social document, and full of much literary wealth, the work was given the Sahitya Akademi award in Assamese for 1960. A large part of the book has now been included in the author's posthumously published autobiography, *Majiyar para mejoloi* (From the Hearth to the Metropolis).

Majiyar para mejoloi gives an account of the author's life and times since his childhood till the year 1950 when he left his village home and moved to live at Guwahati. It is, thus, an incomplete work, for it does not tell us anything about the author's life and work in the last thirty

years of his life. But it is during this period that most of his works were written and published. Had he included an account of his years at Guwahati, we would surely have got much valuable insight into modern Assamese literature and into the lives of some of the writers who thronged around him at his place.

The autobiography has been divided into twelve 'Parvas' (suggestive, as it were, of a kind of epic dimension), and each of them, again, into several chapters.

Majiyar para mejoloi is an eminent work of its kind in Assamese and deserves its place beside Lakshminath Bezbarua's famous autobiography, *Mor Jivon Sanwaron* (The Recollections of My Life). It is autobiography and memoir rolled into one. It enables us to follow not only the development of the author's own personality but also the course of one half century of Assam's social and political history. It begins with a vivid account of the author's birth and parentage, his childhood at the village home at Charing, and then narrates family memories, the school days at Sibsagar, his brief stint of school teaching at Jorhat before he left for Calcutta where he joined Bangabasi College, his active participation in the Non-co-operation Movement in 1921 and 1930, his publication of *Wade's Account of Assam*, and *Maniram Dewan*, his partnership with some lessee in elephant catching operations, his brief spell of service with the National War Front, the part played by him in organising the peasants (the 'riot sabhas'), his initiation of several works of rural uplift, the celebration of the death anniversary of Maniram Dewan, and many other activities. In between, there lie interspersed various accounts of the ways of life, both cultural and religious, of the people of a predominantly agricultural society of Assam in the first half of the 20th century, of the historic town of Sibsagar—its political past and its elite—and a similar account of Jorhat, considered, even today, to be the centre of traditional Assamese culture. There are also absorbing accounts of the author's experience in Jorhat jail, and in the jungle suburbs while engaged in capturing

elephants as well as an account of the deadly habit of opium-addiction of a large section of the Assamese people under the abetment of the colonial rulers.

The title of the book is significant, for it tells us about the emergence of a young boy, born and brought up in a conservative rural family, to the wider world of secular culture and modern norms. One recalls at this point the following passage of H.G. Wells from his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) as being quite relevant here :

Essentially this autobiography treats of the steady expansion of the interests and activities of a brain, emerging from what I have called a narrow-scope way of living, to a broader and broader outlook and a consequent longer reach of motive. I move from a backyard to cosmopolis ; from Atlas House to the burthen of Atlas...

The author of the present work has admitted that Calcutta was for him a window to the world, and that had he not gone there for studies, he would have remained a frog in the well. He has succeeded in making real to the reader the entire course of his life by which the obscure infant of Charing became the famous man of Assam.

The chief attraction of the autobiography lies in the numerous annals, short and simple, of men and women—more men than women—of all ranks whose hearts once burnt with patriotic fire. They include his co-villagers and relatives and teachers and friends and acquaintances, political personalities of Assam and Bengal and, most in number, his colleagues in the non-co-operation movement. These accounts of persons of flesh and blood whom the author knew quite closely have been presented in a living manner. His admirable art of presentation in his unique, idiomatic style, with emphasis on the revealing fact to present an insight into the subject's inner nature, has succeeded in striking the responsive chord in the reader's heart. The

lengthy. The account of the late Gobinda Chandra Bezbarua, the pioneer of English education in Assam, stands out above the rest. It is a piece of living biography rendered with all the facility and ease of artistic presentation and enlivened by the author's characteristic wit and humour. As a result, the subject finally emerges as a character and lingers in the reader's mind. In the presentation of all his characters, the author is appreciative of their virtues. He has admired all but condemned none. His accounts are always balanced, never onesided. He has recognised the fact that even in the lowliest and the lost, there often remain hidden sterling qualities of innocence, purity, and self-sacrifice. The occasional dramatization of situations has enhanced the liveliness of the accounts. Also, underlying the accounts of some of the characters, there is a sad note of nostalgic longings. The author has expressed the regret that men of their ilk are no more to be seen amongst us today.

