

# The Evolution of Modern Assamese Poetry

## Since the 1980s to the Present

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If any intrepid scholar makes an attempt to chart out the trajectory of Assamese poetry between 1980s to the present time, he or she will be awestruck with its variety and different hues. If we want to talk about post 1980 Assamese poetry then it becomes essential to make an attempt to understand the contemporary socio-political environment. During 1979 to 1984 there was a conscious movement (known as Assam Agitation Movement) to drive away the non-Assamese people from Assam who, according to the native Assamese people, were eating up the economic framework of the State. During the poetry of that period we find a typical Assamese community consciousness. During that period some of the poets became progressive in their attitude of course, according to some critics, that kind of consciousness was integrally related to the formation of Assamese community as a whole. The Assam accord which was signed as a result of the Assam Agitation Movement brought about a new sense of being in the mindset of middle class people who thought with enthusiasm that change would come. One also finds a sense of new dawn and the rise of regional politics which gave birth to a narrow sense of provincialism. This sense of enthusiasm felt by the middle class did spread among the contemporary Assamese poets. Parallel to that the rise of ULFA and their activities of terrorism brought about a huge change and that period also witnessed the rise of small communities who were striving to form their own identity. Some there was a feeling of disenchantment and the sense of shattered dream affected the poets of the contemporary period.

Some of the tribal communities were also demanding sovereignty which found reflection in the contemporary poetry. The dream which was visualized by the contemporary middle class people during the Assam Agitation Movement was shattered by the happening and incidents of terrorism that took place during the 1990s because of full-fledged arm struggle spearheaded by the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). Assam was shattered due to the failure of Assam accord, fundamental or communal hatred, conflict, murder and continually increasing violence.



Sameer Tanti, Anubhav Tulasi, Anupama Basumatary

Against the background of such a scenario contemporary Assamese poetry advanced in a fragmented way. There was the rise of a huge number of poets, they continued to practice poetry, some could not leave the field of poetry but some other poets totally disappeared after writing a few poems. The poetry starting from the 1980s saw a departure from the poetry of the 1960s as it became less complex in tone and reader-oriented in tenor. Even though the sense of urbanity witnessed in the poetry of Navakanta Barua had not totally vanished yet the present Assamese poetry has become more and more anti-urban in nature. Assamese poetry has enriched itself because of the participation of a few tribal writers who are writing their poems in Assamese. Regarding the aesthetics of Assamese poetry the contemporary poets are quite influenced by the western poetry of symbolism and imagism. Newer techniques have been applied by the Assamese poets and one can even witness the influence of movement like magic realism. A sense of uncertainty, an attempt to visualize readers as merely consumers, a distrust of universalism, and belief in the sense of plurality an anguish against everything pre-determined, rejection of a sense of cohesion, accepting poetry as a commodity, a sense of spiritual emptiness, socialist thought, disbelief in any sort of ideology, distrust of any unified movement regarding the change of society, to regard men as playthings in the hands of destiny—all these can be seen in the contemporary Assamese poetry in a fragmented way.

**Sameer Tanti** (born in 1956), started writing his major poems since the 1980s and his poetic voice has been recognized as unique. He has penned several poetry collections—some of those are *Poems of Battlefield*; *The Textbooks of Torture*; *Green Festival*; *Context of Famine*; *Companion of Melancholy* and *the Boat of Blood and Darkness*. He has also exposed in his poems political ideology, has offered his own criticism of politics and thus he has also expressed anguish, desolation and these have given birth to a voice of protest. According to the Sahitya Akademi award winning poet Harekrishana Deka, “Sameer Tanti is not an ordinary poet. The way he has expressed the political restlessness of contemporary period in his poetry has not been seen in the poems of any other poet.” He has presented to us a blending of so-called socialist poetry and modernist poetry. If we look at the tenor and life blood of his poems then we would find the so-called progressive trend but if we look at his language and its expression then we can find the experimentative streak of modernism. He has expressed the turbulence of the 1980s in his poetry which cannot go unnoticed. His poetry becomes a witness of the contemporary political unrest, loss of communal harmony brought about by a strong sense of provincialism, the ruthlessness of state machinery and death, murder and violence of society. But yet he has expressed a sense of protest and optimism in many of his poems. There is also a sense of universalism in his poetry. His poetry is not bereft of the concept of love—though that love is directed towards his native land, his compatriots, the tortured and subjugated simply human being, the vulnerable and fragile people or sometimes an unknown beloved. His poetry basically expresses political plight of the State but there has been witnessed a sense of lyricism in his later poetry very strongly.

