PG EG S4-05 (DSE)

TWO YEAR MASTER'S DEGREE COURSE

(CBCS in Accordance with NEP 2020)

SEMESTER – IV

LITERATURE FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA

ENGLISH

Padmanath Gohainbaruah School of Humanities

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

Literature from North East India (In English and Translation) is a Course, which is offered as an option for the **Discipline Specific Elective (DSE) Course** for MA English programme in 4th Semester. In this Course, some pieces are originally written in English and some are translated into English. Translation works in Indian literature is a domain that has been mostly associated with the interpretation of English works into other regional and vernacular languages or vice versa. However, the multiplicity of languages and cultures in India often poses an incredibly difficult challenge to the readers and critics of Indian Writing in English. In the context of the regional literatures from the North East of India, particularly those often projected as 'marginalised' or 'removed' from the mainstream, the experiment being undertaken by the indigenous writers on the 'formal' aspects of literature has provided a re-newed scope to review Literary Studies itself. Seen against such a consideration, when we look at the trends of writing in North East India, it becomes obvious that although the regional literatures of India involve certain linguistic and political issues, they have also created new pathways for cultural communications in a globally competitive world. This realisation further reflects, to a great extent, on a global academic pre-occupation with notions like–'space', 'identity', 'territory' and 'subject position' among the writers from all over the world.

We shall, at the same time, note that there is no single definition of North East Indian Literature as the diversity of this region defies any easy definition of this category of literature. Broadly, this phrase refers mostly to English writing but may also include the various language literatures and other writings in the indigenous languages of the different tribal people living in this region. Hence, some writers as well as critics tend to express their discomfit with terms like North-East India and North Eastern writers, mainly because they think that the term is colonial, and hence, an artificial construct. There is nothing called a "north-easterner" and the concept is purely geographical. Besides, it tends to homogenise an extremely heterogeneous cluster of people with individual history and heritage.

Despite all such intrinsic problems of definition, we have undertaken this ambitious attempt to introduce ourselves to the works of some of the important writers from North east India. The purpose has also been to help them have some taste of our own writers along with the literary doyens of World Literature. For example, learners in this course will get an opportunity to read about Navakanta Barua, Nilamoni Phukan, Desmond Kharmawphland, Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom for poetry, Hiren Gohain, Easterine Iralu and Chandrakanta Murasingh for prose writing, Saurav Kumar Chaliha, Temsula Ao, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Indira Goswami and Bina Barua for fiction, and Arun Sarma and Ratan Thiyam for drama.

But, these SLMs should not be considered complete or self-sufficient as North East Indian Writing is still an evolving field. Moreover, due to lack of secondary resources, adequate elaborations could not be incorporated into some of the units. Learners are advised to read the books suggested in the Further Reading List at the end of each unit.

This course is divided into three Blocks. **Block 1** shall deal with Poetry; **Block 2** shall deal with Fiction; and **Block 3** shall deal with Prose and Drama. Each Block shall comprise 5 units.

Block 1 of the Course deals with total five units on poetry by five North East Indian poets. From the units, we shall get to learn how these poets have rendered significant contribution to poetry with their unique themes and style.

Unit 1: Navakanta Barua: "Silt" & "Bats" shall deal with the late Assamese poet Navakanta Barua and his poems "Bats" and "Silt" which are the translated versions of his poems "Baduli" and "Polosh" in original Assamese. The poem "Bats" brings to reader's mind the modern spirit perceived through the image of 'Bats', while "Silt" reflects his modern spirit.

Unit 2 : Nilamoni Phukan: "*The Dancing Earth*"shall provide us with a scope of exploring an interesting poem in translation i.e., from Assamese to English language, by the renown and award-winning Assamese poet Nilamoni Phukan. Through his poetical expressions, we shall learn, Phukan brings alive old memories and new reflections, capturing a range of human emotions and experiences.

Unit 3 : Mamang Dai: "The Voice of the Mountain" & "An Obscure Place" deals with the Arunachali poet Mamang Dai and two of her well-known poems "An Obscure Place" & "Voice of the Mountain". In a poem like "An Obscure Place", the poet reflects her urge to introduce the rich heritage and culture of her native Arunachal Pradesh, while the poem "The Voice of the Mountain" is a celebration of the mountains, the very spirit of the poet's existence.

Unit 4 : Robin S. Ngangom: "Poetry" & "Everywhere I Go"deals with the Manipuri poet Robin S. Ngangom and two of his famous poems namely "Poetry" & "Everywhere I go". The poem "Poetry" shows Ngangom as a sensible poet who is working hard to define the very spirit of poetry. While, the other poem "Everywhere I go" talks about going back to one's root as a poet is bound to carry his homeland, wherever he goes.

Unit 5 : Desmond Kharmawphland : "Letter from Pahambir" & "The Conquest"shall help us to discuss Desmond Kharmawphland's poems "Letter from Pahambir" & "The Conquest". Desmond is an important contemporary poet and folklorist from Meghalaya. A poem like "The Conquest" is based on his introspective eye to his own identity, while the other poem "Letter from Pahambir" is about a lost culture with the invasion of the British to his land.

Block 2 of the Course deals with five distinguished fiction writers from North East India. From the units on five different prescribed texts, we shall learn about the various preoccupations of the writers who shaped North East Indian fiction.

Unit 6 : Saurav Kumar Chaliha : "Slaves" shall deal with Saurav Kumar Chaliha, one of the most important writers of Assam, through his much-acclaimed short story "Slaves". "Slaves" is a translated version of his story "Golam" which deals with the story of a narrator, supposedly Assamese, landing up in Germany, and the different course of experiences and contemplations that follow.

Unit 7 : Temsula Ao : "The Curfew Man" shall provide an opportunity to study another short story "The Curfew Man" written originally in English by the Naga writer Temsula Ao. Ao's collection of short fictions entitled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone,* from which the short story "The Curfew Man" is taken, carries with it the significance of an insider's views on certain contemporary issues which also provides room for thoughtful speculations on certain burning challenges confronting today's India.

Unit 8 : Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya : *Love in the time of Insurgency(Earuingam)* shall introduce us to Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, one of the pioneers of modern Assamese literature, and his novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* the English translation of the Assamese novel *Yaruingam by* Bhattacharya himself. Set in Nagaland during the World War II, the book leads you to some very sensitive truths of the battlefield of China-India-Burma with the freedom movement at the background. It also shows the start of a movement that later on led to birth of NSCN in Nagaland. It is one of the most celebrated books in Assamese literature and it is still read by young and old alike due to the relevance of the story in today's world.

Unit 9 : Indira Goswami : *Moth-Eaten Howda of the Tusker*shall try to discuss the life and works of the Assamese novelist Indira Goswami with particular reference her novel to *Moth-Eaten Howda of the Tusker.* Indira Goswami, popularly known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami, is an Assamese editor, poet, professor, scholar and creative writer. The novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker,* which is also a classic

in Indian literature,is based on the nostalgic memories of Goswami's own experience of the Amaranga "Sattra" (a "Vaishnavite" monastery) situated in Southern part of Kamrup district of Assam.

Unit 10 : Bina Barua: *Along the High Road* (*JivanarBatat)*shall acquaint the learners with Bina Barua's novel *Along the High Road* that is the English translation of his novel *JivanarBatat.* Bina Barua is the pen name of Birinchi Kumar Barua. The narrative of the novel *Along the High Road* is woven round the lived lives of a people and society which was at the threshold of change brought in about by the conflict between a culture rooted in traditional essence of yore and the reformist zeal ushered in by the nationalist movement in a pre-independent India.

Block 3 deals with three important prose pieces and two important plays written by authors belonging to North East India.

Unit 11: Hiren Gohain: "*Two Roads to Decolonization: Gandhi and Tagore"* shall discuss the idea of decolonisation in the context of postcolonial societies, through a reading of Hiren Gohain's prose piece "Two Roads to Decolonisation: Gandhi and Tagore". Decolonisation, a much-debated concept within the field of postcolonial study, refers to the process of complete dismantling of political domination of colonial forces from the erstwhile colonies of Europe. Hiren Gohain's essay examines and analyses the idea of decolonisation in the context of the Indian nationalist movement through the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi.

Unit 12: ChandrakantaMurasingh: "Kokborok—Her People Her Past"shall deal with Chandrakanta Murasingh, an important writer from Tripura, and his essay— "Kokborok: Her People and Her Past". The essay is about the writer's own language, which has been presently used only by nine lakh people.

Unit 13: EasterineKire: "Should Writers Stay in Prison"shall consider the Naga writer Easterine Kire who reflects on the realities of life the way it is in Nagaland. Her essay "Should Writers Stay in Prison" is one of her best reflections on the plight of the writers in Nagaland.

Unit 14: Arun Sarma: *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* shall acquaint ourselves with the late Assamese playwright Arun Sarma and his celebrated play Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya. This play beautifully addresses the necessary isolation of an artist.

Unit 15: Ratan Thiyam: *Chakravyuha* shall provide an opportunity to read Ratan Thiyam's play Chakravyuha (Army Formation). This play deals with an episode from the Mahabharata, the killing of the young Pandava hero, Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna, by seven Kaurava warriors. The play-script evolved in collaboration with the actors during an extended workshop, which included reading the epics and training the actors in traditional performing techniques and martial arts.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in "LET US KNOW" along with the text. We have kept "CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the "FURTHER READING" which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

References:

UNIT 1: NAVAKANTA BARUA: "BATS" AND "SILT"

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 Navakanta Barua: The Poet

1.4 The Poems: "Bats" and "Silt"

1.4.1 Texts of the Poems

1.4.2 Reading the Poems

1.4.3 Major Themes

1.4.4 Barua's Poetic Style

1.5 Critical Reception of Barua

1.6 Let us Sum up

1.7 Further Reading

1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

1.9 Possible Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss briefly the life and works of Navakanta Barua one of the most important poets from Assam
- explain how Barua develops his subject and relate it to his own experiences of life and people
- examine and the ways in which he uses language to convey his ideas
- make yourself familiar with the themes that Barua takes up
- appreciate the prescribed poems in totality.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of the course on North East Literature in English and Translation. In this unit, we shall discuss the prominent Assamese poet and novelist Navakanta Barua (December 29, 1926–July 14, 2002), with reference to two of his poems 'Bats' and 'Silt'. Popularly known among

the reading public as 'Ekhud Kokaideu', he wrote many poems under the pseudonym Sima Dutta in his early life. His contribution to Assamese literature includes 11 collections of poetry, 5 novels, essays, short stories for children and several lyrics. Some of his works have been translated to different Indian languages including English. The poems "Bats" and "Silt" are the translated versions of his poems "Baduli" and "Polosh" originally written in Assamese. The poem "Bats" brings to the reader's mind the modern spirit perceived through the image of 'Bats'. 'Bat' is used in the poem as a metaphor of modern life. On the other hand, the poem "Silt" too reflects his modern spirit. Yet there can be found an underlying grief, which he is bound to feel deeply. Thus, the two poems will help us to understand some of the important concerns of Navakanta Barua as a poet.

1.3 NAVAKANTA BARUA: THE POET

Navakanta Barua was born in Puranigudam, Nagaon, Assam in 1926. He went to Santiniketan and Aligarh Muslim University and he had also visited Yugoslavia, Poland, Italy, U.S.S.R and Greece under cultural exchange programmes. Two of his award-winning books have been translated into several Indian languages. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975 and the Padmabhushan in 1976. He is considered one of the pioneers of modern Assamese poetry. He retired as vice principal of Cotton College Guwahati, Assam.

The total thirty-eight books that he wrote include poetry, fiction, critical works and books for children. Starting with a slender volume of verse, Barua has published, besides poetry, five novels and novelettes, verses for children, a treatise on Indian culture, a volume of belles-letters, a travelogue and many translations from old and modern classics. His honours include the Kabir Samman, Soviet land Nehru Award amongst others. He also translated Dante, Goethe, Pushkin, Whitman, Vasko Popa and Kabir, besides others. He died in 2002.

In the introduction to *One Hundred Years of Assamese Poetry*, Prof. Hirendra Nath Dutta said, "Among the forerunners of modern Assamese poetry, the name of Navakanta Barua stands at the top. Navakanta Barua's

first collection of poems *Hey Aranya, Hey Mohanagar* (Oh Forests Oh Cities) is a poetic commentary on the intricate ways of modern urban culture. His poetic quest starts from this book published in 1951 and the same quest went on moving forward till his death in 2002. Over this long span, one can notice important stages of development of this major poet. An agile sense of history tends to influence his observations of the contemporary reality. Myth, folktales and classical Indian literature written in both Sanskrit and Pali have converged in his rich poetic vision. His later poems show the poet's keen contemplative power. Navakanta Barua is a brilliant poetic craftsman and his poetry fascinates the readers by its wonderful evocative power."

It is true that Navakanta Barua is considered to be the pioneer in connection of modern Assamese poetry. Birinchi Kumar Barua, in 'History of Assamese Literature' is of the view, "Navakanta's three published books of verse are *Hey Aranya, Hey Mahanagar* (O Forest, O Metropolis), *Eti Duti Egharati Tara* (Counting up eleven stars) and Yati. Navakanta Barua was influenced more deeply by T.S. Eliot than by others. Like Eliot, he also believes that poetry requires a language distinct from that of prose, a language rich in suggestions both to the senses and to intellect. Naturally, his poetry tends to become difficult. In this respect, the Assamese poet also holds that poets in our complex civilisation must be difficult. He seems to agree with what T. S. Eliot had stated: "Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing on a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive and more allusive, in order to force language into his thought." Navakanta Barua's stay in Calcutta and at Santiniketan in connection with his higher education brought him also under the influence of Rabindranath Tagore, Jivanananda Das, Amiya Chakravarty and some other modern Bengali poets. The experiences with such stalwarts of Indian literatures had a lasting effect in his poetic mind.

Navakanta Barua is one of the most noteworthy modern poets in Assamese literature. His main Assamese poetry collections are *Hey Aranya, Hey Mahanagar* (O Forest, O Metropolis, 1951), *Eti Duti Egharati Tara*

(Counting up Eleven Stars, 1957) and *Yati and Keitaman Sketch* (1960), *Samrat* (1962), *Ravan* (1963), *Mur Aru Pritivir* (1973), *Ratnakar* (1986), *Ekhon Swasha Mukhare* (1990), *Surjya Mukhir Angikar* (1990), *Navakanta Baruar Kabitavali* (1994), *Rati Jilmil Tara Jilmil* (1999) and *Dalangar Tamighar* (2000).

His poems written with a modern perspective started appearing in prestigious Assamese journals like *Banhi, Jayanti, Ramdhenu, Manideep, Gariashi* and so on, when he was a student. He began writing poetry under the pen name Seema Dutta and subsequently began writing in his own name.

His *Mur Aru Pritivir* (1973) was awarded 'Assam Publication Board Award' in 1974 and this collection contains 113 poems. Almost all poems of this volume focus on the gradual decline of some of the finest feelings of mankind for the sake of rapid changing society. But he was conferred **Sahitya Akademy Award** not for **his poetry, but for his novel *Kokadeutar Haar*** in 1975 and that was followed by **Assam Valley Award** in 1993.

Navakanta Barua's poems, is a blend of the influence of Indian philosophy and the poems of Rabindra Nath Tagore. They reflect the modern men's sense of despair and monotony and draw a parallel with the past time. A few of his poems describe his inability to live at ease with the growing modern life. But, his love for Rabindra Nath Tagore's poems, seen in the poems like, "The Mask behind the face, "—

"I had a past beyond my birth
In the leaves of history, the chanting of Psalms
Or in the cooing of birds
In a slogan by the road
Or in Rabindranath's songs…"

Describing the nature of Navakanta Barua's poems, Prof. Bhaben Barua, the eminent critic and Sahitya Akademi award winner, said, "The three eminent Assamese poets of the early 1940s are Amulaya Barua, Ajit Barua and Navakanta Barua. His poetry profusely displays a sense of sadness and a sense of pervasive death."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Mention some of the important works of Navakanta Barua.

Q 2: What is common between Navakanta Barua and the English poet T. S. Eliot?

1.4 THE POEMS: "BATS" AND "SILT"

1.4.1 Texts of the Poems [translated by D. N. Bezbaruah]

"Bats"

The inert bats were suspended
Behind the string of grocery shops,
Innocuously blending
With the flaming abundance of yellow cassia—
A multitude of embryonic infants
In the cavernous innards of the sky.
They saw:
The earth strung above the sky,
And the trees that rest on the firmament
Thrusting their roots
Into the hoary darkness of the earth.
Women, their mats pulled over their resilient forms,
Chasing the weary hours of nocturnal ennui,
With a brief midday siesta.
And they saw us boys
Hanging upside down from our kite-strings
Like dubious notes of interrogation…
Then evening.
With the bats' hesitant flight
The perverse trees stand again
On the earth as is their wont;
Women lean on crimsoned portals

Longing anew for the drowsy hour.
And we boys
Inch back our fragile kites
With our reels timidly turning.
Concentration, like a winged missile
Hits them between the eyes:
The sky?
Whence did it rise above our heads?
They kept singing:
Hang on! Cling on!
Hold fast with both feet
To the liquid death that speeds
Through tense electric wires.
And then?
Then the sky will again lie
Recumbent.
The hills will pin it down
Astride in an inverted coital variant;
And under the monstrous mammaries
Of an insatiable with,
Love will die a shattering death.

"Silt"

The fire of the palaash has gone out now.
In the saal and sotiyaan woods
Spring-storms of days past—
Days of the Burmese invasion.
How many dreams fell who keeps count?
On the banks of the Kolong, Kopili, Diju
Grandfather's bones.
The wild lily sprouts through
Grandfather's heart.
What did the clouds say,

Give, give more, give your all,
Plant trees by the road, open a high school,
The dear traveler is always on the road,
Heave a sigh
Let the water speeding through roofs
Flood out the cells of dead spiders
Let the silt fertilise the banks of the Kolong.
In the furrows of our grandson's new farmstead
We shall wake.
In our fossils they will read
Amusing tales
Of those who remember past births.
In the lane where dreams are blind
We stay there. In the gutters
Their future.

1.4.2 Reading the Poems

The poem "Bats" brings to reader's mind the modern spirit perceived through the image of 'Bats'. The Bats, as metaphor is the projection of modern life. The poet brings forth several fragmentary scenes form modern life, which have no similarity at all. The complex modern life is incoherent, where one always has to face a cluster of diverse experiences. In addition, their cumulative effect is to stress the inadequacy and purposelessness of many people's lives in the 20th century. The poetic images like 'the hoary darkness of the earth', 'the evening/with the bats' hesitant flight' are the reflexion of bored aimlessness of the people in the society they live in.

The image of the 'sky' is dominant in Navakanta Barua's poems. In this poem also, we discover how the image of the 'sky' is used throughout the poem like 'In the cavernous innards of the sky', 'they saw/the earth strung above the sky', 'The sky? Whence did it rise above our heads?', then 'the sky will again lie /recumbent' and so on.

It is a fact that Navakanta Barua received his influence from the English poet T. S. Eliot about which he himself admits: "I had mostly limited myself to surface borrowings and to bodily lifting some of the imagery, particularly of the early Eliot." Like Eliot, Barua's language is rich in suggestions to both the senses and the intellect, and he also believes that poetry requires language rich in suggestions. Eliot's poetry shows the spiritual aspect of death, while Barua's 'death' is not always spiritual, when he says, "Let my death die, killed by your kisses."

This is not a land for flourishing love and so he is made to speak about the death of love that 'love will die a shattering death'. This image of death of love is really significant and suggestive of modern life's monotony. Commenting on his concept of death, Bhaben Barua says, "this pervasive nature of death, explicit in most of Navakanta Barua's poems gave a new and unique aspect in modern Assamese poetry. This sense of pervasive and all encompassing death, that began in his early poetry continued till the time of *Hey Aranya, Hey Mahanagar*, has been the prevailing central theme of the poem.

"Silt" is yet another most popular poem of Navakanta Barua. His poems are modern in spirit and this particular poem reflects the same attitude. The title 'silt' refers to fine sand or clay carried by running water and deposited as sediment. The river Kolong is very dear to poet's heart as he spent his childhood on the banks of that river. The image "Let the silt fertilise the banks of the Kolong" evokes in him a sense of hope after a long waiting full of despair.

The poem, though shows a very optimistic picture, yet there is an underlying grief, which he is bound to feel deeply. And, that makes him to say,

"The fire of the Palash is gone out now.
In the Sal and Satiyan woods
Spring-storms of days past—
Days of the Burmese invasion."

The Nature is at stake and all past glory has declined, and the poet urges the modern man to plant trees or to create new hopes for the future—

"the dear traveller is always on the road,
Heave a sigh."

But, not all is lost. As the shells of dead spiders will get washed away, there is every possibility to create hope, as the silt will definitely fertilise the banks of the Kolong. The poet hopes that the glorious past will definitely get an opportunity to emerge and grow into a beautiful world in near future.

Silt is a symbol of hope and describing this beautiful poem of Navakanta Barua, Nalinidhar Bhattacharya, one of the eminent Assamese poet critics opines, "Although the poem appears to be a positive one, yet the underlying sadness for losing the glorious past is more prominent in this poem."

The image "In the lane where dreams are blind", the poet tries to show us the picture of modern life. And for Bhaben Barua, "the modern life is like a blind alley, where people cannot move further."

It is the past, that makes its way to future on the strength of presence, so the poet is hopeful for a flourishing future –

"In the furrows of our grandson's new farmstead
We shall wake.
In our fossils they will read
Amusing tales
Of those who remember past births."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What is the poem "Bats" all about?

Q 4: What, according to you, is the theme of the poem "Silt"?

Q 5: What does 'Bats' signify in Navakanta Barua's poem by the same name?

1.4.3 Major Themes

Navakanta Barua's poetry can be divided into three groups, the first being his romantic poems, written during 1940 and 1950s, the second group of poems spring from his sensitive heart and, the third group of poems include his long poems like 'Ravana', 'Samrat' and 'Ratnakar', written in the period of 1962-73. The later poems are rhetorical and they reflect his modern perspective more intensely.

Navakanta Barua's poems are **modern** in spirit as well as in style. Regarding the themes of Navakanta Barua's poetry, Birinchi Kumar Barua said, "One can catch, here and there, in Navakanta's poems a music akin to that of Tagore. He is an experimenter in verse-form with a delicate sense of rhythm and symphony of words. He has shown admirable skill in handling metres, rhymed or free or mixed. Like Eliot, he is aware of the monotony and dichotomy of the modern age and the snobbery of the middle class. However, he is never caustic. Acceptance of life is the keynote of his poetry. The poet's feelings and realisations have beautified and ennobled the earth, which is no metaphor to him but a warm reality. Even after departure, the poet will ever seek to return to the earth (The poetry of Return). His love and desire for a fuller and ampler life under the broad blue sky is beautifully expressed in his prayer to the night sky (To the night sky: Prayer through the window)

"Helpless I am, even if mine
Is only the luxury of supplication;
Hear my prayer, O sky,
Tell me what issue falls like an arrow
From the moon's amber-creascent?
Give us a little more room, O sky,
For our sky is too, too narrow."

Navakanta Barua's genius linked the old and the new in Assamese poetry. Two distinctively diverse strains originated from his poetry: **the aggressively celebratory and experimental**, and **the romantic and purely lyrical**. He initiated that exploration of

folkways, which helped evolve the idiom of modern Assamese poetry. The thirst towards intellectual modernism had its beginnings in him and still continues its onward movement.

Navakanta Barua's *Hey Aranya, Hey Mahanagar* (O Forest, O Metropolis) depicts the lifelessness and loneliness of modern urbanity, which is described by Eliot as 'death-in-life." The ugliness associated with modern urbanity is vividly portrayed in his poems. At the same time, **the loneliness and identity crisis of a modern man** is beautifully expressed in his poems. He is very disturbed, when he says, in his poem, "The mask behind the face", "Will you, my brothers/ build a mask of that disturbed emptiness?"

A blend of T. S. Eliot, Rabindra Nath Tagore, a consistent sense of death and Indian Philosophy, Navakanta Barua's poetry gives us a glimpse of **Assamese folk tales** too, particularly the 'Deh-bichar songs', used in modern perspective. In *Folk Literature: An Introductory Survey* (page 8), Dr. Prafulla Dutta Goswami stated: "Folk literature, which is but folklore narrowed down, is indeed, a means of understanding the folk around us. To illustrate again, it is quite possible than an examination of the Deh-bichar songs would explain more the general apathy of the inhabitants of the country side…The Deh-bichar songs stressed the futility of the deha or body and suggested a course of mystical action, which ended in a negative creed. Even the very tunes to which Deh-bichar songs are sung, suggest a feeling of languor and self-hypnotism." According to Dr Karabi Deka Hazarika, one of the foremost poets and critic, "As a very sensitive poet and a scholar, Navakanta Barua's poetry not only reflects the influence T. S. Eliot, Whitman or Khalil Gibran, but also deeply reflects Assamese culture and folk literature."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What are the distinct characteristics of Barua's poetry?

Q 7: Which are the three groups of Navakanta Barua's poetry?

1.4.4 Barua's Poetic style

Talking about the poetic style of Navakanta Barua's poetry, Birinchi Kumar Barua said, "Modern poetic diction is marked by a great economy of words. In common with other modern poets, Navakanta also has used a diction where there are semantic disturbances, words of different levels, and the juxtaposition of difficult Sanskrit and English vocabulary, and dialect words, producing contrast images. Phrases, quotations, pictures and symbols of the European and Indian literatures are freely employed by him to convey a complex sensibility. His symbols are ambiguous, as they do not definitely convey one idea, but a spectrum of ideas. Their beauty and circumambience vary in proportion to the cultural and emotional range of the reader." According to Karabi Deka Hazarika, Barua's poetic language is rhetorical with his thought-provoking expressions, sometimes very serious. His treatment of sweet love is explicit in the images of a few of his poems. His poems are the artefacts of heart as well as intellect that make his poems unique and pleasing for the readers.

1.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BARUA

The poetry of Navakanta Barua has dominated the post-Independence poetic scene of Assam with his distinctive style. In her 'Introduction' to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* Dr. Tilottoma Misra stated: "Navakanta Barua's poems bear the marks of a variety of influences from Anglo-American and European modernist poetry, combining these with elements from the classical Indian tradition. Barua delves deep into the world of a modern man, trying to discover logical connections between the shattered images of a modern post war situation and the inner world of a modern man, trying to discover logical connections between the inner and the outer world. Barua's language has great evocative power and his poems as well as novels reflect a deep sense of history. Some of the most memorable images in his poetry spring from this historical sense."

Talking about the style of Navakanta Barua's poetry, Birinchi Kumar Barua said, "One can catch, here and there, in Navakanta Barua's poems, a music akin to that of Tagore. He is an experimenter in verse form with a delicate sense of rhythm and symphony of words. He has shown admirable skill in handling meters. Like Eliot, Navakanta Barua is aware of the monotony and dichotomy of the modern age and the snobbery of the middle class. But, he is never caustic. Acceptance of life is the keynote of his poetry. The poet's feelings and realisation have beautified and ennobled the earth, which is no metaphor to him but a warm reality. Even after departure, the poet will ever seek to return to the earth, as expressed in the poem, 'The Poetry of return'. His love and desire for a fuller and ampler life under the broad blue sky is beautifully expressed in his prayer to the night sky."

It is a fact that Navakanta Barua's poems reflect more of Matthew Arnold than T.S. Eliot, as in one of his interview to Homen Borgohain in *Nilachal*, in 1969; Barua admits, "I love the poetry of Matthew Arnold, especially his sense of sadness and the poetry of Khalil Gibran. But it is beyond my ability to perceive the deep meaning portrayed in *Four Quartets* of T. S. Eliot." His poems like "Cloistered'' honestly reflects this sense of sadness—

"The fossil heaved its stony sigh
Moaning:
God's failures have caused,
All his tears to helpless man."

But the poet in him is not always bereft of hope and that is why he wrote in his poem,

"Bringing up the rear"—

"The man bringing up the rear
Didn't know he was at the head
Of a fresh procession
In the last word of my poems
Glimmers a new beginning."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Mention some of the distinctive features of Navakanta Barua as a modern Assamese poet.



1.6 LET US SUM UP

From your reading of the unit, you have found that Navakanta Barua was a prominent Assamese poet and novelist. Popularly known among the reading public as Ekhud Kokaideu, he wrote many poems under the pseudonym Sima Dutta in his early life. His contribution to Assamese literature includes 11 collections of poetry, 5 novels, essays, short stories for children and several lyrics. Some of his works have been translated to different Indian languages including English. "Bats" and "Silt" are two important poems of Barua. The poem "Bats" brings to reader's mind the modern spirit perceived through the image of 'Bats'. On the other hand, the poem "Silt" too reflects his modern spirit. Yet there can be found an underlying grief, which he is bound to feel deeply.



1.7 FURTHER READING

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Barua is known for around thirty eight books… … they include poetry, fiction, critical works and books for children…. …he wrote five novels and novelettes, verses for children, a treatise on Indian culture, a volume of belles-letters, a travelogue and many translations from old and modern classics… …he also translated Dante, Goethe, Pushkin, Whitman, Vasko Popa and Kabir, besides others.

Ans to Q 2: Like Eliot, Barua also believed that poetry requires a language distinct from that of prose, a language rich in suggestions both to the senses and to intellect… …like Eliot, his poetry too tends to become difficult.

Ans to Q 3: "Bats" is a metaphor that projects modern life… …the poet brings forth several fragmentary scenes form modern life… …images like 'the hoary darkness of the earth', 'the evening/with the bats' hesitant flight' are the reflexion of bored aimlessness of the people in the society they live in.

Ans to Q 4: "silt" refers to fine sand or clay carried by running water and deposited as sediment… …the river Kolong is very dear to poet's heart as he spent his childhood on the banks of that river… …the image "Let the silt fertilise the banks of the Kolong" evokes in him a sense of hope after a long waiting full of despair.

Ans to Q 5: 'Bats' is as metaphor of modern life… …the complex modern life is incoherent, where one always has to face a cluster of diverse experiences… …also refers to the stress, inadequacy and purposelessness of people's lives in the 20th century.

Ans to Q 6: The aggressively celebratory and experimental, and the romantic and purely lyrical… …he initiated that exploration of folk-ways helped

evolve the idiom of modern Assamese poetry… …the thirst towards intellectual modernism had its beginnings in him and still continues its onward movement.

Ans to Q 7: The first group is the romantic poems written during 1940s and 1950s… …the second is those poems springing from his sensitive heart… …and, the third is his long poems like 'Ravana', 'Samrat', and 'Ratnakar', written in the period of 1962-73… …the later poems are rhetorical and they reflect his modern perspective more intensely.

Ans to Q 8: According to Tilottoma Misra, Navakanta Barua's poems bear the marks of a variety of influences from Anglo-American and European modernist poetry, combining these with elements from the classical Indian tradition… …Birinchi Kumar Barua stated that in Navakanta Barua's poems, there is a music akin to that of Tagore… …like Eliot, Navakanta Barua is aware of the monotony and dichotomy of the modern age and the snobbery of the middle class.



1.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: In what ways, do the poems "Bats" and "Silt" bring to the reader's mind the modern spirit? Discuss.

Q 2: Navakanta Barua's poetry profusely displays a sense of sadness and a sense of pervasive death. Discuss.

Q 3: Do you think that Navakanta Barua was influenced by the English poet T. S. Eliot? Illustrate your answer with reference to the texts prescribed.

Q 4: In what ways, according to you, have the elements of nature been used by Navakanta Barua in his poetry?

Q 5: In what ways, does Navakanta Barua, dominate the Post-Independence poetic scene of Assam with his distinctive style?

Q 6: Comment on Navakanta Barua's poetic style as reflected in the poems 'Bats' and 'Silt'.

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UNIT 2: NILAMONI PHUKAN: "THE DANCING EARTH"

UNIT STRUCTURE

2.1 Learning Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 Nilamoni Phukan: The Poet

2.4 Reading the Poem

2.4.1 Major Themes

2.4.2 Phukan's Poetic Style

2.5 Critical Reception of Phukan

2.6 Let us Sum up

2.7 Further Reading

2.8 Answers to Check Our Progress (Hints Only)

2.9 Possible Questions

2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the life and literary contributions of the poet Nilamoni Phukan
- explain the text of the poem "The Dancing Earth"
- highlight some of the major themes that emerge from the text of the poem
- discuss the style and language employed by the poet
- gain an idea on the critical reception of the poet's work

2.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have gone through the introductory unit of the Block. The present unit provides us with a scope of exploring an interesting poem in translation i.e., from Assamese to English language, by the renown and award-winning Assamese poet Nilamoni Phukan. During the time, when poets like Ajit Barua had first begun a modern trend of Assamese poetry, Phukan had already received wide critical acclaim as a

poet and writer. When one explores the anthologies of his poetry, the economy of his words, the depth of his poetical expression and the combination of his personal symbolism is quite hard to miss. Through his poetical expressions, Phukan brings alive old memories and new reflections, capturing a range of human emotions and experiences. It may interest the learner to know that the poet first began jotting down his poetical thoughts as early as the 1950s and the volumes of his poetry is replete with some of his own personal reflections, philosophical speculations and the tussles of his sharp intellect. Today, Nilamoni Phukan is considered one of the leading Assamese poets who like the noted Assamese poets and writers namely, Navakanta Barua, Hiren Bhattacharjya, Shimanta Bhattacharya, Nirmalprabha Bordoloi etc. have enriched the treasures of Assamese literature and particularly Assamese poetry. Let us in this unit, then familiarise ourselves with the life and works of the poet which shall further help in exploring the prescribed poem in details.

2.3 NILAMONI PHUKAN: THE POET

Nilamoni Phukan was born in a small village named Sakiyal in Dergaon district of Assam in the year 1992.His first formal education began at his own native place in Dergaon and he completed his graduation from Cotton College in 1957 with History as his specialised subject following which he began working as a teacher. After completing his post-graduation from Arya Vidyapeeth College, Guwahati in the year 1964, he had joined his *alma mater* and served for a long period, eventually retiring from service in the year 1992. Phukan now lives at his Maligaon residence in Guwahati, post retirement.

The poet has several literary works to his credit, namely-*Surjya Henu Naami Ahe Ei Nadiedi* (1963), *Nirjanatar Xobdho* (1965), *Aaru Kinu Xobdho* (1968), *Phuli Thoka Xurjyamukhi Phooltur Faale* (1972), *Kaait Gulaap Aru Kaait* (1975), *Kobita* (1981), *Nrityarota Prithibi* (1985), and *Olop Agote Aami Ki Kotha Paatiasilu* (2003). His first anthology of poetry was titled *Xurjya Henu Nammi Aahe Ei Nadiedi*(1963). Some of his widely-read anthologies of poetry are namely:*Jaapani Kobita* (1971), *Garcia Lorcar Kobita* (1981),

Lokakalpa Drishti (1987), *Rup Barna* Baak (1988), *Xilpakala Darshan* (1998), *Aranyar Gaan* (1992) and *China Kobita* (1996). His poems have also been included in selected anthologies of poetry titled *Gulaapi Jaamur Logno* compiled by Bhaben Barua, *Xagortolir Xonkho* edited by Hiren Gohain and also (in translation) in the anthology of poetry from the Northeast edited by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin Ngagom. He had also received the Padma Shri in the year 1990 and the Sahitya Akademi Award, with the title of "Fellow 2002" the same year.

In his early works, one shall note a range of themes interwoven in his poetry such as his reflections on life and death, nature and culture, the self and society, love and sorrow, longing and loneliness- all touched upon with a sense of maturity, as well as, a certain sensitivity. In addition, his poems reflect a note of optimism together with some interesting glimpses of his eclectic experiences and his remarkable poetical sensibilities. The essence of his poetical writings exudes a humanitarian worldview in which he captures human experiences that hold a universal significance. His is the kind of poetry that captivates and springs from the depths of his soul and the gravity of his thoughts, inspiring not just his avid readers but also the younger generation of Assamese poets today. The learners will find that the poet provides any reader with much food for thought and captures the inner stirrings of the human heart and the unanswered mysteries that life holds out, for each one of us.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Name some of the leading poets and writers of Assamese literature.

Q 2: Which was the first anthology of poetry by Nilamoni Phukan?

Q 3: Mention the names of some of Phukan's anthologies of poetry which are widely-read.

Q 4: What were some of the major themes found in Phukan's early poetry?

2.4 READING THE POEM

In this subsection, we shall explore the text of the poem titled-"The Dancing Earth" which highlights some of the pressing concerns of the poet. After a thorough reading of the poem, the learner is also encouraged to add his or her own interpretation of the poem to the given explanation and further exercise his or her own critical or analytical skills. The explanation of the poem is provided in this subsection corresponding with the text of the poem which shall enable the learner to relate to the content of the text and also facilitate one's reading of the poem. The learner may note that the English translation of the poem was done by the eminent Assamese writer, critic and noted intellectual, Hiren Gohain. Let us then make an attempt to grasp the meaning and content of the poem.

The Dancing Earth

Two families we lived
Under leaking roofs
Of the same house
And years passed through them
With nights drenched in rain
And sometimes in dreams
A wagtail settled here a while
When you laughed I
Cried and you
Cried when I laughed
Exchanging each other
Changing
Nights and days and sleep and wakefulness
Childhood and youth
And age old parched with desire

The opening lines of the poem present a vivid imagery of two families huddled under a single, leaky thatched roof due to the heavy rains. The poet in retrospect takes us back to the past when these two families had lived together through hardships and moments of crisis. Their humble

homes in which they had spent years together were in dilapidated condition, yet these were all that they had to call their own and the unbreakable bond among each other. Through the years, they adjusted with their share of difficulties, never giving up on hope, dreaming of better days and happier lives for themselves in the future. Thus, the poet wonders at the yesteryears that pass by quickly almost as if it were in the blink of an eye.

In the next lines, we find the presence of either a friend or a family member who had a share in building similar dreams and also the presence of wagtail bird which unlike them was free to go away wherever it wished to, leaving behind everything. While they laughed and cried through those years and while the years rolled by with nights changing into day, days into weeks, weeks into years- those days also continued to haunt them and their memories. Thus, in a way they could never forget or completely leave behind their difficult past. They had faced far too many hardships of life early in their lives but it had also made them all the more resilient. The poet recalls and contrasts the ways in which some of the nights that they spent were calm and peaceful, while there were times when their nights were filled with sleeplessness and fear for their own lives.

When you laughed I
Cried and you
Cried when I laughed
Exchanging each other
Changing
Nights and days and sleep and wakefulness
Childhood and youth
And old age parched with desire
What dreams and nightmares
Dreams of nightmares
Dreams ever and after
What home and shelter here and abroad and dungeon
Spacious plains
Bamboo groves and wild woods
Past and present

The poet captures the swiftness with which time passes by, constantly bringing in new changes while they had grown up through those years, passing from childhood to youth and then to old age, still filled with desires of the heart, with hopes and expectations that never seemed to be satiated, the undying thirst for the longings of the heart. Here, one finds emotions and experiences that contrast with each other, with dreams and nightmares, hopes and fears all being muddled up at once, almost like a confusion of the senses. Even dreams seem to be captured by nightmares at times. Here, nightmares refer to bad dreams and the feeling that one receives is that of the poet chasing after his dreams or expressing his longing for the fulfilment of dreams and the desperation of realising the heart's desire. The poet at once recalls his home in his native place and in the next moment- his shelter abroad. Then again, he is suddenly reminded of the tall encircling bamboo groves and surrounding wild woods being immediately transported to his past and his childhood. Again, his thoughts bring him back to his immediate present. Doesn't that happen to all of us, almost all the time?

And the children only
Set fire to evening's fireflies
Brushing away tears
And only the blossoming flower
Search in its fragrance
For the soul's expanse
Where have I come where have you gone away
None knows
There are rumours of Arjun's return
Bringing what news of the dead child
Somewhere vin some gallery
Nandalal's Shiva
Consumes cosmic poison
We do not know
Nobody knows

Whose boats was wrecked off Kurua
By westerly winds
Neighing like wild horses
In stampede
And yet will you not plant
Plantain saplings
Again in your backyard

The striking image that the poet presents is that of little children with their inherent innocence that finds expression in their endearing ways of being. Little children have a way of finding little joys to cheer them up, wiping away their tears and bringing smiles on the faces of everyone- simply by enjoying the little things in life like the glowing fireflies in the dark. Therefore, these fireflies may also symbolise hope, joy and optimism against all odds. These are compared to the blossoming of flowers with lovely 'fragrances' that define its inner essence, much as the little children are defined by the expanse of their soul or the inner core of their innocent hearts. The poet then wonders the ways in which times have drastically changed, thinking about the changes in his own life and the life of his dear ones with whom he had grown up with. There is a sense of uncertainty all around him and the poet experiences a loss of words to describe his muddled up thoughts.

