

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **Post-Colonial Identity in North-East India: Perceptions and Challenges**

**Randhir Gogoi**

Research Scholar, Department of History, Gauhati University, Assam, India

**Abstract:**

*The idea of identity has changed in the academic and the popular milieus. Where identity was examined and perceived as an unchanging entity in discourses that have emerged not so far down the timeline, but present ideas of entity have embraced its fluid nature and have applied this perception to look at various research issues. While this paper is not an attempt at any theoretical constructions, it looks at the changing idea of Identity (National, regional and indigenous) amongst the Assamese ethnicity by looking at its portrayal in Assamese literature to understand the changes in attitude, ideas and perceptions of this community towards other ethnicities of the region. However, Assamese which is a regional language provides certain structural constraints in the reception of the changing ideas and perceptions of identity amongst the Assamese community. This paper also makes an attempt to highlight these constraints and analyse its nature and to offer a rationalisation.*

**Keywords:** *Post-colonial Identity, North-East India, perceptions, conflict, non-reception*

The production of nation, region and the indigenous as aspects of identity in post-colonial Assamese literature has undergone change since its inception in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Where the first modern writers of Assamese literature posited a picture of a savage to describe the different ethnic groups of the hills to a picture today in the post-colonial world where the Assamese writer talks about shared experiences with these same ethnic groups who have been designated as 'Tribes'. These productions in a way reflect the growing understandings within post-colonial Assamese society about the social and cultural diversity of north-east India, since literature is often a mirror for society. A few valid reasons for this new perception of the Assamese community maybe the socio-political changes that have emerged as a result of the 'Indian Nation building project', emergence of the Tribal identity movements that the Assamese society and the north-eastern region in general has witnessed over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its violent cousin insurgency. However, certain structural constraints do have bearings over how identity is shaped or represented. In the case of Assamese literature as well as its society, the structural constraint of defining or representing identities no matter how sensitively portrayed in the narrative, is the language itself. The acceptance of diversity of the region by the Assamese community is shadowed by the limitation of reception which therefore restricts the creation of a composite Assamese identity inclusive of the tribal communities. This paper attempts to illustrate the changes in perceptions of identity of the Assamese ethnicity of themselves and of the other ethnic communities that share not only common geographical space but cultural space as well by looking at representations of identity in Assamese literature in the colonial and post-colonial period as well as to explore, despite this change a politico-historical rationalisation of the non-reception of these new perceptions and understandings.

Colonization with all its affects not only initiated a process of identity assertion in new ways that disturbed the order of society in the Indian sub-continent inviting conflict but also in more indirect ways contributed among other things in the creation of a platform in the form of modern literature writing in different regional languages. It is in these different literatures that we find projections of this process and the conflicts it produced woven intricately around touching stories that brings us nearer to the experiences that were felt. Assamese like other regional languages was asserted as a form of identity by the Assamese speaking middle class from the 19<sup>th</sup> century leading to the articulation of the *Axamiya Jati*. The Assamese speaking populace and especially its middle class became a dominant group in the region due to the opportunities provided by the Colonial government. This class of people began to attach themselves to the Colonial machinery which for them, symbolised modernity and progress and in the process acquired the same ideas, perceptions that informed this system about the different ethnic communities that also inhabited this region. These perceptions which at times were spelt as prejudices finds space in the Assamese literature of this period. Literature was used by the pioneers of the language to espouse among other things the idea of nationalism, which they identified with the region that was defined as Assam and the Assamese language speaking people. Assam soon came to designate the Brahmaputra valley, Naga, Garo, Khasi, Jaintya and the Mikir hills as well as NEFA. But with the strong currents of the National Movement, followed by independence from the British and the post-independence nation building project new changes were seen in the region as competing concepts of identity sought accommodation. Thus the question of this accommodation of the Indian nation within the ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities in the region which was of course not without conflict can be seen in the literature of the region in the post-independence period. Birinchi Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Iyyarungam* (1960) is a case in point that depicts the workings of multiple discourses of nation, region and indigenous in the north-eastern region of the Indian sub-continent. Discussed in detail in the next section this book depicts

a story of rising Naga nationalism in the face of the new Indian nation building project and how this generated conflict that was not confined to Naga society alone.