At certain times, his poetry has assumed a sense of individuality and subjectivity. His poetry portrays nature, love, emptiness and a consciousness of death. In many of his poems he has depicted the life of tea-tribes. We find a smell of soil, the sound of drums, the tribal dialect along with polished Assamese language in some of his poems.

**Anupama Basumatary** (born in 1960) has registered an individual voice in the domain of contemporary modern Assamese poetry. She deserves credit for popularizing contemporary modern Assamese poetry and it has become possible because she has successfully bridged the distance or gap between common people and poetry through a unique linguistic touch.

Though she has been born into Bodo family who have their own language (both oral and written) yet she has found her true poetic expression in Assamese language. She is also one of those women Assamese poet who has got a distinctive poetic style. She believes that poetry is the mirror of heart and soul and yet her poetry is not devoid of intellect and the depiction of freedom of women. Her poetry brings us closer to sensibility which has the audacity to discard traditional rigid social values and who can tolerate the ups and down of life, who can distinguish between moral and immoral and create a path of her own and who can candidly express every incidents or secret of individual life. She had given expression to the loneliness of women and their pain and sorrows. She has experienced a lot in her life and she transparently expresses those experiences in her poetry. She has taken life as a scientific laboratory and dissected the complex relation between males and females. One of the major themes of her poetry is love and this has been pinpointed by readers and critics alike and she does not disagree with them totally. Love has come to her life at many times and she has given expression to those poems in her poetry. But she does not agree with those critics who have said that she has wasted her poetic talent by writing simple love poems. She has written two unique poems taking snail as a symbol where she depicts the poignant experience of life. The tribes to which Anupama belongs eat snails. In her poems we find solitude in the midst of company and strong sense of feminine sensibility.

**Nilim Kumar** (born 1961) has given a new lease of life to modern Assamese poetry through new experiments and he is not only widely recognized but also hugely popular. He has made a departure from traditional subject matter and form. His poetic sense has evolved through paradoxical intellectual crosscurrents. On the one hand we find in his poetry a sense of melancholy and desolation while on the other hand we find a sense of raw enthusiasm and a sense of revolution. He becomes nostalgic in some of his poems as he departs from traditional cultural rituals. He rages a battle against the traditional Assamese poetry and he has been compared with the Beats poets of the 1960s and 1970s. He has shown that he can blend emotion and intellect, a tendency to experiment, a mixture of symbol and images, a keenness to observe life from different viewpoints etc. One of his most famous poems 'Narakasur' shows or exhibits these tendencies. He laces his poetry with narrative story, and he uses a strong sense of intellect to give a sense of dramatic turn to serious and unsolved mysteries of life. In Nilim Kumar's poetry we find anecdotes regarding women, their sensibility. In this context Nilim himself says, "My poetry has taken its shape through the contemplation of women body and its transcendent existence. I want only the Midas touch to love to impart me the much cherished pain."

According to Dr. Madan Sarma, Nilim Kumar's poetry has a rare charm and an unusual freshness. Though always aware of and alive to the contemporary reality, he tries to negotiate with it in his own way, always exploring the self. Love, sexuality, spontaneous, exuberance of joy at richness and variety of life, indefinable sadness and gloom at times from the thematic concern of his poetry. Insecurity and uncertainty of the present after take him to the past, to the childhood memories and even to the womb, to a pre-lapsarian state. A remarkably unsentimental, even a little playful poem on childhood memory and disappearance of simple, familiar and

uncomplicated rural ways of living is ‘Chor’ (thief). His poetry has a variety of moods and a resonance of multiple voices.