The author has presented not only Indians but also Englishmen some of whom were high officials of the Raj and others who served as managers of different tea estates. Here also his depiction is no less perceptive and lively. He has frankly acknowledged the help he got from some of them, like Middleton, in his historical research.

The work abounds also in anecdotes and reminiscences, witty observation and sharp insight into life and things, funny situations, captivating sketches of nature and the like. All these have enhanced its value as literature, and made it lively and entertaining reading.

Majiyar para mejoloi thus gives the reader an impressive account of the spontaneous response of hundreds of people to the call of freedom under the Mahatma's leadership. A valuable account of the participation of the Assamese women in the early years of the freedom movement is also available in the book.

In brief, then, this autobiography is a valuable document of the Assamese society in the first half of this century that was slowly but surely coming under the influence of the West, mainly as a result of the spread of

English education; and was at the same time showing a positive awareness of its fundamental rights. The spirit of the times has been truly reflected here.

The primary question to ask about an autobiography is the nature of the author's personality that emerges out of it. Another equally important question to ask is about any possible perspective adopted by the author, so that all his activities are twisted to suit it. In the work under discussion, there is neither a conscious projection of the author nor an adoption of a particular perspective. There is no attempt here to reconstruct the author's life. In a sense, it is a kind of flat statement of the author's life and times. He is here more a medium than the object. The reader gets an insight into the author's life more from the facts of his life as they are than from any subjective analysis of his motives and purposes. The reader here discovers a man of burning patriotic zeal, a man who dedicated all his life to the cause of the Assamese people, their literature and culture. All his writings are inspired by this one noble concern alone. The reader also discovers in the author a humanitarian, a man of practical common sense, a strong minded man free from all romantic day dreaming. He was one who prized independence of thought dearly, one who would not compromise in matters of principle, whatever the price. After his total involvement in the country's struggle for freedom for about twenty years at a stretch, he decided to remain aloof from the Quit India Movement, for he would not be an incendiary. He emphatically declared that he was not the one to join a movement that would achieve its goal of ousting the British from the country by setting houses on fire (p. 561). He was always fearless and assertive and never hesitated to speak the unpleasant truth when the occasion so demanded. His mind was sharp and witty, and he had also a fine sense of humour.

Benudhar Sharma's inner life was not that of a passive idealist but of a soldier, so that it is reflected in all its ripeness of wisdom and judgment in the facts of his life. Not that there was no reflective cast in his

character, but his life was essentially 'action oriented'.

The most important merit of the book is its extreme readability—it reads like fiction. Open anywhere you like, and you are bound to the page. That is thanks mainly to the polite manner, the overall human interest of the work, and its triumph of style.

Majiyar para mejoloi is a repository of wisdom and experience. An account of the best part of a spirited soul's life, it is the mirror of an age, and the mirror of a mind, one incorporated into the other.

Translations, Literary Criticism

Robinson Crusoe (1918) is a condensed translation of Defoe done jointly in racy Assamese by Benudhar Sharma and Girindra Chandra Nath. Thanks to the inevitable appeal of its style, the work has become greatly popular with all sections of Assamese readers. Another work, *Mongalatir Kanthimālā* (1946) is also an impressive translation of five detective stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The translator's purpose was to enrich his own literature with the thoughts and ideas of eminent authors in other languages. In his preface to this work, the translator has rightly emphasized that a translator must have a through grasp of his own language. Mere substitution of synonyms of the original in another language is no translation, he observed. His own performance proves his competence in this field of literary activity also.

