

## Post Independence Assamese Poetry – Part 6

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In the context of the changes in poetic conceptions and conventions in post independence Assamese poetry, Hem Barua's opinion needs to be considered as he was the precursor of modernism in poetry: "Should poetry evoke emotions or appeal to the intellect? ...Poetry that provokes thought or evokes emotions while provoking thought is poetry that is widely admired today. Literature and society are like the sun and the moon. New poetry mirrors a society in transition." ('Kaifiyat', *Hem Baruar Kabita*, translated) Hem Barua kept a balance in his poems between emotion and thought but with some of his younger contemporaries the balance tilted to intellect. He articulates the resolution of the masses in a simple imagery when he writes: "... We shall swim in the great monsoon flood/ May be we shall swim across and reach land/ If not, we drown/ Like us a thousand others will perish." ('Saimum', translated).



Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Hem Barua and Navakanta Barua

Navakanta Barua wrote poems for over half a century. His first collection *He Aranya He Mahanagar* (1951) is considered the first collection of modern Assamese poetry. The *Mahanagar* in the poems of the collection is unmistakably Calcutta. Over the decades Mr. Barua wrote a large number of lyrics of a wide range of structures of feelings and thoughts. He wrote long poems besides the lyrics of first intensity of feelings. He was keenly aware of a world in which all moral, intellectual and aesthetic values were uncertain and the poet in him delved deeper into his own self. In a foreword to his 1973 collection titled *Mor Aru Prithivir* he wrote: "Sometimes I feel as if I am engaged in a deep excavation. The rocky land of daily routine has overlaid the prehistoric self of poetry and with a weak weapon of words I have to dig it out." (translated) He writes poetry with words and they always carry associations. He was a conscious and deliberate poet careful of the impact of the words and

their metaphorical value. He was a careful reader of the dictionary. Loneliness, isolation, ennui, alienation, loveless sex, loss of creativity and other problems of modern city life are themes in many of his poems and at times he is nostalgic of a romantic past but he is basically a humanitarian poet. Echoing Eliot's 'tedious argument' he writes in *Mahakabyar Pandulipi*: "Shake off on my floor/ The dust of debates/ Shake it on my floor." Life Sciences cannot animate the eyes of a man who has lost his dream but innocent love can warm up a fool: "If there is peace anywhere for us/ If there is hope/ It is there in those fools who are eternally children." The child's innocent love always made him sanguine and he wrote poems for children.

The stress on the cerebral muscles in modern Assamese poetry was relieved to some extent by poets like Hiren Bhattacharya and Hirendranath Dutta. Hirendranath Dutta presents in his poems hard, concrete images and renders the particulars exact by carefully avoiding vague generalities. Sensuousness of the images is most striking in his poems. Hiren Bhattacharya's poems in his from the early sixties have bridged the gap between modernist poetry and socially committed poetry. His poetry is comprehensible without much efforts and it increased readership. Poetry of both the Hirens have drawn on images and symbols from the country-side, oral tradition and common experience. Nature and countryside which were marginalised in modernist poetry of the fifties were welcomed back to the centre.

Politics has always made claims on modern Assamese poetry but in the late forties and fifties the ideologically committed poets were seen as a separate group. The sixties saw convergence of the two parallel streams. Hiren Bhattacharya's early poems have clear political overtones and undertones. He also brings back patriotism of the Romantics in a modified form: "My country, the life of my life, the song of my song" ("My Country", translated). In an essay appended to *Shaishar Pathar Manuh* (1999), the poet defines the attribute of a poet as an ability to use words as a medium of communicating creative and imaginative thoughts and feelings. He also says that society is the poet's school and life is the headmaster. A shift from the study of books to the study of life and society is unmistakable in modern Assamese poetry from sixties onward.