**Anubhav Tulasi** (born 1958) has been writing since the mid 1980s and he has exhibited a unique poetic sensibility in the realm of contemporary modern Assamese poetry. Dr. Hiren Gohain aptly pointed out in the preface to Tulasi’s maiden poetry collection *Nazma*. “*Nazma* is a new experiment in Tulasi’s poetry. Thought his economy of words of sense pain found in Japanese poetry, inner beauty etc... The lucid picture of Assamese folk culture is expressed in his poetry through beautiful imageries, symbolic hue and a strong sense of lyricism.” He has not neglected social reality. Because of his intricate symbolic tune the readers have to go through intellectual exercise to understand his poetry. The colorful portrayals of his birth place, intermingled with his existence in Guwahati, reading of English Literature and his knowledge of western cinema has added a modernist touch to Tulasi’s poetry. Depiction of nature and rural life have given a unique touch to his urban experience. Love is a central matrix of his poetry and it is found in his poetry in different dimensions.

Among the poets who could avoid Navakanta Barua’s poetic style is **Rajeev Barua** (born 1963) and he has discovered a new linguistic medium of poetry of conscious effort and hard labour. He has also shown a Wordsworthian streak to democratize poetry through the simplification of language. He penned a poem titled ‘Football’ where he has used a comment by Miroslav Holub “Poetry should aspire to the condition of newspaper and the experience of watching a football match...” Rajeev Barua has exhibited an intimate poetic touch through the observation of common human life. He has used both satire and narrative style in his poetry and these have turned out to be his strength. Some of his poetry show a spirit of French symbolic pattern but it would be an exaggeration to comment that Barua is an exponent of symbolism. In the context of post Lakshminath Bezbaroa Assamese poetry Rajeev Barua has exhibited a style of satire which was practiced by Janjeshwar Sharma.

**Pranay Phukan** (b. 1962) happens to be a doctor by profession and a writer by passion, to be more particular a wordsmith in the guise of a poet. He is not a prolific writer but whatever he writes becomes significant. He is a matured poet since poetry has been a vocation for him. He is basically a romantic poet who addresses the matter of heart. His love poetry is very passionate in nature but he has the capability of making a simple situation of love into a mantra for living a fully realized and spent life. His diction is lucid and his poems are nice to read as he invests extraordinary emotion of heart within the texture and structure of his poetic oeuvre. He has a leaning towards metaphysical intensity but his poems do not confuse the readers. His poems are as fresh as mountain dew and some of his poems are musical in resonance. The relation between man and woman is a common feature of his poetry. He has also written on mythological aspects which makes him ambidextrous. He is well read in world poetry and it can be expected that if he devotes much more time to the calling of his heart then contemporary Assamese poetry will be further enriched.

**Bipuljyoti Saikia** (born 1966) started writing poetry since middle of 1980s and his poetic oeuvre is colorful. His poetic universe consists of a quest to understand the meaning of existence and the bitter and sweeter experiences of life. His poetry bears witness to the Assam agitation movement of the 1980s and the communal strife which gives a historical framework to his works. He has

never tried to be apolitical in his poetry and his poetry acts as the sentinel of contemporary society. Some of his poetry can be called protest poetry but he never degenerated to slogan or clichés. Many of his poems bring forth the theme of war and it is known by everyone that war is harmful and that is why his poems talk about peace.



Lutfa Hanum Selima Begum, Nilima Thakuria Haque, Nilim Kumar

**Nilima Thakuria Haque** (born 1961) is a familiar name in the domain of Assamese poetry. Her poems bring out fresh images and she tries to deal with contemporary society in her poetry. She also talks about the evil tendencies of human beings but she is thoroughly grounded in her root. She has painted the picture of death, dread and violence in her poems but she has also tried to transcend those. She had satirized the evil trends of consumerism and its bad effects.