Thus, he brings in the image of Arjuna, who is one of the leading figures in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*and also the third brother of the Pandavas. The heroic figure here is presented as probably returning home with some uncertain news related to death, implying the uncertainty of life and the loss of a loved one. And then, again the poet presents the image of the Destroyer the third of Hindu Trinity, Lord Shiva consuming "cosmic poison" as you may probably know that the Lord Shiva is also known as "Neelkantha" (the Blue-throated) for He is believed to have taken in all the poison of the world so that all living beings could be spared from death and destruction, implying the ways in which our fate was saved by the powerful Lord. There is no certainty about our lives; we as mortals come and go from this world of *maya*, mostly unsung and almost always forgotten in the

course of time. Neither we, nor anyone else knows when will death come and take hold of us.

Thus, the poet writes that none can tell when and why the westerly winds may claim the lives of people travelling in a boat and drown it ruthlessly, just as no one can be too sure with any other situation of life. We are continuously faced with the unknown and perhaps are pre-destined to move towards unknown destinies, in mysterious ways. However, the poet questions on whether we will continue with our lives, with our hopes and dreams, wishes and longings, our promises and endeavours, despite unknowing how life can take strange ways and lead to unbelievable futures.

In the waning daylight
And scent of godhuli gopal in the air
Grandfather sat brooding
What he found and gave and to whom
Cold fire of muskets in the old stone bridge
A fistful of mud and water
From the river Niranjana
A splotch of blood on the turf
Copper silver gold diamond bell-metal bronze
Glass and nickel and lead
A rock-crab caught
In the river of his youth
The pearl of life in its eyes
Clashed out of the net
On the night without a dawn
The world burns in poisoned flames
And the thunder of prayers
Chanted from the four quarters

Again, the poet takes up back into time by remembering his old grandfather and the scent of the flowers known as *godhuli gopal* in the twilight hours that makes the poet associate with these special memories-lost in time. The poet remembers his grandfather 'brooding', rather than

simply reflecting- brooding perhaps owing to some sadness that he held at heart, weighing what his heart had achieved, what had he contributed to the lives of others and who were those people in his life. Yet again, we are immediately transported to another context of probably a 'revolution' or may be a 'war', with images muskets or guns, an old stone bridge, a handful of muddy water and blood stains on the fields. These are the fragmented images that are strewn like sad memories in the chapters of history and also symbolical in a sense.

The poet then compares the rock crab that he remembers his grandfather to have caught in the river of his youth, perhaps symbolically denoting the work and contributions that his grandfather had achieved in the days of his youth. Similarly, the rock crab is described to have lost its life being crashed out of the fishing-net perhaps, symbolically representing the long lost hopes and the lack of recognition of his grandfather's achievements in his lifetime. This perhaps explains the image of the dreadful night when he might have passed away, reduced to ashes by the flames of the fire and the chanting of fervent prayers that surrounded the fire. That fateful night is described as one long night that seemed to never end, "the night without a dawn" (225).

And we
What are we searching
Offering whom
What thrill what truth
What freedoms what magic stone
Open and veiled unfading
What sense and nonsense
From what treatise now
Blind the priest of blood sacrifices
And crows and dogs infest
The deserted camp of the Vaishnava preceptor
Many things have now increased decreased
Man's age man particular and universal
Man alienated and whole

Concrete and abstract
Brittle hard dialectical stationary
Violent cunning treacherous
Compassionate
Solitary and sad
Many things rise and fall
Accidents lethal weapons suicide depression
Booms abortion humanist
Cancer agitation Baba comrade
Uncertainty unrest
Plan to change life
Where is the end or where its beginning
Beginning of what where
Who will take the measure
Of what
Whom shall we ask what whom

Then the poet goes on to place the question on who are we all searching for or chasing after and what kind of thrill or truth are we presenting and to whom. Thereby, he questions the ultimate meaning of life bringing in the confusions that entail our entire life till the day we die. This is precisely the reason that he presents the chaotic state of our existence and also the meaninglessness of it all. Everything is in a continued state of flux and many aspects of human life has seen both an increase and a decrease for an instance in the human mortality rate. Then there is aspect of the individual and the universal figure of modern man who feels the contrasting forces of alienation, as well as, a certain commonality of these human experiences. These mixed experiences create loneliness together with a reclaiming sense of sadness that undoubtedly surrounds the existence of man here on earth.

Thus, the poet notes that many things rise and fall with the list that he draws are as follows- "Accidents lethal weapons suicide depression/ Books abortion humanist/ Cancer agitation Baba, comrade/ Uncertainty unrest/ Plan to change life" (226) all mentioned in the same breath without

any punctuation. This indicates the ways in which all of these aspects are chaotically mixed up together. Thereby, he makes these questions that he had paused all the more complex- denoting that there is no end, no beginning, no source of beginning or extent of its limits; these are confusions that entangle human lives and disturb the human mind without any limit. None can measure its complexity and there is no one whom we could turn to for answers, perhaps not even God.

Somewhere if I die waiting
In the darkness of some primeval cave
On a dying pyre
Somewhere if I lie
In the dissecting-ward of some hospital
On some loaded truck
Naked in some rice-field
Somewhere if I wait
On some blind crossroads
In the chorus of spring
At Chidambaram of Nataraj
Whom does one ask and what whom
Why does the rice-plant
Sprout in the dark
Why does rain fall why
Seeds grow in man's loins and
Milk in woman's breasts
wonder if
have ever seen all the earth and
All the sky

In the following lines, the poet imagines himself almost at the brink of death in some unknown corner, or being reduced to ashes on a dying pyre or even finding himself lost in the haunting memories or the darkest hours of his life also symbolically represented by the reigning darkness of a primitive cave. In representing many people like him in the world, he imagines

that his dead body being laid on the dissecting-table of a hospital room for medical purpose; or his corpse being loaded on a truck full of bodies as is seen in times of war; or even imagines himself naked in the paddy fields like the struggling peasants or stripped migrants from different lands. Again, he imagines himself waiting in the confusing crossroads or in the joys of spring waiting at Chidambaram of Nataraj.

The question that however remains is "whom does one ask and what whom" (227). This again sprouts another set of questions on the minute details that surround us, our lives such as- the question on why the rice plant on which we all thrive, the very source of our sustenance, why does it sprout into life in the dark; how and why does the rain fall bringing floods and havoc into our lives yet also bringing everything to life and cleansing the earth. The poet wonders at the boon of fertility and nourishment that both men and women carry in their matured beings and wonders again if he has ever taken in fully the sight of the bountiful earth and the limitless skies.

All the faces of men
Living and dead
Did I ever find one morning
Myself in awakening lacerated face
Have I ever known
An orange
A rosewood tree
Must I do
That which is unending
Truth or love or
Reality
Pomegranate flowers burning in tears
Compassion in the holy grail of blood
And over the cemetery
Harvest moon

The poet then imagines the faces of all the living and the dead, those who may have been his dear ones and also those whom he may have never known in his lifetime. He then imagines himself on the brink of ruin, imagines himself diseased as suggested by the image of him dreaming of waking up with a lacerated face. He questions himself if he has ever known of the trees that bear fruit that have a life source, a living sap in them. Further, he wonders as to what is the appropriate step to take with regard to the unending aspects of life be it 'Truth', 'Reality' or 'love'.

Followed by the images of the orange tree and the rosewood tree, the image that the poet again reintroduces is that of the pomegranate tree. Here, he presents the imagery of the blooming pomegranate flowers that is drawn into comparison with the intensity of 'Compassion' in the 'search' of the Holy Grail of blood, a search that was undertaken by brave knights in the medieval period as the Holy Grail (that resembles the shape of a stone or metallic cup or goblet), is considered to be related to Christ. The Lord had drunk from this cup during His Last Supper and in which His blood was collected following his crucifixion. The next image is that of the moon shining over the harvest of living and also over the cemetery of the dead, much like the figure of Jesus Christ who shines his Light on humanity- the living and the dead, as well as, draws his Divine Light from 'God the Father' who could well be represented by the sun.

Two families we thus lived
Under leaking roofs
Of the same house
And years passed through them
With nights drenched in rain
No do not tell me
We shall never arrive
No water in the river
No fire in the water
Hark
How she cries sometimes

In what desperate torment
In what indignation and ecstasy
The dancing earth

In the closing lines, the poet again recalls the two families who we were introduced in the opening lines, the families that lived under leaking roofs of a house and the unbelievable ways in which that the years had passed by in them, with many rainy nights that held the difficult experiences of the poet's life. Thus, he refuses from being told by anyone that he shall never arrive, that there is no life around him, no power in the elemental forces or the elements of nature. The poet, thus, calls for the attention of the masses, of those around him to the ways in which the bountiful earth, the dancing earth spinning in its motion also cries out in desperate torment in the opposing forces of "indignation and ecstasy" (228).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What does the poet present in the opening lines of the poem?

Q 6: What does the poet question with regard to the meaning of life?

2.4.1 MAJOR THEMES

After the explanation of the text, we shall now move towards the major themes that emerge from the text of the poems, which have been highlighted in this subsection. The learner is advised to add to the extracted themes from the poem by attempting to read and interpret the text in his or her own way in order to come up with new perspectives to analysing the poem prescribed.

The Challenges of Life:

If the learner carefully re-reads the opening lines of the poem, it is found that the poet presents the struggles and difficulties of two families with limited sources to their avail, so much so that even their basic needs such as their house requires repair. The first image that we thus receive is that of the two families struggling to keep

warm and dry under the leaky roof of their house with the only comfort being the company of each other. The voice of the poet seems to relate it to his own life as he says "two families we lived" (223).

The main challenge of life, of all our life is survival- as Darwin had famously declared; "Survival of the fittest", only the fit and the resilient survive, the rest is bound to perish as determined by the laws of nature. Human life is bound to be continuously entangled with the struggles of survival. Moreover, it is held that from the time we are born, we are all predestined to struggle with the challenges of life, as it is never an easy journey for any living being, here on earth. Another challenge that we as humans continuously face is that of the continuous changes which defines everything in and around us, and human life in itself. While changes present us with the challenges and struggles of keeping up with the pressures or demands that it creates, together with the uncertainties of life, ever pushing us beyond our comfort zones.

Thus, the poet presents several examples of opposite and changing elements and experiences, to cite instances, the ever changing natural phenomenon of dawn and dusk, seasons and environments, the past and the present, hopes and disappointments, dreams and realities, childhood and old age, struggles and celebrations, endings and new beginnings. Changes in fact, define the very nature of human life and therein lies the very essence of life. Moreover, without the element of change, perhaps there would be no progress nor would there be any development in life. Challenges and changes thus have a close interrelation that defines the very core of our survival and survival of everything that the world encapsulates.

Life in a State of Flux:

Many of us are perhaps, very fortunate to have never experienced the struggles and difficulties of life, but there are many who go through tremendous hurdles in life before they can find a life of security and stability. Life has its share of ups and downs which

is why one can say that life exists is in a state of flux, ever shifting and changing in its context. There are joys and sorrows, expectations and disappointments, triumphs and failures, fruition and negation- the list can go on. There are changing seasons, changes in time, changing stages of human growth, changes in human history and changes in our everyday lives by the minute which again validates the saying that 'change is the only thing that is constant'. Change is thus inevitable and perhaps, this is what defines life on earth. As it is also said that-after every high tide, there is a low tide, this is true in the case of our lives as well, everything undergoes changes.

This follows the fact that everyone has a story to share, stories of unending struggles, stories of endurance and strength or perhaps even stories of failures. The poet here similarly shares his own share of hardships and years of crises that he has never been able to forget, long after he has overcome those difficult days of his childhood. The chaotic stream of thought and reflection is well reflected in the poem, which brings out the clash of thoughts and the contrast in experiences of the poet as an individual (as well as, a member of the larger human race). Thus, he takes the reader back and forth in time and provides an interesting glimpse into the inner workings and confusions of his mind.

Life is strange and unravels unpredictable journeys for each of us in ways that we will never really know. Perhaps, the only option that we are left with is to live life to the best of our abilities and leave no space for regrets, as some day, in fact any given day, will certainly be our last. It may be difficult to accept the truth but it is indeed the law of the Universe, the eternal truth and we must all confront it rather than escape it all the while. The message that the poem leaves us with is that trying to extract too much of meaning out of life's mysteries by ruminating on them too much will lead us to nowhere and in fact leave us even more puzzled. However, we must make the best of all that we are blessed with, work towards our endeavours and engage ourselves in making sense of our own purpose in the world.

Activity:

The learner will certainly agree that human life is filled with mysteries of the unknown. Life can be as fun and fulfilling as it can be strange and problematic with its twists and turns. Just as the poet grapples with the problem of uncertainty and confusion that he faces while struggling with the questions that haunt his mind, do you in anyway relate to the poet? Have you ever found yourself reflecting on what is your own view of life? Take a piece of paper and write down your subjective feelings and thoughts on this aspect. Also, you must jot down your 'best blessings' in life which you will find is the major source of your strength and inspiration towards life, for you will certainly agree that the world rests on hope and optimism.

2.4.2 Phukan's Poetic Style

With regard to the style and language employed by Phukan, the poet employs a lot of symbolism and conjures interesting imagery in his poetry. The text of his poems do not make for an easy reading and it takes considerable efforts to extract meaning from these. His poetry significantly contributes to the treasures of Assamese poetry, which now has undergone credible translation works. One of his widely anthologized poems is titled "Brahmaputra Xurjyastha" which in capturing the mesmerising sunset by the mighty Brahmaputra also holds a deeper meaning encircling his personal reflections. Given his academic pursuits, the creative bent of his mind and his love for reading, Phukan was well versed with the works of various national and international poets and writers, which had interestingly inspired his own poetic techniques and his writing style as well.

If we consider the text of the poem "The Dancing Earth", we shall note that the poem is replete with imageries that evoke a pictorial representation of all that the poet wants to convey. The poetical expressions that are noted in the poem are crisp and also reflect the poet's speculative, as well as, philosophical bent of mind. It takes

up some of the common questions that encircle human lifetimes without ever being answered thereby, also reiterating the ways in which human life is greatly riddled with chaos and confusion. The web of confusion is apparent in the text of the poem as the poet puts forth several questions that he is confronted with. These questions also present the common quest of man in arriving at meaningful explanations of human life.

Also, consider the title of the poem "The Dancing Earth", do you think that it is apt given the content of the poem. One way to analyse the relevance or the significance of the poem is the core message that it carries. After having read through the poem and the concise explanation of its content, you may note that the poet rests his entire confusion on the complexities of this world. We are sons and daughters of the earth and our lives begin and end here in this soil itself; and this is the same for all living entities of the world. The earth is personified as a dancing figure symbolising changing rhythms and movement, which characterises everything here on earth.

While on the one hand we have changing seasons, environments, histories, cultures, realities, technologies and growth that characterise human life on earth at the macroscopic or larger level; we also have changing phases of growth, transforming psyche or temperament, actions and experiences to mention a few at the microscopic or the individual level. Both these levels interact and influence the other and therefore, are closely enmeshed into one another often enriching and being enriched, as well as, confusing and make the other all the more complex. Everything tends to be jumbled and chaotic when they interfere with the other, thereby, making it increasingly difficult for one to extract meaning from life itself and from the ways of this world, the dancing of the earth. This reminds one of the 'rudra tandava nritya' of Lord Shiva which at once is held to cause destruction on earth and at the same time is revered for the contrasting elements of its intensity and grace,

creating new life here on earth again. The earth too spins in its axis never for once resting, if it did, there would in all possibility no life here on earth.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Mention some of the examples provided by the poet with regard to the opposite and changing elements and experiences in the poem.

Q 8: 'Life is in a continuous state of flux'. What is meant by this phrase?

Q 9: Write a few words on the poetical expressions found in the poem "The Dancing Earth."

2.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF PHUKAN

In an interview with Nilamoni Phukan conducted by poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in December 2004, which is titled- "May All Men Become Poets Rebels and Lovers", he shares many inputs regarding his life and his incredible literary journey. Phukan talks about how the lush green tea gardens and the greenery around him during his childhood years had left an indelible impression on his mind, perhaps also stirring his inherent poetical sensibilities. He has always been deeply influenced by the cultural heritage and the folklore of Assam that had inspired in him, a sense of belongingness to his homeland. Phukan is also an art critic- with his art and artistic representations stemming from a deep influence on his consciousness. It was in the 1940s, the time of the Second World War, when Assamese poetry began to take on a more modern critical approach. The literary style of writing in 'free verse' came as a major change in Assamese poetry, its practitioners being the leading poets Hem Barua, Amulya Barua, Maheswar Neog and Bhabendranath Datta among others.

In the preface to his work entitled *Bichitra Lekha* (2010), Phukan expresses the joy of reading poetry at any given moment and also enjoying certain poems only after multiple readings of the text before arriving at a set of ideas on its possible meaning. While he is steeped in his translation works which he considers as his sincere obligation towards literature,

Phukan also enjoys the creative process of writing poetry that unfurls like the petals of a flower. The poetry of Nilamoni Phukan is very much symbolic, difficult to decode in some sense or in other words cryptic often bringing out the figure of the confused modern man. It is rather difficult to extract meaning from his symbolical representations which mostly represent the chaos and confusion of the modern man. Post-war, he had published six volumes of poetry and two volumes of translations from Japanese and Chinese poetry and a translation of Garcia Lorca's poems who is a renowned Spanish poet. Phukan is much self-critical when it comes to his own poetry. Thus, Phukan with his significant literary contributions has enriched the treasures of Assamese literature, inspiring many with his remarkable poetry and the command over his native language in which he writes- Assamese language.

One of his volumes has Indian tribal love poems and four volumes of essays relating to other vocation as an art critic. He had also worked as the editor of *Sanjaya*, a leading literary and quarterly. Phukan was also made Emeritus Fellow of the HRD Ministry and Fellow of Sahitya Akademi. As far as his literary achievements are concerned, Phukan is much modest saying thus:

"You may think that I have 'tremendous achievements', but personally, I would like to repeat Jaroslav Seifert and say- I have only added a few poems to the several million poems of the world. There is no deeper wisdom in them than the sound of crickets. I know you will forgive me."



2.6 LET US SUM UP

Thus, after having gone through all the finer details of the poem, we are now aware of the life and literary contributions of the poet Nilamoni Phukan to the treasures of Assamese Language and Literature. In addition, a thorough reading of the poem has enabled us to gain an insight into the content of the poem, as well as, identify some of the emerging themes of the text of the poem. Further, the discussions on the style and language employed together with the critical reception of the poet's work must have

enabled us to analyse the nuances of the poetical expressions of Nilamani Phukan and study the same in a critical light. It is hoped that the present unit shall further encourage you to explore more poems by the poet both in original Assamese and English translation.



2.7 FURTHER READING

Ngagom, Robin S. and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih. (Eds.). (2009). *The Dancing Earth.* New Delhi: Penguin House.

Phookan, Nilamoni. (2010). *Bichitra Lekha.* Guwahati: Banphool.

Web resources:

www, poetryinternationalweb. net>

www. Nezine.com.info. "The Poetry of Nilamoni Phookan"



2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK OUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Navakanta Barua, Hiren Bhattacharjya, Shimanta Bhattacharya, Nirmalprabha Bordoloi, Nilamoni Phukan among others have enriched the treasures of Assamese literature and particularly Assamese poetry

Ans to Q 2: Phukan's first anthology of poetry was titled *Xurjya Henu Nammi Aahe Ei Nadiedi* (1963).

Ans to Q 3: Some of his widely-read anthologies of poetry are namely: *Jaapani Kobita* (1971), *Garcia Lorcar Kobita* (1981), *Lokakalpa Drishti* (1987), *Rup Barna* Baak (1988), *Xilpakala Darshan* (1998), *Aranyar Gaan* (1992) and *China Kobita* (1996).

Ans to Q 4: Some of the major themes found in his early poetry were the aspects of life and death, nature and culture, the self and society, love and sorrow, longing and loneliness- all touched upon with a sense of maturity, as well as, a certain sensitivity.

Ans to Q 5: The opening lines of the poem present a vivid imagery of two families huddled under a single, leaky thatched roof due to the heavy rains. The poet in retrospect, takes us back to the past when these

two families had lived together through hardships and moments of crisis. Their humble homes in which they had spent years together were in dilapidated condition, yet these were all that they had to call their own and the unbreakable bond among each other.

Ans to Q 6: The poet puts forth the question on who are we all searching for or chasing after and what kind of thrill or truth are we presenting and to whom. Thereby, he questions the ultimate meaning of life bringing in the confusions that entail our entire life till the day we die. This is precisely the reason that he presents the chaotic state of our existence and also the meaninglessness of it all.

Ans to Q 7: The poet presents several examples of opposite and changing elements and experiences, to cite instances, the ever changing natural phenomenon of dawn and dusk, seasons and environments, the past and the present, hopes and disappointments, dreams and realities, childhood and old age, struggles and celebrations, endings and new beginnings.

Ans to Q 8: Life has its share of ups and downs which is why one can say that life exists is in a state of flux, ever shifting and changing in its context.

Ans to Q 9: The poetical expressions that are noted in the poem are crisp and also reflect the poet's speculative, as well as, philosophical bent of mind. It takes up some of the common questions that encircle human lifetimes without ever being answered thereby, also reiterating the ways in which human life is greatly riddled with chaos and confusion.



2.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Describe the life and works of the poet Nilamoni Phukan.

Q 2: Explain the content of the poem "The Dancing Earth" in your own words.

Q 3: Discuss some of the emerging themes of the poem "The Dancing Earth".

Q 4: Explain the style and language employed by the poet in "The Dancing Earth".

Q 5: Give a critical reception of the poet Nilamoni Phukan.

Q 6: Explain with reference to context:

a) "Two families we lived
Under leaking roofs
Of the same house
And years passed through them
With nights drenched in rain
And sometimes in dreams"

b) "A wagtail settled here a while
When you laughed I
Cried and you
Cried when I laughed
Exchanging each other
Changing
Nights and days and sleep and wakefulness
Childhood and youth
And age old parched with desire"

c) "A rosewood tree
Must I do
That which is unending
Truth or love or
Reality"

d) "Pomegranate flowers burning in tears
Compassion in the holy grail of blood
And over the cemetery
Harvest moon
Two families we thus lived"

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UNIT 3: MAMANG DAI: "AN OBSCURE PLACE" & "VOICE OF THE MOUNTAIN"

UNIT STRUCTURE

3.1 Learning Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Mamang Dai: The Poet

3.4 The Poems: "Voice of the Mountain" & "An Obscure Place"

- 3.4.1 Texts of the Poems
- 3.4.2 Reading the Poems
- 3.4.3 Major Themes
- 3.4.4 Dai's Poetic Style

3.5 Critical Reception of Dai

3.6 Let us Sum up

3.7 Further Reading

3.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

3.9 Possible Questions

3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of Mamang Dai one of the most important poets of North East India
- explain how Dai develops her subject and possibly relate it to her own experiences of her life and people
- make yourself familiar with the themes that she has taken up
- examine and analyse her poetic style
- discuss what it is that makes her poetry distinctive

3.2 INTRODUCTION

In the two previous units, we have gained some glimpses of Navakanta Barua and Nilamoni Phukan—the two celebrated Assamese poets from North East India. In this unit, we shall study another North East Indian poet Mamang Dai, who hails from Arunachal Pradesh and who writes

in English. Dai is a poet, story writer and journalist. This unit is based on two of her well-known poems "An Obscure Place" & "Voice of the Mountain". In the poem "An Obscure Place", the poet reflects her urge to introduce the rich heritage and culture of her native Arunachal Pradesh, which is still considered obscure to the world outside. While, the poem "The Voice of the Mountain" is a celebration of the mountains, the very spirit of the poet's existence. By the time you finish reading the unit, you will be able to locate the importance of Mamang Dai as one of the most celebrated North East Indian poets writing in English.

3.3 MAMANG DAI: THE POET

In the following sections, you will get to read about the life and works of Mamang Dai in brief.

Mamang Dai was born in Pashighat, East Siang District, in 1957. She belongs to the Adi Community of Arunachal Pradesh. She did her schooling at a boarding school in Pine Mount School, Shillong. Subsequently, she completed her BA in English Literature under Gaihati University. She has published her poems in journals such as *Chandrabhaga* and *Indian Literature*. She lives in Itanagar and is a journalist. Previously, she was a reporter for *The Sentinel* and *The Telegraph* newspapers and currently writing for the Hindustan Times and is President, Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUWJ). She is also an active radio and TV journalist covering news programmes and interviews for All India Radio and Door Darshan, Itanagar.

A former member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), she left the service to pursue a career in writing and journalism, travelled extensively and has numerous articles, poems and short stories published in various journals. Mamang Dai has authored *Arunachal Pradesh –The Hidden Land* that won her the State's Annual Verrier Elwin Award, 2003, (in the publication in print media) for the book.

She was a Programme officer with World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) during the first years of its establishment in the state, and worked with the Bio-diversity Hotspots Conservation Programme in the field of research, survey and protection of the flora and fauna of the eastern

Himalayas. She has also worked as the President, Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUWJ); Secretary, Itanagar Press Club; Vice President, North East Writers' Forum—an organisation dedicated to the growth and development of the North eastern states of India.

Mamang Dai has so far written fictional works like *The Sky Queen* (2005), *Once Upon a Moon Time* (2005), *The Legend of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2009). She has also written non-fictional works like *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land, Sky* (2002). *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh* (2005), and so on. Her non-fiction prose narrative *Arunachal Pradesh –The Hidden land* grew out of her travel notes, journeys to her ancestral village and sort of rediscovering the land and people.

Besides such works, she has also composed *River Poems* published by Writers Workshop, Kolkata in 2004, where she has written extensively on the land and rivers of Arunachal Pradesh. Throughout the volume, the river is used as metaphor, and the exquisite flow of the river is like the very spirit of the people of Arunachal Pradesh where men and nature exist in equal proximity.

The first poem of this collection is about the majestic River Siang and she aptly eulogises the splendid flow of the river.

"I will remember then,
The great river that turned, turning
With the fire of the first of the first sun,
Away from the old land of red robed men
And poisonous ritual…"

In the same collection, she tries to redefine her poetic art,

"Without speech
We practiced a craft,
Leaving imprints on sky walls
Linking the seasons
Coding the trailing mist,
In silent messages
Across the vast landscape."

For her, river has a soul and their very existence is blended with it.

"The river has a soul
In the summer, it cuts through the land,
Like a torrent of grief. Sometimes
Sometimes, I think it holds its breath
Seeking the land of fish and stars…"

In an interview, Mamang Dai admits the tribal influence in her works: "I am a tribal, and the geography, landscape, our myths, stories; all this has shaped my thoughts. I feel fortunate that I never forgot my mother tongue– Adi. One could easily have lost it during the years in school, being away as so many tribal children do not speak their mother tongue these days. I have learnt a lot travelling through different parts of the state, from talking with miri shaman healers as mythology and spiritual belief is an area of interest for me. I am particularly influenced by our oral narratives dealing with creation myths. This is like an archaic, intricate, sparkling epic poem that opens up another world like the branches of a living tree."



LET US KNOW

Mamang Dai, In an Interview, states the following regarding how the Oral Tradition of Arunachal Pradesh has influenced her as a writer.

Well, the oral tradition is a way of life that nurtured us through the centuries. All our beliefs, rituals and customary practice have come to us via the oral tradition. About literature, very briefly, the classical literature of the Adi people consists of epic narratives originally transmitted in ritual language by a Miri, the shaman well versed in the different branches of evolutionary history. Collectively this literature is called Aabang. In its simplest meaning, the Aabang is a story or an act of storytelling for an audience. There are stories of fire, flood, lost civilisations, common enough themes, but the stories come down to us with many ramifications. Each branch of the story buds into another story. Today there is a new engagement with oral traditions with research and

documentation. There are many Aabangs and an Aabang can have several parts. There are also categories of Miri: those who are able to communicate with the world of spirits, and those who are pure rhapsodists. Certainly I am influenced by the oral narratives. Knowing the stories gives me a sense of identity. It inspires my writing – after all it is a world of myth, memory, and imagination. Oral narratives are generally perceived as a simple recounting of tales for a young audience but I think their significance lies in the symbols embedded in the stories about the sanctity of life, about what makes us human. My response to myth/stories is akin to a quest. It is a world view I am still exploring.

(In Conversation with Mamang Dai. Jaydeep Sarangi. Writers in Conversation Vol. 4 no. 2, August 2017. https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic)

Mamang Dai's **River Poems** contains poetry which one can only describe as old world, neo romantic in essence-"a race of fireflies bargaining with the night." That's what her poems are, engaging with landscape and nature, through a half-animist, half-pantheistic outlook. She has stated, "I know where memory hides/ in the long body of the mountain." "The river has a soul," she says, "it knows the immortality of water." Dai has rendered a fine turn of phrase: "when lightning strikes, we'll dance again/ wearing our skirt of rain." Her love poems almost always end on a sad note, indicating perhaps she hasn't been too lucky in love. However, the fact that the Northeast is a cauldron of politico-ethnic conflicts. But, one hardly gets a hint of all this except in the poem "Remembrance", where she talks of people from the region as "foragers for a destiny" and of "weapons multiplying in the forest."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Mention some of the works written by Mamang Dai.

Q 2: How does Mamang Dai look at her tribal background?

3.4 THE POEMS: "AN OBSCURE PLACE" AND "VOICE OF THE MOUNTAIN"

The following sections will help you to read the two prescribed poems by Mamang Dai in terms of their various aspects.

3.4.1 Texts of the Poems

"An Obscure Place"

The history of our race
begins with the place of stories.
We do not know if the language we speak
belongs to a written past.
Nothing is certain.
There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.
We climbed every slope. We slept by the river.
But do not speak of victory yet.
An obscure place haunts the hunter.
The prise slips away.
Yesterday the women hid their faces.
They forbade their children to speak.
Yesterday we gave shelter to men
who climbed over our hills
for glory of a homeland, they said-
those who know what knowing is,
And now the sleeping houses, the men and the villages
have turned to stone.
If there is no death the news is silent.
If there is only silence, we should be disturbed
Listen, the tone of a prayer is hushed:
If a stranger passes this way
let him look up to the sky.
A smoke cloud chases the ants.
See! They have slain the wild cat

and buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep.
The words of strangers have led us
into a mist deeper than the one we left behind
weeping, like the waving grassland
where the bones of our fathers are buried
surrounded by thoughts of beauty.
There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.
We climbed every slope. We slept by the river.
But do not speak of victory yet!

"The Voice of the Mountain"

From where I sit on the high platform
I can see the ferry lights crossing
criss-crossing the big river.
I know the towns, the estuary mouth.
There, beyond the last bank
where the colour drains from heaven
I can outline the chapters of the world.
The other day a young man arrived from the village.
Because he could not speak
he brought a gift of fish
from the land of rivers.
It seems such acts are repeated:
We live in territories forever ancient and new,
and as we speak in changing languages.
I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree
and try to make a sign.
I am an old man sipping the breese
that is forever young.
In my life I have lived many lives.
My voice is sea waves and mountain peaks,
In the transfer of symbols
I am the chance syllable that orders the world

Instructed with history and miracles.
I am the desert and the rain.
The wild bird that sits in the west.
The past that recreates itself
and particles of life that clutch and cling
For thousands of years –
I know, I know these things
as rocks know, burning in the sun's embrace,
about clouds, and sudden rain;
as I know a cloud is a cloud is a cloud,
A cloud is this uncertain pulse
that sits over my heart.
In the end the universe yields nothing
except a dream of permanence.
Peace is a falsity.
A moment of rest comes after long combat:
From the east the warrior returns
with the blood of peonies.
I am the child who died at the edge of the world,
the distance between end and hope.
The star diagram that fell from the sky,
The summer that makes men weep.
I am the woman lost in translation
who survives, with happiness to carry on.
I am the breath that opens the mouth of the canyon,
the sunlight on the tips of trees;
There, where the narrow gorge hastens the wind
I am the place where memory escapes
the myth of time,
I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain.

3.4.2 Reading the Poems

The poem "An Obscure Place" reflects her urge to introduce the rich heritage and culture of her place called Arunachal Pradesh, which is still considered obscure to the world outside. But, Arunachal Pradesh is rich in culture as well as language. In an interview, Mamang Dai stated: "In Arunachal today, there are very few speakers left of the original literary language used in classical oral literature that is different from the language of current usage." That is exactly why, in his foreword to "Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from North East", the eminent poet Jayanta Mahapatra said: "Undoubtedly, it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will not keep us away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets when one reads these poems from the very different regions of the Northeast of our country."

The place around the hills is calm and quiet. However, the poem "An Obscure Place" might refer to the on-going violence, as she says, "If there is no death, the news is silent." Insurgency remains a major concern for the people of the Northeastern states, and that is why, all the sensitive poets fail to escape from that reality. In another anthology of poetry from North East India *Dancing Earth* the editors Robin. S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih argued: "Much of the uniqueness of North-East poetry is the consequence of contemporary events, violence especially. The writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness."

It the poetry of the North East, insurgency has occupied a well defined place. Poets as a social human being often fail to escape this blatant reality for the sake of humanity. The poem also praises the hills and rivers, which have been standing with their existence for long. One of the characteristics of Mamang Dai's poetry is her treatment of the local and the personal. Although social and political

aspects of Northeastern poetry cannot be denied, yet the recurrent theme of most of the poets is of myth and tribal folklore. That is what is beautifully explained in the introduction to *Dancing Earth*: "There is certainly more to the use of the myth than mere Romantic escapism as suggested by some critics. As the poets see their people, often themselves included, losing their way completely in the midst of the unsettling cultural changes of the times, there is born a desire in them to interpret the mythic past flourishing in timeless villages and repossess this as high culture."

In such an atmosphere, the poem definitely shows a way out to find peace and repose in the ambience of natural world. Dai so said,

"There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.
We climbed every slope. We slept by the river.
But do not speak of victory yet!"

However, they are not so sure of their victory, as 'the words of strangers' have led them into a mist. This is an interesting revelation on the part of the poem.

The poem "The Voice of the Mountain" is also of mountain, the very spirit of the poet's existence. In this political atmosphere, the only way out is to make oneself fit in the atmosphere in the changing time. Trees, mountains, and rivers only can provide the food for human love as well as mental peace.

"We live in territories forever ancient and new,
and as we speak in changing languages.
I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree
and try to make a sign."

The poetic voice is assimilated to 'sea waves and mountain peaks', and that is why, she said,

"In the transfer of symbols
I am the chance syllable that orders the world
Instructed with history and miracles."

Change is definitely the metaphor of her poem that sweeps through the very roots of her existence as well as her fellow people. Insurgency, rampant in tribal society and where people have an inner yearning for peace, but 'peace is falsity', after a long combat, as the poet clarifies. Their own place is like the land of rivers, where the sunlight is on the tips of trees.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What is one of the important characteristics of Mamang Dai's poetry?

Q 4: What does the poem "An Obscure Place" reflect?

Q 5: What is the subject matter of a poem like "The Voice of the Mountain"?

3.4.3 Major Themes

In most of Dai's poems, **hills and rivers** are used as metaphors of the implicit, hidden, and rich culture of Arunachal Pradesh. At the same time, hills and mountains have metaphorical implications at three levels –physical, emotional and as a way of identity. It is around the hills their existence revolves. It is the physical nature of their identity. On the other hand, emotionally, they have been involved with this mountain for a long time. At the same time, hills and mountains are their prime identities and a distinct cultural idiom. Arunachal Pradesh is not only rich in natural beauties, rivers and hills, but also a rich melting pot of different tribes. Her poems often attempt to focus on its **cultural heritage**.

Myth and folklore accompanied by the beautiful natural panorama is an inherent characteristic of Mamang Dai's poetry.

"There, where the narrow gorge hastens the wind
I am the place where memory escapes
the myth of time,
I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain."

The image 'narrow gorge hastens the wind' is symbolic of the flow of outward influences that makes its presence, where the voice of mountain is not at all lost.

Arundhathi Subramaniam in her article on "Mamang Dai" writes that Mamang Dai's poetic world is one of river, forest and mountain, a limpid and lyrical reflection of the terrain of her home state Arunachal Pradesh. Nature, in Dai's poems is mysterious, verdant with myth and dense with sacred memory. But, the paradisiacal landscape is also one of "guns and gulls", punctuated by "the footfall of soldiers". Subramaniam also states, "For all its simplicity, Dai's poetry does not arrive at easy conclusions. There is no dishonest sense of anchor here, no blissful pastoral idyll. The poet describes her people as "foragers for a destiny" and her work is pervaded by a deep unease about erased histories and an uncertain future. And yet, implicit in Dai's poetics is the refusal to divorce protest from love…This seems to translate into a commitment to a poetry of quiet surges and eddies rather than gritty textures and edges. It also translates into a voice that is never raised in rage or indignation; a tone that is hushed, wondering, thoughtful, reflective. The strength of this poetry is its unforced clarity, its ability to steer clear of easy flamboyance. Therefore, when she describes herself as a member of a tribe of "ten thousand messengers/ carrying the whispers of the world", you realise you have a pretty succinct definition of what being a poet means to Mamang Dai. You also realise what makes Dai such an effective messenger."
[Adapted from http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/16974/27/Mamang-Dai]

3.4.4 Dai's Poetic style

Accompanied by a strong feeling for her roots, her vocabularies are lucid and touching. Their appeal is to some extent, universal. The imageries and poetic images are akin to Nature. At the backdrop of Nature, she likes to narrate the history of her race

as well as the changes that continues to take place within the framework of the society. All her imageries, mostly drawn from Nature, help to reveal the strong tradition of that society. Her poems reflect the extensive use of symbols as well as the irony emerging out of a situation. Thus, her poetic world is one of river, forest, and mountain, which lyrically reflect the terrain of her home state. Nature, is thus, used by Dai as mysterious, verdant with myth and dense withy sacred memory.

3.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF DAI

As you are already informed, Mamang Dai is a poet and novelist writing in English. She was a correspondent of *The Hindustan Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Sentinel* newspapers and President, Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists. She also worked with World Wide Fund for nature in the Eastern Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspots programme. In 2003, she received the state Verrier Elwin Award for her book *Arunachal Pradesh—The Hidden Land*, featuring the culture, folklore and customs of Arunachal's different communities. She has featured in several national and international forums, and her poems, fiction and articles have been published in numerous journals and anthologies. Her works are widely read. She is one of the most prominent writers of the North East of India who have shaped what we may call North East Indian literature. She received Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her novel *The Black Hill*.



3.6 LET US SUM UP

By this time, we have perhaps realised that Mamang Dai, who hails from Arunachal Pradesh is one of the most important poets of North East India. The poem "An Obscure Place" reflects her urge to introduce the rich heritage and culture of her native Arunachal Pradesh, which is still considered to be obscure to the world outside. While, the other poem "The Voice of the Mountain" about which you have read here is a celebration of the mountains, the very spirit of the poet's existence. You have understood that Dai develops

her subject and possibly relates it to her own experiences of life and people around her. Her poetic style and the ways in which she uses language to convey emotions and ideas make her poetry distinctive amongst those written by other North eastern poets of India.



3.7 FURTHER READING

Gupta, Mamnika. (Ed.). (2006). *Indigenous Writers of India: Introduction and Contributions. Volume I: North East India.* New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

Ngangom, Robin S. & Kynpham S. Nongkynrih. (Eds.). (2009). *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-east India.* Penguin Books.

Misra, Tilottoma. (Ed.). (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-east India*: *Poetry and Essays*. OUP.

Mahapatra, Jayanta. *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from North East*.

