



INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY GUWAHATI  
SHORT ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Programme of Study : Ph.D.

Thesis Title:

**LAKSHMINATH BEZBAROA AND HIS TIMES: LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND MODERNITY IN COLONIAL ASSAM**

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**SHORT ABSTRACT**

The thesis is an attempt to write a biography of Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), an acknowledged writer of modern Assamese literature, situating him against the broader social history of the time. While exploring language, literature, religion, history, folklore, gender and all-pervading cultures of mundane life, from cooking to child-rearing, the study's prime focus is on the question of modernity in south Asia, particularly Assam. It tries to explore the real and psychological worlds of the modern intelligentsia of Assam in colonial time, who consciously chose to live their lives in particular ways, but always found themselves among certain dilemmas, contradictions, confusions, anxieties and doubts. Initiating its journey with Dinanath, the father of Lakshminath, a representative of pre-colonial gentry, who had to negotiate with the colonial time in its early days, the study's central concern is the changing panorama and perspectives of life in colonial modern situations. It tries to understand the formation of the regional Assamese identity, and its complex relations with caste, ethnicity, language, religion and the emerging notion of a broader identity of being an Indian. The study tries to understand the cherished ideology of *matribhasa* and nationalism against the concrete situations of the life of a celebrated crusader of linguistic nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century- Assam, who fortuitously had to live a long expatriate life. Thus, it tries to examine and question such dominant ideologies of the time from within.

Rather than perceiving language and literature as disinterested activities of the nationalist intelligentsia of the time, the thesis explores the economic and political aspects of such seemingly apolitical ventures. Coming away from the simplistic notion of a self-conscious intelligentsia's concerted attempt to form an Assamese identity, the thesis examines multitudinous components which became interactive in the field, and became crucial in shaping the intellectual- cultural activities of the time.

It explores the print world in Assamese as a gateway to modernity in colonial situation, and tries to concentrate on the issues like literary-historiographical mentalities, celebration of platonic love theme as a new version of *bhakti* or emotional attachment with God, experimentations and hybridization of existing and new genres, exploration of history as an inspirational force of assertion of identity and above all, emergence of a reading public, which subsequently came to form the public opinion. The study also examines the historical necessity and processes involved in it, by which, the society explores its heroes of different kinds, whether it be a religious *guru*, *mahapurush*, a great person, '*jatir janak*', a begetter of '*jati*' or an authorial figure, both from the past and the present. It examines the process of elevation of such celebrated figures, and focuses on the journey of an author like Lakshminath from an anonymous writer to a canonized, larger-than-life figure in the realm of the literary. It tries to understand how a literary persona has been constantly being made and unmade to serve the causes of the imagined life of a community, and elevated to the status of a hero. It also asks why Lakshminath was chosen for this purpose, emphasizing why a man of letters and a creative writer, rather than a contemporary politician, was chosen to represent a regional identity in Assam. It also tries to understand how a song composed by Lakshminath, without concern to its literary merit, came to signify the whole life of a nationality, and subsequently acquired a symbolic value. Finally, the thesis explores the making of cultural symbols like singing a particular song in particular places and ways, as attestation of one's claim to the Assamese identity.