The basic tone of **Lutfa Hanum Salima Begum** (born 1962) is romantic. She is not conscious of the harsh realities of life and she speaks about the bitterness and happiness of human life. Her language is lucid and one can find a picture of rural life combined with a romantic spirit on her poetry.

**Cheniram Gogoi** (b. 1960) has been writing for quite some times now and he is regularly well informed about contemporary Assamese poetry. He draws his materials from rural Assam and we get smell of soil in his poetry. He shuns publicity and poetry for him is a sort of meditation. Though he is a senior and important poet he has not got his due but his poems will survive the test of time because he writes what he feels.

Among the post *Ramdhenu* poets of second phase **Ajit Gogoi** (born 1968) is remarkable for his simplicity of style. But he seems to be serious against the lighter tendencies of some of his contemporary Assamese poets. He has satirized the artificial culture of contemporary society. He has also given voice to the sense of pain, anguish and desolation felt by people. He has portrayed a picture of the loneliness and broken dreams of modern life. Even though Gogoi basically talks about the melancholy of human life yet he is optimistic about man's future on earth. He can be called a painter of the darker realities of rural life and he has been able to exhibit a strong sense of realized experiences of life.

**Gangamohan Mili** (born 1968) has exhibit a sensitive style, a lucid language and expression of folk culture in his poetry. He has himself said about his poetry, "I feel it unethical to betray people by portraying the false realities of life." He depicts the rural realities of life and brings

alive river, forest, trees and parallel to this he talks about the sorrows and broken dreams of people.

He has expressed the lived realities of rural people who basically live on the basis of agriculture and that is why a tone of regionalism can be found in many of his poems. There is a touch of sensitivity to fellow human being in his poetry and he basically sympathizes with the oppressed class of society. He belongs to the Mishing ethnic group and their culture customs are revealed in his poems. He had given expression to the lived realities of his own tribe which has added a unique charm to his poetry.

**Jiban Narah** (born 1970) has expostulated a fresh idiom and subjects matter in his poetry. He also depicts rural life and that is why his poetry is devoid of artificiality. The folk life portrayed in his poetry is his strength and his poems appear to be natural. He has advanced towards a sense of modernism through the use of contemporary images and symbols. Even though there are regional portrayals in his poetry yet he is free from provincialism. His poems are universal in nature and some of his poetry brings out a sense of desolation. His poetry also shows social awareness.

**Rajib Borah** (born 1970) has portrayed in his poetry the human response to life and the world. He avoids complexity but uses the experience derived from the knowledge of nature and human life. His poems have a smell of the soil and he feels unique attraction to common man. He has used tradition in a modern way and his poetry can be a mirror of contemporary Assamese rural life. It would not be an exaggeration to call it Assamese life-scape. Some of his poem emanate from a strong sense of history.



Jiban Narah, Rajib Borah, Kabita Karmakar

**Kushal Dutta** (born 1976) is a significant name in the realm of contemporary Assamese poetry. His poetic sense has evolved from a combination of emotion and intellect. He has discarded complexity and experimented with new subject matter and technical innovation. He has consciously attempted to break tradition and he had tried to weigh certain philosophical ideals in his poetry. He tries to move closer to the spoken language of common people. He does not give place to unnecessary images and symbols.