Web Resources:

http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/16974/27/Mamang-Dai

https://www.thehindu.com/lr/2004/11/07/stories/2004110700350500.htm



3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Fictions like *The Sky Queen* (2005), *Once Upon a Moon Time* (2005), *The Legend of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2009)… …Non fictional works like *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land, Sky* (2002). *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh* (2005)… …poetry collections like *River Poems.*

Ans to Q 2: In an interview, she states: "I am a tribal, and the geography, landscape, our myths, stories; all this has shaped my thoughts. I feel fortunate that I never forgot my mother tongue – Adi…I have learnt a lot travelling through different parts of the state, from talking with miri shaman healers as mythology and spiritual belief is an area of interest for me. I am particularly influenced by our oral narratives dealing with

creation myths. This is like an archaic, intricate, sparkling epic poem that opens up another world like the branches of a living tree."

Ans to Q 3: Her treatment of the local and the personal… …although social and political aspects of North-eastern poetry cannot be denied, yet the recurrent theme of most of the poets is of myth and tribal folklore.

Ans to Q 4: The poem "An Obscure Place" reflects her urge to introduce the rich heritage and culture of her place called Arunachal Pradesh, which is still considered to be obscure to the world outside.

Ans to Q 5: The poem "The Voice of the Mountain" is also of mountain, the very spirit of the poet's existence… …in this political atmosphere, the only way out is to make oneself fit in the atmosphere in the changing time…. …trees, mountains, and rivers only can provide the food for human love as well as mental peace.



3.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Comment on the life and works of the poet Mamang Dai. How does her use of river, forest and mountain lyrically reflect the terrain of her home state?

Q 2: How does a poem like "An Obscure Place", reflect Dai's urge to introduce the rich heritage and culture of her native land Arunachal Pradesh? Discuss.

Q 3: The poem "The Voice of the Mountain" is a celebration of the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, the very spirit of the poet's existence. Discuss.

Q 4: Discuss Dai's poetic style as explicit in poems like "An Obscure Place" and "The Voice of the Mountain".

Q 5: Mamang Dai has been received as an exponent of North East Indian literature? Discuss with reference to her poetic works.

Q 6: How, according to Dai, has the oral tradition of Arunachal Pradesh influenced her as a writer? Discuss.

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UNIT 4: ROBIN S. NGANGOM: "POETRY" & "EVERYWHERE I GO"

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 Robin S. Ngangom: The Poet

4.4 The Poems: "Poetry" & "Everywhere I go"

- 4.4.1 Texts of the Poems
- 4.4.2 Reading the Poems
- 4.4.3 Major Themes
- 4.4.4 Ngangom's Poetic Style

4.5 Critical Reception of Ngangom

4.6 Let us Sum up

4.7 Further Reading

4.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

4.9 Possible Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of Robin S. Ngangom one of the most important poets from Manipur
- explain how Ngangom develops his subject in poetry
- make yourself familiar with the themes that Ngangom develops in the poems prescribed
- examine his poetic style and the ways in which he uses language to convey emotions and ideas

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the 4th unit on poetry coming out of the North East of India. This unit deals with the Manipuri poet Robin S. Ngangom and two of his famous poems namely "Poetry" & "Everywhere I go." Ngangom who is a poet, short story writer, editor and translator, is also a faculty in the

department of English, North East Hills University. An important member of "The Shillong Poetry Circle", Ngangom's poetry is one of the major sources of popularity of poetry from the Northeast to the outside world. Ngangom's poetry expresses local identity with a view to get exposure in the world outside. The poem "Poetry" shows Ngangom as a sensible poet who is working hard to define the very spirit of poetry. While, the other poem "Everywhere I go" talks about going back to one's root as a poet is bound to carry his homeland, wherever he goes. I am sure, by the time you finish reading the unit, you will be able to develop a likeness for Ngangom's poetry.

4.3 ROBIN S. NGANGOM: THE POET

In the following sections, you will read briefly about the life and works of Robin S. Ngangom.

Robin Singh Ngangom was born in 1959, Imphal, Manipur of North Eastern India. He is a bilingual poet who writes in English and Manipuri. He studied literature at St. Edmund's College and the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, where he now teaches. His books of poetry include *Words and the Silence* (1988) published by Writers Workshop, *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). His essays include *Poetry in A Time of Terror*, which appeared in *The Other Side Of Terror: An Anthology of Writings on Terrorism in South Asia* published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi (2009). He was conferred with Katha Award for Translation in 1999, and was invited to the UK for the UK Year of Literature and Writing, 1995. He was also awarded the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry, 1994.

In Meghalaya, nearly a dosen poets write regularly in English. Some are bilingual poets and a few of them exclusively write in English. Most of them are the members of the "Shillong Poetry Society" and contribute to the journals namely—*Lyric, The New Welsh Review,* and *Voices from Hills & Valleys*. Among them, Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond Lee Kharmawphlang, Kynphang Sing Nongkynrih, Ananya S. Guha, Anjum Hasan, Paul Lyngdoh, Donboklang Ryntathiang, Almond D. Syiem, Esther Syiem and Indari Syiem Warjri are noteworthy.

Robin S. Ngangom is a representative poet of Northeast India. He is a Meitei by birth; but has contributed profusely to Indian English poetry by exploiting the folk-culture and folkloric tradition of Meghalaya. His long association with Shillong-culture has been reflected in his nostalgic matrices of expounding affinity with Meghalaya. In 1986, Robin writes about *Hynniewtrep*, which in Khasi means 'Seven Huts'. The Khasi myth reveals that the ancestors of the Khasis are heavenly beings belonging to sixteen families, who descended to earth from time to time to enjoy earthly pleasures by alighting from a tree. Once, when seven of these families were on earth, one of the beings, succumbing to earthly desires, chopped down the connecting tree. Hence, the seven families were stranded on earth. Since then the Khasis call their hills the "Land of the Seven Huts".

Ngangom's significant publications are *Words and the Silence*, published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1988, *An Anthology of New Indian English Poetry*, published by Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 1993, *Time's Crossroads*, published by Disha Books, Orient Longman Ltd., Hyderabad, 1994, *Khasia in Gwalia*, Alun Books, Wales, 1995, A *New Book of Indian Poems in English*, Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 2000, *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, NEHU Publications, Shillong, 2003, *Confronting Love: Poems*, Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2005, and so on.

His work has featured in important magazines and journals like *The Telegraph Colour Magazine*, Calcutta; *Debonair*, Bombay; *Chandrabhaga*, Cuttack; *Kavya Bharati*, American College, Madurai; *Poetry Chronicle*, Bombay; *Poesis*, Bombay; *Indian Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi; *The Brown Critique*, Maharashtra; *The New Welsh Review*, Wales; Kunapipi, University of Aarhus, Denmark; *SWAG Magazine*, Swansea, Wales; New Statesman & Society, London; *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, Aberystwyth, Wales; Verse, University of Georgia, Athens, US etc.

Robin S. Ngangom perhaps had left his home state and adopted another state Shillong, which he loved and that definitely has given him wider prospect to enrich his poetry. He used Khasi legends and myths in his poetry which he has diligently been trying to read and understand.

However, his homeland Manipur was visibly present in his poetry as he invoked the historical past of this great culture and its ancient kingdom: Kangleipak. The violence that was circumnavigating his home land was also poignantly reflected in his poetry as he mourned the loss of a land, of friends, spoke of a brutalised society and the obliteration of the halcyon days of a mythic past.

This conflict between past and present and their subtending realities were also present in Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang's poetry which was sensitised deeply by his love for folk traditions, the oracle of the past, the folk narrator and spoken oral tradition. This gave to their poetry a strong Romantic element, which mythologised their poetry with an innate charm of the small town, small loves, wishes and desires. However, the violence that was taking place in the town and elsewhere was a means of greater reflection and introspection especially in Robin S. Ngangom's poetry.

Robin S. Ngangom and the Shillong Poetry Circle:

The Shillong Poetry Circle came into existence in 1988-1989. Robin and Desmond in our incessant literary discussion mooted the idea of such a society. Before that, the Telegraph Calcutta had already started publishing the poetry of some poets from Shillong, which of course included Robin and Desmond. The Shillong Poetry Society meets were held every month, courtesy the Late M.C. Gabriel who was the Director of the North Eastern Hill University Publication Cell. This forum gave a platform for free creative expression, discourse and thinking. Soon, Kynpham and Anjum joined, and then they started contemplating on bringing out a poetry journal by the name of *Lyric*. In the first few issues they had poets like Nissim Esekiel contributing as well as regional poets such as Assamese poets like Navakatan Baruah. The members of the circle thus include writers like Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond Lee Kharmawphlang, Kynphang Sing Nongkynrih, Ananya S. Guha, Anjum Hasan, Paul Lyngdoh, Donboklang Ryntathiang, Almond D. Syiem, Esther Syiem and Indari Syiem Warjri are famous.

There was a special issue of *Lyric* dedicated to Welsh poetry in English, after a visit of the Welsh poet Nigel Jenkins to Shillong, to renew the Khasi-Welsh historical and cultural connections. Perhaps, that was the

biggest event in the Society's history and Nigel Jenkins came to Shillong to recapture the Khasi-Welsh connection. *Lyric*, the mouth piece of the Shillong poetry society got very good reviews in Sahitya Akademi's Journal *Indian Literature* as well as newspapers such as *The Indian Express*.

The Shillong Poetry Society had many youthful members from colleges and the University students and due mainly to financial contingencies and is now defunct. But poetry in English from Shillong as well as in Khasi and in Manipuri continues to remain as vibrant, as sensitive and as lyrical as ever. Ngangom makes it clear that modern Manipuri poetry was born amidst the ravages of the World War II, of which Manipur remains a forgotten theatre. And the modern-day literature of Manipur reflects the political events that followed soon after the War–the departure of the British, the disillusionment with the new political arrangement and the emergence of insurgency and so on.

Editing the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom stated: "The writer from the North eastern region differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics, but must perforce master the art of witness." Robin's second collection of poetry *Time's Crossroads* has been divided into two parts: 'Poems of love and Despair' and 'Poems of Time and Tide.'

Ngangom who came to Shillong to study and subsequently settled in Shillong, vehemently reacted to the striking violence of his society and took the route of 'escapism' by speaking of the natural beauty of their land, the hill-scape, the ravines and gorges cut deep into their psyches. These were recurring motifs in his poetry as also were the legends, myths and folk tales of their societies.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who are the poets of Shillong Poetry Circle?

Q 2: What kind of a poet is Robin S. Ngangom?

4.4 THE POEMS: "POETRY"& "EVERYWHERE I GO"

4.4.1 The texts of the Poems

"Poetry"

What they don't need is poetry,
these gnarled men and wrinkled women
who work on slopes,
swaying in the rain like knotted,
weather-beaten pines, breathing
mountain air, these weavers and herdsmen.
What matters if I can't explain to them
the nuance of an ode or a ghazal,
the iron and flint of a Mayakovsky
or a Guillen, how do I impress upon them
their miserable plight
when all they want to do
is smoke and chatter away time.
When he hears poetry
the peasant will lean on his hoe
in exasperation while his fields lie fallow,
the hunter will return empty-handed with
a sad poem, and if the goatherd listens
to poetry's demand cadences
his goats will not give milk.
Let me explain.
Like the great poets
pardoned by time
I wanted to gather words
from arrows knocked in a turquoise sky.
I wanted to catch words in my embroidered bag,
rainy words spattered, thrown about
by the March wind, I wanted to collect

pebbly words from riverbeds, smooth,
geometrical consonants of primary colours.
I wanted to unearth roots and herbs
and compound a word-salve, I wanted
to forge words on an anvil.
I wanted to be a wordsmith.
The sweeper wakes up the morning without irony.
I want him to burn my anxieties and not
sweep them under the mat as I used to.
I want a carpenter
to fashion me a word-chair
to sit me down and calm me,
I want him to nail me down a poem.
The carpenter has learnt his trade and cannot
waste hours chiselling and planning couples.
I wanted the mason to lay
The cornerstones of living for me.
The mason awaits cargoes of sand and bricks
on the shores of afternoon and doesn't need
silken rhetoric or spice adjectives.
All I wanted was to sing
with my mystical sparrows,
but only a murder of crows
nest in my throat at dawn.
I wanted to harvest words
which grow on their own, words
which die without tawdry funerals;
of creepers and vines, stars and stone,
wisdom and folly, flowers and moss.
Top of Form

"Everywhere I go"

Everywhere I go

I carry my homeland with me.
I look for it in protest marches on the streets of the capital,
In dark-maned girls of beauty contests
Forced to waiting now behind windows.
I harbor the wretchedness of those youths
Who do not wish to return
But would rather serve in a city's sordid restaurants
Because devils and thieves rule their home.
I often hear about its future
In conflict resolution symposiums
Where professors and retired generals
analyse the fate of my people and their misery.
But I can see it returning with women
and water in rural evenings.
And I want to tell my poet-friends
of the twelve mothers who stripped themselves
and asked soldiers to rape them.
In fact, I make imaginary journeys
to its little world every day
and wait for the fog of justice to lift
for a murdered 8-year-old girl.
Those who speak the language of progress
call my homeland a mendicant state
not knowing its landlocked misery,
its odd splendour.
And no one knows who picks up its bodies.
I know I must stop agonizing
(Perhaps I am the only one who broods about his land)
Even if people say
Suffering must reach new heights
For a new beginning.
But whenever I touch my homeland's streets
Everyone seems happy and have no grouses.

I must stop agonizing or save what I can
Such as the tunes of my homeland.

4.4.2 Reading the Poems

"Poetry":

Poetry for each poet is a unique experience. In this poem, Robin S. Ngangom, as a sensible poet, works on defining the very spirit of poetry. The attempt to define poetry, by the way, depicts many aspects of a real human being. It is poetry, nothing else, which can console his wounded being. Introspecting on his own being, he finds out the inner substances of his being, which is really authentic. In the process, he emerges to be the representative of his own race. When everything is lost, poetry is never lost, which is an inexplicable inner worth.

The poem also tries to focus on his own problems of culture through a few metaphors like 'empty hands' and 'a lifetime silence.' His cynicism is quite explicit, when he says, 'I saw my self-selected pain, entire history only through memory.' At the same time, his angst is clear the moment he extracts happiness only at the backdrop full of sadness. However, he is in a position, where he can neither live, nor hate. Though everything is lost, the only refuge is that poetry is there to peep into one's inner being.

"Everywhere I go"

Going to one's root is definitely a humane concern for everyone. The poet is bound to carry his homeland, wherever he goes. The poem truly reflects the disturbing state of his homeland, where only devils and thieves rule their home. The people and the youth of his homeland are forced to leave their homeland only to find a secure place outside, and for them, it is better to serve in a city's sordid restaurants. His cynical notion about his own state is reflected when he says, "those who speak the language of progress call my homeland a mendicant state." Love for one's own place and

culture, though explicit in each one of us, is always strongly focused in a sensitive soul and as a poet, he is no different from that.

As a sensitive poet, his only duty is to look into the society and to reflect the abject reality of his society. However, suffering must reach new heights and must create a new future. However, as a poet, belonging to the Northeast, he is bound together by the love for the land. In addition, the seed of patriotism, which he carries with him, has given him the scope to narrate the world outside through his poetry.

His lyrical tone accompanied by the enthralling poetic imageries, is a major source of wide range of appeal throughout his poetry. The images like 'dark-maned girls' of beauty contests and a murdered 8-year-old girl are enough to portray his cynicism and angst directed towards this absurd reality of modern world, where his poetry remains as the only weapon of truth to proceed with.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: How does Ngangom consider poetry in his poem "Poetry"?

Q 4: How is the idea of 'roots' or 'rootedness' reflected in the poem "Everywhere I Go"?

4.4.3 Major Themes

In the preface to *Time's Crossroads*, published by Orient Longman, Hyderabad, in 1994, Robin S. Ngangom stated, "Good poetry develops its own feet. The best poems, I have read never failed to please, surprise or haunt me. I cannot say that these poems of mine have evoked a similar response within me…I have been suffering from an extreme poverty of experience and in order to keep the creative pulse in me going, I have become an incurable filcher." This is an important outlet that leads the readers to Ngangom's poetry.

With clean and fresh images, Ngangom paints **elegiac vignettes** of scenes and locals seldom touched upon in Indian poetry, including Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Imphal and the hills and rivers of the northeast. He brings alive the little-known legends and myths of this picturesque region, in poems that range from the quietly contemplative to the violently angry.

Ngangom's poetry reflects expressing local identity with a view to universalise to the world outside. Commenting on his poetry, Prof. Nigamananda Das in an article published in *Dialogue*, Vol III, 1998, stated: "The search for roots or quest for identity, which is introduced into English poetry by Toru Dutt, has proliferated in new poetry after 1960. But, in the Northeast India, it comes with Ngangom. In his poetry, Ngangom has been recurrently confined to the worlds of **myth and legends** of Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram.

He is much worried about the problems of **insurgency** in Manipur. In many of his poems, he seems to be the spokesman of the grief of Imphal. Being conscious of his inability to do something worthwhile, he sings out:

"Day after day
I have done nothing worthwhile
Only I have chosen to tread
The path of a versifier
My heart still unknown
By many."

But the poet has an inexplicable urge to affirm his patriotic feeling. As one can find in the introduction to *Dancing Earth:* "In their patriotism, the poets are not blind to the fact that their land is also 'The land of the Half-humans'." Ngangom's poetry is not only a projection of reality. And it is also stated, "A few fine poets have moved beyond merely recording events and have internalised the complex conflict between themselves and the milieu. In Manipur, when the reality becomes oppressive, poets frequently seek refuge

in absurdist irony often directed towards oneself, in parody, in farce and in satire." Speaking about the scenario and his concern, the poet is of the opinion that he aired in another book entitled *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast:* "Although a great cultural cauldron, the Northeast of India remains little known and largely misunderstood. The uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds, such as the folk and the westernised, virgin forests and car-choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant corruption, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsiders predicament, make this picturesque region especially vulnerable to tragedy."

Such views throw light on the various aspects steeped in the poetry of Ngangom.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Mention some of the important themes in the poetry of Robin S. Ngangom.

Q 6: What is so specific about Ngangom's poetry?

4.4.3 Ngangom's Poetic Style

Ngangom's poetic style is unique because of its innate simplicity. Going through his poems, his readers can perceive sense, though it may not be distinct. His poetic images are very subtle and they sufficiently carry the underlying and intended meanings. The easily understood syntax also adds beauty to his poetry. Any a reader can discern the beauty of his poetry, as Ngangom's poetry is intensely based on his heartfelt love towards his own place and culture.

4.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF NGANGOM

Unlike the Khasi poets, Ngangom's poetry has a solid chord, imbued from the rich source of literature from Manipur. The poems intensely reflect this rich heritage of the tradition and culture of Manipur. In this connection,

we can refer to Dr. Tilottoma Misra's views. While editing *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*, Misra stated: "The history of modern Manipuri literature marks a significant departure from the general pattern that is visible in the emergence of a new literature during the colonial period in the other states of the region. The Christian missionaries could not make such much of an inroad into the Manipur valley where a vibrant Vaishnava culture patronised by the ruling dynasty of the Kingdom was strongly entrenched." Thus, literature of Manipur is strongly rooted to its own land, people and tradition. In addition, the birth of modernism in Manipuri literature is not marked by the missionaries, but by the growing awareness of the indigenous Meitei identity. Dr. Misra also said that "The roots of the present-day militant identity movement in Manipur, therefore, can be traced back to the early part of the twentieth century which was marked by the efforts of the writers to re-invent a glorious Meitei past for Manipur."



4.6 LET US SUM UP

From the reading of this unit, you have learnt that Robin S. Ngangom is one of the most important poets from Manipur. Ngangom, who is a poet, short story writer, editor and translator, is also a faculty in the department of English, North East Hills University. An important member of The Shillong Poetry Circle, Ngangom's poetry is one of the major sources of popularity of poetry from the Northeast to the outside world. The poem "Poetry" shows Ngangom as a sensible poet who is working hard to define the very spirit of poetry. While, the other poem "Everywhere I go" talks about going back to one's root as a poet is bound to carry his homeland, wherever he goes. I am sure, by this time, you have understood how Ngangom develops his subject in poetry by stressing more on local experience and the way he uses language to convey emotions and ideas.



4.7 FURTHER READING

Gupta, Mamnika. (Ed.). (2006). *Indigenous Writers of India: Introduction and Contributions.* Volume I: North East India. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

Ngangom, Robin S. & Kynpham S. Nongkynrih. (Eds.). (2003). *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*. NEHU: Shillong.

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Misra, Tilottoma. (Ed.). (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-east India*: *Poetry and Essays*. OUP.



4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: The Shillong Poetry Circle came into existence in 1988-1989… …Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang, Robin S. Ngangom are some of the important poets of the circle.

Ans to Q 2: Robin S. Ngangom is a representative poet of Northeast India… …although he is a Meitei by birth, he has contributed profusely to Indian English poetry… …he has exploited the folk-culture and folkloric tradition of Meghalaya… …his long association with Shillong-culture has been reflected in his nostalgic matrices of expounding affinity with Meghalaya.

Ans to Q 3: Poetry for each poet is a unique experience… …in his attempt to define poetry, he depicts many aspects of a real human being… …it is poetry only which can console his wounded being… …but the poem also tries to focus on his own problems of culture through a few metaphors like 'empty hands' and 'a lifetime silence.'

Ans to Q 4: Ngangom is bound to carry his homeland, wherever he goes… …the poem truly reflects the disturbing state of his homeland… …the people and the youth of his homeland are forced to leave their

homeland only to find a secure place outside… …as a sensitive poet, his only duty has been to look into the society and to reflect the abject reality of his society.

Ans to Q 5: Elegiac vignettes of scenes and locals of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Imphal, and the hills and rivers of the northeast seldom touched upon in Indian poetry… …use of myth and legends of Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram… …problems of **insurgency** in Manipur etc.

Ans to Q 6: In Ngangom's poetry, there are vibrant portrayals of the current society and of social trends experiencing painful, horrific processes of change and transition… …in most of his poetry, he voices anguish… …there is objective distancing from the subjective reality when the poet finds solace in the self… …poetry for him is the only way to search for self as well as truth.



4.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: In what ways, does Ngangom's poetry express local identity that needs to be exposed to the world outside?

Q 2: How does Ngangom talk about going back to one's root, as a poet is bound to carry his homeland, wherever he goes. Discuss with reference to the poem "Everywhere I go".

Q 3: "The writer from the North Eastern region differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way". Discuss this point with reference to Robin S Ngangom as a North East Indian writer.

Q 4: Do you think that Ngangom, in his attempt to define poetry, actually depicts many aspects of a real human being. Justify your answer.

Q 5: Comment on Ngangom's use of myth and legends of Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram in his poetry.

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UNIT 5: DESMOND KHARMAWPHLAND: "LETTER FROM PAHAMBIR" & "THE CONQUEST"

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 Desmond Kharmawphland: The Poet

5.4 The Poems: "Letter from Pahambir" & "The Conquest"

- 5.4.1 Texts of the Poems
- 5.4.2 Reading the Poems
- 5.4.3 Major Themes
- 5.4.4 Kharmawphland's Poetic Style

5.5 Critical Reception of Kharmawphland

5.6 Let us Sum up

5.7 Further Reading

5.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

5.9 Possible Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss briefly the life and works of Desmond Kharmawphland one of the most important poets from Meghalaya
- explain how Kharmawphland develops his subject and relate it to his own experiences of life and people
- make yourself familiar with the themes that Kharmawphland takes up
- examine and the ways in which he uses language to convey his ideas

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the Block. In this unit, we shall be discussing Desmond Kharmawphland's poems "Letter from Pahambir" & "The

Conquest". Desmond is an important contemporary poet and folklorist from Meghalaya. The author of a number of books of poetry and folkloristics pertaining to North East India, he has represented India in numerous conferences outside the country notably in Switzerland, the UK, Ireland, Norway, the US, Finland and Greece. The universal appeal in his poetry has generated tremendous critical attention for their ability to blend localised themes with a universal concern. When you go through the unit, you will find that the poem "The Conquest" is based on his introspective eye to his own identity, while the other poem "Letter from Pahambir" is about a lost culture with the invasion of the British to his land.

5.3 DESMOND KHARMAWPHLAND: THE POET

Desmond Kharmawphlang was born in Shillong, Meghalaya in 1964. A poet and folklorist, he has published two volumes of poetry and a play in Khasi. His poems have appeared in journals and anthologies in the country and abroad. He was brought up in Assam and Meghalaya. Educated at St. Anthony's High School, St. Edmund's College, and the North-Eastern Hill University, he works at present at the Centre for Creative Arts, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. A bilingual writer, he translates from Khasi to English and vice-versa, and has so far published three collections of poems in English – *Touchstone* (1987: Shillong), *Here* (1992: Ranchi) and *Home Coming* (1996). Contemporary socio-cultural concerns of Meghalaya, the cultural past and environmental changes are main subjects in his poetry. In the poem *Letter to a Dear Friend,* the poet writes about hills, rivers and people.

Desmond L Kharmawphlang is Professor in the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, NEHU. He has also published various scholarly articles in national and international journals. He had also participated, on sponsored invitation, in literary programmes in Switzerland, United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, and Norway. He lectured at Western Oregon University, Oregon State University and Portland University, USA on a consultancy programme sponsored by the Institute of International Education, New York, USA. He had lectured at the Folklore Department, University of Helsinki,

Finland during July 2002. He was inducted as an Associate Member, Folk Fellows, an Association instituted by the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters. He has been serving as National Editorial Board member of the *Journal of Indian Folklore Research*, Mysore and is one of the four National Vice Presidents of the Indian Folklore Congress.

In Meghalaya, nearly a dosen poets write regularly in English. Some are bilingual poets and a few of them exclusively write in English. Most of them are the priests of beauty, serenity, solitude and silence. In this world resides the mist of myths and mysteries. The traditional tribal world has been confused by the intrusion of modernism and subsequent decadence. The poets here pine for a lost world dreaming the exotic. Most of them are the members of the Shillong Poetry Society and contribute to the journals namely, *Lyric, The New Welsh Review,* and *Voices from Hills & Valleys*.

So far, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang has published a number of important books namely *Touchstone*, a book of poems, *Here*, a book of poems, *Ki Matti Byrshem* (A collection of essays on Folkloristics) *Narratives of North-East India I & II, Folklore in the Changing Times, Conference, Confluence:* (a collection of essays), *Attributes of Khasi Folklore, Khasi Folksongs and Tales* and so on.

5.4 THE POEMS: "LETTER FROM PAHAMBIR" & "THE CONQUEST"

The following sections will help you to read the prescribed poems in terms of its different important aspects.

5.4.1 Texts of the Poems

"The Conquest"

I never get tired of talking about my
Hometown.
In summer the sky is pregnant,
Swollen with unborn rain.
Winter arrives, with a tepid sun
Touching the frosen hills, the dream-boats on lakes.

Long ago, the men went beyond the
Surma
To trade, to bring home women
To nurture their seed.
Later came the British
With gifts of bullets, blood-money
And religion.
A steady conquest to the sound of
Guns began.
Quite suddenly, the British left.
There was peace, the sweet
smell of wet leaves again.
But in the wavering walk of time
There came those from the sweltering plains,
From everywhere.
You stricken land, how they love
Your teeming soil, your bruised children
One of them told me, "You know
Yours is a metropolitan city."

"Letter from Pahambir"

At sundown we set out in a car,
Past silent, dark huts,
Cicadas buzzing the dusk.
We have left the church far behind,
Glowing strangely in pallid
Arrogance, through the dust kicked up
By our passing.
Village curs turn quarrelsome
As we city men await
The verdict of reception, smoking uneasily
Outside the village Chief's abode.
"We come", I plead, "to learn, not to teach.

We come with longing, we are the
Forgetful generation, our hearts tapping
A rhythm spawned in shame, a shame
That splits our present from our past.
We have suckled for a long
On a wisdom of falsehood _ we are ourselves
Our own worst enemies."
A fire dances crazily, throwing
Shadows on the hard mud floor, and good
Laughter swells like moonlight.
Someone breaks out in song
And hardened feet tap unsteady punctuations
Around the weird tune.
Voices intone, hands fashion leaf plates
To hold food for the men
From the big city. I shove more brushwood
Into the fire.
U Di squats on the floor,
Gnarled hands extended, hooded eyes
Stealing tiny lights from the fire.
"See this diplin, spattered with
Good red mud? Have stored centuries of prayers for harvest, a hunt….
Our bellies understand hunger, our hands
Are shaped by it. It is black, as only
Good smoke can make it, it has told my children stories for c
Countless years now. So wait for the night
To grow, and endure our
Difficult ways."
U Di strips to loincloth, and bares
A hunched back, scarred like
a honing stone, upon which hungry
blades lick like tongues.

With trembling voice, he gases blindly
At the night, tension cording his
Throat, like vines tying everything
Into a knot of one race of skin
And blood, chanting the songs.
The stories burn our memories like
A distant meteor searing
The unnamed gloom; by their light I examine
The great hurt I carry in my soul
For having denied my own.

5.4.2 Reading the Poems

The poem "The Conquest" of Desmond is really appealing, based on his introspective eye to his own identity. He is deeply in love with his own hometown, but his home town tends to lose its identity and becomes a metropolitan city in turn. The basic peaceful nature of his hometown was subjected to change as the British made presence to their land. Looking at the past, he feels past is permeating, yet, the past and the present interface with a sense of longing: the emotional pause created between the past and the present leads to sadness, layered with irony, notwithstanding a touch of sarcasm.

"I never get tired of talking about my
Hometown.
…….
…….
Long ago, the men went beyond the
Surma
To trade, to bring home women
To nurture their seed.
Later came the British
With gifts of bullets, blood-money
And religion.

A steady conquest to the sound of
Guns began."

The arrival of the British had brought with them nothing significant but only the gifts of bullets, which took over the other things and which ultimately destroyed the inherent peace of the people of his home land.

The poem, at the same time, portrays the poet's treatment of the local as well as his personal view. As Jayanta Mahapatra, in his foreword to *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* says: "In a number of poems of the Northeast, one is touched by the poet's treatment of the local and the personal, that moves toward an involvement in the collective longing for renewal and the search for a better world…It is true that poetry can reform a society and like P. B. Shelley's unacknowledged legislator or Seamus Heaney's Government of the tongue, these poets of the Northeast are aware of the ills that tend to sweep them over and thereby crushing the very edifice of local culture and heritage."

The poem "Letter from Pahambir", on the other hand, is a story unfolded in a poem and worked upon insightful words. A tale of lost culture with the invasion of the British to his land, the story is like,

"The stories burn our memories like
A distant meteor searing
The unnamed gloom; by their light I examine
The great hurt I carry in my soul
For having denied my own."

They set out in car, a journey symbolic of the coming of new westernised culture. It is true that coming of westernised culture had definitely given them a new lease of life, but at the same time they tended to lose their own identity in the process. They did not have a written script before.

In the Preface to *Dancing Earth,* it is mentioned that "Apart from the Assamese, the Manipuries and the Bengalis of Tripura, who have their own distinct scripts and whose written literatures can be traced back to the fifteenth century or earlier, the literary history of most other communities is fairly new, as recent as the advent of the white missionaries from Wales and America in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the Khasi Hills, in about 1841, Thomas Jones of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Mission cast the Khasi language in written form using the Roman script."

But the British gave them some other things also. It is undoubtedly a progress subtle in nature.

"We have suckled for a long
On a wisdom of falsehood _ we are ourselves
Our own worst enemies."

Desmond L Kharmawphlang looks at the past in an ambivalent manner with a kind of ferocity. According to him, the past is permeating, yet the past and the present interface with a sense of longing: the emotional pause created between the past and the present leads to sadness layered with irony; notwithstanding a touch of sarcasm. This is best reflected in the following excerpt from the poem "The Conquest"

"I never get tired of talking about my hometown,
In summer the sky is pregnant,
Swollen with unborn rain
Winter arrives, with a tepid sun
Touching the frosen hills, the... boats on lakes.
Long ago, the men went beyond the Surma
To trade, to bring some women...
Later came the British with gifts of bullets,
Blood-money and religion.
A steady conquest to the sound of guns began."

LET US KNOW



Read the following Excerpts from Ananya S. Guha's article "The Poetry of Feeling: The Shillong Poets", dated 27 Feb, 2012 published online for Merinews at: http://www.merinews.com/article/the-poetry-of-feeling-the-shillong-poets/15866408.shtml&cp

North East India also witnessed the emergence of such a younger group of poets in the '80s and early '90s whose poetry, written in feverish moments of societal crisis, attracted the attention of critics and literary journals of India and abroad. Coincidentally these poets all live in Shillong and it was the poetry page of the Telegraph Colour Magazine edited by the celebrated Indo English poet Jayanta Mahapatra which gave them the opportunity to be published and break new grounds in the Indo-English poetry scene. In the mid and late 90's the North East Forum for English studies was established in Guwahati, and formed mainly by some College teachers; and the North East Writers Forum consisting of creative writers in this part of the country devoted much of their energy in encouraging the art of poetry in English in the region. This article will focus on these poets from Shillong as certain binding themes of personal, social and historical concern unified their poetry and gave it a distinct flavour, marked by an astonishing sense of lyricism.

The poets who readily come to the mind are: Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang, Robin S Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, votaries of the poetry of feeling. Their verse immediately attracted critical attention for their universal concerns, kneading these with localised themes. Their poetry was lyrical, imbued with a striking poise, clarity and spontaneity. They empathised with one another in their themes, and their 'influences' were many: Neruda, Arghezi, Gullen, Pessoa, Jayanta Mahapatra to name a few. Yet these 'influences' on their poetry did not stultify their verse, rather they empathetically related experiences of these poets to their own poetic credos cleverly. They believed in encouraging younger poets and helped them to publish their poetry in

their mouthpiece Lyric. Lyric, the poetry journal of the Shillong Poetry Circle subsequently gained reputation as a standard poetry journal acclaimed by critics in Sahitya Akademi's "Indian Literature", "The Times of India", "The Indian Express", "Business Standard" etc. Lyric published the works of poets on a national and international scale, and was scrupulous in its editing and selection. The chief architects of Lyric were the poets mentioned above though much of the pioneering work in publishing it was achieved by Robin Ngangom and Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What are the subject matters of the poem "The Conquest" and "Letter from Pahambir"?

Q 2: What are the distinctive qualities of the poets from Shillong?

5.4.3 Major Themes

The emergence of a new younger group of poets in the 1980s and early 1990s is an important phenomenon, so far as poetry in North-East of India is concerned. Desmond L. Kharmawphland, in his poems, looks at the **past in an ambivalent manner.** It is an undeniable truth that the Khasis have a rich stock of folk tales, myth and oral tradition, but they did not have a distinct script.

It is an inner urge for poets like Desmond Kharmawphland to dig through his poetry the **hidden resources of the Khasis**. And one of the important aspects of his poetry is his attempt to enrich his poetry based on the Khasi resources. In this connection, we may refer to the Introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*: "The Khasis, says the Welsh Scholar Nigel Jenkins, 'were weaving stories long before the Bible-thumping, hymn-crazy Welsh arrived on the scene." The same story of a colonial 'civilizing' mission persuading a people to abandon their

rich indigenous oral tradition and to adopt an alien way of life which was projected as the only 'universal' civilization model was repeated in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills as elsewhere in the region."

The inner **conflict between the urban and the rural** thematically weaves into his poems. As a critic Ananya S. Guha comments: "The dialogue between the urban and the rural thematically weaves into their poems and much of them are dialogic in the best sense, between the inner contemplated realities and the outside world. At the same time, the modern angst of being and becoming besets their poetry, layered as it is with deep humanistic perspectives, with the 'rural' or 'small town' syndrome. A very positive element in his poem is a finely tuned introspection and the ability to achieve moments of self-criticism."

Since, Desmond writes both in English as well as in Khasi, so his themes were based on **strong local resources**. In an interview, eminent Oriya poet, Sitakant Mahapatra once said, "Unless a poet is rooted in his own milieu, he or she cannot speak to any reader." He also comments that "Poetry is something so intense and emotive that magical experience can be felt and expressed only in a language that is most intimate to you." It is quite advantageous for Desmond as he writes in Khasi and vehemently interested in Khasi folk literature.

To find one's own identity or a cultural idiom in a changing scenario is innate in his poetry. In this connection, the views aired by Niranjan Mahanty in his Preface to his "A House of Rains" needs to be mentioned: "I believe that poetry enables me to connect, ennobles and kindles me to relate myself to a flux that is inescapable to a centre of faith that is interminable."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What are the themes in Desmond Kharmawphland's poetry?

5.4.4 Kharmawphland's Poetic Style

The lyrical warmth is to be seen in almost all his poems. And his poems are imbued with striking poise, clarity and spontaneity. Moreover, his poems are explicit with the modern angst. "A very positive element in their poems is a finely tuned introspection and the ability to achieve moments of self-criticism," as Ananya S. Guha stated. The images he uses in his poems evoke the intensity of feelings as well as his inner urge. The domination of irony, seen in Desmond's poems makes his poems subtle, and the identity of an individual is also strongly portrayed throughout his poems. It is true that the use of hills as a metaphor in the poetry of the Northeast is a distinct cultural idiom. He is not apart from it.

5.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF KHARMAWPHLAND

Kharmawphland's poetry has universal appeal, as he often writes his poems based on his own folklore and myth. He, like the other fellow poets attracted critical attention for their ability to blend localised themes with a universal concern. As a critic Ananya S. Guha comments, "Their influences were many: Neruda, Arghezi, Gullen, Pessoa, Jayanta Mahapatra and many others." One is amased at the richness of poetry written in a small place like Shillong, especially in the English language. Such a wealth can be attributed to the locale, its natural surroundings, places of scenic beauty in and around Shillong, in Meghalaya in general. Also, what cannot be divested of this fact are the rich oral traditions, myths and folklore of the Khasis and the Garos, the inhabitants of Meghalaya. Such details infuse the poetry of certain poets from Shillong like Kharmawphland, drawing inspiration from the oral narratives and legends. Three poets began this tradition in the mid-eighties and early nineties: Robin S. Ngangom, Desmomd, Leslie Kharmawphlang, and Kynpham Sing Nonkynrih. Although, Robin S. Ngangom is from Manipur, he has been living in Shillong for over three decades. These poets brought a veritable revolution in the world of Indo-English poetry by breaking away from the mainstream tradition of city-

based cultures and urbanised images, which marked poets from Mumbai, or Calcutta.

Of course in the 70s a poet such as Pritish Nandy based in Calcutta then talked about the severe societal crises in Bengal due to violence and the Naxalite movement. A lot of the poetry written by him centred on the city of Calcutta, feelings of hurt caused by death of people perhaps savaged by a policing effect. Pritish Nandy in fact could evoke such passions lyrically as well as in his love poems. However, in the mid eighties Robin S. Ngangom and Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang in their twenties forged distinct voices of their own by writing about the small town axis and a feverish societal crises witnessed by people's agitation as in Assam and Meghalaya over issues such as infiltration of outsiders and foreign nationals.

Moreover, there were repressive police measures to tackle student agitationists, and since the late 1970s a peaceful hub such as Shillong was plunged into the throes of crisis. In neighbouring Assam, there was the people's intervention in the form of the famed Assam agitation over the illegal immigrants' issue, which incidentally still continues today. In the other neighbouring states of North East India such as Mizoram, Tripura and Nagaland also, militant forces were at their height asking for independent nation states. In fact, the entire North East India Manipur included was plunged into a veritable war between armed forces of the Indian Government and militants termed variously as extremists or terrorists.

In *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-east India*, Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih says: "Much of the uniqueness of North-East poetry is the consequence of contemporary events, violence especially." However, at the same time, each of the poets makes his own poetic journey to glorify the lost tradition at a flux apparently inescapable. The conflict of exotic and local, though explicit in their poems, help them for defining their own identity. Their only strength lies in their hidden and enriched culture. Dr. Tilottama Misra, in her foreword to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-east India* makes an important observation when she states "The new generation of Khasi poets, who share a deep sense of cultural loss, which came with the conquest of the

territory and the mind by waves of colonisers of different hues. While they strive to seek out roots that would firmly bind them to the racial memory of the past, at the same time, they also display an eagerness to master the new modernist poetic idioms that can link them with a global audience."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: How has Desmond Kharmawphland been received as a poet?



5.6 LET US SUM UP

By this time, we are able not only to identify Desmond Kharmawphland as one of the most important poets from Meghalaya, but also to discuss some of his contributions to the poetry from North East India. We have learnt that his poetry helps to understand how he develops his subject and relates it to his own experiences of his own people and society. He uses the language so lucidly that it directly hints at the message that he is trying to convey. You have thus, learnt that Desmond is an important contemporary poet and folklorist from Meghalaya. The universal appeal in his poetry, as it is explicit in poems like "Letter from Pahambir" & "The Conquest", has generated tremendous critical attention for their ability to blend localised themes with a universal concern.



