



Background of Post-Colonial Assamese Literature

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Abstract

Post-colonial Assamese literature represents a transformative period in the trajectory of Assamese intellectual and artistic expression. The end of British colonial rule in 1947 initiated new political, socio-economic, and cultural realities for Assam, which directly influenced the thematic and aesthetic dynamics of Assamese literature. The post-colonial period witnessed challenges such as ethnic identity movements, language politics, economic marginalization, and the quest for cultural assertion. These contexts shaped a literary landscape in which Assamese writers began to explore issues of identity, nationalism, migration, regionalism, alienation, ecological consciousness, linguistic struggles, gender marginality, and socio-political crises. This research paper examines the historical transitions, political changes, social transformation, economic shifts, and cultural negotiations that contributed to the emergence of post-colonial Assamese literature. Through a descriptive and contextual analysis, this study investigates how colonial legacies, globalization, neo-liberal policies, and inter-ethnic dynamics influenced literary production in Assam. The paper also traces the evolution of literary forms—novels, short stories, poetry, drama, and prose—highlighting key post-colonial concerns reflected in them. This hybrid study integrates chronological and thematic perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multilayered background shaping post-colonial Assamese literature. The paper concludes by presenting findings that reveal the deep interconnectedness between Assam's post-independence socio-political history and its literary creativity.

Keywords: Assamese literature, Post-colonialism, Political background, Socio-cultural transformation, Language movement, Identity crisis, Economy of Assam, Historical roots, Cultural identity, Indigenous tribes, Ethnicity, Neo-colonial influences.

Introduction

Post-colonial Assamese literature is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the Assamese people, who endured prolonged colonial domination by both Ahom monarchy (in pre-colonial contrasting discourse) and British imperial rule. The departure of British power in 1947 did not mark the disappearance of colonial effects; instead, a complex continuation of socio-political challenges emerged, influencing the psyche of the region. Assam, known for its ethnic diversity and cultural richness, stepped into the post-colonial era with unresolved issues of identity, economic disparity, linguistic insecurity, resource exploitation, and migration-induced demographic changes. These realities became powerful narrative forces shaping Assamese literature in the post-independence period. Writers such as Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Homen Borgohain, Indira Goswami, Lakshmi Nandan Bora, Hiren Gohain, Harekrishna Deka, Navakanta Barua, Mitra Phukan, and others used literature as a medium to critically engage with the shifting political and social landscape of a newly independent region. Thus, post-colonial Assamese literature is not only a body of creative works—it is a socio-historical testimony and a cultural text reflecting the struggles, dreams, and transformations of Assamese society.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this research paper are:

1. To study the historical foundation of Assamese literature in the post-colonial era.
2. To analyze the political background that shaped post-colonial Assamese literary themes.
3. To understand the socio-cultural transformation and its reflection in Assamese writings.
4. To investigate the economic condition of Assam and its literary implications.
5. To establish the relationship between post-colonial identity politics and literary creativity in Assam.
6. To explore how literary forms evolved through post-colonial experiences.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses primarily on:

- Assamese literature written after **1947**
- Geographical scope: **Assam**
- Analysis includes **novels, poetry, drama, short stories, essays**
- Background of post-colonial era concerning:
 - Politics
 - Society
 - Culture
 - History
 - Economy

It does not deeply examine pre-colonial forms, though references are made where necessary for contextualization.

Methodology

This research is qualitative and descriptive in nature. The methodologies include:

- **Historical-analytical method** → tracing events influencing literary developments
- **Contextual interpretation** of literary texts and authors
- Review of **secondary sources** such as books, journals, articles, and government reports
- **Post-colonial theoretical framework** to interpret themes like identity, resistance, marginalization, and cultural assertion

The study uses textual examples only to support background analysis, not as detailed literary criticism.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to academic scholarship by:

- Highlighting the intersection of politics and literature in Assam
- Providing a comprehensive socio-economic and historical context to understand post-colonial Assamese texts
- Offering insights into how indigenous voices negotiate power structures
- Supporting further research on regional post-colonial literature in India

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- Documenting the transformation of Assamese cultural identity

Historical Background of Post-Colonial Assamese Literature

The historical landscape of Assam has always shaped the direction and consciousness of its literature. While the colonial period disrupted indigenous socio-cultural structures, the immediate post-colonial years brought hopes of freedom, linguistic resurgence, and cultural restoration. However, independence also exposed unresolved historical tensions.