Bhaben Baruah is a poet critic. A striking quality of his poems is a balance between thought and feeling. He has a fine ear for the music of words and the images in his poems evoke and suggest thought and emotion. There is a conflict in his poems between what is in time and what is out of time. He has an enquiring intellect and at times he stands a spectator of his own emotions. Nirmalprabha Bordoloi has written poems for several decades and a wide range of images from nature and the Assamese countryside as well as towns and cities are the striking features in her poetry. Some of her lyrics are intensely emotional. Her images are highly sensuous. Harekrishna Deka has a fine awareness of the problems of the modern world and his poems reveal the poet's response to such situations in terms of symbols and images. Sordidness of modern city life is a recurring theme in the poems of Dinesh Goswami. For several decades Rabindra Bora has been writing poetry with a keen social awareness. He keeps faith in the revolutionary spirit of man and is sanguine of the social changes for the better.

In the seventies, a new group of poets began to articulate new voice of protest. They may be called angry young men. The stream of socially committed poetry gained in strength as the chorus already begun by Rabindra Bora, Rabindra Sarkar, Abani Chakraborty and a few others was joined by the young poets like Samir Tanti, Sananta Tanti, Jnan Puzari and Jatindra Kumar Borgohain. These poets have consciously and deliberately broken away from

the techniques of Eliot and Pound. Corruption in public life, unemployment, poverty, hunger, frustration and sympathy for the toiling and suffering masses became the themes of poetry. Once again the subject became more important than the form. Poetry no longer remained elitist and neither did it intend to entertain, amuse or to offer aesthetic pleasure. It was a kind of poetry that wanted to provoke thought. But that it could not stand repeated reading. The poets also did not show any remarkable growth as artists. Poetry tended to become ideological statements. Barring a few like Samir Tanti, Sananta Tanti and Jnan Puzari, others did not pay much attention to the structuring of thoughts and emotions. The number of practitioners in verse rapidly increased in the seventies with the publication of a large number of little magazines from different quarters of the state. These little magazines have played a vital role in the making of the new poets. The sterling quality of the best poems of these new poets are racy language, felt emotions and a close observation of social life.

An important feature of the poetry of the seventies is that in spite of resistance to the modernist trends, tendencies and techniques, it also extended modernism. The new poets of the seventies also gradually changed their technique of writing and became more attentive to the formal aspect of poetry.

In scope and treatment Assamese poetry had significant extensions in the eighties. The little magazines offered platforms to the new poets and they responded to the terrorism and political unrest in the state. The leading poets of the fifties ushered in modernism with their fore knowledge and the new poets of the eighties reacted to the immediate political situation. The new poets started with the basic assumption that nothing could be above politics. Ethnic movements in the region invited the attention of the younger poets. The Assamese cultural complex is a mosaic of the cultures of different ethnic groups and communities. The new poets of the eighties and nineties have added to the variety of Assamese poetry by picking up symbols and images from the ethnic cultures. Quite a large number of new verse practitioners have appeared in the scene and some of them have written poetry as insiders to their ethnic cultures. Samir Tanti and Sananta Tanti have articulated the misery of the teagarden workers with a force that compels attention. Jiban Narah, Gangamohan Mili and Anil Panging have brought into poetry situations of ethnic life in terms of symbols and images never before known in Assamese poetry.

Jiban Narah has brought into poetry fresh new sights, smells and sounds from the countryside. Bibeka Lagachu celebrates the joy and voices the suffering of a few stranded villages in a small river island having no communication to the nearest town.