5.7 FURTHER READING

Gupta, Mamnika. (Ed.). (2006). *Indigenous Writers of India: Introduction and Contributions*. Volume I: North East India. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

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Web Resources:

http://www.merinews.com/article/the-poetry-of-feeling-the-shillong-poets/15866408.shtml&cp



5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: "The Conquest" is based on the poet's own identity… …he is deeply in love with his own hometown, but his home town tends to lose its identity and becomes a metropolitan city in turn… …"Letter from Pahambir", on the other hand, is a a tale of lost culture with the invasion of the British to his land.

Ans to Q 2: The poets like Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang, Robin S Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih are votaries of the poetry of feeling… …their verse exhibit their universal concerns, kneading them with localised themes…. …their poetry is lyrical, imbued with a striking poise, clarity and spontaneity.

Ans to Q 2: Reflection on the past in an ambivalent manner… …digging through the hidden resources of the Khasis like folk tales, myth and oral tradition… …the conflict between the urban and the rural and so on.

Ans to Q 3: Kharmawphland's poetry has universal appeal, as he often writes his poems based on his own folklore and myth… …he has the unique ability to blend localised themes with a universal concern… …he is part of the new generation of Khasi poets, who share a deep sense of cultural loss.



5.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: How does Desmond Kharmawphland's poetry reflect the collective longing for renewal and the search for a better world.

Q 2: How does a poem like "The Conquest" represent the poet's introspections regarding his own identity?

Q 3: Do you think that "Letter from Pahambir" is a tale of culture which was lost following the British invasion of the poet's land? Illustrate.

Q 4: There is an inner urge for poets like Desmond Kharmawphland to dig through his poetry the hidden resources of the Khasis. Discuss.

Q 5: Comment on Kharmawphland's poetic style as reflected in poems like "The Conquest" & "Letter from Pahambir".

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UNIT 6: SAURABH KUMAR CHALIHA: "SLAVES"

UNIT STRUCTURE

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Saurabh Kumar Chaliha: The Short story Writer

- 6.3.1 His Life
- 6.3.2 His Works

6.4 Reading the Story: "Slaves"

- 6.4.1 The Storyline
- 6.4.2 Major Themes
- 6.4.3 Major Characters
- 6.4.4 Chaliha's Narrative Style

6.5 Critical Reception of Chaliha

6.6 Let us Sum up

6.7 Further Reading

6.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

6.9 Possible Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- reflect on the life and works of Saurabh Kumar Chaliha
- form an idea of Chaliha as an important exponent of Assamese Short story
- discuss the important aspects related to the story "Slaves"
- discuss the plot, characters, and narrative techniques used by Chaliha in the story
- make an assessment of the reception of Chaliha as an important exponent of modern Assamese literature.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 2 and it introduces us to Saurav Kumar Chaliha, one of the most important writers of Assam, and one of his much

acclaimed short stories "Slaves". His real name was Surendra Nath Medhi. He was basically a writer of short stories, and his short story collection *Golam* won him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974. However, Chaliha, did not go to receive the award himself. The award was later sent to him by the Akademi. His was an enigmatic personality and he never wanted any publicity during his lifetime. This might be one of the important causes for which he always avoided the media. He was also against writing his autobiography and never encouraged others to write about him. That is why perhaps very little is known about this great author. "Slaves" is a translated version of his story "Golam" which deals with the story of a narrator, supposedly Assamese, landing up in Germany, and the different course of experiences that follow.

6.3 SAURABH KUMAR CHALIHA: THE SHORT STORY WRITER

6.3.1 His Life

Saurabh Kumar Chaliha was born 1930 in Mangaldoi town under Darrang District. His father name was Kaliram Medhi and mother was Swarnalata Medhi. His father was a prominent litterateur and presided over the 1919 session of the Axom Xahitya Xabha.

Chaliha started his school life on 1939 at Saint Mary's Convent School, Guwahati and later shifted to Cotton Collegiate School, from where he passed the Matriculation Examination. In 1946, Chaliha joined Cotton College for studying ISC. He was a brilliant science student and passed the exam with flying colours standing 5th in the state in 1948. Chaliha then opted for BSc. in Physics in Cotton College only. However, he got attracted towards communist and Marxist ideologies during those days, and got actively involved into RCPI. This ended up with his arrest and subsequent imprisonment. He completed his MSc in physics from London University.

Chaliha worked in several educational institutions in Germany before returning to India in 1960 to join the Assam Engineering College as a lecturer in the Department of Physics. He retired as the

head of the same department and was honoured as life time associate of the college in 1990. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974 for his short story collection, *Golam*. In the year 1995, he was also honoured with the Assam Valley Literary Award. But, the reclusive Chaliha never cared for any formal recognition. In one of his award acceptance speeches, he went even further as he said, 'I feel like an interloper.' Writing under a pseudonym, he has never directly come into public limelight and continued to remain an enigma for his countless admirers to this day.

Chaliha breathed his last on the 25th of June 2012 at the age of 78. He was suffering from some respiratory problems.

Saurav Kumar Chaliha does not have an official photograph and an official biography. The name is also his pen name. However, for the last six decades, he is known to his readers by this name only. He never directly comes into public lime light and till date, he remains an enigma. The reclusive Chaliha does not care for any recognition. For example, he accepted the Sahitya Akademi award through post! The Akademi sent him the cheque in due course but never cared to dispatch the Citation and the Medallion. As usual, the writer was not bothered to call the organizers. The Assam Valley Literary Award was received by his niece, on his behalf. In both the events, the award acceptance speeches were read out by someone else. In these two speeches, written in his signature style, Saurav Kumar Chaliha has shared a few thoughts.

6.3.2 His Works

Considered by many to be the most innovative writer of the Assamese short story, Saurav Kumar Chaliha is credited with having ushered the genre into modernity with his "Ashanta Electron" written around 1950. His stories are tempered by a cosmopolitanism that blends the complexities of the social order with a characteristic

fascination for formalistic experimentation. Many of these stories first appeared in Assamese magazines and literary journals like *Banhi, Ramdhenu, Awahan, Sadin, Dainik Asom, Asom Bani* etc. and many have been translated into English, Bengali, Hindi, Telegu and Malayalam etc. and published in various Indian magazines and collections.

The bulk of his stories are contained in a few anthologies: Ashanta Electron (1962), Duporiya (1963), Ehat Daba (1972), Golam (1974), Golpo Nohoi (1988), Aji Sukrobar (1992), Abarudha Sahar (1994), Bhal Khobor (1998), Kabi (1999), Ekoish Sotika Dhemali Nohoi (2004),Janmadin (2005), Jonbiri (2006), Dron aru Goethe (2007), Nabajanma (2008), and Marudyan (2009). A few other recompilations are—Swa-Nirbasito Xonkolon (1994), Rachana Samagra (1999), Soi Dasakar Golpo (2001), Saurav Kumar Chaliha Rasanawali (2008) etc. He also translated world classics like Round the World in Eighty Days, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What kind of a person Saurav Kumar Chaliha was?

Q 2: What are Chaliha's contributions to Assamese literature?

6.4 READING THE STORY: "SLAVES"

In the followings sections, you will read about the various aspects of the story "Slaves."

6.4.1 The Storyline

The narrator starts the story with an unusual beginning—Guwahati during November and December is experiencing heavy snowfall. The roads, roofs of houses, flowers, trees and vehicles are all covered with snow, as though a blanket of snow has enveloped the whole city. The little children come out of their houses on skis and start throwing snowballs at each other. The small swimming

pool in front of Ranju and Anju's house has frozen over. They cross the pool on their roller skates with glee. All other people buttoned their jackets up to their chins and came out to see the snow. The other children start making a huge snowman. Herr Barua has just opened the snow-covered gate and emerged on to the road. He has wrapped a blue coloured muffler tightly around his throat. Herr Barua is looking for the car that he had been parked outside the gate, but it is now covered with snow and is looking like an igloo built by the Eskimos.

Then the readers come to know that what has been narrated in the previous para is part of a German essay, written probably by the narrator himself, and being loudly read by Frau Muller in Germany who wonders about snowfall in India. Soon the narrator deflects Frau Muller's attention by beginning to describe the hills of Shillong—its winds, hilly roads, streams, gorges, pine trees just like their 'Fichte' trees, big waterfalls and so on. Actually, the narrator had come to the business house in Germany to be trained for school education, and Frau Muller—the German lady was to take an examination to test his proficiency in the language, at the end of which he will get a diploma. Frau Muller said that she had read a lot about Japan and India and longs to visit the country. She would bring her children – Gretchen and Fritz – with her, to show them the eastern lands, which seemed like fairy tales to them, not to get diplomas. However, Frau Muller asks the narrator about the values of the diploma in a subject like "Business Management" as the rules and customs of business and commerce in India are different even from those of other European nations.

The narrator however, clarifies that he wanted to get the diploma so that he could 'take it back and flaunt it before my countrymen'. A diploma from Germany was a ladder for Promotion. Alternatively, he could see himself as 'returned from abroad'! as done by every Ram, Shyam and Jodu. They have all invented strange pretexts to achieve this feat or else life would be meaningless, a

total failure. The narrator had to adopt every possible means like taking 'leave without pay' from the job at home, and finally, he landed up in Germany. Frau Muller states that she would try to send his report on language test that day itself, and congratulates him, which means that he has passed the test. She also asks him if he is feeling homesick and tells that he will be back home in six months.

The narrator is then reminded of the day in which he had to leave home. It had rained heavily and almost incessantly that whole month. The narrow lane in front of their house was inundated by the swiftly flowing river. Neither cars, nor rickshaws could ply on it. The narrator and his brother handed over the bags to the bare-footed office 'boy' took off their shoes and socks, rolled up their trousers, and prepared to cross the ditch. He did not allow his sisters to come to the main road to see him off for a number of reasons. First, they would start wailing loudly when he would board the taxi on the main road; second, along with the rains came in all kinds of insects, frogs, snails and both his sisters had red eruptions on their skin from contact with scorpions; third, with the rains, the water from an area of some migrant people who had built there their base, has entered their lane, and suspicious objects had been deposited in the potholes on the road making the water even more dirty. The narrator is also reminded of how he had touched the feet of his parents and some elderly people who had come to see him off. His mother was weeping and clinging to the curtain, and his father—, who had been a retired teacher, was giving him some last minute advice.

The narrator sipped his coffee and felt a sense of satisfaction, thinking that he will be able to send home three or four hundred mark from his savings. He hopes that his father carry out some repairs to the walls of his room and mend the holes in the roof of his mother's kitchen. After returning home, he will also talk to Manik Babu— the ward counsellor, and try to get a certain length of lane in front of our house black topped, and have the blocked drains on either side

opened. He is concerned only about his own family and none of the locality.

Frau Muller gets up from her chair, and tells the narrator that his essay "A description of Your Town" in the German language, was having no mistakes. Besides, it represented extremely mature skilful narration. If she had known earlier that he was capable of producing this, she would have given him more difficult a work to complete—for example, 'a description of what your town looks like when the snow starts to melt'. Hearing this, the narrator panicks but gives her a polite smile in response. Frau Muller then starts describing her own town, and what she would have perhaps done if the snow would melt in her own place, and then wants to know if it would be the same in India as well.

Then, in an ironic twist, the narrator states: "The description that I have written in my essay, as may be easily guessed, is lifted from a chapter "Snow in our City" in an old English to German book "Elementary Lessons in German." All I have done is to change the names – just replaced "our city" with "Gauhati".

6.4.2 Major Themes

It is not so easy to explain the themes of the fictional works of Saurav Kumar Chaliha. However, some of his themes are hinted at by the writer himself in the following lines:

"Nothing is permanent, only change. Nothing is constant, only death. Every heartbeat causes us a wound, and life would be a continuous bleeding to death if there were no narrative-art. The art of narration gifts us those assurances which nature denies us: a golden time that never rusts, a springtide that does not wither away, unclouded joy and eternal youth." (Ludwig Börne)

Nature has also denied me many things (e.g. to take but a single instance I've not been given the strength of will to assert my views or my stand in private and public life), and maybe I've been trying to make up for those deficiencies in a roundabout way with

pen and paper, and have perhaps tried through such efforts to feel some 'cloudless joy'. Maybe this is the yearning of the subconscious mind- I wouldn't know, a psychologist might. However, I am not without doubt if those endeavours have attained the level of 'literature' (or 'prose'). To hear the word, one feels that 'prose' is an aristocratic adjunct, a high-toned classical thing. There is of course nothing aristocratic about my writings, but perhaps even those mundane pieces have given me some happiness, some satisfaction, a few perhaps 'cloudless' , most others basically 'clouded'. But at the same time, there is always the conscious feeling that these writings are not entirely my private, personal stuff to be put away in my drawer, that these would be printed on the pages of books and magazines, read over the radio. That is to say, these words would be transmitted to the perception of the reader, and if as a result the reader also feels some resonance of my happiness, only then would those words be of any value, otherwise meaningless. Fruitful or futile, the writer wouldn't be able to say; only the reader would. [adapted from http://www.sauravkumarchaliha.org]

Prof. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami argues that "Saurabh Kumar Chaliha's works resist stereotyping of any kind: there is an undertow of pain and suffering beneath laughter, irony and play – and the comic in his stories is nearly always in tension with an overarching tragic vision of life. A writer incessantly questioning his own feelings and never at rest, Saurabh Kumar Chaliha was always careful not to repeat himself."

6.4.3 Major Characters

There are only two important characters in the story.

Frau Muller:

The German lady who examines the essay "A description of Your Town" written by the narrator in the German language. She is quite mature in age, but her interest and curiosity for all things is limitless. She is shocked to find the skilful writing of the narrator.

She longs to visit India with her children and wants to know from the narrator if things are similar in Germany and India.

The narrator:

As it is quite clear by now, the narrator is on a visit to Germany to get a diploma in the German language. He encounters a lady called Frau Muller who is also the examiner of his language test. He is given the task of describing his own town in German, and he is able to beautifully write the essay for which he is praised by the lady. Gradually, as the story progresses, the readers get to know that the narrator is an Assamese guy and is having a modest background. He has his parents, brother and sisters. His father is a retired teacher.

6.4.4 Chaliha's Narrative Style

Regarding the narrative style of Saurav Kumar Chaliha, Prof. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami states: "…Insofar as Chaliha's works are concerned, one usually has recourse to several different frames of reference: impressionism, cubism, surrealism and interior monologue among others. And Saurabh Kumar Chaliha is one of the few Assamese writers whose texts invariably call for a kind of networking with, or recourse to, other arts: music (western classical music in particular), painting, sculpture, architecture and cinema. Indeed, some of the stray references in his stories to either the "geometric design" of a wall or Picasso's "Harlequin's Family" adorning some room, description of a table gradually broadening itself "as in a close-up shot", or characters in his tales either alluding or listening to Mozart, Salieri, Beethoven, Dvorak, Tagore songs, jazz and barcarole invite the reader to relate these narratives to an exceptionally broad range of associations. The details of his stories involve a subtle play of voices and styles that contribute to an overall effect that is peculiar to poetry alone in its communion with other arts, music notably. Chaliha, endowed with auditory imagination of an exceptional type, delighted in the use of counterpoints as a

strategy of representation: an exciting game of chess (in Ehat Daba) gradually draws to a close with the sound of naam chanted to the accompaniment of khol somewhere in the distance…The world represented in "Bina Kutir" is a curious mix of what is "given" and what is constructed, or fantasised, by the narrator. What is given, or reported, comes into play with a series of tacit interpretations (meditations perhaps) adroitly woven round various components of the texture of his tale. Several stories including "Ratir Rail" foreground the fictional, textual character of reality." (Adapted from "Saurabh Chaliha's literary radiance will last forever")

6.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF CHALIHA

In his article, "Saurabh Chaliha's literary radiance will last forever" the noted critic Prof. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami states: "Two Assamese writers in the forties and the fifties of the twentieth century introduced their readership to a kind of sensibility rare in its sophistication, subtlety, scope and comprehensiveness: Ajit Barua (b. 1926) in poetry and Saurabh Kumar Chaliha (1933-2011) in fiction. Steering himself free of the sing-song lyricism of his romantic predecessors (some of them later associated with what literary historians called modernism in Assamese literature), Ajit Barua effected a radical shift away from patterns of rhythm derived, as it were, from the metronome; explored the possibilities of the language of everyday speech and tried to load just about every rift of his verse with what may be called an ore of silence. Chaliha, in his turn, fashioned an idiom that was "impure" in its break from the standard literary idiom of the day (current since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, more specifically from the literary eras of Banhi and Jonaki) and sensitized it to accommodate the anxiety, loneliness and restlessness of a "modern", post-independence generation confronting a world devoid of traditional certitudes. Combination of several registers (Kamrupi, Bengali, English and Standard Assamese), Chaliha's prose with its ingenious use of diegesis and mimesis captured a multiplicity of feelings adroitly organised and thus made for fresh experiments and play. The break from classic realism was clear and unmistakable."

Tilottoma Misra rightly says the following in favour of Saurabh Kumar Chaliha in her 'Introduction' to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India:* "The invasion of an alien culture that lays exclusive claim to modernity and progressiveness and compels the indigenes to be apologetic about their own culture has been the subject matter of much of the satirical writings from the region. In Assamese literature, Anglophiles had been the target of ridicule in the works of many nineteenth century satirists, including Lambodar Bora and Lakshminath Bezbaroa. Saurabh Kumar Chaliha's *Golam* (1974) is thematically in the same tradition, through structurally it represents the innovative style which was introduced into modern Assamese short fiction by Chaliha." (xvii)



6.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that Saurav Kumar Chaliha is an eminent Assamese short story writer. Considered to be the most innovative and powerful writer of Assamese short stories, he won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974 for his collection *Golam.* In 1995, he was honoured with the Assam Valley Literary Award by the Williamson Magor Education Trust. However, it is really so interesting that the publicity-shy Chaliha, whose real name was Surendra Nath Medhi, never appeared in public even to accept the awards. Therefore, most of his admirers did not have the opportunity to know the real man who wrote under the pseudonym. He even received the Sahitya Akademi Award by post, and his niece received the Assam Valley Literary Award on his behalf. His signature style of writing is still considered unique in Assamese literature.



6.7 FURTHER READING

Dev Goswami, Ranjit et al. (Eds.). *Katha 2.* Katha Publications.

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http://www.assams.info/people/saurabh-kumar-chaliha# ixzz33bNIkdzo



6.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Reclusive Chaliha never cared for any formal recognition... ...in one of his award acceptance speeches, he went even further went he said, 'I feel like an interloper.'... ...writing under a pseudonym, he has never directly come into public limelight... ...he still continues to remain an enigma for his countless admirers to this day.

Ans to Q 2: He is the most innovative writer of the Assamese short story... ...he is credited with having ushered the genre into modernity with his "Ashanta Electron" written around 1950... ...his stories are tempered by a cosmopolitanism that blends the complexities of the social order with a characteristic fascination for formalistic experimentation.



6.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Comment on the major themes in Saurav Kumar Chaliha's fictional works with special reference to the story "Slaves"?

Q 2: Do you think that the short story "Slaves" is a representative work of a man who develops connections among different frames of narration.

Q 3: Saurabh Kumar Chaliha's works resist stereotyping of any kind. Discuss.

Q 4: Discuss the role of the narrator in the context of the story. How does he set the story in motion.

Q 5: The invasion of an alien culture that compels the indigenes to be apologetic about their own culture has been the subject matter of much of the satirical writings from Saurav Kumar Chaliha. Discuss.

Q 6: Would you like to consider the story "Slaves" to be a vehement critique of Western Modernity? Discuss.

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UNIT 7: TEMSULA AO: "THE CURFEW MAN"

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Temsula Ao: The Writer

- 7.3.1 Her Life
- 7.3.2 Her Works

7.4 Reading the Story: "The Curfew Man"

- 7.4.1 The Storyline
- 7.4.2 Major Themes
- 7.4.3 Major Characters
- 7.4.4 Ao's Narrative Style

7.5 Critical Reception

7.6 Let us Sum up

7.7 Further Reading

7.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.9 Possible Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- reflect on the life and works of Temsula Ao
- form an idea of Ao as an important exponent of Literatures from India's North East
- discuss the important aspects related to the story "The Curfew Man"
- discuss the plot, characters, and narrative techniques used by Ao in the story
- make an assessment of the reception of English writings from a Naga writer like Temsula Ao.

7.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have read about an Assamese short story in English entitled "Slave" by Assamese short story writer Sourav Kumar

Chaliha. In this unit, we shall study another short story "The Curfew Man" written originally in English by Temsula Ao. Ao, who is a Naga poet, short story writer and ethnographer, often writes in English. Decades-long bloodshed and terror have marked the history of the Nagaland and its people who live in the troubled North–Eastern region of India. Their struggle for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity provide both the context and inter-text for the very few Naga fictions published so far. Temsula Ao's collection of short fictions entitled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone,* from which the short story "The Curfew Man" is taken, carries with it the significance of an insider's views on certain contemporary issues which I believe, also provide room for thoughtful speculations on certain burning challenges confronting today's India.

7.3 TEMSULA AO: THE WRITER

In this section, we shall get to read about the life and works of Temsula Ao.

7.3.1 Her Life

Temsula Ao is a Naga poet, short story writer and ethnographer. She writes in English. She is a retired Professor of English in North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), where she had taught since 1975. She has written total five collections of poetry, two collections of short stories, and a number of articles on Naga folk life. She was also awarded the most coveted Fulbright Scholarship and was sent to the University of Minnesota, USA in 1985-86. During that time, she came in contact with the Native Americans from whom she learned about their culture, heritage and Oral tradition. This exposure inspired her to record the oral tradition of her own community, Ao Naga. She has been working on the Oral tradition for more than a decade. In 1999 she published an ethnographic work called *Ao-Naga Oral tradition* which is an authentic document about the Ao Naga community. She was also appointed the director of the North-East Zone Cultural Centre in Dimapur from 1992-97. Today, she is considered an authority on

Naga culture, which has earned her the prestigious entry into the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore* and *Folk Life in Folklore of Nagaland Vol-2*, brought out in Westport, Connecticut, USA.

7.3.2 Her Works

Known mostly for her research on culture and the oral traditions of the Naga tribes, Temsula Ao seems to have taken liberty in writing her experiences in the form of the short fictions. Temsula Ao has published two short story collections—*These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for my Head* (2009). The former consists of ten short stories, which deal with insurgency in Nagaland fired by a sense of self-determination of the Naga people. The later consists of eight short stories, which have mythical as well as modern overtones. The stories are sensitive, evocative and also powerful. She is also one who vehemently critiqued the atrocities done against the Naga women during the time of insurgency. In one of her papers aptly entitled "Benevolent Subordination" gives expression to this state of affairs in Nagaland, she mentions that many men tend to protect women not necessarily out of love, but because they consider women as weak and vulnerable. If one wants to revolutionize this, one will land up going against one's own fathers, brothers and uncles. Therefore, change has to start at the village level.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who is Temsula Ao? What are some of her preoccupations as a writer especially in her short stories?

7.4 READING THE STORY: "THE CURFEW MAN"

7.4.1 The Storyline

The night curfew was still on following the trouble in Nagaland. The hostility between two warring groups—the Indian Army and the underground militants accusing the other as rebels fighting against the state was increasing. Basically, the Indian Army was seen as the illegal occupier of sovereign Naga territories. Caught between these two, the plight of the common innocent people was very grim followed by many restrictions like the night curfew imposed on them. Everything came to a standstill following the curfew, as soon after dark all social activities stopped. Even church services or social gatherings had to be concluded on time. There were several incidents in which relatives carrying sick people to hospitals had to face humiliations, innocent civilians were shot dead by patrolling parties and their deaths were reported as those of underground rebels killed in 'encounters'.

However, for the informers, employed by the civil authorities to gather information about the militants, the real work began only after dark. Their role was to monitor the people, watch them where they went and find out what they told their neighbours and relatives. Besides, the informers also monitored the sympathisers of the movement many of whom were Government servants, doctors, teachers or even housewives. The government recruited the informers from the low rank people from villages and towns by paying them handsomely. Thus, a new group of people emerged and they functioned, either by choice or by compulsion, between the government forces and the so-called 'freedom fighters'.

Nevertheless, Satemba, a former constable in the Assam police became an informer through a strange turn of events. Although he failed in his Matriculation examination, he got the job only because he was a good football player who would be an important addition to his battalion. But following a final match between the Assam Police and the Assam Regiment, he got his knee chattered. He could not play competitive football again, nor could he qualify for a desk job. His wife Jemtila, suggested that he take a premature retirement that they should leave for their village in Nagaland and start farming. Despite his not fulfilling the required number of years for regular

pension benefits, the authority offered him a token pension of Rs 75 per month.

However, the piece of ancestral farmland that he acquired from his clan was not suitable for any kind of cultivation. Besides, the dull village life and the hard grind forced the couple come to Mokokchung town and take up residence in a small rented house for Rs 30 per month on the outskirts of the town. That means they had to live on the rest of the pension money. Subsequently, Jemtila decided to do odd jobs in people's houses, and managed to get a job in a house with two young children in which the mother was suffering from prolonged illness. She was an honest and hardworking woman and soon her services were in great demand. She started earning a handsome amount of money through better bargains and deals.

A new Sub-divisional Officer took over the charge of the town and was looking for a maidservant as his wife was expecting their first baby. Jemtila was called to his office one day and, as it was almost certain, she got the job on a full time basis with a monthly salary of Rs 100. Satemba was very happy and started thinking of having a job for himself to make their life better. Satemba often escorted his wife back home after work. One day, having seen this, the Officer asked Jemtila if her husband is willing for a job, as he needs to gather information regarding some people in town. But experienced Satemba could easily understand that the SDO was not as innocent as he was trying to be. Satemba, who was looking for a job, simply answered that everything depended on the nature of information. Soon Satemba was recruited as a Government informer. Satemba also had to accept the job because he knew it well that the fate of his wife's job depended on accepting the SDO's offer. In due course, he got acquainted with the officers of Army intelligence and was instructed to deliver all-important messages to them directly.

At first, Jemtila was not aware of the nature of his job. He began to stay out at night that aroused the suspicion of his wife.

Satemba had to admit that he needed to go out at night to collect important information for the employer. On being asked how he could move during night curfew, he stated that it was not a problem for him as he was given a password each night by his masters. On listening everything in detail from Satembaa, Jemtila got furious, and even suggested that, they go back to their village leaving aside all such 'hanky panky' job. She was afraid that one day the underground people will come and lift him up, or he might himself be a suspect in the eyes of the Government.

On a particular night, Satemba was carrying information that an important meeting of the underground leaders of the area was to take place, to Brigade Major (Intelligence) who stayed in the Army head quarters in the centre of the town. The information was too important to be passed immediately, and failure to do so would result in serious consequences. That night, there was a nagging worry. If he could carry this message tonight and if the meeting did take place as scheduled, the Army could actually capture the area commanders and inflict a big blow to the underground organisation. Satemba was thinking about the rightness or wrongness of his activities and thought about an incident of the Army raiding a house in the nearby village. While the underground militant escaped, the owner of the house was arrested and beaten up so badly that he died of serious injuries. Satemba stayed back at home during night following that incident. However, the real trouble was within his heart.

Vowing that this was going to be his last job, Satemba climbed the steps that led to the Brigade headquarters. That day, he was suffering from unbearable pain in his damaged knee. But suddenly, he saw a dark figure emerging out of the darkness. He at once knew that it was a real stranger with a black shawl. He motioned Satemba to come forward and quickly pulled him into the circle of darkness. He gripped Satemba by the neck and hissed in the air:

"Go back home curfew man, and if you value your life, never again carry tales." So saying the stranger quickly vanished in darkness. Satemba was shocked and remained there for the rest of the night contemplating on the various possibilities of what had just happened. When the sky lightened, slowly and painfully he made his way back home. Jemtila took good care of him and nursed him well. She could easily find out what had happened as blood was oozing out from both his legs.

She was almost sure that he would never be able to work for the SDO again. But she took the damage of the second leg as the freedom from the sinister bondage of the SDO. Next day, she rushed to the SDO and told that he had a fall last night and that now his good knee was also injured. However, the cunning SDO could easily understand everything from the animated tone of Jemtila and thought that she was actually happy for what had happened. He orders Jemtila that Satemba's service is no longer required, and that he should not open his mouth in front of others.

The SDO started thinking of an immediate replacement of Satemba. Soon he started dialling to someone and both Satemba's injury and Jemtila's behaviour began to seem insignificant. But he was agitated for not being able to contact anyone immediately. After several attempts, he did make contact with someone and his body seemed to relax visibly. A new curfew man will be in place by evening and Satemba will become a history.

7.4.2 Major Themes

If literature is regarded as the reflection of the changing reality of a Nation, most of the regional Indian writers like Temsula Ao are often seen to have dealt with the specific socio-cultural realities of their respective regions. Describing how ordinary people cope with violence, how they negotiate power and force, how they seek and find safe spaces in the midst of terror, she ponders over a way of life under threat from the forces of territorial conflicts, ethnic crisis, modernisation, and war.

For Temsula Ao, **identity** is a word loaded with meanings, evocative of multiple interpretations. Assigning a common identity to the ethnic groups now collectively known as the Nagas, comprising of many different types, speaking many different languages, many distinct linguistic groups, many different dialects, is really very problematic. For a Naga, identity is not static or fixed, but multilayered. This brings in the other related theoretical issues like Nationalism, Territory and Space. Temsula writes: "It was as though a great cataclysmic upheaval threw up many realities for the Nagas within which they are still struggling to settle for a legitimate identity… Nagaland's story of the struggle for self-determination started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism, but it somehow got re-written into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome" (Ao X).

In her moving 'Foreword' to the book *These Hills Called Home*, entitled "Lest we forget" Ao states that not being the kind of person who would brush aside the pain of another human being, "in these stories I have endeavoured to revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged". (Ao IX) She further states that her stories do not state "historical facts", nor are they about "condemnation, justice or justification of the events which raged through the land like a wildfire half a century ago". "On the contrary", as she beautifully asserts, what the stories are trying to state is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life – their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul." (X)

"The Curfew Man" has its genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that refer to the history of the Nagas since early 50s of the 20th century, and their demand for independence

from the Indian State. Therefore, the main thrust in such stories is to probe how the events of that period have re-structured the Naga psyche. It was almost a birth by fire as the Nagas were struggling to settle for a legitimate identity.

Thus, a story like "The Curfew Man" is to be regarded as the snippets of those innocent people of the Naga Hills whose peace was shattered by political designs, the common suffering folk hardly understood. She compels the readers to empathize with the suffering people with her attempt to create a wholeness of experience. Such frank narrative by a Naga woman writer powerfully brings out the ghastly reality in this part of India to contemporary readers fed on news-stories with their preoccupations with jargons like "insurgency", "mainstream", "encounter", "surrender", "atrocity", "human rights" and so on. Besides, the very specific experiences, of which the writers themselves are a part, make them implicitly comment on certain issues, which have gained significance in terms of women's relationship with society, culture and history of society.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: What are the important themes of the story?

7.4.3 Major Characters

Satemba:

A constable in Assam Police who later becomes a Government informer. Although he failed in his matriculation examination, he was recruited to the police force for his expertise in football. It was because of him that his battalion won many shields and trophies. However, following a serious injury during a football match, his kneecap was chattered and he could never play competitive football. His permanent damage of the leg made him incapable of doing his regular duties of a constable. On the suggestions of his wife Jemtila,

he took retirement from office because of his consistence performance as a goal-scoring player with a token pension of Rs 75 per month and left Assam for his village in Nagaland to try his luck in farming.

Jemtila:

She is the wife of **Satemba** and suggests that he should take premature retirement from his service so that they can return to their village in Nagaland and take up farming. She is a dutiful wife of a good husband, and expresses her concern over the future of their family by thinking of doing odd jobs in the families of the locality to which they shift later. She manages to win a job of a maid and becomes very popular. Soon, the SDO who arrived in the town, provides her a handsome bargain, and she gets a job in his household on fulltime basis. She is innocent but prudent enough to alert her husband as he was doing the job of an informer under the Army officials. Being a common woman, she was also very ignorant about the turmoil in town and expressed her concern regarding how the innocent, peace loving people turning to unacceptable means for livelihood.

Sub Divisional Officer:

He is the new officer in town and is looking for a maidservant to attend his wife who is expecting their first baby. He is a cunning officer who can beautifully run the state machinery. Since it is a troubled time, he is under tremendous pressure from the Army headquarters that he should recruit some people who can act as informers. He is very intelligent and at once understands everything when Jemtila requests the SDO that he should set her husband free from duty. However, he is again under pressure when Satemba quits, and is relaxed only when he can recruit another Curfew man to do secret duties.

7.4.4 Ao's Narrative Style

The issue of an appropriate 'form' in the North East Indian literary context seems to be very pertinent issue to be studied in greater detail as many of the North East Indian writers have taken to writing in English instead of their respective regional languages. Thus, the problem of visibility of the writers from this part of India is reduced to such an extent that they are no longer perplexed by the dichotomy of centre and periphery. Even Sahitya Akademi has rendered a great service in promoting the works of these writers by publishing and translating many of their works in many other Indian languages. Yet the problem of being 'marginalised' looms large among these writers which is reflected in the way they are trying to showcase their traditions and cultures through fictional writings.

Although, most of the stories by Ao are women-centric and symbolize her concern over gender issues, they also excel in representing the entire history of the Naga communities. Story-telling thus became a necessary tool for Temsula Ao for delving deep into the practice of writing in a place like Nagaland. Her writing is lucid and her stories never tend to be written for special readers as well as critics.

Collecting the oral and written literatures of one's own community became a part of the nationalist agenda of identity assertion in Nagaland as well as in the other North East Indian states. Tilottoma Misra states: "People whose history and civilisation had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of Eurocentric concept of modernity, took up the task of re-creating their past and reinventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process of marching from the past to the future" (Misra xv). This can be seen, as Misra observed, as synonymous with African and Native American communities showing interest in adopting elements from their own oral tradition in order to create a modern literature of their own which would resist the colonial

project of denying a history to the colonised. Subsequently, it has been observed that the old oral storytelling tradition, which is common to all oral cultures of indigenous people, has been creatively integrated into modern literary genres to a give a distinct identity to the literature of the region (xxiv).

But Temsula Ao, whose own writings display a sensitive blending of the oral and the written, perhaps claims that 'new literature, rich with indigenous flavour, that is being created by modern storytellers and poets from the North East, does not seem to have a political agenda like the postcolonial literature that is emerging in Africa and Native America. Drawing a dividing line between them and North East India Temsula states in her "Writing Orality": "…the people of North East India seem to have attained a new 'maturity' in their perceptions about themselves, that the 'other' of their position vis-a-vis mainland India was not 'them' elsewhere but very much within their own sense of isolation in an oral culture. Once articulated through the written text, similarities of world views have helped forge new affinities, and at the same time enabled them to accept the differences as only uniqueness of any given culture rather than as dominators of any deficiency or inferiority" (qtd. in Misra xvi). Such views regarding identity and articulation help readers to examine Temsula Ao's fictions from the perspective of an insider.

7.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION

There is no denying the fact that unlike those found in the other parts of the country, Northeastern literatures are yet to prove their strength and make their presence felt in the national and international perspectives. In such a context, Temsula Ao's book of short fictions entitled *These Hills Called Home,* from which the story "The Curfew Man" is taken, can be seen as a significant attempt made by a North-East Indian writer in presenting this part of India to the rest of the world. You will find that in Nagaland, each tribe with its distinct language, social customs and dress codes, has continued to live as an identifiable ethnic entity within the group

collectively known as the Nagas (Ao, *Indian Folk* 6). Within the tribe what is also important is that identity is deeply rooted in the village of his birth and residence. Being a resident of a particular village is the most important aspect of Naga identity specifying ethnic and linguistic space. A Naga, banished from his own ancestral village for political, criminal and social offences is like a person without a country. There can be no greater humiliation for a Naga than this fate that robs him off this symbolic identity and he is thus disaffiliated from his origin and tradition. Hence, "the combination of ethnicity and territory gives a Naga the most dynamic definition of his identity" (6). In Temsula Ao's book, we do find both an assertion of such ideas and a dissenting voice of the Nagas against all sorts of nationalistic representations. The formation of an identity, usually attached to the Indian 'nation', blurs all the existing parameters and offers a Naga the identity solely on the basis of their habitation within the boundaries of the sovereign state of India. She states that the definitions of this identity are derived from political and economic dependencies rather than any cultural, traditional or linguistic affinities, which also point towards hybridity. Such views of Ao help the readers to accept her as one of the most powerful voices of North East India.



7.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we can assume that Temsula Ao is an important writer from the North East of India. Her collection of short fictions entitled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone,* from which the short story "The Curfew Man" is taken, carries with it the significance of an insider's views on certain contemporary issues like terrorism, insurgency, militant problems, state machinery, oppression by Army which have crippled Nagaland in recent times. You have learnt that identity and marginality, ordinary people compelled to cope with violence are some of the important themes of the story you have read. I am sure, you have understood, by considering how ordinary people negotiate power and force, how they seek

and find safe spaces in the midst of terror, Temsula Ao ponders over a way of life under threat from the forces of territorial conflicts, ethnic crisis, modernisation, and war. Along with these, Temsula Ao's skills as a writer are beautifully expressed through her use of lucid language and writerly sensibility.



7.7 FURTHER READING

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7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Temsula Ao is a Naga poet, short story writer and ethnographer… …she is known mostly for her research on culture and the oral traditions of the Naga tribes… …her short stories deal with insurgency in Nagaland fired by a sense of self determination of the Naga people… …his stories are sensitive, evocative and also powerful… …she is a vehement critique of the atrocities done against the Naga women during the time of insurgency.

Ans to Q 2: The problem of identity of an ethnic group collectively known as the Nagas… …issues like Nationalism, Territory and Space… …in a story like this Ao revisits the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged... … "The Curfew Man" is the story of the innocent people of the Naga Hills whose peace was shattered by political designs, the common suffering folk hardly understood.



7.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Decades-long bloodshed and terror have marked the history of Nagaland and its people. How does a story like "The Curfew Man" reflect this problem?

Q 2: Do you think that "The Curfew Man" is to be regarded as the snippets of those innocent people of the Naga Hills whose peace was shattered by political designs?

Q 3: What do you think about the characters of Satemba and Jemtilla? Are they the victims of political forces around them? Discuss.

Q 4: "The Curfew Man" carries with it the significance of an insider's views on certain contemporary issues like terrorism, insurgency, militant problems, state machinery, oppression by Army which have crippled Nagaland in recent times. Illustrate.

Q 5: Comment on Temsula Ao's prose style? Which are the aspects that make her an important writer from India's North East?

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UNIT 8: BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYA: *LOVE IN THE TIME OF INSURGENCY (EARUINGAM)*

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya: Life and Works

8.4 Reading the Novel

- 8.4.1 The Context
- 8.4.2 Brief Summary of the Novel
- 8.4.3 Major Themes
- 8.4.4 Bhattacharya's Narrative Style

8.5 Critical Reception of Bhattacharya

8.6 Let us Sum up

8.7 Further Reading

8.8 Possible Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss briefly the life and works of Navakanta Barua one of the most important poets from Assam
- explain how Barua develops his subject and relate it to his own experiences of life and people
- examine and the ways in which he uses language to convey his ideas
- make yourself familiar with the themes that Barua takes up
- appreciate the prescribed poems in totality.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit shall introduce us to Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, one of the pioneers of modern Assamese literature, and his novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* the English translation of the Assamese novel *Yaruingam by*

Bhattacharya himself. Set in Nagaland during the World War II, the book leads you to some very sensitive truths of the battlefield of China-India-Burma with the freedom movement at the background. It also shows the start of a movement that later on led to birth of NSCN in Nagaland. It is one of the most celebrated books in Assamese literature and it is still read by young and old alike due to the relevance of the story in today's world. Bhattacharya conceived the idea of writing this novel in 1950, when he was serving as a teacher in Venture Christian Mission High School in Ukhrul, Manipur. Ukhrul was inhabited by the Tangkhul Nagas. Living in close proximity to the Tankhul Nagas, Bhattacharyya experienced first-hand the culture, practices and everyday lives of the Nagas, which finds expression in his noted novel *Yaruingam* for which he was conferred with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1961. He later translated the novel into English as *Love in the Time of Insurgency.* By the time you finish reading this unit, we shall be able to discuss the novel in terms of its various important aspects.