After 1947, Assam faced:

- Partition and the influx of refugees
- Redrawing of boundaries
- New identity-based movements
- Resource-driven conflicts and political interruptions

The division of Sylhet, once part of colonial Assam, had a major impact on the demography and linguistic composition. Similarly, the creation of separate states—Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Mizoram (1987), and Arunachal Pradesh (1987)—changed Assam’s geographic and political presence in Northeast India.

Such historical situations intensified Assamese writers’ sensitivity toward:

- Land
- Identity
- Ethnic rights
- Security of Assamese language

For instance, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s narratives deal with political upheavals and liberation movements (e.g., *Mrityunjay*, *Yaruingam*). This historical disquiet fuels a literature grounded in realism, questioning authority and reconstructing lost identity.

Role of Language in Historical Consciousness

Assamese literature faced linguistic marginalization under colonial policies which once declared Bengali as the official language (1836–1873). Even after independence, language continued to be a major concern due to migration and demographic changes.

The post-colonial period attempted:

- Reinvention of Assamese identity
- Reconnection with indigenous roots
- Strengthening of Axomiya bhaxa as the core of cultural survival

Revivalist literary spirit led writers to historically reclaim:

- Srimanta Sankardeva's cultural contributions
- Indigenous oral traditions
- Folk memory and tribal history

Thus, the historical background of post-colonial Assam directly nourished a literature that upholds self-esteem and collective memory while confronting fears of displacement.

Political Background of Post-Colonial Assamese Literature

Post-colonial Assam witnessed intense political transformations. Instead of political peace after independence, the state experienced:

- Centre-state tensions
- Ethnic uprisings
- Language riots
- Insurgency and counterinsurgency movements
- Demands for autonomy by tribal and linguistic groups

These political turmoils deeply influenced Assamese literature.

Key Political Movements Influencing Literature**1. Assam Movement (1979–1985)**

A major uprising against illegal immigration from Bangladesh, leading to large-scale mobilization, violence, and sociopolitical trauma.

This struggle echoed in literary works portraying:

- Identity anxiety
- Regional nationalism
- Sacrifice and political betrayal

Writers like Homen Borgohain, Nilomoni Phukan, and Indira Goswami expressed the emotional and psychological disturbances of the period.

2. Insurgency Movement (ULFA and others)

Arising from perceived economic exploitation and political neglect by the Union government.

Literature depicted:

- Youth disillusionment
- Militarization of society
- Human rights crises

Example: Mamoni Raisom Goswami's writings highlight the human sufferings behind armed struggles (*Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah*, etc.).

3. Ethnic Assertion Movements

Communities such as Bodos, Mishings, Karbis, Dimasas, and others demanded:

- Autonomy
- Cultural rights
- Recognition of identity

This created a multicultural political tension reflected in literary portrayals of inter-ethnic relations and shared trauma.

4. Language Politics

Assamese Language Act (1960) created linguistic rifts between Assamese and tribal/Bengali groups.

Thus, political discourse consistently interrogates:

- Whose identity is "Assamese"?
- How can multiple ethnicities coexist?

Political Anxiety as Literature

Writers responded to post-colonial politics using:

- Political allegory
- Revolutionary metaphor
- Narratives of displacement
- Realistic depictions of terror and hope

Thus, politics became a key narrative lens shaping post-colonial Assamese literature.

Social Background of Post-Colonial Assamese Literature

The social structure of Assam in the post-colonial era underwent dramatic shifts due to:

- Urbanization
- Industrial growth (oil, tea, coal)
- Rise of middle class
- Spread of modern education
- Migration and demographic change
- Increasing ethnic and caste awareness

These changes produced new social identities, values, and conflicts.

Major Social Themes Reflected in Literature

Social Change	Literary Reflection
Decline of traditional rural life	Nostalgia, loss of roots, rural-urban contrast
Spread of education	New consciousness, questioning norms
Gender awakening	Feminist writings, female subjective experiences
Tribal social assertion	Growth of indigenous literature
Cultural hybridization	Conflict between modernity & tradition

Writers like Indira Goswami brought forward:

- Women's oppression
- Widowhood
- Sexual violence
- Religious hypocrisy

Similarly, urban settings such as Guwahati became modern literary landscapes representing alienation, competition, loneliness, and modern anxieties.