Assamese Literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to increasingly depict the idea of Assamese Nationalism as is seen in the works of writers and social reformists like Andaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Rajni Kanta Bordoloi and Lakshmikanta Bez-Baruah. The initial articulation and representation of Assamese nationalism can be seen in works like *Rohdoi Ligiri* and *Manomati* by Rajnikanta Bordoloi which implores the traditional society in Assam to have become degenerate, imagines a glorified past and calls on a new course of action which would lead to the development of the Assamese nationality. What *Rohdoi Ligiri* and another of Bordoloi's novels *Rangili* also seek to do is to express a deep belief in the benevolence of British rule and how it would benefit the Assamese nation.<sup>1</sup> The idea of Assamese identity that developed due to the Colonial system also tended to hold the same prejudices to the other indigenous communities as the British officials, especially the Hill communities designated as 'tribes' under British administration and the same nomenclature continued by the post-colonial Indian State. An attitude of the indigenous groups as the 'other' was adopted by the Assamese speaking sections. This inevitably crept into the narratives of Assamese writers. The following paragraph describes a meeting of the village council called a *Kebang* of the *Hill Miris* who were the traditional enemies of the *Mishings* of the valley, in the harsh language of the imperial subject:

- It is the day of the village council meeting of the *Hill Miris*. About three scores of these *Gassis* have assembled. They are all wearing bamboo hats with cane belts around their waists. Each savage is carrying a *dao* in his hand and each has between his lips, a pipe made of bamboo, brass or some alloy. They are smoking those pipes with dry leaves stuffed in to them. Two pigs have been killed with iron pikes thrust through their bodies. Then the pigs were roasted whole in the fire and with blood still oozing out of them, pieces of meat were chopped off and consumed. When those demons had gorged on the meat, then each sat with his legs spread out, like real animals. Today is their big meeting. The *Baregam* (the headman) has made his appearance. Something important is going to be decided here. It seems as if these beasts are holding their Sessions Court.<sup>2</sup>

The narrative stance here is one that is typically adopted by the colonial ethnographers whose accounts of the north-eastern tribes often tend to deny even the basic human attributes to the tribesmen. Most of the writers and intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had taken up such a stand in support of the colonial agenda to project the British system of governance as the best and most suitable for the Indian people.

The belief of benevolence in British rule changed to an anti-imperialist attitude as the imaginings of the Nation expanded to a pan-Indian vision in the minds of the leaders of Assamese Nationalisms with the freedom movement gaining momentum and reaching the north-eastern part of the sub-continent in the early twentieth century. The imaginings are seen reflected in the literature as the discourse of the Indian nation was superimposed on this region and so are the conflicts that were produced when the nation, region and indigenous as aspects of identity sought space and accommodation. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's novel *Iyyarungam* which begins with the last stages of the Second World War when the Indian national movement was at its height looks into the question of Naga identity vis-a-vis Indian Identity. It portrays this thematic with the two characters of Reishang and Phanitphang symbolizing the two divergent ideologies of Indian nationalism and Naga nationalism respectively. The idea of region as Nation is also seen in the form of the demand of a separate Nation state in the hills that would comprise of the Naga Hills that enjoin the Brahmaputra valley, spreading into Myanmar. However, this conflict was not restricted to the Naga tribes but spilled over to the adjoining regions which shared commonalities in terms of shared historical experience as can be seen reflected in position of the author who is an outsider, Jiban an Assamese school teacher living among the Tangkhuls. He dies in the conflict that ensues between Reishang and Phanitphang the protagonists of the story, thus symbolizing the fact that Naga nationalist politics which had to be located within the Naga communities was not restricted to them alone and the Assamese would inevitably be affected even though they wanted to adopt the stance of outsiders. The book according to Manjeet Baruah is a critique of the construct of Assamese, a critique of the Indian nation-building project in the North-East region and the conceptualizing of the indigenous vis-a-vis the nation.<sup>3</sup>

*Iyyarungam* even though a book written in post-colonial Assam and reflecting certain post-colonial sentiments such as the acceptance of the Naga struggle as a legitimate movement of identity assertion still brings forward certain aspects of Assamese identity that is informed by colonial ideas. In upholding the distinctiveness in the identities of the different groups of the region while there is an acceptance of the diversity and the belief that every group had the right to exist and choose its own destiny, Bhattacharya has also posited a picture that positions Assamese as separate from the other ethnic groups here. He has adopted a position that shows the Assamese identity, which would include people who speak the Assamese language, to be a specific ethnic identity different from the other ethnic groups of the region. The juxtaposition of Jiban an Assamese vis-a-vis the Tangkhuls in the narrative brings this affirmation of the idea.

