

# Post Independence Assamese Poetry – Part 4

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*Navakanta Barua, Ajit Barua, Mahendra Bora and Nirmalprabha Bordoloi*

Modern Assamese poetry was no ‘fast moving consumer books’. It was no longer a natural human activity or a state of awareness of a common man. Poetry came to be structured on subtle hints, suggestions, implications and indirect allusions. Poetry no longer remained easily comprehensible and meaning had to be puzzled out after repeated readings. Readers familiar with the Romantic conventions of poetry found reading new poetry neither rewarding nor-enriching. Poetry reading public became small. The explicator had to mediate between the poet and the reader. Reduction in readership, however, is not everything that matters. What was difficult in the fifties and sixties is no longer difficult for a reader in the twenty first century. There have been considerable discussions on modern Assamese poetry to make things easier for the willing readers.

The modern Assamese poets kept close to the spiritual tradition of India to structure collages in poetry. The poets felt that the stream of collective life was running dry, the trunk line of communication was cut across at many points and life got fragmented. With the loss of values like friendship and love, the individual felt alienated and lonely. Religion could no longer assure man of a purpose and meaning of life and the poet explored the consciousness of the individual. Poetry came to be written with the memories of the physical impact of feelings and sensations. Thrust shifted from the strength and validity of the subject matter to the subtle use of the poet’s language. The poet turned away from social relations and from the world of social experience to the world of human consciousness.

All the poets of the fifties, however, were not modernists and some poets wrote on common social experience. In their poetry the emphasis was on social reality. They did not believe the

world of poetry to be an autonomous and absolute world separated from the world of common experience. This group consciously attempted to make poetry a social statement.

Eliot was indeed a great influence on modernist Assamese poetry of the fifties. Navakanta Barua, the doyen of modern Assamese poetry, has himself admitted his debt to Eliot: “As a minor poet reacting to the genius of T.S. Eliot, I had mostly limited myself to surface borrowings and to bodily lifting of some of the imagery, particularly of the early Eliot... A heap of broken images’ neither had the impersonality nor the finality to an Indian. In India, images broken by nature or by the iconoclastic activities of man do not lose their divinity or spiritual content but are readily invested with newer significance.” (*Eliot in Assamese Literature*, ed. Pona Mahanta : 2) This shows how the Assamese poet keeps close to his spiritual tradition while borrowing from Eliot. Another leading modern Assamese poet, Ajit Barua writes in a foreword to *Brahmaputra Ityadi Padya*: “A statement of Eliot on why a poet writes seems true to me. This is simple like many other profound truths. He said that he wrote to find verbal equivalents to some of his mental states... The inspiration of many metaphors in Eliot’s poetry was reading books. For images, I also feel inspired from reading books.” (p.3: translated) The statements of Navakanta Barua and Ajit Barua show how the modern poets studied Eliot and other European poets to structure their thoughts and feelings. Ajit Barua has translated *The Waste Land* into Assamese and proved the resources of the Assamese language. Navakanta Barua has translated Goethe’s *Faust*.

Eliot’s influence added to the difficulty of the modernist Assamese poems. Ajit Barua’s ‘Brahmaputra’ is one such example. Love for poetry alone does not help a reader to understand this poem because of the references and cross references. The reader needs some prior reading. To understand the first thirty two lines of the poem one needs to be familiar with certain facts of history and geography of India’s north-east. A reader will understand these lines only when he knows certain facts about the origin of the Brahmaputra, geographical location of its course, the history and the myths associated with its origin, the adventures in different ages to discover its source and civilizations built throughout the ages in the valley. The poet adds notes to the poem and in view of the inbuilt difficulty of the structure of the poem the notes are necessary. This was a new thing in Assamese poetry and obviously an influence of Eliot.

In a survey of modern Assamese poetry of the fifties, Dilip Barua, a poet critic, writes: “Modern poetry once developed in Assam as an awakening or a movement. Readers were enthusiastically concerned about it. A portion of enthusiasm and curiosity in the sunshine of independence was expressed in this concern for poetry Now the time has come to check: where lies the mistake in this movement of modern poetry. Was it a whim from the beginning? Had it never been keenly related to national life? Was the body of our modern poetry the result of writing experimental poetry out of a love for mere novelty? (*Kabitar Bhabishyat: Panchadashakar Sahityar Parampara* : 112, translated by this author) As an answer to the question raised by the author it can be said that the modern Assamese poets did not write at whims and just for their love for novelty. In spite of the influences from abroad, their poetry was rooted to the tradition.

Post independence modern Assamese poetry flourished centering *Ramdheni* and in this regard its editor Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya is worth quoting: “In a period of transition, Hem Barua inspired the modern poets and readers with *Adhunik Sahitya*, other writings and speeches. The poetry of protest started by Amulya Barua and Hem Barua did not develop due to the shrinking

rebelliousness of the people in the post independence era. The poets who resolved from a state of dilemma to write poetry with a social commitment were this author, Nalinidhar Bhattacharyya, Ram Gogoi and some others... Social consciousness being eroded in a decadent middle class, the society comes under pressure of misguiding consumerism and utilitarianism. The poets with fine aesthetic sense have felt disgusted and alienated.” (*Dersha Basariya Asamiya Sanskritit Ebhumuki: 70-73*).

The issue of the relationship between poetry and social life has been discussed at length by poet critics like Dr. Hiren Gohain, Nalinidhar Bhattacharyya, Dr. Mahendra Bora, Dr. Dilip Barua, Hirendranath Dutta, Rabindra Bora and a few others. The most important thing in the history of post independence Assamese poetry is the shift in the poetic preconceptions. Nature and function of poetry came to be discussed and debated. Poetry as a weapon of change, a mirror of social reality, an autonomous verbal construct and many other related issues were discussed. Navakanta Barua, Ajit Barua, Bhaben Barua, Hari Borkakoty, Mahim Bora, Bireswar Barua, Harekrishna Deka, Nirmalprova Bordoloi, Probina Saikia, Hirendranath Dutta, Anis Uz Zaman and many others consciously broke away from the poetic conventions of the Romantic predecessors. The poets have their individual distinctiveness and their individual poetic outputs are of different shape and size but they share certain common beliefs. Poetry for them is not a weapon of social change and the process of consciousness is more important than dealing with a particular subject matter. Poetry was not a social statement of any shared experience. They turned away from the unrestrained emotions and impulses of the Romantics and a just representation of general nature. Emotional state in the mind of the poet in a given situation is usually communicated to the reader with the help of symbols and images. Besides the dictionary meaning of a word, its sound value, music and indirect allusions were also carefully studied. Instead of making direct statements, they looked for what Eliot defined as the objective correlative. (Contd.)