**Prakalpa Ranjan Bhagawati** (born 1976) is another major poetic voice in the contemporary firmament of Assamese poetry. For him poetry is neither verse play or rhyming exercise. Though he has been writing poetry since an early age, yet his maiden poetic venture found manifestation in the collection of poems titled *Baladharohi* published by esteemed publication

house known as Assam Publishing Company and the collection was published in form of a printed book in 2021 only. Bhagawati does not believe in quantity, rather he emphasises the need for quality and this has been his motto to write less and mean more. He is not a prolific writer of poems but whatever he writes becomes significant. His poems are shorn off all unnecessary ornamentation and in this context he can be compared to the imagist poets like Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, Amy Lowell, Richard Aldington and T.E. Hulme. Bhagawati's poems aspire to the condition of the best of imagist poetry after Nilmoni Phookan perfected it in an unprecedented way in Assamese poetic realm. Bhagawati is well read poet and the gems of erudition are scattered throughout the pages of his poetry. His poems evoke the smell of soil and he has written both rural and urban poetry with equal aplomb and verve. The twin qualities of his verse are compassion and sensitivity and he is an expert poetic artist as he blends the texture and structure neatly in his poems. He knows the tradition of his linguistic heritage and some of his poems show individual talent within the mosaic of his brilliant artistic poetic discourse. His poetry shows modernist trends in Indian context in general and Assamese poetry in particular. Style is the man and Bhagawati is a master stylist and I think here is a brilliant poet who will go a long way as he contemplates upon and meditates significant poetry of the world without imitation. He has been translated by K. Satchidanandan in Malayalam and some of his poems have appeared in *Muse India* in English translation. He deserves kudos and as a literary critic. I think his poems should be translated in all Indian languages and also in English and other European languages.

**Biman Kumar Doley** (born 1971) is another significant name in this context. He has given expression to childhood experience based on the rural life. Even though he lives in urban location yet he has taken recourse to the imaginative life. His poetic universe consists of folk life and its various nuances. He has also dealt with Mishing life and its various rituals in his poetry.

**Mridul Haloi** (born 1988) has adopted a different trait in his poetry. Harkrishna Deka says about Haloi's poetry that, "His poetry has created faith in my being and he is a strong contender to take a major place in the domain of Assamese poetry." His poetic expression, his language and his sensitivity appealed to the seasoned readers of poetry.

**Kabita Karmakar** (born 1987) has expressed the confluence of life and youth in her poetry. The most significant point to that she has expressed the lives of common man and she can be considered as the daughter of the soil. She has also expressed the terrible picture of violence and dread, exploitation and subjugation.



Kushal Dutta, Kamal Kumar Tanti, Bivarani Talukdar

**Pratim Baruah** (born 1983) is serious poet who has been quite consistent regarding the quality of his poetry. He has been writing in various magazines for quite some time now and he has a unique style which has been inculcated through his reading of various kind of poetry. In one of his poems titled 'Time' he began with a line by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz which reveals his grasp of western poetry. He has also written a few experimental poems and we can say that his poems will be more mature over the years.

**Bivarani Talukdar** is a strong voice in the realm of recent Assamese poetry and she seems to combine both tradition and modernity in her poems. A strong feminine sensibility dominates her poetry but she cannot be called a feminist. There is a balance between subject matter and style in her poetry and one has to wait for the complete flowering of her poetic talent.

Apart from the poet discussed above some other poets are also writing good poetry since middle of the 1980s to the present time. Some of the names of those poets are Sarifa Khaton Chowdhury, Alakesh Kalita, Ajit Bharali, Ankur Ranjan Changmai, Abedur Rahman, Amrit Basumatary, Arcchana Pujari, Uday Kumar Sarma, Uajjal Paogam, Kalyan Bhuyan, Kaustavmani Saikia, Premnarayan Nath, Junmoni Das, Mira Thakur, Bijoy Shankar Barman, Pranab Kumar Barman, Satyajit Gogoi and others.

**Kamal Kumar Tanti** (born 1982) also hails from a tea tribe community and in his poem we find materials drawn from folk life. There is also reference to history injustice and he looks at this from a post-colonial perspective. He also reacts in his poems to the immediate socio-political incidents. He has at the same time, experimented with theme and technique.