8.3 BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYA: LIFE AND WORKS

Born on 14th October 1924 to Sashidhar Bhattacharyya and Aaideu Bhattacharyya, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya began his school life at the Safrai tea garden but soon moved to the Government High School in Jorhat. His literary talent soon lead him to the company of stalwarts like Munindra Narayan Dutta Baruah, Amulya Baruah, Jati Narayan Sarma and Rajen Hazarika, Dimbeswar Neog, Mitradev Mahanta, Trolokyanath Goswami and Maheswar Neog among others who inspired him to pursue a career in writing. Having successfully completed his I.S.C. and B.Sc. from Cotton College, Guwahati, he went to Calcutta to study Journalism and later Law. The literary atmosphere of Calcutta did not fail to affect young Bhattacharyya's mind as he met noted writers and poets of the day and read their works. However, he soon returned to Assam and joined as an assistant editor in a newspaper named *Natun Asomiya.* He later became the editor of *Janata,* the Asomiya edition of the weekly magazine of the Indian Socialist Party.

In 1950, while working in a Christian Mission High School in Ukhrul, Manipur, mostly inhabited by the Tangkhul Nagas. From there he got the inspiration to write the novel *Yaruingam*. Returning to Guwahati in 1952, he joined as the Editor of *Ramdhenu*, the mouthpiece of modern Assamese literature in the mid-20th century. The *Ramdhenu* era is hailed as one of the glorious phases of Assamese literature because the literature produced during this period was heavily influenced by elements of Western modernism.

Bhattacharyya passed away in 1997 at the age of 83, leaving behind a legacy of literature that continues to influence Assamese writing even to this day.

LET US KNOW



The following are some of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's works.

Rajpathe Ringiyai (1955)
Aai (1960)
Yaruingam (1960)
Kolong Aajiu Boi (1961)—short stories
Satsori (1963)—short stories
Sataghni (1965)
Munisunir Pohar (1968)
Nastachandra (1968)
Pratipad (1970)
Mrityunjay (1970)
Sinaki Suti (1971)
Kabar Aru Phul (1972)
Ballari (1973)
Daini (1976)
Ranga Megh (1976)
Kalar Humuniyah (1982)
Chaturanga (1987)
Phul Kownarar Pakhi-Ghora (1988)

8.4 READING THE NOVEL

8.4.1 The Context

Yaruingam or *Love in the Time of Insurgency* was first published in 1960. This novel is the product of Bhattacharyya's long and deep association with the Tangkhul Nagas in Ukhrul. The Tangkhul Nagas are a major ethnic group that live in the Indo-Burma borders and predominantly occupy the Ukhrul district in Manipur. Set in Nagaland during the World War II, the novel looks at the lives of the Tangkhuls as they grapple with the realities of war combined with the more localised separatist movement headed by Phizo and the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). The novel delves into the issue of Naga sovereignty, identity conflict and people's response to the war against the backdrop of India's own Independence movement together with the undercurrent of insurgency in the North East India and the impact of Christianity—all of which combined together to create turbulence in the region. It is interesting to see two conflicting ideas of the nation that run parallel in the novel. Problems with the ideologies of the nation-state has been a persistent concern among the people of the North-East, the desire to forge an alternate identity of the self and the nation is central to the cause of the ethnic tribes. This is well reflected in the novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency.*

The World War II was one of the most devastating episodes of human history, the effects of which reached the hills of Nagaland of the then British India. The Nagas were mostly supportive of the British and so they had to take part in the war and fought what is famously called the "Battle of Kohima". The novel is set during these turbulent times of the World War II when the Japanese forces tried to occupy the land of the Tangkhuls for a brief period and the Nagas in turn struggled to save their land. Finally, the Japanese faced defeat and they had to retreat. The war brought untold suffering to the people of the hills. People were maimed and killed, fields burnt, villages bombed and humanity destroyed forever.

The war significantly marked the beginning of the struggle for a distinct Naga identity, leading to the emergence of the insurgent movement across the region. The advent of the British colonizer was coupled with the arrival of Christianity that resulted in social, political and cultural changes in the region. The missionaries arrived with their own ideas about religion and modern ways of life that immediately clashed with the local practices of the people. An important outcome of this was the 'fear of the outsider' that included not only the British and the Christian missionaries but also people from the Indian mainland who sought to administer the hills with governmental policies and practices. This resulted in the rise of a separatist movement that demanded the recognition of a separate state for the Nagas from the Indian nation state, and this tumultuous period is the setting of *Love in the Time of Insurgency.*

8.4.2 Brief Summary of the Novel

The narrative begins on a day in mid-July 1944, just before the World War II ended. It is situated in Ukhrul and opens with a conversation between the protagonist Sharengla, a Tangkhul girl, and Ishewara, a Japanese soldier. Sharengla has been abducted by Ishewara and seduced to live with him. The Japanese troops are losing the war and are pulling out their forces from Assam and Manipur. Forced by the call of duty, Ishewara leaves Sharengla even as she is carrying his child. When Sharengla implores him not to leave by reminding him of his promises and the fate of their unborn child, Ishewara replies that the war had not ended the way he had hoped. He is worried about his safety and realises that they could not have a future together. If he is caught by her people, he would be handed over to the British towards whom the Nagas are more sympathetic: "Your people have no sympathy for us. You know that your tribesmen are hostile to the Indians as well as to the Japanese, but they have welcomed the British and are showing them the whereabouts of the retreating Japanese. They will hand me over to them. (15)"

When Sharengla protests that this will not happen, Ishewara says, "You don't know what happens to captured soldiers, Sharengla. The only way to stay alive is to escape" (15). He promises her that he would come back for her later, and leaves his faithful dog Abei with her. Sharengla is now abandoned and helpless. Her fate is left to be decided by Ngathingkhui, the headman of the non-Christian part of their village and Ngazek, one of the most respected elders in the village. They both are aware of her story and are considerate towards her.

Rishang, her former lover, is also aware of the events in her life and is sympathetic towards her. His relationship with Sharengla was disrupted with the arrival of Ishewara, and he is jealous that his beloved has been "ravished by another man" (19). Nevertheless, he informs her that the villagers will allow her to live in the *ngalalong*, "the house of the virgins, a community education centre where unmarried girls were trained in traditional crafts and initiated into the adult social life" (22). While the *ngalalong* ensured "the proper development of the girls in the traditional way" (22) the girls who lived in the *ngalalong* "barely tolerated" Sharengla's presence. They gossiped about her and avoided any conversation with her. Sharengla soon finds a friend in Khathingla, the daughter of Ngathingkhui. She is able to confide in her about her doubts and fears. Soon, news of Ishewara's death reaches Sharengla though a letter written by Videsselie, a forty-five year old Angami Naga who was a member of the Indian National Army of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. He hailed from Khonoma village near Kohima and dreamt of establishing an "independent Nagaland" (25). Ishewara's death shatters Sharengla but she is comforted by Khathingla and Rishang.

Rishang and Sharengla discuss the turbulent times they live in. While Sharengla declares that she does not understand war and politics, Rishang explains that war is devastating to the common man. He had joined the Volunteer Force to help the Allied Army but the destruction and miseries of the war destroyed his dreams as

well as his love. "I never thought that the villagers would lose their homes, that prices of essential goods would go up and that you, my childhood friend and beloved, would be taken by a Japanese soldier" he tells Sharengla (27). He believes that the bombing has resulted in the alienation of the people while they desperately want peace. He argues that the need of the hour is to make people believe in the "constructive path." Rishang's dreams are shattered by the war and so he says that "the very idea of establishing a sovereign Naga state is absurd!" (27). Sharengla realises that the villagers are frustrated. Videsselie's ideas, though ambitious, were beyond her grasp. She agrees that Rishang's idea of peace was much better. She also ponders on the chaotic state of affairs in the village. Christianity has taught the Nagas to believe in Christ while they are steeped in their own local beliefs and practices. The Japanese followed the Bushido cult. However, the British seemed to have forgotten the message of Jesus and are bent on war and destruction.

Sharengla finds solace in the Bible and often thinks about Jesus sacrificing Himself to save her soul. She continued to work in the *ngalalong* where she meets Khating, Ngazek's son and her childhood friend. He, along with Rishang, had joined the Volunteer Force of the Allied Army. He had faith in the administration of the British and believed that the British and the Christian missionaries presented the Nagas with an opportunity to improve their life and living conditions. His father was not in favour of the Christians but Khating was determined to marry the Khasi girl he loved. They meet Sirala, Phanitphang's mother. Sirala was a widow and very concerned for her son who had joined Volunteer Force of the Allied Army. She is disillusioned with the war and saddened by the suffering the war has caused to people:

We thought we could return to our own village as soon as the Japanese evacuated it. But the sahibs came and bombed it, reducing our houses to ashes. They probably thought that the Japanese were still there. And look at the prices! (33)

She goes on the say that Sharengla's mother could her bear what happened to her daughter and died in sorrow. Her father, Thisan, too had died of a peculiar aliment caused by war. As Sharengla weeps at the memory of her dead parents, Khating reflects on his own personal crisis. He had converted to Christianity despite his father's disapproval and now he wanted to marry a Christian girl. So far he has not been able to broach the topic with his father. Meanwhile, Ngathingkhui informs Khating that Videsselie's activities have been causing much concern but Ngazek believes that the villagers should follow him. When Khating voices his annoyance, his father rebukes him. Khating reminds his father that Videsselie wanted "a Nagaland which will be separate from India" (35) but Ngazek argues that "the Nagas *should* unite…We must be free ourselves; not just be a part of free India. Christianity and modern education are taking us on the wrong path. I want neither the white men, nor the black men. I have no love for the Japanese either. The Nagas were happier when they were naked. We had no food problems. Our needs were few and we were able to satisfy them…We want to live life our way. Not to be ruled by foreign ideas." (35)

Father and son continue to argue on the pros and cons of Christianity when Khating seeks Ngazek's permission to marry the Khasi girl. The marriage will take place in a church in Shillong. Ngazek refuses to bless his son. Rather he pleads with him to "come back" (37). Ngathingkhui witnesses the confrontation between father and son. He had travelled to Europe and other parts of India and observed the culture and practices of the people. He was in favour of allowing young men and women to choose their life partners. While he agreed with Ngazek that the white men did not look upon the Nagas as equals, he was also aware of the changes that gradually seeped into the Naga way of life. His own daughter Khathingla studied in a missionary school. He believed that it is wise to change with the times and tried to convince Ngazek. However, the village elder refused to further comment on the topic.

Meanwhile, the villagers faced a new problem—small pox had broken out and many villagers caught the disease. At the same time, the missionaries wanted to start a High School in the village and wanted to appoint Rishang as a teacher. Rishang liked the idea although it meant that he would have to acquire a degree from a college outside the village, which further meant that he would have to leave his village for two years. There was another problem—the land on which the school is supposed to be built is a disputed land with both the Christians and the non-Christians of the village lying claim to it. Rishang chooses to follow his father, Yangmaso, and Dr Brock's decision.

The war is over. There is joy all around. Sharengla and Rishang converse happily. Sharengla informs him that Khating had left. She also tells him that Ngathingkhui had promised to give her a separate house, and under the recommendation of Miss Pam, the lady doctor, she would soon train as a nurse in Dibrugarh Medical School. Khathingla too is overjoyed with the end of the war. She receives a present from Rishang— a black box containing some cornelian beads, a pair of armlets, a bottle of *An evening in Paris* and a small ivory replica of the Taj Mahal. They talk about her education when Phanitphang arrives to take Rishang to the meeting. He tries to flirt with Khathingla but she snubs him and leaves. In the meeting Phanitphang opposes Rishang's imminent departure for Calcutta and argues that the village needed his services more now, "I have no faith in education…I want all of us to remain as we are, so that we can serve the people better" (46). Rishang explains that the High School is an absolute necessity and Phanitphang and his friends could continue to work for the people while he was away. In another meeting at Phanitphang's courtyard there was a heated discussion about the vaccination campaign to control the epidemic that was spreading fast. Some people suggested that people should be vaccinated but the more conservative villagers like Ngazek opposed this idea and advocated the use of traditional methods of

healing, "You cannot kill a disease by injecting the germs that are causing it" (47). Ngathingkhui counters by saying, "The doctor is also a maiba…If rules don't change automatically we must force the change. I am all for vaccination" (47). Ngazek feels betrayed and leaves. There is another discussion about the rebuilding of the church on the land that Yangmaso had donated to the villagers. Ngathingkhui's shang opposes this and claims that the land has been encroached. Yangmaso argues that the land belonged to God and should not be claimed by anyone. Rishang intervenes by saying Ngathingkhui's shang may be offered another piece of land in lieu of the present one and construction of the church should be postponed until then. But Yangmaso and Ngathingkhui's shangs refused to arrive at a compromise. Phanitphang explains to Rishang that the villagers will eventually arrive at a conclusion but Rishang is sceptical of Phanitphang's ideas. Later in the evening, he meets Dr Brock and fills up his BA application form.

The next section of the novel opens on August 14, 1945. The war is over. Despite the damages and destruction, the displaced villagers are finally making plans to move back to their original villages. The small pox vaccination began, as also construction in the disputed piece of land. Ngathingkhui comes to know of his daughters' decision to marry Rishang. He decides to consult Ngazek who is unwell now. The village elder however voices his opposition to the union, "they do not know or have no regard for our customs" (61). Varamla, Khathingla's stepmother, pleads her stepdaughter's case but Ngazek points out that such a marriage proposal would "affect the prestige of your shang" (61). He declares that as he is will and will perhaps die soon, Khathingla's parents will then have no problems in marrying their daughter to Rishang. Khathingla arrives with a letter from Khating saying that he has married the Khasi girl and the news that Phanitphang's mother Sirala is delirious with illness. Ngazek leaves but tells Khathingla that he is unhappy with her choice. As he walks away burdened with pain Ngathingkhui says with

sadness, "Tonight, a banyan is going to fall" (63). Small pox takes its toll on the villagers and many people including Ngazek and Sirala were suffering. Sirala's ill health leads her son Phanitphang to ponder on his own life and his failure to gain a steady foothold in life. He discusses his mother's health with Khathingla who had brought food for them. Khathingla tells him that Ngazek's condition is serious and he has been talking to Videsselie. Phanitphang decides to talk to Videsselie and this surprises Khathingla because she knew Phanitphang and Rishang worked together. But Phanitphang tells her that with Rishang away in Calcutta he wants to work with someone who guided him constantly, "This is not the time for education, but for action of any sort that will force the government to come to our aid. We need hospitals, roads, compensation and other aids, yes, but first we need a firm leader" (67).

Sirala dies early next morning. A distraught Phanitphang weeps inconsolably and is comforted by Khathingla. He tells her that he needs someone like her to care for him but Khathingla replies that she loves him as her neighbour. At this moment Yangmaso sees them and Khathingla becomes embarrassed. She goes home fearing that Yangmaso may misunderstand her innocent relationship with Phanitphang. She talks to Varamla and the latter advices her to be careful. Meanwhile Ngazek's condition deteriorates. He refuses to take vaccination and relied on traditional herbs and medicines given by the maiba, the village doctor, who also offered sacrifices to Kameo, the god of evil. Ngazek realises that his end is near. The news of Khating's marriage to the Khasi girl and his decision to join the Army breaks him completely. "His gigantic figure in its kashan, his elaborate hairstyle, his ornaments of beads and wooden heads signified a passing age which was unlikely to return" (61). On the day of Sirala's death Ngazek makes his last pronouncement. He decides to select his *thilakapo*, who would act his representative after his death. He selects Videsselie. The villagers are surprised

and remind him that according to Tangkhul lore the *thilakapo* has to be someone from within the village, a man who bore physical resemblance to the deceased. Ngazek replies that he chose Videsselie for qualities he possessed and for the spiritual resemblance he bore with Ngazek. Despite the fact that Videsselie was an Angami Naga and followed the Christian faith, Ngazek believed that he was a "true Naga" because he worked for the unity and betterment of the Naga people. "A man should be known not by what he worships, but by what he thinks … We Nagas must regain our lost glory", Ngazek pronounces before breathing his last (76).

The passing away of Ngazek and Sirala greatly upsets Phanitphang. He thinks of his mother and Khathingla. Walking by the riverside, he heard two young girls talking about him. He enters the forest and soon sees a leopard feasting on the carcass of a pig. Even before he could turn away, he hears a loud gunshot that kills the leopard. The shot has been fired by Videsselie who rebukes Phanitphang for entering the forest unarmed. This gives Phanitphang an opportunity to talk to Videsselie. They discuss the war and Videsselie tells the former about Netaji and the INA. He realises that Phanitphang is full of raw instinct and needed the guidance of someone more experienced. He tells the latter the he plans to ask the people to start fighting again because the "fire will not be extinguished till real freedom quenches it" (83). He offers food to Phanitphang and tells him that the first need of the Nagas is self-governance. Videsselie tells him about his village Khonoma, near Kohima. The people of Khonoma fought the British with traditional weapons. Videsselie, who had been a trader before the war, immigrated to Burma and later joined the INA in Singapore. He then came to the Naga Hills with dreams of freeing the hills from colonial rule as well as the Indian government. He organises a band of rebels to fight for the Naga cause. Phanitphang is convinced by Videsselie's principles and expresses his desire to join him and fight for the cause. He finds believes that Videsselie's ways are correct and it would

lead them to their desired independence. The villagers, still suspicious of Videsselie's intentions, continue to watch him from afar when he performs his duties as *thilakapo* during Ngazek's funeral. Here he meets Abei, the dog, who recognises him immediately. When he does not see Sharengla he tells Ngathingkhui of Ishewara's gifts for her and asks the latter to give the same to Sharengla.

The villagers gossip about Phanitphang and Khathingla as well as Rishang and Sharengla. Phanitphang is pleased about the as Rishang-Sharengla gossip and hopes that Khathingla comes to know of this and changes her mind about marrying Rishang. Yangmaso's wife Atip is upset with her husband for spreading rumours about Khathingla but her husband retorts that he has "simply reported what I saw. *I* did not exaggerate anything" (91). When Atip reminds him that Khathingla is their future daughter-in-law, Yangmaso becomes repentant. However, deep down, he is still upset about the alliance because the prestige of his shang is at stake. Dr Brock visits them as they are talking and soon Yangmaso tells his surprised wife that their son is going to Calcutta for further studies. Yangmaso later meets Ngathingkhui who voices his concern about the developments in the village and Videsselie's popularity with the villagers. Khaikho, the local Sub Divisional Officer warns Ngathingkhui that Videsselie's actions may lead to unhappy consequences. He says, "The government cannot just sit and do nothing…if there are rotten potatoes in the field, they should be dug out immediately" (96). Khaikho tells them about Gandhi who is fighting an unarmed battle with the British, and explains Gandhi's strategy to them. He once again warns the villagers against Videsselie and advices Ngathingkhui to dissuade Phanitphang from engaging in such anti-governmental activities. Meanwhile Yangmaso and Ngathingkhui engage in a heated exchange of words regarding the impending marriage of their children Rishang and Khathingla. Yangmaso was not in favour of the marriage but Ngathingkhui

reminds him that times have changed and it is important to respect the wishes of their children, “We are both good Nagas, I know. But times have changed. Our sons and daughters feel and at differently. We may persist in our old enmity, but there is no guarantee that my naongalava and naomayara will, is there?” (100). He further says, “Our actions should bring benefit to our sons and daughters. The welfare of our offspring is the measure of things” (100). Yangmaso however does not agree with Ngathingkhui. Their clans had been at war earlier and Yangmaso still carried the seeds of anger in his heart against the enemy shang. Male pride, as his wife Atip reflects later, is beyond all logic and reason.

Meanwhile Rishang and Sharengla continue to read the Bible together and find peace in the word of God. They have been staying at Huining and are working in the vaccination campaign. The campaign required hard work and both Rishang and Sharengla are stressed. Reading the Bible gives them solace. Rishang has been staying with his friend Envey. He believes that education is important for the upliftment of the people, “We need no more war. One was enough to shake us” (107). Envey tells Rishang that the mood of the people in the hills are changing and they may not hesitate to act soon. Yangmaso arrives in Huining and voices the same concerns as Envey. He tells Rishang that is mother had called him back because the villagers are gossiping about him. Most importantly, Rishang is to soon leave for Calcutta. Before his departure, Sharengla voices her fears that it would be difficult to find another leader as influential as him, a leader who could speak to and for the community. She fears that Videsselie and his men have already become very persuasive. Rishang comforts her, “You are unnecessarily concerned. It is not a leader that we need, we need ideas. And ideas will come if we have educated young men and women” (106). Despite his words Rishang was aware that Videsselie’s men were very active as well as impatient. This might lead to errors and misunderstandings.

Rishang had no time to meet Khathingla before he left for Calcutta. In fact he did not even leave her a message. This upsets the latter but she is consoled by her friend Paisola that all men are callous. Paisola also tells Khathingla that Rishang may have not gotten over his feelings for Sharengla. Khathingla strongly dismisses her friend's insinuation but could not conquer the pang of jealousy that rose in her heart. She avoided talking to Sharengla for the next fortnight despite the latter's endeavours to be friendly. When Sharengla discovers that Khathingla was upset with her, she becomes sad and starts weeping. When Ngathingkhui comforts her, she assures him that she did not harbour any feelings of love for Rishang for she knew that he was going to marry Khathingla. Ngathingkhui tells her that Ishewara had sent a Bible and a Japanese sword as tokens of love for Sharengla. He gives them to her and asks her whether she loved him. Sharengla replies with pain that she did not love him, "He was a good man but lust was his weakness. One half of me belongs to him. Had the war not come, I would have led a normal life, married him" (114). Ngathingkhui's infatuation with Sharengla becomes obvious here and he offers to marry her. Since his wife Varamla cannot bear him a child, he sees Sharengla child as the inheritor of his vast property. Sharengla is disgusted by this proposal from a man old enough to be her father and refuses immediately, saying she would go to Phanitphang's cottage, which is near the dispensary, and there she would train as a nurse. Ngathingkhui misunderstands her intention and warns her that Phanitphang would never marry her but Sharengla replies that she did not have any intention of marrying Phanitphang or working for his cause. Ngathingkhui tells her, "You are a free woman…You are not bound by the morals of our society" (116). Sharengla feels humiliated by these words. Ngathingkhui laughs, "…you are a daughter who has gone astray and does not want to be rehabilitated" (116). He apologises to Sharengla for his thoughtless proposal and warns her to be careful. Sharengla soon shifts to Phanitphang's

cottage and begins training as a nurse under Dr Pam. She received a monthly allowance and spent her free time reading the Bible.

Meanwhile, Videsselie and his men were becoming very active. He recruited young men and urged them to carry on the propaganda work. Despite these activities, Khaikho urged Dr Brock to begin the construction of the school building. On a particular night, Phanitphang comes to visit Sharengla. He hands her some pamphlets to be sent to Rishang and Envey. He tells her of his hopes for freedom, "We will be free...like the English and the Americans. We shall have our own assembly and development plan, we will rule ourselves" (121). He bequeaths his mother's belongings to Sharengla, lets her have his house as long as he is in the forest (and tells her that he may never come back) and thanks her for her kindness and hospitality.

The narrative now shifts to the year 1946. India is on the verge of gaining independence from the British and the nationalist fervour was at its peak. Rishang had shifted to Calcutta and stayed at the Young Men's Christian Association Hostel on College Street. In a city far away from home, Rishang's ideas of independence became stronger for Calcutta was an important centre where the ideas of nationalism flourished. The slogans of "Quit India" and "Inquilab Zindabad" reverberated through the lanes and by-lanes of Calcutta. Rishang meets Abinash, Amulya, Tombi and other friends who discuss Gandhi and his non-violent protest. Once during a heated argument Rishang says, "Maybe Nagas don't have a tradition of nonviolence. Maybe they know how to fight. But that does not mean that they'll only fight. Most domestic problems are settled though discussion. So there is a tradition of nonviolence amongst villagers. Most of them are Christians, they believe in peace. I feel that education can only improve their way of life." (131)

Rishang's views on the movement take a different stand now as he becomes aware of the people's efforts to win freedom from the

British. He now believes that "it is time for constitutional struggle" (132). In contrast, news from his home was not too promising. Sharengla writes to him about the events back in the village. Videsselie was pursuing a different line of action and has been exhorting people for money to support his cause. Clearly his actions differed greatly from the ways of the INA. All this disillusioned Rishang and he began to believe that Gandhi's ways were more effective in achieving freedom.

One day Abinash was engaged in a war of words with an official. The officer suspected Abinash to be a rebel. When Rishang and Amulya intervene, the officer asks them to take Abinash away because he did not want innocent lives to end. Even as they thank the officer for his consideration, Abinash is dragged away by a group of unknown persons. Unaware of the whereabouts of their friend, Amulya, Rishang and Tombi pass a stressful night. Next morning they come to know that Abinash has been killed in police firing. The loss of his friend disturbs Rishang greatly. He yearned for peace. Soon riots break out in Calcutta and Rishang and Tombi lose yet another friend—Amulya. Riots and communal tension spread and the city of Calcutta burned. There was unrest everywhere. Rishang's exams were approaching but his mind was in turmoil and he began reading the Bible in earnest. On August 14th, 1947, Gandhiji arrives in Beliaghata. Rishang and Tombi go to Beliaghata to attend Gandhi's meeting, "The streets wore a gay look. Groups of boys and girls were seen moving towards Beliaghata singing patriotic songs. The atmosphere of fear and suspicion was gone" (141). Despite the festivities, tension loomed large in the air. The Independence of India also meant the Partition of India into two countries—India and Pakistan. Gandhi's meeting was a success. Rishang and Tombi stay at their friend Shyamali's house for the night. When they return to the hostel on the morning of August 15, 1947, Rishang receives a telegram from Khathing (who was in Imphal now) saying that his father is seriously ill and is in the hospital.

When he arrives in Imphal, Khating tells Rishang that the church land dispute resulted in both the groups fighting with each other. Ngathingkhui's shang forcibly tried to take possession of the land by dismantling the building. On a particular night Yangmaso was confronted by a group of men from the other shang. A spear was stuck deep into his chest and the wound has now turned sceptic. Rishang is saddened by this news. Besides his father's health, he is also concerned about the warring shangs and their deep-rooted enmity over petty issues. Khating also tells Rishang about Videsselie and how the latter has been able to influence the young men of the village to join the agitation. The next morning Rishang leaves for Ukhrul to see his father. He meets Sharengla in the hospital and surprised to see her –she has lost weight, the lustre in her eyes ad dimmed and there were dark circles under her eyes. His own father looked very ill. Sharengla tells him that Dr Pam had done her best for Yangmaso and given him the best medical care. Rishang goes home and meets Jivan, Videsselie's brother-in-law. He had a son called Koncheng. Jivan had come to Kohima after completing his education from Cotton College, Gauhati. There he fell in love with Roni whom he later married. After his wife's death he came to Ukhrul. He has been brought to their village by Yangmaso to teach in the high school. When Rishang asks Jivan whether Ngathingkhui is responsible for his father's condition, the latter advices him not to jump to hasty conclusions because Ngathingkhui, who was present with the attackers, never wanted to hurt Yangmaso. Moreover, it was dark and nobody knew whose spear pierced Yangmaso's heart. Rishang thought about the incident and the violent ways of the people. He ponders: "I feel that the whole Tangkhul society is on the decline. Poverty and ignorance are eating into its vitals. There is civil strife…I know that the spiritual foundation of the church was shaken to its depths when my father's men clashed with Ngathingkhui's. The Christians have gained nothing from this conflict. From the church

should have emanated the message of brotherhood, but instead it has become the cause of conflict." (151)

Jivan is astonished by Rishang's outspokenness. He concludes, "It is difficult for a Naga to give up beliefs that are enshrined in tradition, there is iron in his soul which cannot be melted" (152). According to Jivan Videsselie's chosen path of violence is wrong. Rishang agrees. Jivan asks Rishang that his real test will be in his ability or inability to pardon Ngathingkhui and his men. They talk about Phanitphang who is in hiding now. Jivan informs Rishang that Sharengla had delivered a dead child a few months ago and has been very distraught. Her attachment to Phanitphang results in the whole village talking about them. This saddens Rishang. Also, Phanitphang's efforts as an underground rebel has not met with much success. The independence of the country failed to bring the much-needed peace to the people of the hills. Videsselie's agenda has caused confrontation with the new government and has divided the Naga people like never before. The conflicting ideologies have alienated the people.

Yangmaso passed away in September. Rishang bore this calamity with great calm. After the funeral rites were over the villagers, including his mother, expected him to take quick and strong action against Ngathingkhui and his men. However, Rishang confined himself to his room and read the Bible. Dr Brock visited him with the request to complete the construction of the church but Rishang tells him that there are more important matters that needed to be attended to. He wanted to build cooperation among the Shangs so that they could work together for the greater benefit of the people. Dr Brock feels disappointed at Rishang's attitude. With the rebellion becoming stronger, Dr Brock realises that his services were no longer needed. Soon, he departed for America.

Meanwhile the people in Ukhrul were in turmoil. They were unsure of Videsselie's plans and yet they could not defy him because he had been appointed the *thilakapo* by their most revered elder

Ngazek. With Independence the British had left their village but "their demands were yet to be fulfilled and a struggle was necessary" (160). While Videsselie went about recruiting young men and spreading his propaganda in the name of Ngazek, the villagers voiced their innermost fears and doubts to Rishang. Most people were of the opinion that violence was unnecessary. Rishang realises that the people had great faith in him. They were impatient for him to act. This only made him restless.

Meanwhile Atip broaches the subject of marriage to Rishang. She is surprised that her son still cared for Khathingla. Jivan chides her for speaking "like a conservative who does not want to change anything" (162). Rishang assures Atip that he would not do anything without consulting her. Sharengla arrives with the news that Phanitphang visited her the previous night with the message that Videsselie was angry with Rishang for planning a meeting with the villagers in Huining. While Rishang seemed unperturbed, Sharengla tells him that something serious may happen if Rishang goes ahead with the proposed meeting. She says she did not want to join Phanitphang's cause although he has asked her twice. She wanted to adopt Koncheng and take care of him. Rishang asks her to take of life of service but Sharengla says she wanted to be of some use to him so that her past sins may be redeemed. She decides to write to Khathingla about Rishang's desire to marry her. Rishang leaves to work in the field but his mind is disturbed. He contemplates on his conversation with Sharengla, unable to understand the mystery of love. While working in the fields he hears a sharp cry. Running towards the direction of the cry he discovers Ngathingkhui whose stomach has been pierced by the splinters from the explosives he had been throwing into the river to catch fish. Varamla was wailing because her husband had been mortally wounded. He took off his shirt and tied it around Ngathingkhui's stomach. He then prepared a rough stretcher with the help of a few men that Varamla had gathered. They carried Ngathingkhui to the hospital. Ironically, Ngathingkhui

was laid on the same bed where Rishang's father had lain. The news of Ngathingkhui's accident spread across the village. The people could not stop talking about Rishang's presence of mind. They praised him for his magnanimity. Rishang wrote to Khathingla informing her about her father's condition.

Three days before the harvest festival Ngathingkhui passed away. The political situation, meanwhile, had become tensed. Police and soldiers swarmed the village searching for Videsselie and his men. There were incidents almost every night when Videsselie and his men become active. The villagers were distressed with this constant turbulence in their lives. One Sunday Rishang receives a letter from Khathingla. She is coming home with Jivan's brother and his sister Aruna. She is unaware of her father's death but expresses her concern and her eagerness to meet Rishang. The letter delights Rishang. He hopes to marry Khathingla despite the recent turn of events beginning from his father's death. He believes that he had set a different standard of behaviour by helping Ngathingkhui and surely now the shang shall have no reservations in their marriage. Jivan is upset to know about the imminent arrival of his brother and sister. He believes they may not be very happy seeing him since he married outside his caste. His behaviour puzzles Rishang. Nevertheless, he tells Sharengla about Khathingla's letter. The latter tells him that Jivan has not yet said anything about her wish to adopt Koncheng. Rishang realises that despite the fact that the villagers considered her as a fallen woman. Sharengla's heart was full of love and compassion.

Rishang was very happy on the day Khathingla was due to arrive in Ukhrul. As he prepares to leave for Huining for the meeting, Sharengla arrives and forbids him from going. She tells him that she had overheard that Videsselie and Phanitphang's men looking for him. Rishang is not the least bit worried because he would be accompanied by guards but Sharengla pleads with him not to go alone and take some men with him. Jivan decides to accompany

Rishang and leaves Koncheng in Sharengla's care. As they leave taking Abei with them, a sense of fear begins to lurk in the minds of the guards—they felt as if they were being watched by someone. As the near Huining they meet some women who inform them that Envey and Phanitphang have decided not to allow the meeting to take place. Just before the party reached Huining they are ambushed by a group of men with guns and rifles. They caught hold of Rishang and blindfolded him. All efforts and pleas fell into deaf ears as the abductors refused to listen. They said that they were working on the orders of Videsselie. When Jivan attempted to free Rishang the men bounded him and carried him and Rishang away.

When the people who had gathered in the meeting heard about Rishang and Jivan they demanded that something must be done about Envey, Phanitphang and Videsselie. They sent messages to Khating asking him to come to Ukhrul. Khaikho too ordered the Assam rifles to raid the hostile camps. Rishang's mother was distressed. Sharengla stayed with her for a few days. Meanwhile Khathingla had arrived alone; Jivan's brother and sister changed their plans owing to the reports of strife and conflict in the region. Khathingla mourned her dead father and worried for her beloved. A week later when she went to bathe in the river she saw Phanitphang standing under a pine tree, waiting to talk to her. He professes his love for her but Khathingla reminds him that her heart belongs to Rishang. She tells him that he is no better than Rishang's kidnappers. Phanitphang had hoped that Khathingla would change her mind about Rishang but her deep concern for Rishang unsettles him. Already their aim behind kidnapping Rishang had backfired. "Videsselie had resorted to terrorist methods thinking that this would give his men scope to intensify the underground work and impress upon the people the inferiority of Rishang's method" (192). People are viewing this act as yet another example of Videsselie's terrorism. They are upset for the injustice done to a servant of God. Even Jivan became popular

for his efforts to save Rishang. Phanitphang is now confused. His once-upon-a-time friend is now his enemy. Even the girl he loved did not understand him or love him. Khathingla pleads with him not to kill him but the latter replies that only Videsselie would decide Rishang's fate. Pushing Khathingla away, he leaves. At night he goes to Sharengla's house. She was away. He waited for her. When she arrives she inquires about Rishang. This irritates him and he protests but Sharengla says, "He is a different kind of man. You are nowhere near him in anything that matters" (195). This infuriates Phanitphang, "Why do you treat him like a god? Is he faultless?" (195). Sharengla tells him that he can save Rishang if he wishes. Even Khathingla would love him for this, but in a different way of course. Miserable, confused and desperate to win Khathingla's approval Phanitphang tells Sharengla that there may be a way to save Rishang.

At this moment, Khating arrives to meet Phanitphang. He asks for the latter's help to save the men. He had overheard the conversation between him and Sharengla. He enquires about Videsselie's whereabouts and when Phanitphang tells him that Videsselie is still in the jungles of Huining he leaves. Sharengla asks Khating to let Phanitphang escape but the latter is helpless. There are soldiers all around who are aware of his presence in the village. Bidding goodbye he walks out leaving Phanitphang to realise that his time had come.

Rishang and Jivan are now held captive in a camp deep in the forest. Although Videsselie was not in the camp, his informers kept him up-to-date of the happenings in and around the village and also the activities of the army. Rishang worries about his mother and Khathingla. One day he and Jivan are called to Videsselie's quarters. The latter's men are busy dismantling the camp and preparing to move elsewhere. An agitated Videsselie says that he had been misunderstood by all except Ngazek. He says, "I want an independent Nagaland where a Naga can feel that he is somebody and can be his own master. Life will be then worth living" (203). To

this Rishang replies, "I do not want Nagas to live and die as Nagas. I want each of them to become a complete individual, able to transcend their limited tribal personality and live as proud members of the great Indian family…A man's environment embraces the whole earth. He shouldn't confine himself to these hill alone." (203)

Videsselie disagrees, "These hills are the Naga's abode. I believe that the Nagas are a separate and distinct nation" (203). At this moment, the sounds of firing come near and Videsselie realises that the army is closing in on them. He orders his men that they must leave within an hour. Rishang feels sympathy for Videsselie. He asks him not to leave. They could work together for their people. The latter, however, does not respond to this request. Instead, he bids goodbye to Rishang hoping that they may meet again later. Soon Khating arrives at the spot. Rishang tells him about his conversation with Videsselie and his ideals but Khating only replies, "He can't win, I am sure…The past cannot be brought back to life. The Nagas must learn to adjust to the times" (206). He advices Rishang that now that the British have left he should not to get involved in any further agitations but the latter argues that the peoples' demands need to be met. Rishang realises that in some ways,, Videsselie is better than Khating; although his chosen path and goals were wrong, "he has the real spirit of self-sacrifice" (207). Khating explains that Nagas need to listen to the government to solve their problems but Rishang reminds him that in a democracy the government cannot be superior to the people and the Nagas need the rule of real people. Both friends had different points of view regarding the service to the Naga people.

Back home Rishang's mother, Atip, is suffering from pneumonia. She is attended by Sharengla who has been looking after Koncheng as well. Khathingla comes to see Atip. During her conversation with Sharengla she admits harbouring jealousy for Sharengla given her previous relationship with Rishang. Sharengla tells her friend about Phanitphang's love for her whose first act of

genuine love landed him in jail. Soon Jivan arrives and tells the overjoyed girls that Rishang too will arrive shortly. Rishang arrives soon to see is mother who lay on her death-bed. That winter the guerrillas were not able to act freely as armed forces entered the villages and began patrolling them. The situation was tense and the people unhappy. Foreign missionaries had started new schools and religion seemed to be a way to find peace but this was not easily achieved. Rishang was aware that the people looked up to him for leadership. His views and opinions touched a chord with the people. Meanwhile, Rishang and Khathingla got married. Towards end-January, some villagers, at Videsselie's behest, decided to start a no-tax campaign in response to the government's failure to pay for the war-damages. One day Jonathan from Nungbi village arrives and tells Rishang that people are beginning to lose faith in him. Videsselie and his men were more active now and the harassed villagers wanted action. A guilt-stricken Rishang decides to leave with Jivan and meet the people of Nungbi. Before his departure, he receives the news that Gandhi had been killed in a prayer meeting the previous day. This saddened Rishang—he felt as if he had lost someone very dear to him.

When he arrives at Nungbi, Rishang realises that the situation was grave—the armed forces failed to provide adequate security to the people, and many young men, misguided by the promise of freedom, were joining the underground forces. The village lacked good roads and modern means of communication. Rishang meets the villagers and tells the villagers to present their petition to Khaikho. Meanwhile the headman of Pawi requests Rishang to speak at his village too. The next day at noon the peace mission started at Pawi and was very successful. Rishang spoke, "…the Nagas are as much Indians as the Assamese or Manipuris. We live in a common territory and under the same administration, and share the same economy. Our present and future are bound up with the fate of the country as much as our past was… (230) The Nagas could achieve their own

well-being by exercising their rights and doing their duties. Freedom only offered them the scope to raise their standard of living." (231)

One morning they arrived at Cingjiroi, the last Tangkhul village bordering the Angami territory. While Rishang talked to the people, his movements were being monitored by Videsselie's men James, Zamphang and Rishang's friend Envey. They had orders to shoot Rishnag and his followers if they moved beyond Cingjiroi. Envey was aware of the deadly nature of their mission and the danger that his friend was in but he was convinced that Rishang was wrong. When his men inform him that Rishang and Jivan were going as far as Phek, Envey decides that it is time to warn Rishang. Videsselie has been camping near the border. Jonathan warns Rishang that Envey has been monitoring his movements and has been instructed to shoot. Rishang, however, believes that Envey would not shoot a friend. He decides not to withdraw the campaign. Moving towards Phek the party reaches a hillock where they decide to rest awhile. Suddenly there were two rifle shots—one hit Jivan who dies on the spot; the other hit Rishang on his calf and his head hit a stone after which he became unconscious. Almost immediately there was an exchange of fire and Jonathan realises that there was an encounter between the police and the rebels. Rishang is at home recovering from his wounds where he thinks about Jivan. He realises that his peace mission could be called a success only when "the Nagas accepted the peaceful way and when Videsselie gave up his armed struggle" (236). Before he is shifted to the hospital in Imphal Sharengla visits him and he tells her that she should look after Koncheng now that his father is no more. Khathingla arrives to meet her husband and tells Sharengla that Phanitphang wanted to see her. Jonathan too comes to inquire about Rishang's health and informs him that the villagers are ready to present a petition to Khaikho. Khathingla tells Rishang that she is pregnant with their

child. Her husband tells her that is the child is a boy he should be named Yaruingam, meaning "People's Rule" (241).