Impact of Migration on Social Consciousness

Partition, refugee influx, and economic migration altered the social tone of literature.

Themes emerged:

- Loss of homeland
- Mixed culture tensions
- Human bonding beyond ethnicity

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Thus, Assamese literature became a **mirror of social turbulence** yet also a space for hope, reform, and empathy.

Cultural Background of Post-Colonial Assamese Literature

Assam is a land enriched with multiethnic harmony, distinctive folk traditions, and a long literary lineage. In the post-colonial phase, Assamese literature became a powerful carrier of cultural rewriting and resistance to homogenization.

Cultural Revival and Identity

Writers revived:

- Neo-Vaishnavite philosophies
- Indigenous myths & folklore
- Tribal cultural narratives
- Local dialects and folk performances

Sankardeva's legacy emerged as cultural inspiration, shaping performative traditions like:

- Borgeet
- Ankiya Naat
- Sattriya dance (recognized as classical dance in 2000)

Post-colonial writers reconstructed Assamese cultural pride through:

- Symbolism of nature and river Brahmaputra
- Assertion of native beliefs and customs
- Documentation of subaltern folklore

Themes of cultural crisis, driven by migration and globalization, also appeared frequently.

Representation of Cultural Plurality

Assam's ethnic composition includes Bodo, Mishing, Karbi, Dimasas, Rabhas, Deoris, Tiwas, Morans, Motoks, Koch-Rajbongshis, Manipuris and others. Post-colonial literature celebrates coexistence but also unveils inter-community conflicts and cultural insecurities.

Example:

- Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Yaruingam* depicts Naga socio-cultural identity and tribal political consciousness.

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Thus, Assamese literature constructs a shared cultural memory acknowledging both harmony and discord.

Economic Background of Post-Colonial Assamese Literature

Despite its natural wealth (oil, tea, coal, forests), Assam experienced economic neglect even after independence.

Major economic concerns include:

- Unequal resource exploitation
- Underdeveloped industrial sector
- High unemployment and poverty
- Rural economic dependence
- Large workforce migration

These economic frustrations motivated literature focusing on:

- Tea garden labor exploitation
- Petroleum economy and marginalization
- Peasant struggles
- Working-class voices

For example, writers exposed:

- The exploitation of Adivasi tea workers brought during colonial rule
- Class division between elite Assamese and marginalized labor society

Impact of Economic Factors on Characters & Themes

Economic Condition	Literary Expression
Lack of opportunities	Youth frustration, migration stories
Resource extraction	Anger against central power
Poverty & inequality	Realistic depictions of rural hardships
Development imbalance	Discontent, loss of faith in governance

Economic deprivation became a recurring force, pushing youth toward:

- Militancy
- Protest politics
- Existential crisis

Thus, economy not only shapes society but also the entire **tone and direction** of post-colonial Assamese narratives.

Conclusion

Post-colonial Assamese literature is a dynamic creative expression shaped by profound political, historical, cultural, social, and economic transitions. After independence, Assam confronted identity crises, linguistic tensions, ethnic assertion, and economic marginalization. Writers chronicled these realities through literature that questions authority, portrays trauma, strengthens cultural identity, and envisions justice and harmony.

This study demonstrated that Assamese literature:

- Is deeply rooted in post-colonial anxieties
- Documents lived experiences and regional pride
- Engages in continuous negotiation with modernity and globalization
- Embraces multicultural ethos while confronting ethnic polarization

Therefore, the post-colonial era marks an important literary renaissance where Assamese writers played the role of historians, social critics, and cultural guardians.

Findings

1. Post-colonial Assamese literature emerged from the historical legacy of colonial exploitation and linguistic marginalization.
2. Political movements like the Assam Movement and insurgency strongly shaped narrative themes of alienation, identity, and nationalism.
3. Social modernization produced new hierarchies, gender discourses, and rural–urban contrast reflected in literary forms.
4. Cultural revivalism strengthened indigenous heritage and identity pride in literature.
5. Economic disparities and resource exploitation contributed to themes of class oppression and frustrated aspirations.
6. Literature served as a platform for voicing marginalized communities and preserving multicultural ethos.
7. Assamese literature evolved to incorporate modernist, post-modernist, and feminist perspectives responding to socio-political realities.
8. Post-colonial Assamese literature mirrors the resilience, struggles, and hopes of the Assamese people.

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