Benudhar Sharma has not left behind any separate work of literary criticism, but there are some scattered observations by him on subjects like the art of story telling, qualities of ballad poetry, on the art of writing for children as distinct from the one for writing for grown-up people, on some of the characteristic aspects of Lakshminath Bezbarua, on the contribution of some well-known literary periodicals etc —all of which prove his perceptive critical power and on the basis of which it can be asserted that had he devoted his time to this branch of literature, he would have proved his worth.

Benudhar Sharma tried his hand at humorous writing also of which there is evidence in a work called *Chatai Charar Katha*.

8

The Stylist

Benudhar Sharma has been rightly regarded as a stylist per se in Assamese. By his idiomatic and homely style, he has carved for himself a separate niche among the Assamese writers. Such is the appeal of this style that many are inclined to say that his alone is the true Assamese style. However, it is far from possible to convey a sense of it in translation ; we can only take note of its characteristic elements.

A happy fusion of thought and argument, or an aptness of expression, is one of the advantages of this style marked by a preponderance of words and phrases of indigenous origin over the 'tatsama' and 'tatbhava' words. It also facilitates quickness of grasp. The efficacy of an allusive style is inherent here. It can be precisely expressive without being effusive. It is a style that has its moorings in the cultural roots of the language, and is a constant reminder of its separate identity. It need not be necessarily rigid and exclusive in its diction. It does not exclude accommodation of non-idiomatic terms and expressions in its own syntactical frame. A close analysis of Benudhar Sharma's practice of this style amply proves the point. Sensitivity, and a closer approximation to language of daily use, are its other features. It is a language only for the adept ; in the hands of one without a thorough knowledge of the cultural synthesis of his people, it will only flounder.

Benudhar Sharma was capable of achieving stylistic variations to suit his purpose. He wrote also a style that is unhurried, neat and precise. This is a descriptive style which he used mainly in his historical writings. The effusive style also was not beyond him. But the different styles of a writer tend to coalesce ; their elements cannot be easily segregated.

In whatever style he wrote, Benudhar Sharma proved the wisdom of Buffon's saying that the style is the man himself.

9

Concluding Remarks

Benudhar Sharma can be rightly called a valuable link between the past and the present. He had a great love for Assam's past heritage, and he sincerely believed that the present could be shaped properly only in the light of the past. He believed that to cut ourselves off from the moorings of the past would be to jeopardise our very existence. That is why he valued the past. That, however, did not reduce him to a sort of a sectarian ; he welcomed changes in tune with the changing times. In personal life and ways, he rose above all conservative narrowness of outlook, and believed only in the religion of man. That is how he was basically a humanist. No perceptive reader will fail to discover this aspect in his writings.

In 1922 the then Deputy Commissioner of the Sibsagar district while introducing Benudhar Sharma, then a political prisoner in Sibsagar jail, to the provincial Commissioner, Mr Allen, remarked : "He is a Brahmin, and a forceful writer." The aptness of the remark is fully justified. Benudhar Sharma had the wisdom and the nobility of outlook of a true Brahmin, and the power of his pen has been rightly recognised today. It will be no exaggeration to say that by virtue of the variety and richness of his output and the range of his interest, in Assamese literature he is second only to Lakshminath Bezbarua.

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Chotāi Charār Kathā (1969)

The dates mentioned against the works are those of the first publication.

All the above works, barring the autobiography, were published by Asom Jyoti, Suwagpur, Guwahati under the author's direct supervision.

The autobiography, the first of a series of four volumes of the author's collected works, was published by Shri Ajit Kumar Sharma on behalf of Benudhar Sharma Memorial Trust with assistance from the Government of India. The other three volumes are expected to be published soon.

Works on Benudhar Sharma

1. *Benudhar Sharma* — a felicitation volume prepared by Upendra Borkotoky (Koliabor, Nowgong, 1969).
2. *Aamaar Benudhar* — a commemorative volume, ed. Upendra Borkotoky (Asom Jyoti, Guwahati, 1983)
3. *Benudhar Sharma* by Tirthanath Sharma (Asom Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat, 1983)