Sharengla goes to the police lock-up to meet Phanitphang. As she waits for him she hears a commotion in front of Khaikho's office where a large and impatient crowd had gathered to demand war compensation. When Phanitphang is brought before her, she feels sorry for him. According to Sharengla, Phanitphang is a man with the heart of a child. He did not understand himself and therefore nobody understood him. She narrates the incident at Phek. Phanitphang tells her that he now realises that Rishang's ways were better than the path he had chosen. He asks talks about Khathingla too and comes to know that she is soon going to a mother. He says that he would be taken to Imphal that night and asks Sharengla to write to him. That latter wishes him peace and leaves. As she goes out she sees Jonathan being taken away by the police. She reaches home with a heavy heart, thinking about the ways of the administrative forces and the unrest of the villagers. Feeling faint, she sees a vision of Christ with blood flowing from his wounds. She remembers Ishewara and is immediately filled with a brief sense of resentment. That night as she and Koncheng slept she hears Abei barking, which was followed by a gunshot. The hospital gardener comes in to inform her that Phanitphang has been shot dead a while ago, probably by Videsselie's men, as he was about to get into the van that would take him to Imphal. Sharengla is bewildered at the news. She draws Koncheng close to her, unable to speak for she felt that the bullet that pierced Phanitphang's heart had actually pierced her own.

8.4.3 Major Themes

An important highlight of the novel is the plight of women in times of conflict. Sharengla represents the fate of women in war. Generally, war is seen as a male activity, something that only men take part in order to conquer lands and earn laurels. The women are never given a voice in the narratives of war for they are never considered active participants of war. However, war is more than often devastating for women for they not only lose their fathers,

husbands and sons in the battlefield, they too become vulnerable to assaults and exploits as their bodies turn into battlefields. In another scene of the novel when Sharengla refuses Ngathingkhui's proposal he comments that she is a stray woman who refuses to be rehabilitated. These words tell a lot about the plight of women like Sharengla who inadvertently become victims of war and are left to suffer the consequences alone. Patriarchy treats women as second-class citizens. The humiliation and the notion of that such women are easily available to men further traumatises the women.

The conflict between Rishang and Videsselie is another important feature of the novel. Bhattacharyya uses religion as a premise to dwell on the Rishang-Videsselie conflict and also to highlight the ways in which the advent of Christianity affected the lives of the Tangkhul Nagas. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, the Nagas, irrespective of their tribal affiliations, chose to prioritise and practise their particular socio-cultural ethos that has been in existence for centuries. The advent of Christianity questioned the validity of the practices and attempted to establish an order of faith that rested on Jesus and his teachings. The Tangkhul faith and social-cultural practices were thwarted with the arrival of the British and the new religious order. In the novel, the elders of the village such as Ngazek and Ngathingkhui opposed the reformist ideals of Christianity that sought to overwhelm their traditional beliefs and practices. Khating, Ngazek's son, favoured the British and was supportive of the war for "it also gave them an opportunity to rebuild the village and to modernize Naga life" (31). He argues, "Who does not want to unite? Who does not want to be free? Why should the Naga not unite with the Meiteis, the Assamese and other Indians? If freedom comes, it can only come through collective effort" (35). It is no wonder then that Videsselie dreams of Naga nation finds support in the older Tangkhuls who believed that Naga identity could be safeguarded only when the Nagas are united and free.

It is important to remember here that Ngazek's dismissal of Christianity also stems from the fact that his son is intent on marrying a Khasi girl, a bond that he and the villagers disapprove of. Ngazek was sceptical of external influences corrupting his son and, by extension, the larger Naga tribe. The father-son conflict showcases the conflict between traditional religious practices and Christian faith. Most hill tribes have their own indigenous faith that is deeply rooted in earthly beliefs and rituals. Christianity advocated the supremacy of a God that the hill people are ignorant of. The resultant clash between these two faiths lead to the bifurcation of the hill people and lines were drawn on the basis of faith and religious beliefs. With Christianity arrived western education that traditionalists were suspicious of. *Love in the Time of Insurgency* rests on this historical background where the indigenous peoples' desperate efforts to hold on to their roots was thwarted by an inevitable change that was beginning to make its presence felt in the form of ideas and opinions among the hill people. This is evident when smallpox breaks out among the villagers. Rishang and his supporters wanted to get the villagers vaccinated but Ngazek and other traditionalists opposed this move arguing that the epidemic was a result of the breakdown of social rules and regulations. Such clash of interests only highlights the ways in which new ideas and knowledge disrupted the older established ideas and practices. When the villagers oppose the construction of the school building Khating argues, "But don't you see how Christianity and education have widened our outlook, released us from the bondage of a superstitious and parochial existence? ... Thank god for Reverend Pettigrew and Dr Brock. They opened schools and churches in the villages and gave us new ideas, and the benefits of modern medicines and machines. The government has set up a modern administration, built roads, ended things like recruiting. Are these not the very things that we wanted?" (36)

To this Ngazek replies vehemently, “Pettigrew! He comes here and makes us all cowards. You call his work, work? Because of your ideas people will no longer remain real Nagas. To be modern means aping your masters. Puny white men. Puny black men. Mental Slaves. You see the sahibs laugh at you when you ape them. They don’t consider you their equals. Are you not ashamed of it?” (36)

This clearly shows that the traditional Naga society has been invaded by news ideas and ideology that threatened to erase the existence of older values and practices. Despite the clash of interests, the **positive influence of Christianity** cannot be ignored altogether. Sharengla finds solace in the Bible and often thinks about Jesus. Reading the Bible together Sharengla and Rishang develop a deep bond of understanding and mutual concern. By the time Rishang leaves for Calcutta, he has complete faith in the Christian way of life and living. His hopes to marry Khathingla on his return. The many references to the Bible is an important way to highlight the turmoil in Rishang’s soul and also to comment on the futility and uselessness of violence

Ngazek symbolises the decline of the traditional Naga way of life, which is questioned and challenged by the young and new generation who seek change. The deaths of Ngazek and Sirala, symbolises the passing of the old order. Ngazek’s recognition of Videsselie’s ideology signals a rational shift towards the Naga cause for an independent Naga nation. The author uses Videsselie’s separatist ideology to comment on the futility of the same, “Wars and famines bred evil. Guns were wielded by those who were in power or those who wanted to be in power. However, it is bad like any other primitive cult. Made into a fetish, it killed the initiative for other fresh ideas.” (133)

The setting of Calcutta and Ukhrul allows the writer to show Rishang’s inner turmoil from two spaces. The independence of India played out differently in Tangkhul land with Videsselie engaging in separatist politics resulting in the confusion of the people. He projects

a different image of independence that clashes with what most villagers thought. Videsselie's dreams of Naga nation stems from the twin forces of colonialism as well as home administration which Videsselie thought failed to understand the real needs of the tribal people.

We get a glimpse of Rishang's ethnic consciousness during the conflict over the piece of church land. While he thought that the villagers had more important issues to solve, deep inside he was aware of the seriousness of the problem because it involved the prestige of two Shangs. This is the reason why he wanted to postpone the discussion of the church land to another day.

The novel presents the story of a **people caught in conflict**. This conflict does not stem from the World War II alone. Nor does it stem from the India's struggle against the British. The larger issue in the novel is the desire and effort to hold on to one's tribal identity in the face of colonisation and, later, sweeping generalisation by authorities. Rishang, Videsselie, Ngazek and Ngathingkhui—all represent different responses to such identity politics. While Ngazek wants to hold on to tradition, Ngathingkhui favours change. Videsselie advocates separatist ideology and Rishang aims for assimilation. And, there is Phanitphang who is misguided by a false sense of purpose. The task of the reader is not to judge the characters or their actions but to locate them in their respective contexts and understand their points of view. The novel presents a huge spectrum of ideas though the small canvas of a village but the ideas presented provide a glimpse of the ways in which people respond to situations and handle them.

8.4.4 Bhattacharya's Narrative Style

This novel makes important reference to the plight of the war victims, to the Indian National Army (INA), the wish to establish a Sovereign Naga State, and the drawbacks of World War II, the need for people's rule "Yaruingam." The novel gives an Indian

viewpoint that common mass was against the Naga National Movement, which is of course not true. Nagas are proud of Phizo and the fight for an independent Naga nation is still going on with the same spirit. Although, the politics has crept in and the rebel groups have been divided on principles, but the local masses still support them and the various rebel groups support each other with logistics, arms and training after taking some money which is used to fund their own operations. The local people still don't like the presence of Army and the para-military forces in the area. The novel shows sufficient insights that the author Bhattacharya had a better understanding of the Naga viewpoint. The fast narration and the interesting twists and turns of the story employed by the author makes the book an interesting read and keep the reader hooked until the end.

8.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BHATTACHARYA

Bhattacharya's contribution to the literature of his land earned him the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1979 for his path-breaking novel *Mritunjay*, followed by Indira Goswami in 2001. He was the first writer of Assamese origin to be honoured with this award. He was also a recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award in Assamese in 1961 for his Assamese novel *Iyaruingam*, which is considered one of the masterpieces of Indian literature. In 2005, a translation of the work published by Katha Books with the title *Love in the Time of Insurgency* was released. He also served as the President of Asom Sahitya Sabha, the significant literary body of Assam, from 1983-1985.



8.6 LET US SUM UP

The detailed discussion of the novel in this unit has helped the reader to understand the novel in its context. It has helped us to understand the complexities of human life as presented in the novel. We should understand the underlying identity politics in the North East, and how it finds expression in a literary work like *Love in the Time of Insurgency.*



8.7 FURTHER READING

Bhattacharyya, Birendra Kumar. (2005). *Love in the Time of Insurgency*. New Delhi: Katha.

Juneja, O. P. (1995). *Post-Colonial Novel: Narratives of Colonial Consciousness*. Creative Books.

Misra, Tilottama. (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India*. Vols. I and II. Oxford University Press.

Thakur, Nagen. (Ed.). (2000). *One Hundred Years of Assamese Novel*. Jyoti Prakashan.



8.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What are the contributions of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya to Assamese literature? Discuss.

Q 2: Attempt a character sketch of Sharengla and Rishang. Discuss Bhattacharyya's art of characterisation in the play *Love in the Time of Insurgency.*

Q 3: Rishang and Videsselie work for the same goal through different ideologies. Discuss.

Q 4: Discuss the context of the novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency.* Examine the idea of nationalism embedded in the novel.

Q 5: How does the novel comment on the clash of cultures? Explain.

Q 6: Examine the ways in which the villagers strive for peace while struggling with their continuous situation of conflict.

Q 7: Write a note on the poet of the novel Love in the *Time of Insurgency.*

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UNIT 9: INDIRA GOSWAMI: *MOTH-EATEN HOWDA OF THE TUSKER*

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Indira Goswami: Life and Works

9.4 Reading the Novel

- 9.4.1 The Storyline and the Context
- 9.4.2 Major Themes
- 9.4.3 Major Characters
- 9.4.4 Goswami's Narrative Style

9.5 Critical Reception of Goswami

9.6 Let us Sum up

9.7 Further Reading

9.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.9 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the Assamese award winning novelist Indira Goswami
- explain the context of the novel *Moth-Eaten Howda of the Tusker*
- grasp the content of the novel in terms of its various important aspects
- appreciate the novelist's idea behind writing the novel
- critically discuss the reception of Goswami as a leading Assamese writer of her time

9.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall try to discuss the life and works of the Assamese novelist Indira Goswami with particular reference to *Moth-Eaten Howda of the Tusker.* Indira Goswami, popularly known by her pen name Mamoni

Raisom Goswami, is an Assamese editor, poet, professor, scholar and creative writer. Not only within the state of Assam, but also in the whole of India, the winner of prestigious literary awards like the Sahitya Akademi Award (1983), the Jnanpith Award (2001) and Principal Prince Claus Laureate (2008), Goswami has been a much accomplished and celebrated writer. Many of her fictional works are translated into English from her native Assamese which include*The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, *Pages Stained With Blood* and *The Man from Chinnamasta*. The novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker,* a classic in Indian literature,is based on the nostalgic memories of Goswami's own experience of the Amaranga "Sattra" (a "Vaishnavite" monastery) situated in Southern part of Kamrup district of Assam. As we finish reading the unit, we shall be able to discuss the novel in terms of its various important aspects besides also being acquainted with the writer Indira Goswami and her works.

9.3 INDIRA GOSWAMI: LIFE AND WORKS

Indira Goswami (1942–2011) was born in Guwahati to Umakanta Goswami and Ambika Devi. She was born into a family with deep connection with the Sattra life of the Ekasarana Dharma. She got early education at Latashil Primary School, Guwahati; Pine Mount School, Shillong; and Tarini Chaudhury Girls' School, Guwahati. After completing her Intermediate Arts from Handique Girls'College she started higher studies in Cotton College taking major in Assamese literature and obtained a Master's Degree from Gauhati University in the same subject.

Goswami started her writing career in 1962, with the publication of *Chinaki Morom*—her first collection of short stories, while still a student. Gradually,becoming famous as Mamoni baideo**,** she came under the influence of famous editors like Kirti Nath Hazarika who was also the publisher of her short stories in the literary journal he edited. One characteristic trait of Goswami as a person was that she had suffered from depression since childhood.In the opening pages of her *The Unfinished Autobiography*,she refers to her proclivity to jump into Crinoline Falls located near their house in Shillong.Then repeated suicide attempts marred

Goswami's youthful vigour. Following the sudden death of her husband, Madhaven Raisom Ayengar from Karnataka in a car accident in Kashmir, after only eighteen months of their marriage, she became addicted to heavy doses of sleeping tablets.Once she returned to Assam, she joined the Sainik School, Goalpara as a teacher.This was the time, she devoted most of her time to writing. She claimed that she wrote just to live and that otherwise it would not have been possible for her to go on living the life of a wretched. Her experiences in Kashmir and Madhya Pradesh where her husband had worked as an engineer provided the raw materials for her novels *Ahiron* and *The Chehnab's Current*.

Subsequently, her teacher and mentor Upendra Chandra Lekharu persuaded her to go to Vrindavan, UttarPradesh and pursue research there for peace of mind. Her experiences as a widow as well as a researcher finds expression in her novel *The Blue Necked Braja* (1976), which is about the plight of the Radhaswamis of Vrindavan living in abject poverty and sexual exploitation in everyday life. Another important aspect the novel touches upon is the plight of the young widows for whom companionship beyond the confines of their ashrams and fellow widows become impossible. Their urge to live, as well as the moral dilemma are brought out with astonishing clarity. This novel, which is autobiographical in character and which reflects what the author herself had gone through after her husband had died, remains a classic in modern Indian Literature. It was also the very first novel to be written on this subject.



LET US KNOW

While staying in Vrindavan, she devoted most of her time to Ramayana studies. Tulsidas's Ramayana purchased during her stay in Delhi for just eleven rupees was a great source of inspiration in her research. This finds expression in her book *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra*, an unparalleled comparative study of Tulsidas's Ramayana and the 14thcentury Assamese Ramayana written by Madhava Kandali.

Goswami then returned to to Delhito join as a Professor of Assamese in the Modern Indian Languages & Literary Studies (MIL) Department at the University of Delhi. While staying at the university campus, she wrote most of her greatest works. Short stories, including “Hridoy”, “Nangoth Sohor”, “Borofor Rani” etc. used Delhi as the background.Two of her other important novels *Pages Stained With Blood* and *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*—were also written during this period. *Ahiron*,*The Rusted Sword*, *Uday Bhanu*, *Dasharathi’s Steps* and *The Man from Chinnamasta* were her other important works.

*Pages Stained With Blood*is based on the plight of the Sikhs in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots following the assassination of the then prime minister Indira Gandhi.When she was at the zenith of her literary career, she wrote the controversial novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* which provides a critique of the thousand-years-old tradition of animal sacrifice in the famous Shakti temple of Kamakhya located in Guwahati, Assam.Following the publication, she even faced deaththreats. In this novel, she quotes several scriptures to authenticate the argument she puts forward in the novel–to worship the Mother Goddess with flowers rather than blood. She said in an interview,

“When the novel was serialised in a popular magazine, I was threatened with dire consequences. Shortly after this, a local newspaper, *Sadin*, carried an appeal about animal sacrifice, which resulted in quite an uproar—the editor was gheraoed and a tantrik warned me. However, when the appeal was published, the response was overwhelmingly in favour of banning animal sacrifice. I also had to contend with rejection from a publisher who was initially keen and had promised me a huge advance, but who later backtracked, offering instead to publish any other book of mine. But the rest, as they say, is history and *Chinnamastar Manuhto* went on to become a runaway bestseller!”

Another major piece of her fiction during the period was *Jatra* (The Journey), based on the problem of militancy/secessionism that has affected almost the entire North-East India frontier ever since Indian independence.

Indira Goswami died at the Gauhati Medical College Hospital on 29 November 2011.

The Important Works of Indira Goswami

Fiction:

1972 Chinavar Srota (*The Chenab's Current*)

1976 Neelkanthi Braha (*The Blue-Necked Braja*), translated by Gayatri Bhattacharya; Zubaan Books, 2013)

1980 Ahiron

1980 Mamore Dhora Tarowal aru Dukhon Uponyas (*The Rusted Sword and Two Other Novels*)

1980 Budhosagor Dhukhor Geisha Aru Mohammed Musa

1988 Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda (*The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* translated by the author, Rupa Publications) 1988 "Adha Lekha Dastabej" ("An Unfinished Autobiography")

1989 Udaybhanur ChoritroNangoth Sohor

2001 Tej Aru Dhulire Dhusarita Prishtha (*Pages Stained With Blood*) Dashorothir Khuj (*Dashorothi's Footsteps*)

2005 Chinnamastar Manuhto translated as (*The Man from Chinnamasta*) translated by Prasanta Goswami, Katha)

Autobiographies:

An Unfinished Autobiography

Biography's New Pages

Indira Goswami received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982 for her contribution to literature. She also received the Jnanpith Award (2000), India's highest literary award, for writing about the subalterns and marginalised. Two of the main features in Goswami's writing have been the focus on women and the cultural and political construct of womanhood in the Assamese society. However, she also created possibly one of the finest male characters in contemporary Assamese literature, viz. the character of Indranath in *Datal Hantir Une Khowa Howdah* (*The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What motivated Indira Goswami to start writing?

Q 2: What was the advice of her teacher and mentor Upendra Chandra Lekharu?

Q 3: Mention the subject matter of the novel *The Blue Necked Braja.*

Q 4: Write a note on the contexts of some of her important works.

9.4 READING THE NOVEL

The novel first appeared in 1981 in a serialised version in the prominent literary magazine *Prakash* published by the Publication Board of Assam. This novel caused a stir by realistically depicting the plight of women in the"Sattra"—the socio-religious institution of the Mahapurusha Dharma founded and popularised by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th century. Initially, the "Sattras" started as the centre for egalitarian learning to be used to spread the message of the Bhakti that was in vogue in the whole of India in that period. However, before and after India's Independence, they deteriorated into feudal institutions with the Sattradhikaars owning vast amount of land, and its inhabitants and most specifically the women becoming the victims of the evil and merciless customs in the name of tradition. This novel provides a vehement critique of that tradition.

9.4.1 The Storyline and the Context

Set in Assam of Northern India during the 1940s, this novel projects the tragic dilemma of three widows—Durga, Gossainee and Giribala who are seen struggling against the oppressive patriarchal ethos and the male-cantered religious setup that relegates women to subservient roles after the demise of their husbands. These three women live in the home of a wealthy 'Sattradhikaar' Indranath who is also the chief of the local religious and cultural centre of Neo-Vaishnavism called the "Sattra." But, due to sudden providential changes after the death of their husbands,

each of them is forced to endure the pangs of widowhood and the consequent identity crisis as women in a male dominated society.

Durga, the elderly widowed sister of the 'Sattradhikaar' and a typical caste-Hindu widow is determined to arrange for her late husband's last rites in Puri, but before she finishes, her gold ornaments are stolen; Gossainee is the widow of the brother of the 'Sattradhikaar', who is trying hard to manage her late husband's estate until a manager she trusted most, betrays her. Thus, she is crushed by the revelation of perfidy. Finally, it is Giribala—the daughter of the 'Sattradhikaar', the youngest, the most rebellious and the most beautiful of the three, who breaks taboos and shocks everyone by submitting herself into the arms of a British scholar Mark Sahib who is there in order to study the ancient religious scripts. When opposition grows too intense from both the society and the family, the rebellious Giribala resolves her situation in a spectacular and tragic manner by submitting to self-immolation following the rites of expiation imposed on her by the local Brahmin priest, thus providing a vehement mockery of the existing Brahmanical ethos.

In "A Few Words from the Author" at the beginning of the book, Goswami states, "...it would have been difficult to get it translated by any other person than the author herself. Not many people from Assam are conversant with this dialect. Besides, many words of this particular dialect have now become obsolete." However, she acknowledges important names like Hiren Gohain and Harish Trivedi who helped her through the manuscript.

The novel is set in the aftermath of World War II, around India's Independence. It is also based on the Goswami's impressions of her childhood and early adulthood spent in a Vaishnavite *Amaranga Sattra* of Southern Kamrup district in Assam. It is a breathtaking narrative of crumbling orthodoxy, the onslaught of modernity, the passion, longing and deprivation of young women widowed very early in life, the inexorable changes brought about in the feudal hierarchy by the advent of Communism, problems and issues related to land reforms and so on.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Write a note on the context of the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker.*

Q 6: What ideas on the 'Sattras' can be derived from the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker?*

9.4.2 Major Themes

Goswami's contribution to Assamese feminist literature is quite evident in a work like *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Sometimes, this novel is also read with a post-colonial tinge in it as we see the mimicry of the colonisers among the colonised. Nevertheless, the following are some of the important themes of the novel.

Experience of the 'Sattras':

As mentioned already, the novel is based on the nostalgic memories of Goswami's own childhood and early adulthood in Amaranga Sattra located in South Kamrup, Assam. This novel exhibits the writer's observation of many of the ill practices of her Brahmin community following India's Independence. Another subtext of the novel is the lives of people under opium addiction, who can go to any extent to satisfy their opium addiction. Apart from this, their other obsession is a strong adherence to orthodox religious practices. The religious rites and customs of the "Sattra" culture are so extremely strict that any lapse in their proper performance often lead to severe punishment. A close reading of the novel reveals that the task of pleasing the gods falls mostly on the shoulders of women and the minorities, as they are the principal victims of the resulting violence. They are forced to do long sacrifices even for a slight deviation from the established religious norms. Goswami stated that in the "sattra," menstruation is considered the "greatest sin" and no one touches a young girl or woman during her "monthly flow" because of the risk of contracting the impurity.If someone

happens to touch her, it is the woman who has been touched who has to fast rigorously as a mandatory purification ritual. Goswami, in this novel, highlights the problem-ridden existence of women living in a strict religious community of the "Sattras".

Plight of the Widows in the Brahmin Society:

Goswami, in this novel, presents in minute detail the pitiful existence of widowed women in the Brahmin Society. Widows are not allowed to leave their homes and are supposed to make themselves invisible, because their sight or their touch may bring misfortune on others. Besides, the harsh rituals they are forced to perform make them vulnerable to diseases. Continuous fasting, strict eating norms such as abstaining from cooked food and surviving only on raw food such as vegetables for days, sleeping on a bed of bamboos, wearing the areca nut tree's bark as one's shoes, bathing rituals are some of the customary rituals of widowhood. Even the widowed young women are deprived of education because it is assumed that there is no need for their education as they are to stay enclosed within the four walls of the house. Although, in the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker,* the older Gossainee, Saru Gossainee, Durga and Giribala—all are widowed women in different circumstances, still they share the same fate of depravation.

Crumbling Tradition and the Emergence of Change

The Howdah—a magnificently crafted chair placed on the back of an elephant for the comfort of the person sitting on it is also symbolic of the prestige of the Satradhikars. However the moth-eaten Howdah in the novel also reflects the weakening of the "Sattra" institution and its obsolete traditions further weakening the socio-cultural ethos of a religious institution. In 1981, in an epilogue, Indira Goswami brings back the symbol of the Howdah or the symbol o the Sattra's prestige, which was crushed to pieces by Jagannath—the elephant on rampage a few days before it was killed by the government shooter."The Howdah was moth eaten"–stated by a

character in the novel lifting the Howdah on the back of the elephant symbolically unfolds the mystery. The Howdah also had two long iron nails underneath to hold it farm on the elephant's back causing extreme pain and blood would stream out of the elephant's back, while people sat on it. Perhaps, this was also a reason why the pet elephant went on rampage across the village. This can further be seen as symbolic of the crumbling era and the welcoming of a new age of freedom from the shackles of tradition.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What idea can we have on the life in the 'Sattra' from a reading of the novel?

Q 7: What is the significance of themoth-eaten Howdah in the novel?

9.4.3 Major Characters

There are three major female characters in the novel.

Durga:

Durga, the elderly widowed sister of the 'Sattradhikaar' and is the eldest of the three widows. She is thrown out of her marital home following her husband's death. Her in-laws capture all her property and abandon her at her maternal house. This is also the beginning of her gory tale as she is not allowed to participate in rituals and functions, she is not permitted to take cooked foods, she is not allowed to walk bare foot and many such things. However, Durga continues to harbour the hope that her in-laws will come back one day and take her back home with due respect. In fact she could fight a legal battle to get her share of the property back. However, she is not permitted for that simply because her community believed that respectable women should never step into a court of law as this might invite the gaze of thieves and criminals further making her impure. She suffers from tuberculosis due to her cloistered life and fasting. Durgadecides to go back to her estranged in-laws house

as she wants to die with dignity. As a character, she surrenders to the traditional norms and regulations mutely and without any complaint. She is symbolic of a voiceless character with no courage to regain her own identity. She also represents the image of a traditional Assamese Brahmin widow who gradually turns into a neurotic patient.

Saru Gossainee:

Saru Gossainee, the widow of the brother of the 'Sattradhikaar', is also a victim of the orthodox "Sattra" culture. She owns some acres of land and has low-caste cultivated by some villagers who hold her in high esteem for they consider her very religious and virtuous. But, they cheat her in paying revenue, and she finds it difficult to go tothe court as she is afraid of social censure. A young widower Muhidhar comes forward to help her and gradually becomes her confidant with whom she falls in love with the belief that he reciprocates her feelings. While feeling very fortunate to have received a man's love, she does not even realise that she is being exploited and duped by Muhidhar. However, the rigid social conventions do not allow her to fight for justice. After witnessing the treachery of Muhidhar, her world is shattered and ruined. It is very significant to note that under the grip of societal rule, she could not gather the courage to fight against injustice.

Giribala:

Giribala is the daughter of the 'Sattradhikaar'. She is the youngest, the most rebellious and the most beautiful of the three. She isvery different from Durga and Saru Gossainee. Her fate is also similar as following her widowhood, she too is sent back to her maternal house. Her brother Indranath, however, helps her cast off her melancholy by engaging her with the task of helping an American missionary named Mark Sahib with his scholarly work on the ancient religious scripts. When her in-laws come forward to take her back, she refuses to go because she realises that her life would become

even more miserable in her marital house. Instead, she runs away to Mark's hut. The villagers catch them and accuse them of carrying on a clandestine affair. Subsequently, they get ready to purify her through rituals using water and fire. Giribala, however, refuses to perform any ritual and immolates herself in the fire. Unlike the other widows, sheseems to be non-conformist and is capable of raising voice against the restrictions imposed by the society. Because she wanted to be independent, she meets her own death.

Other minor characters of the novel include characters like Old Gossainee, Indranath, Muhidhar and Mark Sahib.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: In what way is Giribala's character different from the other widows of the novel?

9.4.4 Goswami's Narrative Style

The style in which this novel is written is quite evocative. As mentioned in the Literary Review published in *The Hindu* on 7th November 2004, it is mentioned that there are details peppering up the narrative such as the rude intrusions of history, inducing culture shock, or practices peculiar to the region—references to the American soldiers who had been billeted in the rural scenario like aliens from outer space; the Negro giants hankering after frog-legs and leeches; vignettes of the state-owned opium-trade and the travails of the addicts; catching and taming of elephants and their life in captivity in corrals and a whole culture that developed around it and so on. The leitmotif of the free-roaming rogue tusker Jagannath and the metaphor of the moth-eaten Howda remain too obvious to be explained. Although this is a realistic novel and provides a true picture of the society, the writer also has mixed some ofher imagination with reality as she has stated in the preface of the novel, "there have been close brushes of imagination with reality."

9.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF GOSWAMI

Indira Goswami is often hailed as one of the greatest writers belonging to the Indian literary canon. Her novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* was anthologised in *The Masterpieces of Indian Literature* and was also made into a film *Adajya* by Santana Bordoloi winning several national and international film-festival awards. The novel was included in the list of classics by Sahitya Akademi and was translated into many Indian languages. The novel was also made into two-television mini-series in which Nandita Das played the role of Giribala in one of the mini-series. *Words from the Mist* is a film made on her life directed by Jahnu Barua.

The famous Indian English writer Amitav Ghosh, in his remark on Indira Goswami following her death, states the following, "I first met Indiraji in Delhi in the 1980s. She was one of the kindest and most nurturing people I have ever known. I had the deepest respect for her, as a writer and as a human being."

He further states:

"Indira Goswami is one of the pre-eminent literary figures in India today. She is also a woman of remarkable courage and conviction…Indira Goswami writes in Assamese and has played a significant role in bringing the tribulations of her troubled region to national and international attention. Her books include the short story collection, *Shadow of Kamakhya*; and the novels: *Man from Chinnamasta*; *Pages Stained with Blood; The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Her books, which are widely available in English translation, have won universal acclaim in India and have won all the most important awards in the country, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, and the Jnanpith Prize, which is India's single most prestigious literary award. But apart from being one of India's most important literary figures, Indira Goswami is also a courageous social and political activist. Assam is one of the most troubled states in India, with a long-running insurgency, and Indira Goswami has for many years been one of its most powerful voices of peace and reconciliation. Indeed, she has become one of the most eloquent interlocutors of the Indian government on this subject. Her efforts in this

regard are well documented and can be easily looked up on the Net. She has also been an important voice in championing women's causes, and has done much to highlight the plight of widows. In short, Indira Goswami is one of those rare figures whose achievements as a writer are closely paralleled by their accomplishments as a social and political activist."

The Awards Received by Indira Goswami

1982 – Sahitya Akademi Award (for *Mamore Dhora Tarowal*)
1989 – Bharat Nirman Award
1992 – Sauhardya Award of Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan of Government of India.
1993 – Katha National Award for Literature
1996 – Kamal Kumari Foundation National Award in 1996
2000 – Jnanpith Award
2002 – D Litt Degree from Rabindra Bharati University, West Bengal
2002 – Mahiyoshi Jaymati Award with a citation in gold by Ahom Court of Assam
2002 – Padma Shri (She refused to accept)
2007 – D Litt Degree from Rajiv Gandhi University Arunachal Pradesh
2008 – D Litt Degree from Indira Gandhi National Open University
2008 – Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar Gold Plate from Asiatic Society
2008 – Principal Laureate Prince Claus Award
2009 – Krishnakanta Handique Award, Asom Sahitya Sabha

Other Important Awards

The Ambassador for Peace from the Inter Religious and International Federation for World Peace
The International Tulsi Award from Florida International University for her book *Ramayana From Ganga To Brahmaputra*
Asom Ratna (The Highest Civilian award of Assam).



9.6 LET US SUM UP

As we come to the end of the unit, we have learnt that the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is a ruthless tale of the inhuman austerities and cruelties perpetrated on Brahmin widows in an orthodox Hindu Assamese society and its even more orthodox attitude towards love, sex, marriage and widowhood. This novel impresses the readers as an exceptionally bold novel where social documentation on the status of women in society gains tremendous focus from feminist point of view. This novel raises a strong protest against theorthodox and conservative tradition of the Assamese Hindu society.Though Giribala voices against social customs and oppressions, in this process, she loses her own life. However, we can assume that her sacrifice symbolises a protest of the entire women community against the set societal norms of the conservative society.



9.7 FURTHER READING

Goswami, Indira.(2004).*The Moth-eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Translated from the Original Assamese Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda. Rupa.

Goswami, Indira. (1990). *The Unfinished Autobiography. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.*

Web Resources:

https://www.revolvy.com/page/The-Moth-Eaten-Howdah-of-the-Tusker

Indira Goswami by Amitav Ghosh | November 30, 2011. Retrieved from:http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=1923

http://www.assamjournal.com/2011/11/mamoni-raisom-goswami-profile-biography.html



9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: She claimed that she started writing just to live and that otherwise it would not have been possible for her to go on living the life of a wretched.

Ans to Q 2: Upendra Chandra Lekharu persuaded her to go to Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh and pursue research there for peace of mind.

Ans to Q 3: The plight of the Radhaswamis of Vrindavan… …they lived in abject poverty and sexual exploitation… …the plight of the young widows for whom companionship beyond the confines of their ashrams and fellow widows was impossible… …this novel autobiographical as it reflects the troubles the author herself had gone through after her husband's death.

Ans to Q 4: Short stories like "Hridoy", "Nangoth Sohor", "Borofor Rani" etc. used Delhi as the background…...Two of her other important novels *Pages Stained With Blood* and *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*—were also written during this period… …*Pages Stained With Blood* is based on the plight of the Sikhs in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots… … *The Man from Chinnamasta* is a critique of the thousand-years-old tradition of animal sacrifice in Kamakhya temple.

Ans to Q 5: The novel is set in the aftermath of World War II, around India's Independence… …based on the Goswami's impressions of her days in a Vaishnavite Amaranga "Sattra" in Southern Kamrup… …it also refers to crumbling orthodoxy, the onslaught of modernity, the passion and longing young women widowed very early in life… …also alludes to the problems of land reforms.

Ans to Q 6: Initially, the "Sattras" started as the centre for egalitarian learning to be used to spread the message of the Bhakti that was in vogue in the whole of India in that period. However, before and after India's Independence, they deteriorated into feudal institutions with the Sattradhikaars owning vast amount of land, and its inhabitants and most specifically the women becoming the victims of the evil and merciless customs in the name of tradition. This novel provides a vehement critique of that tradition.

Ans to Q 7: Life in the Sattras is full of rigours and problems… …strong adherence to orthodox religious practices resulting in inhuman treatment of the common people… …rules are too strict and any lapse often lead to severe punishment… …the task of pleasing the

gods falls mostly on the shoulders of women and the minorities… …in the "sattra," menstruation is considered the "greatest sin" and no one touches a young girl or woman during her "monthly flow" because of the risk of contracting the impurity.

Ans to Q 8: The Howdah—a magnificently crafted chair placed on the back of an elephant is symbolic of the prestige of the Satradhikars… …the moth-eaten Howdah also reflects the weakening of the "Sattra" institution… …the writer makes use of the Howdah crushed to pieces by Jagannath—the elephant on rampage… …this can further be seen as symbolic of the crumbling age-old rituals and customs in society.

Ans to Q 9: Unlike the other widows, she seems to be non-conformist and is capable of raising voice against the restrictions imposed by the society. Because she wanted to be independent, she meets her own death.



9.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the life and works of Indira Goswami with particular reference to her novel *The Moth-eaten Howdah of the Tusker*.

Q 2: Who are the major women characters in the novel? In what way, do these characters questioning the patriarchal ethos of the Assamese society of the mid 20th century? Discuss.

Q 3: Comment on the contexts of the novel *The Moth-eaten Howdah of the Tusker* by Indira Goswami.

Q 4: Write a note on the idea of womanhood as reflected in the novel *The Moth-eaten Howdah of the Tusker.*

Q 5: Do you think that the moth-eaten Howdah symbolises the crumbling social institutions that crippled the lives of the common people most specifically the women? Justify your views.

Q 6: In what way, Goswami's stay in Vrindavan help her to emerge as a writer? Discuss.

Q 7: Discuss Indira Goswami as a feminist writer with reference to the novel *The Moth-eaten Howdah of the Tusker.*

Q 8: Who do you think is the most powerful female character of the novel? Give a reasoned answer.

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UNIT 10:BINA BARUA: *ALONG THE HIGH ROAD* (*JIVANAR BATAT)*

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction

10.3 Bina Barua: Life and Works

10.4 Reading the Novel

10.4.1 The Storyline

10.4.2 Major Themes

10.4.3 Major Characters

10.4.4 Barua's Narrative Style

10.5 Critical Reception of Barua

10.6 Let us Summing Up

10.7 Further Reading

10.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

10.9 Possible Questions

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the contribution of Bina Barua to the world of Assamese literature
- explain the important themes implicit in this novel
- identify the important characters and discuss their role in the novel
- identify *Along the High Road* as an early Assamese novel and place the novel in the world of Assamese literature in general

10.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have discussed Indira Goswami's novel *Moth-Eaten Howda of the Tusker*. In this unit, which is also the last unit of the Block, we shall acquaint ourselves with Bina Barua's novel *Along the High Road* that is the English translation of his novel *Jivanar Batat.* Bina Barua is the pen name of Birinchi Kumar Barua. *Along the High Road* was published

in 1944 and it came to be recognised as one of the most important novels that initiated the modern trend in Assamese novel writing. The narrative is woven round the lived lives of a people and society which was at the threshold of change brought in about by the conflict between a culture rooted in traditional essence of yore and the reformist zeal ushered in by the nationalist movement in a pre-independent India. The innumerable social and cultural events that mark the lives living at such a time and the expectation of a modern reformed society that was supposedly being moulded has been perhaps at the centre of the narrative's universe in a manner that moves the reader even today. It is perhaps understood that all narratives intend to give expression to the complexities involved in the process of living and the manner in which the society of the times too, is moulded. While reading the novel, it would therefore be important for us to keep in mind that the incidents of the novel refer to a particular moment in historical past in which the present society had not yet taken shape. However, it is also noteworthy that the values that are presented in the novel are relevant even in today's context– values that lie in righteousness and humane concerns.

10.3 BINA BARUA: LIFE AND WORKS

Birinchi Kumar Barua who was born in 1908 in Nagaon in pre independent Assam and he lived until 1964. He was the son of a government servant and spent his early childhood in Shillong, the then capital town of Assam. He did his Matriculation from Assam and went to Kolkata for pursuing his higher studies. After accomplishing his BA degree with honours in Pali language from Presidency College, he pursued his Masters in Pali from Calcutta University. He was also studying Law in the same university along with his Masters programme, which he completed in 1934. When Calcutta University introduced Assamese as a subject under Modern Indian Language, in 1935, Birinchi Kumar Barua was appointed as a teacher under the university. He authored several textbooks for the University for both the BA and MA classes. It is worth mentioning that although Barua had cleared the ICS Examination under the then British Government, he was not allowed to

join the services owing to his inability to ride horses. He remained as a teacher in Calcutta University for three years after which he came to Assam and joined Cotton College to become a teacher here. Barua left for England in 1946 to obtain his PhD. Barua registered himself at the School of Oriental and African Studies under the London University to work on the cultural history of Assam for his thesis. He completed his PhD in 1948 and his thesis was later published as *A Cultural History of Assam*, which came to be recognised as a seminal work in the field of Assamese historiography.