**Ranjit Gogoi's** poem present before readers a sense of despondency and through such melancholy he indulges in self-introspection to find out the difficult answers of life. The familiar folk-life of Assam is reflected in his poetry and the smell of soil emerges thoroughly. He has given a mobile dimension to his poetry which he derives from a deep sense of rootedness. A sense of inquisitiveness dominates the texture of his poems. It has given him a sense of realization regarding the gains and losses of life. His imageries are drawn from the rural life of Assam and he can intricately design the form of poetry. His poems are also popular because he is deeply rooted in a particular socio-cultural milieu.

**Debaprasad Talukdar** is remarkably original poet who has exhibited his reaction to the changing pattern of society and he graphically chronicles his heart-felt realizations. He has not written cheap poetry for the sake of popularity and he has written stronger poems based on his own experiences. In some of his poems he has offered a pan-Indian panoramic view and his poems offers a sense of freshness. He has been able to cement his place in the realm of contemporary poetry through his grasp over both traditional and modernity. He also laments the loss of something vital from the life of Assamese people and their culture.

**Jyotsna Kalita** writes intellectual poems which have cerebral appeal. She never writes poetry for the sake of writing it or for the sake of mass consumption. Her poetry shows the contemporary urban landscape and her total output can be judged on the basis of quality, not of the basis of quantity as she writes only when she feels the urge to write. She is well read poet and that reflect in her poetry. She has never drifted apart from the particular standard of poetry.



**Ajit Bharali** is another addition to the list of the contemporary Assamese poetry. He does not write sensational poems but his poetry reveals a deep realization of life's varied experiences. He does not commodify poetry; rather he tries to present contemporary life as it is. Some of his poems are full of sensitivity and compassion as he writes from the core of his heart. In some of his poems the nostalgic streak manifests itself.

We can also identify some of the major trends in contemporary Assamese poetry. Globalization has made the world a global village but it has also given rise to a new sort of opening up of economic structure and these things are reflected in Assamese poetry of the recent time. The rise of consumerism is a major factor in this context.

The cultural invasion of English has also affected contemporary modern Assamese poetry. Some of the words found in present Assamese poetry reflect this development. Poets are unhesitatingly using English words in their poems.

The proliferation of knowledge ushered in by the internet is also a major factor in this context and this has affected recent Assamese poetry. Even small children are playing complex games through internet and recent Assamese poetry is not altogether silent about this. More and more people are driving their children to study in English medium and internet is used to a large extent by these small kids. Recent Assamese poetry is highlighting these issues.

The rise of Ambedkarism during the 1990s affected Assamese poetry of the time. The exploitation of the so called lower caste and communities gave birth to an awareness of Dalit paradigm. The poets writing during that period gave full expression to those sensibilities in their poems.

Some of the other trend which have been observed in recent Assamese poetry are as follows:

1. The number of poet writing in newspaper and magazine has increased though there is a lack of quality. Emotion has become the predominant motif and it seems as if the recent poets are cut off from the tradition.
2. After the 1990 there is a sense of stagnation in Assamese poetry. There is very little experimentation regarding form and technique. But it does not mean that contemporary Assamese poetry is bereft of substance.
3. Some of the contemporary Assamese poets are not well read. That is why some of the poems are ordinary.
4. Recent Assamese poetry has become more and more attuned toward societal issue which is a good sign.

In the conclusion we can say that Assamese poetry since the mid 1980s to the present has presented to us a wide spectrum of poetry which is both original and thought provoking.

The effect and impact of globalization can be evident in recent Assamese poetry. The economic liberalization which gave a different hue to Assamese poetry in the post 1990 scenario is to be considered cautiously. Popular culture brought about by the cross-current of postmodernism becomes evident in recent Assamese poetry. Recent Assamese poetry of the contemporary period displays a wide hue and the prospect seems to be optimistic. However, one has to be on guard to

make any generalization about recent Assamese poetry. This entire survey is a humble attempt to make the non-Assamese reader aware of the cross-current to Assamese poetry from the mid-1980 to the present. There may be many short-comings as it is not a definitive survey, nor it claims to be one.

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