Another post-colonial representation of the region and the indigenous in Assamese literature has come from not an ethnic Assamese but someone belonging to a different ethnicity. Lumber Dai writes about his own community which is different from the Assamese and in while doing so he has attempted to remove some common 'insensibilities' that have persisted in earlier writings. He is able to adopt certain sensibilities while addressing certain practices and institutions of his own society. In the following paragraph Dai describes a *Kebang*, which is a council of the Miris and how its organized:

- A *kebang* is being held at the village '*munsup*' (a bachelor's dormitory) today. All the people have gathered there. The meeting is about to begin now. Both the parties, the accused and the complainant, have brought '*apang*' (a drink) for all the members of the *kebang*. The village elders have come in large numbers. So, the supply of '*apang*' from both the parties is also proportionately plentiful.<sup>4</sup>

The difference in the descriptions of a *Kebang* above by Bordoloi and Dai is apparent as Dai who is educated in post-colonialist environment does not suffer through the prejudices that colonisation of the mind infiltrated, something that Bordoloi as a 19<sup>th</sup> century government servant could not escape. Dai as a writer writing about his own society can take the position of an insider and present to his readers a more informed and sensitive picture. He has in his works questioned the traditional social norms of his society and also propagated change as someone who is part of that society. However, the problem with Dai's writing is with its reception. It is in Assamese and therefore fails to acquire a sizeable readership amongst Arunachalis who now prefer Hindi or English.

There were still more works that recognized the social diversity of the Assamese universe itself and accepted the internal conflicts that were existence in the very construct of the Assamese identity as is seen in Birinchi Kumar's *Seuji Patar Kahini* which is a story of the Plantation world and the adjoining areas consisting of Assamese villages. The novel explores how the world of the white planters and the workers and for that matter even the adjoining villages were not mutually exclusive as was held since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus post-colonial representation of identity in Assamese literature we see, while accepting the diversity of the region also reconciles to the fact that different identities co-exist in here and all have the right to carve their own destiny. It is a healthy acceptance by a community long accused of harbouring chauvinistic tendencies. While still others like Harekrishna Deka's *Bandi* (1986), Anuradha Sarma Pujari's *No Man's Land* and Anurag Mahanta's *Aulingar Zui* (2006) break away from the notion of nation, the nation building project and challenge it.<sup>5</sup> The narratives tend to focus on issues that do not only revolve around Assamese society but heralds the presence of other divergent group as a part of this region. Issues of violence that find common ground in the region due to conflicts and clashes between the Indian state and the many ethno-nationalist movements are highlighted. *Bandi* focuses on the Brahmaputra valley, *No Man's Land* on the Meghalaya-Bangladesh border and *Aulingar Zui* on the Nagaland-Myanmar border. The representations of Nation, region and the Indigenous as aspects of identity has changed in Assamese literature amidst raging conflicts of identity where the non-Assamese communities have spelt out accusations of linguistic chauvinism and after almost half a decade or more of ethnic conflicts in the region, the formation of the tribal states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh out of what was Assam. Thus we find that there is a growing understanding of the divergent ethnicities of the region amongst members of the Assamese community. Nevertheless, even with these changes, the language itself represents one of the fundamental barriers to the reception of these changes and new understandings.

The North-eastern part of India at the time of Independence constituted of Assam, *Bor-Assam* as it was called then along with Manipur and Tripura. It was in the course of the next few decades that Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh were created from Assam. All this division due to the imposition of Assamese as the official language on the different ethnic communities of Assam, the emergence of a tribal middle class and their demand for more political space and autonomy from the Assamese during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century leading to multiple ethnic identity movements which continue even today. Of course these reasons could not work in isolation and have formed a process where all of them inform the dynamics of it. The story starts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century when nation, region and the Indigenous as notions of identity began to acquire meanings with the development of an Assamese nationalism. This in a lot of ways was not only a product of the political and administrative changes that Colonialism brought including the usage of Bengali as the official language from 1836 to 1874 in the region that constituted Assam. It was also due to no. 1 presence of certain prejudices and popular stereotypes amongst the Bengali community about the Assamese and no.2 the competition the new class of western educated Assamese speakers facing competition from their Bengali counterparts in terms of jobs and other such economic resources in the Colonial administration of Assam. This led to the generation of an 'otherness' against which the Assamese identity could surface and articulate itself. The new Assamese speaking educated section of people who emerged during the latter part of 19<sup>th</sup> century and who were later to call themselves and others like them the Assamese middle class became the pioneers of this identity. Finally, after 1876 when Assamese became the official language of the region after being declared a chief commissionership, the educated Assamese speaking sections were imbued with a national aspiration that was delimited to the region and which began increasingly to be identified with the Assamese language. Assamese became a dominant language with a developed grammar and literature began to be produced in this language. The region excluding Manipur and Tripura began to be officially defined as Assam and the people Assamese, i.e. people speaking the Assamese language to be identified as an insider while the indigenous who occupied the same space began to be considered outsiders. The prejudices that the Bengalis had against the Assamese began to translate into the ideas of the Assamese now for the other ethnic communities that shared common space.