Birinchi Kumar Barua was one of the most active members responsible for the setting up of Gauhati University at Jalukbari. Of his several achievements, mention may be made of his membership in Indian Film Censor Board, his role as a founder member in the Indian Language Commission, Government of India. He worked for the harmonious relationship amongst various tribes and communities of the North Eastern region and for this; he played a very significant role in the setting up of the socio-cultural organisation under the name of Assam Academy for Cultural Relations. He acted as a Visiting Professor of Indian Folklore at the Indiana University, Bloomington, USA in 1963 with a sponsorship from the Rockefeller Foundation. During his stay in the university, he became very a close aide of Dr Richard Mercer Dorson, the director of the Folklore Institute at the University and who was popularly known as the Father of American Folklore. Birinchi Kumar Barua was posthumously awarded the Sahitya Academy Award in 1965 for his Assamese work titled *Asomor Loka Sanskriti*. Birinchi Kumar Barua came to be recognised as one of the founding figures who paved the way for studies in folklore of the region and was given due recognition for his significant contribution in the field of literature ranging from fiction to drama, history, linguistics and folklore among others. He breathed his last in the year 1964.



LET US KNOW

The journey of the Assamese novel begun in the hands of pioneers such as Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Padmanath Gohain Baruah for whom the traditional notion of novel was one that

had a narrative with a sound storyline woven around a specific thematic structure. In his elaborate study on the Assamese novel titled *Upanyash aru Asomiya Upanyash*, (2015) noted critic and academician Gobinda Prasad Sarma has observed that the Assamese novel is quite similar to its Western counterpart in so far as its traditional practice is concerned – in its various manifestations such as the historical novel, social novel or novel written during the two world wars – these narratives work with a similar pattern where the reader encounters an almost overt expression of the character's inner feelings.

During its early stages, the Assamese novel appeared to be somewhat formal in its representation of the story in terms of the narrative style. Assamese novels such as *Manomati* (1900) by Rajanikanta Bordoloi were based on the historical event of Burmese invasion of the Ahom kingdom. His later novels such as *Rangili* (1925), *Tamreswari Mandir* (1926) and *Rahdoi Ligiri* (1930) are woven around the themes of social concern and nationalist feelings. Assamese novelists such as Dandinath Kalita and Daibachandra Talukdar were seen writing in the latter half of 20th century who engaged with the themes of freedom struggle and patriotic fervour in a pattern quite similar to the writings of authors elsewhere in India. From a reading of these contemporary writers "two trends of nationalism–one is the Indian nationalism and the other is Assamese sub-nationalism or regionalism" (Gobinda Prasad Sarma, 1) could be discerned by the reader and these appeared to the preoccupations of majority of the novelists of the time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 1: For which work did Barua receive the Sahitya Academy award?

Q 2: What made Birinchi Kumar Barua set up the Assam Academy for Cultural Relations?

Q 3: Mention the various fields for which Barua achieved wide acclaim?

Q 4: Write a note on the development of Assamese novels.

10.4 READING THE NOVEL

The following subsections will help us to discuss the novel in terms of its various important aspects.

10.4.1 The Storyline

Let us first refer to the translator's **Introduction** to the novel to get an idea of the storyline–

"The novel opens with a situation of happy conviviality, occasioned by the wedding of the Mauzadar's daughter. The occasion brings Kamalakanta, a young man known to the bride's elder brother, to the Mauzadar's house where he meets Tagar. Kamalakanta instantly falls in love with Tagar and a day before his departure; he opens out his heart to her and, in an impulsive moment, puts his ring on her finger declaring his resolve to marry her. Tagar's initial reaction was of disbelief...yet out of respect for an educated young man, Tagar deeply sad but trusting, consents and becomes betrothed. In due course, the two families also gave their consent. Kamalakanta, a brilliant student stands first in his graduation examination and it is agreed that their wedding will take place once he gains employment. Kamalakanta's father Mahikanta, a clerk in the collectorate aims high and succeeds finally in cornering the prized post of a Sub-Deputy Collector for his son through the good offices of Manik Hazarika, a Rai Bahadur... [Who] offers his eligible and accomplished daughter Suprova in marriage to Kamalakanta; Mahikanta writes a curt letter to Tagar's father breaking off the engagement. The sudden reversal of his daughter's fortunes Tagar's father momentarily distraught...[and] to ward off malicious gossip in the village about Tagar's association with Dharani, Bapuram Bora hurriedly marries her off to a faraway village without her consent.

...Tagar begins a new life ...constantly humiliated by not only her mother-in-law but by also the other women...[Tagar] takes over the mantle of a daughter-in-law in Dharani's household...Dharani joins the Freedom Movement...the police looks for him and not

finding him in the village takes his wife Tagar to the police station. The police officer humiliates her in every possible way but she stands the test with dignity...Dharani rushes in...and surrenders himself...is put behind the bars like thousands of others who are participating in the Freedom Movement. Tagar, all alone, is left to fend for herself. Her little daughter Kamali is now her sole solace....[w]ith Dharani in jail, Tagar leads a forlorn existence….Dharani returns from jail terminally ill...succumbs to his illness in spite of Tagar's devoted nursing and the treatment provided by a kind doctor who is deeply attached to Tagar's little daughter Kamali. Tagar, now in need of a livelihood joins a weavers' guild started by the benevolent doctor...

In an ironic twist to the novel, Kamalakanta appears in the novel as the newly posted local revenue official. His wife Suprova, not knowing who Tagar is, calls the latter to teach her a few weaving designs...there is a theft in Kamalakanta's house...suspicion points to Tagar...the police raid her house. An old ring with Kamalakanta's name embossed on it is recovered inside a box, which bears the name of the doctor. As the police inspector brings the ring before Kamalakanta, the latter discovers the ring is the same one that he had put in Tagar's finger many years ago...He sees in it Tagar's innocence, his own past ...he falls into a trance".

Roughly speaking, the story may be summarised as given above which is quoted from the Introduction. However, while reading the text it is important to note that it has been divided into four chapters and each of these chapters comprise several sub-chapters. Every chapter opens with an epigraph, which is perhaps intended to provide the reader with a direction in reading the narrative besides giving one an idea about the phase of life the central protagonist Tagar would be going through. Every chapter therefore, may be taken as one whole narrating a particular phase of Tagar's life – for instance the first chapter opens with the epigraph –

The beak of a Moorhen is red
A long vermillion mark on it:
Dear Father,
Do not send me afar!

This epigraph introduces the underlying theme of marriage in the opening of the narrative. Marriage initiates new relationships – set within a particular socio-cultural locale, marriage and family relationships may be taken as important parameters to read into the lives of individuals within it. It is important to remember that the epigraph specifically refers to a daughter who pleads with the father not to marry her off to a faraway place – two significant ideas are put forth–a daughter's 'condition' within the family and the society and the all pervading predominance of the institution of marriage in the life of an individual, especially the girl. In addition, the narrative makes a formal opening with an atmosphere of festivities at Morongi where a marriage is taking place. The author's description of Morongi is important as it lays the foundation for the narrative's engagement with the oppositional socio-cultural values brought about by an apparently modern life as against the solemn and dignified culture of Morongi, one that is reminiscent of the glorious reign of the Ahoms, "Morongi was quite a famous place during the days of the Ahom rule. During the reign of King Suhungmung, a fort was constructed around Morongi to stop the marauding Nagas and Kacharis and protect the Ahom kingdom. Morongi's sky was filled with a kind of victory chant…But Morongi of today is 'shorn of all past glory." (1)

The first section come to a close with Bapuram Bora announcing his decision to marry off his daughter Tagar to Dharani, the weaving instructor after the letter from Kamalkanta's father intimates Bapuram of the former's act of breaking off the engagement. Tagar was however, never asked for her consent or otherwise in the decision that men take–even when Kamalakanta put his ring in her finger in the opening of the narrative, in the breaking off of the engagement and nor in her father's decision to marry her

off to Dharani and Bapuram Bora's remarks appear pertinent–"We still do not go for taking the consent of the bride in our families. I do not see any reason for Tagar to object." (71)

The second chapter opens with the following epigraph:

How long it takes to be
A daughter-in-law?

A close look at the epigraph reveals that the subsequent events relate to Tagar's transition from a daughter to a daughter-in-law through her marriage and the predicament she is put in thereafter like all women of her times. This section allows the narrator to explore the condition of women within marriage and family relationships; as a daughter-in-law Tagar seems unable to satisfy her mother-in-law Ahini who does not spare the slightest pretext to find faults in her; Tagar is constantly anxious not to transgress the familial and socio-cultural codes that define her identity as a woman and especially as a wife and a daughter-in-law despite which "Tagar did hear a lot about herself from those who came to her. Some of the women did not shrink from lashing her with their tongues on her very face, others more vain pointed her many shortcomings to her mother-in-law in her hearing. (107)

The epigraph to the third chapter reads thus –

A darling daughter, they call her
Some call her a sister…
The daughter is now a housewife.

The epigraph is indicative of the manifold role playing that a woman is subjected to – Tagar's role as a wife seems to be the core of this section where after Ahini's death "had to do everything…[as] Dharani was always indifferent to his household duties. He liked to spend most of the day outside the house…Leaving aside all the household chores in the charge of his wife alone, he seemed to go about somewhat unmindful of his responsibilities."

(140) Such indifferent attitude by Dharani may be read in opposition to Tagar's responsible behaviour throughout the narrative – from the opening – as a girl, a daughter-in-law and now even as a wife, as she displays extreme fortitude first, in the face of emotional turmoil rejected in marriage by Kamalkanta, then within the complicated relationship that she shared with her mother-in-law and now as the sole caretaker of her family with her husband relinquishing all his domestic responsibilities for the greater interest of the society.

The chronicle of Tagar's life appears to reach its final moment in the epigraph to the final chapter:

Whom should I tell
My tale of sorrow?
Only my soul knows
What it is!

The epigraph rightly summarises the existential predicament of an individual entrapped within the normative codes of society and culture. In the manner in which the narrative takes shape, Tagar emerges as a tragic heroine given her peculiar situation in the roles of daughter, daughter-in-law and wife and as a widow towards the closing scenes – her tragedy is intense, one may argue, owing to the fact that she had been always the submissive woman, conforming to the codes imposed upon her by patriarchy; by always making an effort to be the ideal woman in her multiple roles, Tagar is doomed to 'immanence'. It is the evil machinations of the police inspector Madhab Mahanta who accuses her of theft, to which she falls an easy prey perhaps due to her vulnerability as a widow. Mahanta even conjures a story of illicit relationship between Tagar and the doctor who is a good soul eager to help people in distress. After Dharani's expiry, when Tagar teams up with the doctor submitting to the demands of livelihood, the society weaves ugly gossip about her 'illicit' relationship with the genial doctor. The manner in which the police inspector discusses the so called 'illicit relationship' in relation to his

investigation of the theft from Kamalakanta's residence reveals what society had made of a woman who made an effort to transcend the threshold of domesticity and venture out into the public space:

Take is as certain, wherever there is a woman, there is mystery…[t]hat gentleman will be finished now along with Dharani master's wife…Golap doctor is the president of the weaver's Sangha, she is the secretary. One is a widower, the other one is a widow. (260)

Kamalakanta too appears judgemental regarding Tagar's 'illicit relationship' with Golap doctor as reported to him by the Inspector. However, at the close of the novel, Tagar's innocence is finally established; but the readers are not provided with a concrete end to the narrative.

10.4.2 Major Themes:

The following are the major themes of the novel *Along the High Road.*

Moral Vision:

As one of the earliest modern Assamese novels, *Along the High Road* as mentioned above occupies a place of privilege in the world of Assamese novel writing. The narrative impresses the reader through its vivid portrayal of traditional Assamese life during the pre-independent period. However, right from the start, the theme of morality is made clear – the delineation of locale, description of nature and people appear in conformity with the philosophy of the underlying moral vision, which the narrator wishes to foreground through the storytelling. To the discerning reader, the moral vision of the narrative shall be visible in the manner in which characterization for instance, is taken up by the author. The characters in the novel follow a distinct pattern–as the novel represents a society caught at a transitional juncture, the complexities, temptations and doubts of the people appear reflected through the several characters that

populate the world of the novel. While the central character Tagar is one exemplary portrayal that lives the life of virtuousness in terms of the values she represents, characters such as Kamalakanta fail to deliver. The paucity of values necessary in terms of a humane existence – the universal qualities of truth, righteousness and others appear to decline in the times when society was fast moving towards a life of material worth. A formal reading of the novel would allow one to arrive at an understanding how "the main focus of the narrative brings out a moral vision which imposes a pattern in the novel" (**Introduction)**- one may recognize that the pattern which runs through the novel is one of the struggle between traditional values plotted against the contemporary ways of life brought about by the apparently progressive ideals of a society moving towards modern life and times.

Conflict between Tradition and Modernity:

It is important to note that *Along the High Road* portrays the conflicting tendencies that affected the society during the pre-independent period. On the one hand, the society was not very certain about giving up the conventional way of life and philosophy–a feeling which appears reflected in the very opening scene of the narrative as the novel informs the reader of Morongi's 'past' glory which is now 'shorn off'– the yearning for past glory is reflective of the melancholy which accompanies the contemporary lives of people. On the other hand, the events and characters who represent the new Assamese middle class seem to display a kind of casual attitude towards the qualities of integrity and righteousness–a growing tendency that afflicted modern Assamese society which was moving ahead fast towards the so called progressive lifestyle brought about by initiation into a comparatively more urban society and culture.

Folklore:

The novelist was an acclaimed figure in the studies on folklore and the influence of his academic interest is revealed in the manner in which the narrative world of the novel makes use of conventional

folklores of the society. It is understood that the folklores of any given culture and society are in fact ways through which the people give shape to conventional wisdom while organising the indigenous life on the one hand, and folklores also reflect the lives and ethos of a culture and society on the other. In the novel, we come across various rituals, customs, practices reflected in the celebration of marriage for example, which make abundant use of the folkloristic material. Such use of folkloristic material enables the author to represent the narrative in a realistic manner–the narrative unfolds in the most vivid manner bringing to light several hidden aspects of traditional Assamese culture.

Marriage and Family:

Marriage and family forms one of the most important thematic concerns in *Along the High Road*. The opening of the novel relates a marriage in the village, which paves the way for coming together of two young hearts,– that of Kamalakanta and Tagar which, however, does not culminate in conjugal bliss. Elaborate description of rituals of marriage ceremony in the opening of the novel set in the tone of merriment and joy. The marriage songs reflect upon the manner in which man and woman are situated within marital relationship and the society in general. For example, Tagar sings

"Lord Krishna is my husband
My life will be fulfilled
There is no one fortunate than I."

Which is a rendition of traditional Assamese '*biyanaam*' or marriage song, which reveal the importance of a man in the life of a woman. The novel also works on marriage and family relationships at a deeper level. The Tagar Kamalakanta love affair, which is shown blooming in the beginning of the narrative, does not reach a culmination through marriage owing to material concerns of Kamalakanta's father. Tagar who kept waiting for Kamalakanta to keep his promise was refused by the latter's father because he had his own manipulations. In addition, surprisingly Kamalakanta the

educated knowledgeable young man representing the modern Assamese youth did not have the moral courage to stand by his promise made to innocent and naive Tagar. Tagar marries Dharani and the reader is made aware of the trials and tribulations that a woman encounters through the institution of marriage–Tagar is seen facing various difficulties which are intensified owing to the absence of an empathetic attitude from her husband Dharani.

Condition of Women:

Various female characters are delineated in the novel. A look at Tagar, the central character reveals the social and cultural framework within which women during the times were situated. Throughout the novel Tagar is seen as subjected to several forces of society and culture making her life rather difficult. Kamalkanta puts a ring in her finger at without even asking for her permission– an impulsive decision which he takes leading to unhappiness in Tagar's life later as he fails to keep his promise of marrying her. When she is married to Dharani we see her suffering owing to the social practices – her life as a daughter-in-law appears rather unhappy; after Dharani's death her life is more difficult as she has to take care of herself and her daughter all alone; when she goes out in search of livelihood and joins the weaving society under the guidance of the genial doctor Golap, she faces the pain of gossip– the villagers weave rumours of an illicit relationship between Golap doctor and Tagar which was baseless.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Mention the important themes of the novel *Along the High Road.*

10.4.3 Major Characters:

The following are the important characters of the novel.

Tagar:

She is the daughter of Bapuram Bora, a respectable person in the village. She has received school education and is trained in

household chores, which make her an ideal girl. However, the social customs, which are not very open towards the girl attaining education, acts as a barrier in Tagar is wish to go for higher education. We see the Mouzadar's wife discussing with Kamalakanta thus:

"The girl is so accomplished. She can read the scriptures very well. She secured a scholarship when she passed the primary. However, she is sharp in her tongue...Her father wanted to teach her English. We prevented it...Point is what a village girl do with English education?...Where is the gain by giving a girl too much education? She should learn to manage the household perfectly" (24)

However, Tagar's accomplishments do not seem to give her any opportunity to change her fate. Tagar is seen repeatedly put into complex situations through the narrative– it is important to note that though she suffers a lot at the hands of the mysterious workings of fate and destiny she does not succumb to the pressures; on the contrary she rises through her stoic endurance and her silent struggle against adversity reveals the strength of her character.

"Tagar [is] a woman of purer intent and deeper sensitivity...inherits the best of rural refinement and religious culture of a traditional household" (Introduction)

Kamalakanta:

He represents the growing middle class in contemporary Assamese society. He is educated and is posted at a respectable position in the government service. He has married Suprova, the daughter of Manik Hazarika who has played a significant role in getting his job. As his father Mahikanta had wished, he silently agrees to marry Suprova without thinking about his promise he had made to Tagar long back. He is seen readily compromising his morality for his benefit – in the manner in which Kamalkanta conducts his life it becomes clear that he appears bereft of strength of character unlike Tagar.

Dharani:

The Weaving Instructor Dharani marries Tagar – he appears very happy in the beginning when Bapuram Bora announces his decision to marry off his daughter to him. It appeared to him as he has received a wealth of fortune in the form of Tagar–"A beggar has got all the riches without asking even. Moved by this strange good fortune, Dharani cried for a moment in joy. His eyes...expressed infinite gratitude..." (71) This man who appears overwhelmed by the good fortune however, fails to stand by his wife in the time of need. Dharani appears an escapist in the manner in which he keeps away from his house keeping Tagar all alone to face the unjust wrath of her mother-in-law. He is indifferent to the needs of the family and gives himself apparently for the greater benefit of the society. But his incapability in taking care of his family, his silence in times of conflict between Tagar and his mother reveals his weakness – the social activities that he participates in act only as a mask to hide his weak character

Minor characters: Bapuram Bora, Ahini, Suprova, Mahikanta, Manik Hazarika, Golap doctor.

10.4.4 Barua's Narrative Style:

The novel is remarkable for its realism. Written as a social novel, the narrative makes a genuine attempt to portray the authentic life of Assamese life and society during the pre-independent era. The novel is remarkable for its imaginative representation of subject matter and art of characterisation; ample use of imagery and symbolism in representation of events and incidents which make the narrative rise above most of the contemporary novels. The beauty of *Along the High Road* is accentuated by the fact that it may be read from several perspectives which provides it with a sense of 'wholesomeness'–the narrative appears to unfold the drama of life in a manner that lends it a unique appeal. *Along the High Road* remains for the most part a narrative delineating the lives of common men and women caught in the quagmire of their lived lives – the

peculiarities of individual situation intensified by the superimposition of social and cultural ideology produced within the hegemonic practices of patriarchy as seen reflected especially in the life its central character Tagar. However, the novels appeal may be perhaps also attributed to its impression of 'wholesomeness' owing to its all inclusive narration. While deliberating on the trying existential dilemma encountered by Tagar, the author presents forth the contemporary society–a society at the crossroads caught between traditional worldview against the reformist zeal ushered in by the pan Indian political event of the freedom movement. The idea of modernity in terms of progressive thinking and changes in conventional worldview in India may to a large extent be understood as a by-product of the freedom movement. Given such a socio-political realm, it is perhaps natural that characters who populate the world of *Along the High Road* caught in the turmoil of transition; the emergence of new values that display traces of material outlook as against the traditional simplicity of Assamese society. The open-ended narrative is employed by the author as a strategy to reflect upon the "reality deeply. It also has the potential of representing a plurality or a multitude of voices ..." which makes it an organic narrative. The folklore motif that runs through the narrative complemented by the language that is used enriches the texture of the novel.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 6: Comment on the narrative style of the novel *Along the High Road*.

10.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BARUA

While discussing the aspect of critical reception regarding this novel, it would be helpful to refer to the translator's observations. According to him *Along the High Road* is one of the greatest Assamese novels which

had perhaps failed to receive due recognition from its early critics. While on the other hand, recent criticism accords a high place to the novel owing to its holistic treatment of social theme through realism, which bestows the novel its modern outlook. The underlying moral vision of the plot is made clear in its deft handling of characters and the events imposing a pattern in the text. The novel emerges as one of the most significant voices that would enable the reader to delve deep into the socio-cultural set up thereby establishing itself as one of the texts founded on a multi faceted study of culture. The translator states, "Despite the fact that it was written in the late thirties of the last century, the novel has sustained a realism in which men and women drawn from the common grooves of village life play their roles as they do in real life...older critics, in focussing more attention on the external elements of the plot like the recovery of a signet ring at the end, somewhat in the manner of a medieval romance missed this significance. These critics have regarded the denouement as a kind of device...the significance of the novel in terms of certain specificities of life or culture or habitat genuinely reflective of an Assamese identity can be seen in bold relief if the novel is compared to the other outstanding novels of Indian tradition like Bankim Chandra's *Visavriksha* (1873), Tagore's *Gora* (1910), Sarat Chandra's *Pather Daabi* (1926) and Bibhutibhusan's *Pather Panchali* (1929)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 7: Write in short about the recent criticism of the novel *Along the High Road*?



10.6 LET US SUM UP

We have come to understand the novel *Along the High Road* as one of the most significant texts in the world of Assamese fiction. This novel may be read at many levels–as a socio-cultural narrative, a text revealing the 'condition of women' in contemporary Assamese society, the role of folklore in understanding social and cultural patterns in the rural life of Assam, the significance of marriage and family in the life of an individual

and the society within which he/she is situated and last but not the least it may be read as a significant text documenting the dilemma of a people at the threshold of transition from the traditional mores of life towards a more progressive life with the growing importance of educated Assamese middle class. In the entire text, it is needless to say that Tagar plays the central role – but her evolution through the trials and tribulations of life is reminiscent of Hardy's Tess – another unforgettable character entrapped by fate and chance. Tagar appears to rise above her male counterparts in the novel, namely Kamalakanta and Dharani in her dignified conduct and the manner in which she faces all challenges through a stoic endurance. The author employs folklore and keeps the style of narration simple, which befits the primary subject, and realistic tone of the narrative.



10.7 FURTHER READING

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Bhasin, Kamla. (2003). *Understanding Gender*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.

Deshpande, Shashi. (2003). *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. Delhi: Penguin.

Misra, Tilottama. (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India*. Vols. I and II. Oxford University Press.

Rabinow, Paul. (Ed.). (1991). *The Foucault Reader.* London: Penguin.

Sarma, Gobinda Prasad. (2002). Barua, Bina. *Asomiya Upanyasar Gati Prakriti.* Sahitya Akademi.

Williams, Raymond. (1977). *Marxism and Literature.* Oxford: OUP.



10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *Asomor Loka Sanskriti.*

Ans to Q 2: His work for the harmonious relationship amongst various tribes and communities of the North Eastern region.

Ans to Q 3: Birinchi Kumar Barua came to be recognised for his studies in folklore of the region… …for his significant contribution in the field of literature ranging from fiction to drama, history, linguistics and folklore among others.

Ans to Q 4: Novel in Assam began in the hands of pioneers such as Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Padmanath Gohain Baruah… …in his *Upanyash aru Asomiya Upanyash*, (2015) the noted critic Gobinda Prasad Sarma has observed that the Assamese novel is quite similar to its Western counterpart… …these novels work with a similar pattern where the reader encounters an almost overt expression of the character's inner feelings… …initially, the Assamese novel appeared to be somewhat formal in its representation of the story… … in the latter half of 20th century Assamese sub-nationalism or regionalism too emerged.

Ans to Q 5: Moral Vision… …Conflict between Tradition and Modernity… …Folklore… …Marriage and Family… …Condition of Women

Ans to Q 6: The novel is remarkable for its realism… …a social novel that portrays the authentic life of the Assamese people during the pre-independent era.

Ans to Q 7: According to the translator, the novel is one of the greatest Assamese novels which had perhaps failed to receive due recognition from its early critics… …recent criticism accords a high place to the novel owing to its holistic treatment of social theme through realism… …the underlying moral vision of the plot is made clear in its deft handling of characters and the events imposing a pattern in the text.



10.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the contributions of Bina Barua into the world of Assamese literature.

Q 2: Discuss *Along the High Road* as an early modern Assamese novel.

Q 3: Examine the plot structure of the novel *Along the High Road* and discuss how the narrative progresses.

Q 4: Write a note on the use of folk elements in *Along the High Road*.

Q 5: Who are the main characters of the novel *Along the High Road*? Discuss Barua's art of characterisation in *Along the High Road*. Attempt a character sketch of Tagar.

Q 6: Discuss the important themes in the novel *Along the High Road.*

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UNIT 11: HIREN GOHAIN: "TWO ROADS TO DECOLONISATION: GANDHI AND TAGORE"

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 Hiren Gohain: The Writer

11.4 Reading the Text

11.4.1 Major Themes

11.4.2 Gohain's Prose Style

11.5 Critical Reception of Gohain

11.6 Let us Sum up

11.7 Further Reading

11.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11. 9 Possible Questions

11.1 EARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- Discuss the idea of colonialism in the Indian context and the phenomenon of decolonisation
- explain Tagore's views on nationalism
- comprehend Gandhian nationalism through your reading of the essay
- make the link between political liberation and decolonisation
- examine how the discourse of nationalism continue to influence politics

11.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall try to discuss the idea of decolonisation in the context of postcolonial societies. Decolonisation is a much-debated concept within the field of postcolonial study. It refers to the process of complete dismantling of political domination of colonial forces from the erstwhile

colonies of Europe. In practice, however decolonisation is a much more complicated phenomenon as the scale and form of colonialist power is far more insidious. It is not just political emancipation but embraces all aspects of socio-cultural and economic life where the traces of decolonisation linger even after having gained political freedom. Decolonisation thus means removing those hidden influences of cultural and institutional forces, which sustain it beyond the plane of political independence. By the end of this unit, we shall have learnt that Prof. Gohain's essay examines and analyses the idea of decolonisation in the context of the Indian nationalist movement through the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi both of whom had written extensively on the subject of nationalism and its implications for the Indian subcontinent.

11.3 HIREN GOHAIN: LIFE AND WORKS

Hiren Gohain is a well-known critic, writer, poet and social scientist from Assam who has made significant contributions to the social and cultural life of Assam. He has written several critically acclaimed books. He completed his education from Delhi University and later on after that went on to do his PhD from Cambridge University. On completion of his doctoral research, he returned to India and began his career as a Professor of English in Gauhati University. Hiren Gohain has written several books including. His Book *Assam a Burning Question* is an in depth analysis on the socio-political crisis confronting Assam in the context of the Assam Agitation. He has edited several volumes and is a regular contributor to many journals like *Economic and Political Weekly*. He is the founder president of Assam Sahitya Sanmilani. Hiren Gohain is also known for his political role as the mediator of peace talks between the governments of India and the insurgent group ULFA. Prof. Gohain is had been at the centre of the political turmoil of Assam during the Assam agitation. He had famously criticised the movement calling it a "chauvinistic movement" for which he had been heckled and derided. Gohain had gradually embraced the ideas of sub nationalism but not without warning about the chauvinistic tendencies of such agitations that led to the isolating of other communities, which posed a threat to the larger Assamese

community. In fact, Prof. Gohain who had suggested 1971 as the cut-off year for granting citizenship to migrants in Assam as opposed to 1951. Prof. Hiren Gohain remains a leading intellectual in Assam and a Sahitya Akademi awardee who is the author of several critically acclaimed books.

11.4 READING THE TEXT

The essay "Two roads to Decolonisation: Tagore and Gandhi" discusses and analyses the idea of decolonisation from a postcolonial perspective. In this context he compares the ideas of two of the greatest scholars, Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi. That both were stalwarts and "leaders of national life" in different sphere is a well-known fact. What is less well known is that while there was a great deal of ideological affinity between them, the two differed vastly while it came to the idea of nationalism and national identity. It is this particular aspect of their contrary approach to decolonisation in the context of India that is explored by the author in this essay. As he writes, "What escapes scrutiny and reflection is the unbridgeable difference on certain points. How is this to be regarded and explained?" (23)

Prof. Gohain's essay inquires into a much-debated topic within postcolonial studies, which is that of decolonisation or rather, the nature and consequences of decolonisation for many postcolonial societies, which had been under colonial exploitation, and domination for many years. The phenomenon of decolonisation resulted in many of the erstwhile colonies gaining independence and forming new nations. According to Prof. Gohain, the benefits of this freedom from colonial oppression were incomplete as it failed to lead to any lasting progress and development. This is because of the misconception that equates political liberation with freedom. He states that political liberation does not always guarantee freedom: "But political liberation failed to resolve most of the problems that plagued those countries…" (23). These countries now saw the rise of new conflicts and frustrated aspirations. According to Prof. Gohain this was because of a "half understood and incomplete decolonisation in a modern world where the resurrection of a past culture is no longer an option" (23). According to

the author colonialism took root in India from the time when Macaulay dismissed Indian sciences as "fabulous stuff" and asserted that the "English language was the repository of all that was valuable in…humanity's march towards enlightenment." It was this perception of western civilisation/ education as superior mode of knowledge in comparison to Indian system of thought that led Indian social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy to insist on English education for Indians. They believed that such an education would eventually lead to the emancipation of Indian minds from ignorance and superstition. It was this belief in the potential of western modernity to liberate its subjects that made Indian social reformers in the nineteenth century to favour English instead of the vernacular.

The author critiques the faulty perception responsible for these demoralising effects of colonialism. This is because colonialism is not just about territorial expansion but a form of cultural imperialism meant to enslave and imprison. This is the reason that Prof. Gohain states that political liberation is not enough for decolonisation. One may gain territorial sovereignty but how does one gain freedom from the crippling effects of colonialism that affects the psyche of national culture since colonialism involves a systematic erasure of native culture and identity. He states that such an alteration of perception takes time. By the time people realised the harmful effects of colonialism the damage was already done. In this context he refers to the writings of Jose Marti, the famous Cuban revolutionary who had as early as in the nineteenth century proclaimed the debilitating consequences of colonialism: "Jose Marti in Latin America had realised in the late 19th century the dangers and pitfalls of prioritising the western element over the native one in the thinking and writing of colonised Latin America." (24) Jose Marti had argued that colonisation had two debilitating legacies. The first was that it planted an idea of European superiority in the minds of the colonised. Secondly, that it created a gulf within the native population –between the native elite and the common masses thus dividing a nation in itself: "…it created a gulf between the westernised local elite– hybrids and westernised natives—and the native multitudes. Jose Marti had further asserted that for a nation to be strong it was vital for its people to

know its own history. This was only possible when a nation encouraged the study of its own culture and heritage. Only by reconnecting with its own cultural heritage and glory would a nation be able to withstand the onslaught of colonialism and have a secure national identity of its own, strong enough to engage with other nations of the world on terms of equality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is decolonisation?

Q 2: Why does the author say that political liberation is not synonymous to decolonisation?

Q 3: Who was Jose Marti? What are his views on Colonialism?

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and national culture

Drawing upon the ideas of Fanon from *The Wretched of the Earth* the author indicates what true decolonisation would mean in the context of a postcolonial world. Both Jose Marti and Fanon had criticised the native elite (read bourgeoisie) who were the beneficiaries of colonialism. Fanon describes them as the 'business agents' of colonialism. According to Fanon, only those who were at the receiving end of the colonial burden would have the will to bring about change and a new world order by overthrowing the weight of the colonial past. However, Fanon did not entirely dismiss European science and enlightenment. He did not regard "the western heritage as irrelevant and polluting" (26) For Fanon, the European model is still the most inspiring. The only thing is that one must refrain from blindly imitating it. On the contrary, one must carefully study Europe's achievements and its ideas of social reconstruction for judicious and selective use adapted to the needs of multitudes "in a great endeavour to transmute them into useful elements for creating a new future for mankind." Fanon's idea of national culture was however more radical and belligerent that justified the use of violence if necessary. According to him, the literature of the people seeking decolonisation must be "a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature." It went far beyond the frame of mere armed struggle of militant nationalism and aimed at the restitution of an entire cultural arena.

It was not enough to merely restore to the people "the enormous wealth plundered by the west" but to reinstate "to the people a sense of its lost identity" (as quoted by Prof. Gohain, 26). According to the author, we must not let history repeat itself and carefully evaluate the outcomes of globalisation and post-coloniality: "Globalisation and post-coloniality may well be terms that mask this headlong rush to ruin." Prof. Gohain's is therefore extremely critical of the forms of globalisation and postcoloniality that continue to rob and plunder the multitudes in the name of technological advancement, which is a kind of neo-colonialism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is the name of Fanon's Book?

Q 5: Who according to Fanon are the beneficiaries of colonialism?

Q 6: Does Fanon reject Western heritage as irrelevant and polluting?

Tagore on Indian Culture

Prof. Gohain's essay revisits the nationalist debate between Tagore and Gandhi. Tagore was critical of Gandhi's views of nationalism, which he felt was inimical to the larger interest of the social unity of country. Tagore never approved the insular nationalism of Gandhi that rejected anything foreign as impure and saw such gestures as regressive and isolating. In his essay, "The Cult of the Charkha" (1925), he writes that: "We must not disable ourselves from receiving truth. For the west has appeared before the present-day world not only with the dynamite of passion and the cargo of things, but with her gift of truth. " He stressed on the moral regeneration of the country and rebuilding it from within, from the grassroots level restructuring and revitalising rural life where he felt the real spirit of India lived. It necessarily meant a quiet revolution, away from the hyperbole and rhetoric of impulse driven nationalist movement. He was also critical of the caste system and felt that unless some sort of ameliorating was done it would, in course of time, will lead to greater social divisions threatening the edifice of the nation. This was the reason Tagore was vehemently opposed to the idea of political nationalism. He discussed this in his essay "Prachyo O Pratichyo Sabhyota"

(1908) where he reflects on the genius of India and states that: "At the root of the Hindu civilisation there is society, and at the root of European civilisation, the nation." He was therefore opposed to the idea of foreign/western education and "the set of perceptions and assumptions that went with it that had been imposed by the British rulers upon Indians."(24) Tagore felt that foreign education would only increase our vulnerability and servility; what was needed to revitalize the country was self-reliance and self-confidence.

However, Tagore did not think of European science and enlightenment as completely irrelevant or inimical to life. He despises the mechanised way in which a technology driven western society organised itself to the exclusion of finer human impulses. He did not want India to imitate and have this kind of society driven by material values. He believed in the efficacy of science despite his disapprobation of the gross materialism of Western civilisation. Just like Fanon, he did not believe in completely discarding Enlightenment ideas, as he believed that judicial use of western knowledge could put the country on a path to a new future. In an essay published in 1929, he writes that: "Personally do not believe that Europe is occupied with material things. She may have lost her faith in religion, but not in humanity. Man, in his essential nature, is spiritual and can never remain solely material. If however, we in the east merely realize Europe in this external aspect, we shall be seriously at fault." What he objected to was a slavish imitation of Western ideas and the fallacious belief in the efficacy of such a project to lift the country out of darkness and ignorance.

Gandhian Nationalism

Gandhi was also critical of Western education. Given the fact that he had the exposure and opportunity to acquaint himself with western modes of thought, he was surprisingly staunchly opposed to western education. Unlike Tagore, he completely wanted to do away with western education because he felt that it created a pernicious influence. His book *Hind Swaraj* (1909) is a scathing attack on western 'civilization' where he argues that India will never be completely free till it rejects western civilization. He does not see anything redeeming in modern influence and states that: "…India is

being ground down not under the English heel, but that of modern civilization."(25) This is where Tagore and Gandhi move in divergent directions. While Gandhi takes a dogmatic and cynical stand against western (read modern) influence decrying anything foreign as alien and stultifying, Tagore's is a more temperate and blended approach encouraging a creative combining of cultural influences. As Prof Gohain states in his essay,

"…Here lies the radical difference in their approach to decolonisation. Gandhi, who believed in the viability of the caste system …had a basically conservative though flexible attitude. Tagore believed in the positive benefits of change and man's power to mould his own destiny, though man may at times be horribly led astray. For Tagore decolonisation did not mean rejection of the west, only an independence of mind freed from servility to western ideas and attitudes…" (26)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What was Tagore's view of the caste system?

Q 8: Who wrote *Hind Swaraj*?

11.4.1 Major Themes

The following are the major themes of the essay:

1. Gohain's essay is a rejoinder to the debates around the concept of decolonisation and its consequences in postcolonial societies that have had to grapple with the adverse after effects of years of colonial domination. His essay examines the impact of decolonisation in the context of Indian freedom movement through an examination of the nationalist ideology of two of the greatest minds of India —Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi.
2. Prof Gohain argues that decolonisation should not be confused with political liberation. According to him, decolonisation refers to uprooting of the complex structures of colonialist power that perpetuates the subjugation and exploitation of our minds. It operates as a form of cultural imperialism that seeks to rule by consent through a projection of stereotypes about colonial

societies as "areas of darkness" in need of salvation. Colonial education, especially the introduction of English language and literature, became a means of perpetuating these cultural stereotypes and psychologically brainwashing native population into believing the superiority of western civilisation.

3. Many of the postcolonial societies even after the formal process of decolonisation have had to deal with political instability and internal turmoil. As the essay shows, this is a legacy of colonial education that alienated and fragmented the composite social fabric of local cultures by creating hybridised identities, local westernised elite that helped in entrenching western culture and values. This is the insidious way in which colonial power structures were maintained and even after gaining freedom, it is not easy to dislodge its effects. It is also one of the reasons of internal political clashes in postcolonial societies—the lack of affinity between the ruling elite and the multitudes. The ruling elites, who are the true inheritors of a colonial legacy, continue to function like their foreign masters and persist in the exploitative ways of the colonisers. Thus, true freedom is not possible without a change in attitude and perspective. Decolonisation in this sense would mean removal of any lingering effects of colonialism from the psyche and reclaiming cultural identity.
4. Gohain analyses Gandhi and Tagore's thoughts on decolonisation. Both Gandhi and Tagore opposed British imperialism. Both were against the propagation of western education in India. However, there is a significant difference in the way Gandhi and Tagore felt about Western civilisation. Gandhi was opposed to any kind of western influence (modernism) because he considered western civilisation to be morally corrupt and exploitative. He did not see anything of value in it. Tagore, on the other hand, thought that there was much that India could

learn from European enlightenment philosophy. He did not favour blind imitation but a judicious and selective use of the best in European thought while still rooted to one's own cultural moorings. He also thought that the idea of 'nationalism' as a political idea was alien to Indian society. He feared that such an alien concept if it was allowed to grow in India could very possibly have detrimental effect on national unity. Because unlike Western nations that are characterised by racial homogeneity, India has a much diverse population in terms of culture and religion. He therefore thought that the idea of 'one nation' in a country that is ruled by taboos of racial and social intermingling is a recipe for disaster.

5. It has been pointed out by many postcolonial writers and critics that political liberation is not enough. True decolonisation can only happen when we resist the forces of colonisation that subjugate and exploit our minds. One of the ways colonial forces perpetuated their power was through the institutions of western education that functioned to spread imperialism. Western education –including the study of English literature and English language—in the hands of colonial power became an instrument of colonial propaganda to inculcate western values. Many postcolonial writers' and critics have indicated how colonial education supported and patronised policies of "cultural colonisation." Macaulay's "Minute on Indian education" is an example of how the British sought to create a class of people Indian in colour but English in thought and values. Such a policy allowed the colonisers to rule by consent. Many of the postcolonial nations have often had to deal with the legacy of colonialism riddled as they are with new forms of socio-political instability. Political independence for many of these nations have not translated into any real economic or cultural autonomy, as the effects of colonialism lingered on in language, education, and religion, as well as in economic and political structures.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What were Gandhi's views on western civilisation?

Q 10: How did Tagore view the idea of political nationalism?