A general tendency in post independence Assamese poetry is a movement from difficulty to simplicity. Some poets who began in the fifties have written for over half a century and growth, changes and development in their poetry have tended towards simplicity. Navakanta Barua, Nilmani Phookan, Nalinidhar Bhattacharya are a few examples. Later poetry of these poets is relieved of the stress on the cerebral muscles and the fresh turn is towards expressing sincere emotions and profound truths in simple language. Navakanta Barua in a poem 'Majat Phagun' included in *Dalangat Tamighora* (1999) wonders if it was a mistake to exclude once God and Nature from poetry.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century a large number of new voices were heard in the field of poetry. Quite a few of them are marked by individual distinctiveness. A keen awareness of social reality is a shared feature of these voices. Cheniram Gogoi, Anubhav Tulasi, Nilim Kumar, Kaustabhmoni Saikia, Karabi Deka Hazarika, Anupam Kumar,

Anupama Basumotary, Hemanga Kumar Dutta, Prayag Saikia, Sumitra Goswami, Archana Puzari, Samindra Hujuri, Saurobh Saikia, Jogesh Kishor Phukan, Ismail Hussain, Nilima Thakuria Haque, Debananda Bhattacharyya, Mrinal Gogoi, Purna Bhattacharyya, Prema Gogoi, Ajit Gogoi, Uday Kumar Sarma, Pranjit Bora, Monoj Borpuzari and many others have already invited the attention of the reading public. The best poems of these poets are structured as ballad like narrative species— dramatic, condensed and impersonal. In such poems self reference, personal attitudes and feelings are carefully avoided. These poets have drawn on history, myth, folklore, politics, anthropology and many other sources. Most of these poets are interested in the lives of those who have been marginalised.

Kabin Phukan, a scholar critic, began writing poetry in the period mentioned above and his voice became clear and distinct. He extensively studied Eliot and Pound but solved his personal problem as a poet in his own way. His poetry is closer to the spiritual tradition of India and he is at the finest point of awareness of his age. During this period Nagen Saikia wrote Mitabhash, a kind of prose poems marked by brevity. A second flood of romanticism that has swayed the new poets since the sixties, has been the spirit of the Mitabhash. Symbolism is unmistakably the most dominating influence upon the Mitabhash. Mr Saikia has also kept his poetry very close to the spiritual tradition of India.

Anubhav Tulsi and Nilim Kumar, and especially the latter, have resolved in their poems the conflicts between dream and reality. Nilim Kumar enjoys a great deal of popularity because of the simplicity of language and the ballad like quality of his best poems. In the history of post-independence Assamese poetry short lyrics of great emotional intensity have always occupied the front seat. Poets like Navakanta Barua and Ajit Barua wrote long poems of varied emotional states, thoughts and feelings but long poems have not yet become a convention. The poems of the fifties were marked by an inbuilt difficulty of structure but from the sixties onward poetry came closer to common life and experience and it became more readable. Jyotiprasad Agarwala, an architect of modern Assam, asked the writers to stand by the masses that create and preserve culture to wipe out tears from their eyes. As a whole post independence Assamese poetry has followed the path directed by Jyotiprasad. Assamese poetry has exposed itself to influence from different countries of the world without making itself porous. Ideas and techniques which seemed borrowed in the fifties also gradually settled down, crystallized and absorbed into the tradition of Assamese poetry. The poets as a whole are more aware of life and the world than the other people. Since independence, each succeeding generation has extended the scope of poetry, added to its variety and brought poetry closer to the people. Though poetry has been secularised, it has not actually broken away from the spiritual tradition of the country. The centre of interest or the focal point has now extended from the towns and cities to the villages, croplands and rural life but the poets over the decades have aimed at the ultimate good of man. In explicit or inchoate form, the contemporary Assamese poets have voiced protest against injustice, searched for purpose and meaning of life, re-examined values and explored the possibilities of integrating a fragmented life and society. What the poets have aimed at, the land of one's heart's desire, has been communicated by Nilmani Phookan in a poem included in *Nrityarata Prithibi*: "It seems that none is dying anywhere at present/ No child/ No old man/ From here you can see/ The sunset/ You can see the moonrise/ Opening the door/ You can see/ An earth of love/ In a diurnal course." (Translated) The Post independence Assamese poets have shown an increasing critical awareness along with their creative imagination. Poetry as a whole is bound up with the social life of the region. (End)