The post-independence states re-organization gave Assamese the official status in the region and this in turn created conflicts. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a small tribal elite had emerged. These were members of the other ethnic communities in the region designated as 'Tribes' who had managed to attach themselves to the modern state in terms of education and economic resources. After the states reorganization these new elites began to feel deprived politically and economically. These were further accentuated by the prevalence of popular stereotypes like the one evident in the passage on *Kebang* in *Miri Jiyori*. What followed was a demand for a Hill State. Though a singular Hill State could not materialise<sup>6</sup> but the tribal states of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh were created from the geographical space of Assam.

All these factors that led to the demand from the leaders of the tribes for greater share in political power generated a politics of identity in the North-Eastern India that revolved around the question of language. Subrata K. Mitra argues that there are two primary elements in sub-national movements of South Asia; transcendentalism and transnationalism. Mitra proposes that the first includes all those rationales for the movements which base themselves on values such as language, religion, ethnic bonds and tribe. The leaders according to Mitra draw on sentiments and interest around the mentioned values of the people. The latter defines the instruments of normal political transactions.<sup>7</sup> The tribal leaders in the North-East utilized transcendental elements such as sentiments to rally people around the idea of the Hill State demand and later other political demands. They organized their movements around the idea of

rejecting Assamese dominance and the most profound manifestation was the rejection of the Assamese language. English was adopted not only as the official language of the newly formed tribal states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland but there began a new trend where the larger cultural milieu of the region has started identifying themselves more with popular Western culture in terms of dress, music and other activities. Tillotama Mishra argues that English was adopted as the official language by the tribal elites of the region to come at par with the elites of the mainstream who are at ease with the language. She also sees the activities of the Christian missionaries in the region as well as the utilitarian nature of the language which could cut across ethnic and linguistic divide as reasons for adopting it.<sup>8</sup> English language provided a medium to be used by ethnic groups to express their indigenous identity in new ways and to new people. In the process there has been a larger dissemination of the understandings of the people here about themselves to a larger audience, thus in a way improving connectivity and interaction to the global world. It is very self-evident from the large space that Western English music finds in the region today with Shillong being called the Rock capital of India. A no. of music festivals which showcase Western English music are organized now all over the region such as the Ziro festival in Ziro, Arunachal, NH 37 in Meghalaya, etc. Along with this there is a new genre of literature called English Literature from North-East India that has emerged from the writers of the region and this reflects an attempt to reach out to a global milieu. These signal a move towards a new articulation of identity in the region that is increasingly being informed by a global ethos.

Assamese literature has until recent times adopted a position, however sympathetic, of that of an outsider when representing the ethnic groups in the region. Writers such as Bordoloi, Baruah or even Bhattacharya all have adopted positions that range from a dispassionate viewer in *Miri Jiyori* to the well-meaning teacher Jiban in *Iyyaruigam* but at the end they are not able to or did not want to take the indigenous tribal and the Assamese speaking population to be one. They have adopted a position where the Tribal people were always spelt as the 'other'. However, Assamese writing has learnt to show a larger acceptability of the ethnicity of the region as in evident in works such as *Xeuji Patar Kahini* and others that are more sensitive and acknowledging of the shared experiences of violence and oppression by the Indian state, such as *Bandi*, *Aulingar Zui* or *No Man's Land*. Even with the change alas, the biggest barrier to the reception of Assamese literature and the new understandings of diversity of the region remains the language itself. The Assamese language has been a language of politics in the region. This region that contains various linguistic and cultural communities was identified by the colonial and post-colonial state with a language spoken by only one section of the population, i.e. Assamese. This in turn triggered discontentment amongst the other communities and ethnic groups in the region, especially amongst their newly educated classes. What added to the growth of this discontentment was the already prevalent prejudices that certain members of the Assamese community displayed towards these groups, thus producing conflict which has sparked off various ethnic identity movements that revolve amongst other things around the rejection of Assamese: language and its literature. The rejection of Assamese language a lot of the different ethnic communities like Garos, Khasiyas, Jaintyas, Mizos and the Naga tribes was followed by them adopting English.

The usage of a new language English, both on the official and the popular level by various ethnic groups signals a shift towards a re-fashioning of the perceptions of identity in the region. This re-fashioning is largely adopting and assimilating facets of Western culture that is often in English. This in turn is creating a space for a new identity of North-East which is globally oriented and which increasingly wants to be part of the 'modern' system of identity that Fred W. Riggs has identified with industrialization, democracy and nationalism (Riggs, 1998).

#### Notes

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5. Baruah 2013; Op-cit.
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