11.4.2 Gohain's Prose Style

Gohain's writing style is characterised by clarity of thought and depth of erudition that is presented by means of logically threaded arguments. It has a lucidity of expression that is accessible to both academic and non-academic readers. Gohain's prose style is clear and precise without any superfluous element. His simple unadorned style reflects his grasp of the complex issues he writes about. This is evident in the numerous articles, reviews and commentaries he has written making his writings eminently readable. His writings on various topics and especially on issues concerning the Northeast reveal his political astuteness and intimate knowledge of the region's problems.

11.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF GOHAIN

Gohain is a well-known academic, political commentator, activist and a leading intellectual of Assam. He has always been a leading voice at the forefront of politics and public life in Assam and his essay is a reflection of his political acumen and academic rigor that serves as a critique of nationalist ideologies of existing times. Gohain's academic career has been mired in a number of controversies. At the height of the nationalist movement in Assam, Gohain's was a lone voice speaking out against the perils of Assamese nationalist chauvinism. In an essay that he wrote for the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1980, titled "The Cudgels of Chauvinism", Prof. Gohain had spoken out against the anti-foreigner movement terming it as "propaganda in the Assam press–skilfully mixing up news about influx of outsiders with stories of Bengali trickery, deceit and treachery." In fact, he has been at the centre of the state's anti–foreigner agitations and his

engagement with the political conundrums of the State still continues even at the risk of great personal threat. Whether one agrees with his views or not and despite his leftist leanings, for a large section of the Assamese middle class society, Prof. Gohain has come to represent the figure of the "public intellectual." Even his detractors and critics agree that Prof. Gohain's ideas have had a far-reaching impact on the intellectual and political life of Assam.



11.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the cultural and political implications of decolonisation and how its traces continue to negatively affect many of the postcolonial societies that were previously under colonial rule. We have seen how in our own context the lingering effects of decolonisation and globalisation continue their power and influence over our culture and society. We have also examined the ideology of nationalism through the different trajectories of thought between Gandhi and Tagore and how their ideas are still relevant for us in these times of globalisation and consumerism.



11.7 FURTHER READING

Hiren Gohain. (2011). "Two Roads to Decolonization: Tagore and Gandhi." *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 46, No. 31. pp 23-26. www.jstor.org

Rabindranath Tagore: "Nationalism in India." *Nationalism.* Retrieved from: https://ia800202.us.archive.org/26/items/nationalism00tagorich/nationalism00tagorich_bw.pdf

Gandhi, Mahatma. *Speeches. "*The Quit India Speeches, August 8, 1942" and "Speech at the Round Table Conference, November 11, 1931"

—. *Hind Swaraj*. Retrieved from: https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/hind_swaraj.pdf

Frantz Fanon. (2001). *The Wretched of the Earth.* London: Penguin Books.

11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Decolonisation refers to the dismantling of… ...from the erstwhile colonies of Europe. In practice however decolonisation is a much more… ...insidious. It is not just… ...but embraces all aspects of…...where the traces of decolonisation…...freedom. Decolonisation thus means…...of cultural and institutional forces which sustain it …...independence.

Ans to Q 2: Political independence does not... …as the effects of colonialism linger on in... …as well as… ...structures.

Ans to Q 3: Jose Marti was a… ...who had as early as in the nineteenth century proclaimed the… ...of colonialism. Jose Marti had argued that… ...legacies. The first was that it… ...in the minds of the colonised. And secondly, it created... …between the native elite and the common masses thus… ...in itself.

Ans to Q 4: The name of Fanon's book is *Wretched.*

Ans to Q 5: According to Fanon, the native… ...(read bourgeoisie) are the... …Fanon describes them as the… ...of colonialism

Ans to Q 6: Fanon did not entirely dismiss... …he did not regard western heritage as… ...For Fanon, the European model is still... …the only thing is that one must refrain from ...

Ans to Q 7: Tagore was ...and felt that... …it would, in course of time,… ...of the nation.

Ans to Q 8: Mahatma wrote *Hind Swaraj.*

Ans to Q 9: Gandhi was critical… ...(modernism) because he considered.... …he did not see anything of ...in it.

Ans to Q 10: According to Tagore, the idea of… …was alien…He feared that … …could very possibly have……national unity. Because unlike… …India has a much diverse population in terms of culture and religion. He therefore thought that… …is a recipe for disaster.



11.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Unit 11

Q 1: What are the two approaches to decolonisation according to Prof. Gohain?

Q 2: How did colonisation affect the minds of native population?

Q 3: "At the root of the Hindu civilization there is society, and at the root of European civilization, the nation." Why does Tagore say this?

Q 4: Why does the author say that political liberation failed to resolve the problems of colonialism?

Q 5: What radical difference in perspective divides Gandhi and Tagore on the issue of western education?

Q 8: Discuss Gandhi's ideas of western education on the basis of your reading of the text prescribed.

Q 9: Why did Tagore feel nationalism to be antithetical to Indian society?

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UNIT 12: CHANDRAKANTA MURASINGH: "KOKBOROK—HER PEOPLE HER PAST"

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Chandrakanta Murasingh: The Writer

12.3.1 His Life

12.3.2 His Works

12.4 Reading the Text

12.4.1 Major Themes

12.4.2 Murasingh's Prose Style

12.5 Critical Reception of Murasingh

12.6 Let us Sum up

12.7 Further Reading

12.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints only)

12.9 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- familiarise yourself with Chandrakanta Murasingh as an important writer from India's North East
- describe the significance of the essay "Kokborok—Her People Her Past"
- identify the various themes available in the essay
- discuss the prose styles of Chandrakanta Murasingh
- discuss the different ways in which Murasingh justifies her sense of being a writer from India's North East

12.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall discuss yet another North East Indian writer, whose name is Chandrakanta Murasingh, through one of his important

essays—"Kokborok: Her People and Her Past". He is one of the most well known poets from the North-eastern state of Tripura. Writing in Kokborok, the language of the indigenous tribe of that state, he has published five collections of poetry. He received the Bhasha Samman Award from Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, in 1996 for his contribution to the development of Kokborok literature. The essay "Kokborok: Her People and Her Past", about which you will read in this unit, is about his own language, which has been presently used only by nine lakh people.

12.3 CHANDRAKANTA MURASINGH: THE WRITER

The following sub sections will acquaint us with the life and works of Murasingh, one of the most popular writers from a North East Indian text like Tripura.

12.3.1 His Life

Chandrakanta Murasingh was born to a family of shifting cultivators in the remote Twibandal village in Sonamura Sub Division of Tripura in 1957. He is one of the best-known poets from the Northeast Indian state of Tripura. His poetry reveals a commitment to recording "the agonies of life in contemporary Tripura", a land where "the ugly thud of the boots of both extremists and the Indian Army" is fast replacing the cadence of rivulet and birdsong. He had difficulties in receiving his primary education as in those days; there was no decent primary school in his village, and his father Shyamapada Murasingh decided to send him to a distant school. However, this was vehemently opposed by the village chief who felt that contact with outsiders would dilute his tribal and Vaishnavite Hindu identity. There was a great tussle between the two. In the end, however, the chief agreed to his admission to Mirza S. B. School in a neighbouring village.

He started writing poetry for the wall magazine of our high school, N.C. Institution in Sonamura. That was in Bangla. The praise his first poem received from his teachers greatly inspired him. He

realised that he did have the gift for poetry and so he continued writing in both Kokborok and Bangla. His first publication outside the school magazine was in the Bangla newspaper, *Chinikok*, in 1979. This was after his matriculation. However, his most fruitful years as a poet came after he joined the Tripura Gramin Bank. He has now published five volumes of poetry. He has also edited three poetry anthologies including a Kokborok anthology of folk songs and poems.

He has always tried to capture the sights and sounds, the lights and shades of nature and Tripura's beautiful landscape. He was in love with the forest. As a kid, he would sometimes go to the forest with cows and sometimes accompany my parents to the *jhum* fields. In an interview, he said, "I think the forest with its musical rivulets and swirling leaves has grown quite profusely into my poetry. Besides these, the erosion of human values and traditions caused by modern influences and material development also form recurrent themes in my poetry. I would like to think that I have covered subjects ranging from the lush green *jhum* fields of remote tribal areas to the sophistication of seminar halls in the universities of Calcutta and Dhaka. But what preoccupy me most at present are the agonies of life in contemporary Tripura."

He now lives at Abhoynagar, Agartala and works in a bank.

12.3.2 His Works

Born to a family of shifting cultivators in the remote hamlet of Twibandal, Murasingh recalls his early struggle to receive a primary education. He describes his poetic enterprise as an attempt to capture the varied tones and shades of the Tripura landscape. This, as his poetry reveals, is not a merely natural landscape, but the complex terrain of everyday negotiation where nature and politics, the physical and the cultural, are inextricably engaged. And so, as he tells Kynpham S. Nongkynrih in an interview, his poetry actually embraces a vast topography, from the emerald green fields of distant

tribal hamlets to the sophisticated environs of Kolkata seminar rooms.

He remains acutely aware that he represents a language that has faced a long history of marginalisation (Kokborok was declared a state language as recently as 1979). While he acknowledges certain similarities between the poets of the Northeast, he is conscious of the trend to view the region as culturally amorphous – an impulse that invariably irons out the distinctive identity problems faced by smaller ethnic groups like his own. A lyrical and elegiac vein accompanies the pungency of satire. Far from being romantic or escapist, his vivid evocation of his beloved and embattled forests make his political comment all the more searing. The reader also begins to realise that there are certain moments in the process of cultural, political and spiritual upheaval that can be archived only by the voice of a poet: *"The haunting* madhavi *fragrance escapes the rustle of spring air.It is acrid with the smell of gunpowder."*



LET US KNOW

Kokborok is part of the Bodo-Garo (or Garo-Bodo) group of languages, a branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages which fall under Sino-Tibetan language family. It is very close to two other Bodo-Garo languages: Dimasa and Boro. Kokborok is a relatively homogenous language. Nevertheless, there are dialect variants, which are close to Dimasa and Boro. Kokborok is a language of communication and has no official status, even at a local level. Kokborok is taught in an experimental school, with the agreement of state authorities. There are two rival writing systems for Kokborok. One, first developed by Protestant missionaries, is based on the Latin alphabet; the other is based on the Bengali writing system. Both writing systems are in use, despite the open opposition of some activists. There is a relatively extensive literature: grammars,

dictionaries, children's books, novels, poetry anthologies. The literature available is relatively recent, however, and edited at a local level by activists and religious organisations such as the Tei Hukumu Mission. A couple of films have been made in the Kokborok language. One such film is Yarwng, directed by Joseph Pulinthanath, which is the first film in the Kokborok language.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How does Murasingh view his poetry?

Q 2: What is Kokborok? How does Murasingh view the status of the Kokborok language?

12.4 READING THE TEXT

The major theme of the essay is Murasingh's views on the Kokborok language, which is gradually declining. Thus, the actual focus of the essay has been on the history and the plight of the people, who have been using this language, which tends to be extinct. In the following sub-sections, you will get to read in some detail about the themes implicit in the essay prescribed.

12.4.1 Major Themes

Murasingh very clearly reflects on the three aspects of the Kokborok language in this essay:

(a) Kokborok: Her people and her past

(b) Life and living as pictured in Kokborok folk songs

(c) A Glimpse into the realm of Kokborok folk literature

S. B. K. Dev Varman, in "The Tribes of Tripura: A Dissertation", states that Tripura is a relic of the name mentioned in the great-Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* coming down to the historic period in the Ain-i-Akbari. The stories of conquests of the Kings of Tripura continued till in the 16th century, and its territory stretched from the

Sundarbans in the west and Burma in the east. Such a sprawling empire sheltered in its bosom people of many races belonging to different region and climes. In the centuries, several tribes migrated to Tripura in search of new pastures along the rivers or in the fastnesses of the hills away from their natural enemies. The dialects of these people belong to the same big family of the Tibeto-Burman languages. Ethnologically, most of the tribes are of the same non-Aryan stock. In short, the tribal people of Tripura are more or less akin both linguistically and anthropologically and represent a mixture of various races, which have amalgamated within the historical period. The important tribes of Tripura are divided religion wise into three distinct groups: Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. The Tripura Kshatriyas profess Hinduism. The Lushais, Kukis and Garoes are mostly Christians, and Buddhism is prevalent among the Chakmas and the Moghs.

The **attempt to re-establish the lesser-used language Kokborok** is really encouraging for the people. Dr. Tilottoma Misra in her 'Introduction' to "The Oxford Anthology from North East India" says, "Tripura's cultural history has been influenced by its long history of close proximity to Bengal. Though the ruling dynasties of this small kingdom had always belonged to one of the indigenous tribal communities of the state, the cultural dominance of the plains by people from the neighbouring Bengal under the patronage of the Tripuri rulers continued to create tension in the region...It is only after the rise of militancy amongst the indigenous groups of Tripura that the Kokborok language attained its status as an official language and at present conscious attempts are being made to retrieve the rich oral cultural of the people which reflects the economic and social life of the communities." Commenting on the trend of modern day Kokborok language, Misra further states that "The modern literature that is taking shape in the Kokborok language, on the other hand, displays a self-confidence and a rootedness in the lived experience of the people. Some of the poems and stories translated from

Kokborok which have been included in this collection are refreshingly original and in their depiction of certain enduring truths about life they defy all stereotypical constructions about notions of mainstream and peripheral culture."

On the other hand, in an interview, Murasingh says, "Though the Northeast is known as 'the seven-sister states', yet we do not know each other all that well. One cannot understand another's language, culture, poetry, and so on except through translations. Through such translations there is now a little interaction. Of course, in some languages like Assamese, Manipuri and Khasi, good poetry is being written. However, the problem is with the small ethnic groups, which are unable to develop their mother tongues. Yes, some similarities in the poetry are definitely seen. This is because of the similarities in the landscape and the contemporary situation. The neglect of the region by successive governments seems to be unending. From the age of the *Mahabharata,* this land has been treated as a hunting ground. Because of this continuing neglect, there is now an identity crisis, resulting in unrest. In the forest, instead of the fragrance of flowers, there is the odour of the gunpowder. The ugly thuds from the boots of both extremists and Indian Army have replaced all natural sounds. In the poetry, we hear the shrieks of the victims caught in this vicious conflict.

Chandrakanta Murasingh in this essay **highlights on the Kokborok language and its rich heritage**. He begins the essay by saying, "Tripura is a small state in the north-eastern region. The mother tongue of the Tripuries, the majority of the indigenous people of the state, is Kokborok. Eight communities of the original inhabitants of Tripura speak the language Kokborok, which belongs to the Bodo branch of the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages. The communities which speak Kokborok are: Tipra, Reang, Noatia, Jamatia, Rupini, Kaloi, Murasingh and Uchai. Besides these communities, some other indigenous people of the state and adjacent areas also use Kokborok as their language for

communication. The Tripuries living in Hill-Chittagong of Bangladesh and the Reangs living in Mizoram also speak Kokborok. The total number of Kokborok speakers is approximately nine lakhs."

However, Murasingh also laments that **the language was not given importance** during the princely rule: "During the princely rule the Kokborok language suffered worst neglect. Though the language was the mother tongue of the royal family, it did not yet receive its due status and importance. Nevertheless, it deserves to be mentioned that *Rajmala,* the book on the so-called history of the royal family, was first written in Kokborok language."

The two prominent languages used in Tripura are Kokborok and Bengali. The mother tongue of the 'Tripuris', the majority among the indigenous people of the land, is Kokborok. Eight communities out of the 19 of the original inhabitants speak this language. During the long years of princely rule, Kokborok suffered the worst neglect. Although it was the mother tongue of the rulers, the Maharajas felt ashamed of speaking the language of the poor common subjects and of the near-naked hill people practising Jhum. In the absence of recognition over a deplorably long period, a script acceptable to everyone has not yet been developed. The word Kokborok means the 'language of the Borok race.' On the one hand, the spectrum was the wishful claim of the royal family to have hailed from the illustrious pre-historic 'Lunar dynasty' (Chandra Vamsa), on the other, there flowed the stream of Kokborok language with its tributaries, satiating the thirst for self-expression of its poor commonplace speakers. As a living language, Kokborok developed into a wide range of oral literature, flowering into stories, proverbs, riddles, songs and lyrics Life and living are pictured in Kokborok oral literature in their details. Starting from the description of the advent of a new season, Kokborok oral literature notices the power of hierarchy in nature, it comprehends and states, in its own simple way, abstract concepts of good and evil, of justice and duty.

In due course of time, some small but permanent villages came up in the forests, but the Jhumia had to go to their Jhum fields from these remote villages. In their daily journey to and fro, and during work in the fields young men and women developed relationships which often culminated in love, and such love stories are celebrated in songs and stories. The traditional Jhum cultivation demanded back-breaking labour from sunrise to sunset. After such a day of toil, evenings called for recreations. This included songs, dances and story-telling sessions. With the rainbow, colours of their stories the elderly narrators carried their audience, mostly young, to a world between reality and dreams. The Jhum being the principal economic activity of the Tripuri life, it frequently formed the backdrop of the stories. The tales also introduced the social and religious practices, social and political customs, faiths, beliefs, values, taboos and totems. The Kharengbar-tale is about a taboo, so is the Chethuang tale. Some of the folk-tales hold in them suggestions of social evolution. In spite of being one of the most ancient races, a comprehensive history of the Tripuris has not yet been constructed. Attention of history has been usually invariably drawn to the kings and the court. The course of development of the indigenous society has remained mostly unknown. As a source material for social history, oral literature is of great value. With the passage of time, the present generation is moving away from the treasures and pleasures of oral literature.

Throughout the essay, Murasingh also appeals to readers to take up a **study of folk songs** in this connection—"We may urge upon the discerning reader to take up an in-depth study of the rich store of folk songs of the tribes of Tripura, the songs that speak of the joys and sorrows of the people who live 'far from the madding crowds' ignoble strife' and in the 'cool sequester vale' of their life and yet are as imaginative and sensitive, as eloquent in their expression of feelings and thoughts as are the affluent, fortunate and sophisticated people of the world."

Thirdly, Murasingh explains about the **Kokborok Folk literature**. At the same time, he urges upon the readers to read this rich almost oral literature of the original language of Tripura. Since, the Jhum being the principal economic activity of the Tripuris, it frequently appears as the background of the stories. Murasingh, so says, "Though the stories of the heroes and fools, of love and enterprise, through the tales of social and religious practice and through narratives of socio-political customs like the 'maid-hunt' by king's men, the folk tales reveal the faith, beliefs and values of the Tripuries. In this remote part of the land, away from the so-called 'modernism', these stories bring to light the simple yet vigorous lifestyle, strong sense of values, an innate artistic temperament. In spite of being one of the most ancient races, no comprehensive history of the Tripuris is available yet." Tripuri folk tales are rich in variety and in artistic presentation. Among the stories, one finds themes of moral, of social guidance and restrictions, of ancient legends, fertility, taboos, creation and of fate and destiny.

Murasingh also says that, in some of these folk tales, **suggestions of social evolution** can be traced. Folk literature evolves with the society and marks of this evolution can be traced. It is to be noted that unlike in English language, in Kokborok language, there is no categorisation of folk tales. Murasingh so says, "In English, we find categorisation of folklores into folk tales, fairy tales, myth and legends etc. In Kokborok, we do not have such divisions. In Kokborok, there is a single term for folklores that is Kereng Kothoma. Kereng means the land tortoise and Kothoma means a tale. Folk tales are therefore, tales of the wild land tortoise, whether there be a tortoise in it or not."

Thus, throughout the essay, Murasingh's main purpose has been to appeal to the readers and scholars to make a thorough study of the rich heritage of Kokborok and folk tales so that the language can enjoy a recognised position in the world outside.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What are some of the important themes of the essay?

Q 4: What is Kokborok? How does Murasingh view the status of the Kokborok language?

Q 5: What does Murasingh has to say about Kokborok oral literature?

12.4.2 Murasingh's Prose Style

As a poet, Murasingh's prose is appealing and attracts more to reader's heart than to intellect. His own mother tongue and its deplorable status make him to eulogise the language Kokborok and its rich heritage. Kokborok is a language with its unique folk and oral literature. Throughout the essay, Murasingh's style reflects his emotional tie with his own language as well as his intense feelings towards preserving this beautiful language. His style of writing is straightforward without any ambiguity left to readers' mind. As a writer of Kokborok language, Murasingh's writings reflect the unsophisticated originality with truth.

12.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF MURASINGH

Murasingh's poems have been published in various prestigious journals and anthologies including those from Dhaka. Some have been translated into several Indian languages. He has won two state literary awards and the Sahitya Akademi has recognised his contribution to Kokborok literature by giving him the Bhasha Samman Award in 1996.

His poetic enterprise is viewed as an attempt to capture the varied tones and shades of the Tripura landscape. This, as his poetry reveals, is not a merely natural landscape, but the complex terrain of everyday negotiation where nature and politics, the physical and the cultural, are inextricably engaged. He has very rightly stated in his interview with Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih that his poetry actually embraces a vast topography, from the emerald green fields of distant tribal hamlets to the sophisticated environs of Kolkata seminar rooms.

Murasinh is very much aware that he represents a language that has faced a long history of marginalisation as Kokborok was declared a state language only in 1979. While he acknowledges certain similarities with the North Eastern poets, he is also very much conscious of the distinctive identity problems faced by smaller ethnic groups like his own. His poems reveal the sharp edge of political critique. The poet's chief tool is irony and satire, which he deploys with a skill that can be both savage and understated.



12.6 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have realised that Chandrakanta Murasingh is an important name in the literary landscape of Tripura. He has established himself as one of the most well known poets from the North-eastern state of Tripura. Writing in Kokborok, the language of the indigenous tribe of that state, he has published five collections of poetry. The essay "Kokborok: Her People and Her Past", is about his own language, which has been presently used only by nine lakhs people. You are by now aware that Murasingh, in this essay, very clearly reflects the three aspects of the language: Kokborok: Her people and her past, Life and living as pictured in Kokborok fold songs, and a glimpse into the realm of Kokborok Folk literature.



12.7 FURTHER READING

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Misra, Tilottoma. (Ed.). (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-east India*: *Poetry and Essays*. OUP.

Web Resources:

https://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/2716/27/Chandrakanta-Murasingh

12.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: His poetic enterprise was part of an attempt to capture the varied tones and shades of the Tripura landscape… …this landscape is a complex terrain of everyday negotiation where nature and politics, the physical and the cultural, are inextricably engaged… …as he tells Kynpham S. Nongkynrih in an interview, his poetry actually embraces a vast topography, from the emerald green fields of distant tribal hamlets to the sophisticated environs of Kolkata seminar rooms.

Ans to Q 2: Kokborok is part of the Bodo-Garo (or Garo-Bodo) group of languages, a branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages which fall under Sino-Tibetan language family… … he remains acutely aware that he represents a language that has faced a long history of marginalisation… … the language had been neglected for a long time, even by its own kings, before Tripura merged with India in 1949… …it is only in 1979 that it was declared as a state language a recognition that boosted the morale of the poets and writers and helped them to develop Kokborok literature according to modern trends.

Ans to Q 3: Chandrakanta Murasingh in this essay, highlights on the Kokborok language and its rich heritage… …but he also laments that the language was not given importance during the princely rule… …, Murasingh also appeals to readers to take up a study of Kokborok folk literature… …he also states that, in some of these folk tales, suggestions of social evolution can be traced.

Ans to Q 4: Although it was the mother tongue of the rulers, the Maharajas felt ashamed of speaking the language of the poor common subjects and of the near-naked hill people practising Jhum…. …in the absence of recognition over a deplorably long period of time, a script acceptable to everyone has not yet been developed.

Ans to Q 5: As a living language, Kokborok developed into a wide range of oral literature, flowering into stories, proverbs, riddles, songs and lyrics Life and living are pictured in Kokborok oral literature in their details.

Starting from the description of the advent of a new season, Kokborok oral literature notices the power of hierarchy in nature, it comprehends and states, in its own simple way, abstract concepts of good and evil, of justice and duty.



12.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Would you like to consider Murasingh's poetic enterprise to be an attempt to capture the varied tones and shades of the Tripura landscape?

Q 2: How does the poetry of Murasingh reveal the complex terrain of everyday negotiation where nature and politics, the physical and the cultural, are inextricably engaged.

Q 3: Do you think that Murasingh succeeds in upholding the cause of the Kokborok language that has faced a long history of marginalisation? Discuss with reference to the text.

Q 4: Chandrakanta Murasingh in this essay, highlights the Kokborok language and its rich heritage. Discuss.

Q 5: Which are the three main aspects of the Kokborok language made explicit in this essay?

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UNIT 13: EASTERINE IRALU: "SHOULD WRITERS STAY IN PRISON"

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Easterine Iralu: The Writer

13.3.1 Her Life

13.3.2 Her Works

13.4 Reading the Text

13.4.1 Major Themes

13.4.2 Iralu's Prose Style

13.5 Critical Reception of Iralu1

13.6 Let us Sum up

13.7 Further Reading

13.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints only)

13.9 Possible Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- familiarise yourself with Easterine Iralu as an important writer from India's North East
- describe the significance of the essay "Should Writers Stay in Prison"
- identify the various important themes available in the essay
- discuss the narrative techniques used by Iralu
- discuss the different ways in which Iralu justifies her sense of being a writer of North East India.

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the thirteenth unit of the course on North East Literature. In this unit, we shall read about Easterine Kire Iralu who is a poet, writer and novelist from Nagaland. In her works she reflects on the realities of life the

way it is in Nagaland, and the complexities around the colonial atrocities and discrimination, and the in-house rivalry and ideological differences among the Naga brethren fighting for freedom. She has brought the fascinating and vibrant Naga culture to the rest of the world through her prolific writings that evoke a raw appeal of the age-old traditions and scintillating folklores from the deepest corners of the mystic state of Nagaland. The essay "Should Writers Stay in Prison" is one of her best reflections on the plight of the writers in Nagaland. Originally delivered as a Speech at International PEN Conference, Tromso: Norway, 6-12 September 2004, this interesting essay will help you to understand many of the problems faced by a Naga writer in contemporary times.

13.3 EASTERINE IRALU: THE WRITER

In the following subsections, you will read about the life and works of Iralu.

13.3.1 Her Life

She was born on Easter Sunday, March 29, 1959 and educated at the Baptist High School, Kohima, for the first ten years of schooling. She continued her studies by getting a pre-university degree at the Kohima College, a BA degree from Shillong and a year of Journalistic studies at Delhi followed by occasional writing in a column for the local newspapers. In the next two years, she worked on a Masters Degree in English Literature. With a first class MA in Literature, later she was appointed as Editor in the State Government of Nagaland's Directorate of Information and Publicity. However, after two years, she resigned from the editorial job to become a teacher at the Kohima College and then moved on to a more permanent teaching job at the North Eastern Hill University, Kohima.

While teaching at college and university, she continued to write a column for one of the local newspapers, *The Nagaland Observer.* Aged 22 in 1982, she published her first volume of poems, *Kelhoukevira*. Written in English, it was the first volume of poetry to

be published individually by a Naga poet. The main poems mourn the warriors of Nagaland killed in the Indo-Naga conflict. In the fifties, she had lost an uncle to the conflict and was to lose two more in subsequent years.

In 1997, while working towards a PhD degree, one of her dreams of making a music CD of her poem-songs was fulfilled. She worked with Daphne Kent and Niu Vihienuo. A second dream was fulfilled in 2001 with publishing a volume of poems and short stories with accompanying sketches by good friends of her, artists from the North-east of India. Iralu's *Ernie Wombat and the Water Dwellers* a fun book about a wombat who falls into a waterway and is pulled by strong currents till he surfaces in Dzüleke in the Naga Hills. The book introduces Nagaland through the eyes of an Australian animal and we were happy to look at the Nagas and their habits through the uninformed eyes of a newcomer. In the same year, she wrote her historical novel *A Naga Village Remembered,* an account of the last battle between the colonial forces of Britain and the little warrior village of Khonoma. Also categorised as historical fiction, this was again the first novel in English by a Naga writer.

Aged 5 years, her first memory of the conflict includes lying flat on a cold cement floor with her younger brother, when shots reverberated round our neighbourhood. While her Grandfather and brother were in bed, a bullet whizsed over their heads and went through the wall. Her father was shot at but the bullet hit her cousin in the thigh instead. Curfews and continued periods of gunfire were all part of growing up in Nagaland. Frequently, men came to her Grandfather's house with stories to tell of captured men being tortured and killed. However, the conflict took on a much uglier face with the emergence of infighting in the 80s. In 1987, a school friend was killed in the heart of Kohima town. Ever since then, the cycle of killing and counter revenge killing has not abated. Two levels of violence exist in her homeland. On one hand, Indian army atrocities

continue. A military convoy began shelling, at random, civilian houses in Kohima in 1995 where many were killed and maimed, including children. A few years before that, many houses were burnt in another town, Mokokchung, resulting in loss of many civilian lives. Civilian killings by the army continue to occur on a smaller scale. On the other level is the infighting from ideological differences between the Naga freedom fighters.

From 2000 to early 2005, she personally experienced the stress of living in a house that was stalked by armed men at night because of the political writings of her spouse. Threats were also directed at her when an article of her appeared in the papers protesting the killings. The abnormality of life was something she had resigned herself to, tapped telephones, every movement of her family closely monitored and the horror of sitting up in the night with a double barrel gun to protect my children against stalkers. The brutality of life in Nagaland, especially the brutalisation of many young men made her fear for the safety of her children. Her older daughter was traumatised on a short trip when their car was stopped and they were held for questioning by a group holding them at gunpoint. Her sister came within five meters of being shot when armed men began to indiscriminately fire at their human target, felling an innocent citizen. Her grown son was kidnapped for three days.

13.3.2 Her Works

Easterine Kire Iralu has written several books in English including three collections of poetry and short stories. As mentioned already, her first novel, *A Naga Village Remembered*, was the first ever Naga novel to be published. She has translated about 200 oral poems from her native language Tenyidie into English. Her forthcoming books include *Forest Song, A Volume of Spirit Stories,* and *Bitter Wormwood*, a novel on the Indo-Naga conflict. Easterine is founder and partner in a publishing house, Barkweaver, which gathers and publishes Naga folktales.

Mari, her bestselling novel, recounts the true story of a young mother who after losing her fiancé in the war bravely makes the decision to live on for her child and finds happiness again. It also portrays some unknown facets of the World War II, a lesser known but ferocious battle fought against the Japanese troops in Nagaland. This novel tells the story of seventeen-year-old Mari O'Leary and her young sisters as they are evacuated from their home and separated from the rest of their family following the Japanese invasion of India in 1944. Even as she pines for her fiancé Vic, a soldier in the British army, Mari and her sisters are forced to run from village to village, camping in fields, eating herbs for food, seeking shelter or a trustworthy friend, until the madness has passed. A sensitive recounting of a true story, Mari is also the story of Kohima and its people. Easterine Kire brings alive a simpler time in a forgotten place that was ravaged by war before it was noticed by the rest of the world.

Her latest book *Bitter Wormwood*, a novel on the Indo-Naga conflict, is a stirring insight on how the decades' long freedom struggle has changed the lives of the common people in Nagaland. Easterine has been actively involved in working on creating better opportunities for the Naga youth and nurturing and evangelising the Naga folktales. She has just released her first children's book in English in Nagaland in December 2011.

Her works reflect the realities of life the way it is in Nagaland and the complexities around the colonial atrocities and discrimination, and the in-house rivalry and ideological differences among the Naga brethren fighting for freedom. She has brought the fascinating and vibrant Naga culture to the rest of the world through her prolific writings that evoke a raw appeal of the age-old traditions and scintillating folklores from the deepest corners of the mystic state of Nagaland.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Mention about some of the works of Easterine Iralu.

Q 2: What is the significance of Iralu as a Naga writer?

13.4 READING THE TEXT

The following subsections will help you to read the essay in terms of its different aspects.

13.4.1 Major Themes

Use of Political History of Nagaland

The essay titled "Should Writers stay in prison?" is about the writers and their inherent problems. At the outset of the essay, Easterine Eralu makes it clear: "Every man is a story. Every nation is a bristling galaxy of stories. To be able to share one's story – shouldn't that be a basic human right? Where there is denial of the freedom to tell our stories, invisible prisons are created. Invisible prisons are more poisonous, more effective than visible prisons. The denial of the right to tell our stories violates our humanity." She brings in the idea of prison because as a writer one has to undergo certain inhibitions imposed on him or her by some social factors. At first, she examines her own interpretation of prison, that relates to her own challenge of telling her own story, which is crippled by circumstances. As she states:

"I live on the edge of the earth. Perhaps, you, too, live on your own edges of the earth. My edge of the earth is called Nagaland. In the minds of its people, Nagaland is a nation. What is its story? The poetry of the hills and dark, dense woods, the spirit stories that nestle in every village, the high romance of star-crossed lovers as well as of the people who turn into stars, and now, in recent years, the long holocaust of genocide, rape and torture of a gentle people."

Although the essay appears to be a personal one, yet the essay, in the process discloses the social and political history of Nagaland also. According to Dr. Tilottama Misra, "The scribal tradition is a recent one amongst the Nagas and before the development of a script for the Naga languages through the efforts of the American Baptist missionaries; literature was confined only to the oral form. Amongst the 14 major Naga tribes, speaking about 30 different languages, there is a rich tradition of the oral. So, adaptations and trans-creations of oral literature constitute a significant a part of print literature in modern times. Since, under the initiative of the missionaries, most of the Naga writers from the first group of literates honed their literary skills on translations of the Gospels, written literature of the early phase took on a moralistic note. Amongst the Ao Nagas, who were the first to come into contact with the Christian missionaries stationed at the adjacent district of Sibsagar in Assam, the first printed book was one of alphabets in the Roman script published in 1880 by Rev Edward Clark, who came to work among the Ao Nagas in 1876."

So, the different tribes of the Naga society took the written form after the arrival of Christianity. This transition from oral tradition to written one was a significant event in the history of Nagaland. In addition, that in the process results in vast appealing and heart touching literature from Nagaland. Dr. Misra also narrates, "The literature that developed in the different Naga languages during the early years of their acquiring written forms, bore the recognizable stamp of the style, imagery and diction of the Bible." She further states that "the changes that came to its people after the outbreak of war between the Naga underground army and the Indian Government forces which completely transformed the cultural ethos of the people, bringing in significant changes in what was considered the 'Naga way of life."

Iralu, as a very sensitive writer depicts in this essay the agonies and ecstasies of her people and native place, which was

still a few decades ago completely deprived of the opportunities prevalent in the main land of India. Commenting on the situation, the eminent writer Temsula Ao has stated, "The post-1950s generation of Naga writers have journeyed through territories of the mind which are distant from the world of simple Christian pieties upheld by the newly converted Christian writers of the earlier period. The new literature, most of which is in English, has sprung from the staccato cry of the machine guns and reflects the revolutionary ideals of the militants as well as the disillusionment with their ways that followed. The course of the struggle has also transformed the whole idiom of poetry as well as prose fiction and words with sinister connotations have crept into the vocabulary of common speech."

Iralu, so says about her experience of growing up in Nagaland, "Curfews and continued periods of gun-fire were all a part of growing up in Nagaland."



LET US KNOW

The following is an attempt to let you know very briefly about the **political history of Nagaland**. You can use this as a background to your study of Iralu's text.

In the year 1816, Assam was invaded by Myanmar, following which Myanmar started controlling the place from 1819 to 1826. In the year 1826, the British started ruling over this region. By the year 1892, the entire Naga region excepting the Tuensang area was under the control of the British. The British rule brought an end to the massive bloodshed and inter-regional conflicts. The history of the North East India of which Naga Hills form a part underwent a significant change with the conclusion of the Treaty of Yandabo on 24th February 1826. However, the year 1832 led to more direct Anglo-Naga contact and the necessity of safer road communications between the strategic state of Manipur and the fabulous Brahmaputra valley through Naga Hills.

First, the British were not able to control the Naga areas. From 1854-1865, there were as many as 19 raids committed by the Nagas resulting in the loss of 232 British subjects including some officers. World War I did not affect the Naga much except for the labour corps sent to France. About 2000 Nagas were sent to France to participate in the War. There, they came to know about the outside world.

However, the World War II affected the Nagas to a great extent. Many battles were fought in the Naga Hills. The fiercest battle was fought in Kohima between the Japanese and the Allied soldiers. The British control of the Naga Hills came to end when India got independence in 1947.

In 1951, a Naga delegate led by Phizo went to Delhi to meet the Prime Minister of India to discuss their political aspiration. Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India gave a negative attitude towards their demand. Thus, there was no way out except resorting to violence. Hence, the Naga national Movement took an armed struggle with India. As time went by, the Naga political problem became more serious. The Nagas boycotted the first general election of India held in 1952 under the direction of the Naga national council. No one filed nomination for candidature. No one turned up to cast vote. On the other hand, the Naga national Council was strengthened and more organisations emerged in order to intensify the movement.

There were mainly three bodies in the underground organisation:

1. The Naga national Council, a political party instituted in 1945
2. The Federal Government of Nagaland.
3. The Federal Army

P. N. Luthra, in his book, *Nagaland: From A District to a State* says: "Varied movements in the pursuit of political aims, have characterised the recent history of our country. The Indian national Congress worked for independence through a programme of non-violence. Since Independence, certain states

have come into being by adopting different measures. The creation of the state of Andhra Pradesh was the result of a fast unto death. The State of Maharashtra was found through a combination of violent agitation and self-sacrifice. The Punjab emerged as a state through the assertion of linguistic identity backed by threats of self-immolation.

The history of the State of Nagaland presents yet another variant. It has a chequered history of travail and suffering, which touched every home and hearth of its territory which presents a record of passionate drama of a people devoted to their land and their way of life."

After India's independence, Nagaland remained a part of the state of Assam. The extremist people and the Naga groups took part in an intense revolt for freedom from the nation of India. However, finally, the Indian army succeeded in making this revolt a failure in the year 1955.

The district of Assam called Naga Hills and the Tuensang area were made to represent a single unit under the Indian administration. At the meeting of Naga People's Convention in the year 1960, it was finally decided that Nagaland would be considered a full-fledged state of India. In the year 1963, Nagaland was finally declared a separate state, which constitutes an important part of Nagaland history. Various rebellious actions continued in the hands of the extremists and the Naga ethnic people. The restoration of peace in Nagaland is a major part of Nagaland history. It pertains to the initiative taken for resolving the political disturbances in Nagaland.

At one point, the situation was out of control and presidential rule had to be declared in this state. In the year 1975, many anti-government leaders agreed to accept the administration of the Indian government but there were still some people who kept on agitating against the government.

The Restoration of Peace in Nagaland:

This is one of the most important segments of the history of Nagaland. It pertains to the efforts taken to restore peace and order in the state of Nagaland. Before and after independence, the Naga ethnic people and some extremists took part in a number of revolts demanding the separate identity of the Naga people outside the administration of the Indian government. Nagaland was declared a separate and full-fledged state in the year 1963. After this declaration, a lot of initiative was being taken to resolve the existing political problems.

A very significant name in this context is the Nagaland Baptist Church Convention or the NBCC. In the third convention, the Nagaland Baptist Church Convention took the decision to usher in peace in the state. This convention was held between the 31st of January and the 2nd of February in the year 1964. At this convention, about five thousand people belonging to the different Nagaland ethnic tribes were present. In this convention, the government was offered the suggestion to take the help of Mr Shankar Deva, Mr Jayaprakesh Narayan, Mr Michael Scott and Mr Bimala Prasad Chaliha. Based on this convention, the well-known 'Peace Mission' was established. Mr Michael Scott, who was an Anglican churchman and Mr Jayaprakesh Narayan, a Sarvodaya leader and a devout Gandhian had big roles to play in this mission of peace in Nagaland. Another eminent figure associated with this mission was Mr B P Chaliha, the then chief minister of Assam.

Theme of Social Reality:

Iralu, in her essay says, "Naga society was and continues to be a highly oral society. Both men and women take pride in oratory skill, which is an expression of the agility of the mind. We have an overwhelming majority of orators but only a handful of writers. We feel the immense pressure to document our oral literature and native wisdom and simultaneously direct the path Naga writing would like to take. But Naga writing is facing the same fate that Aboriginal writing of Australia had faced some years ago."

The rich tradition of story-telling and oral literature has huge impact on the present day writings of Nagaland. The culture of Nagaland, a blend of different tribes like Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Pochury, Chang, Konyak, Phom, Khiamniungam, Yimchunger, Sangtam, Lotha, Zeliang, Sumi is reflex of colourful state with rich heritage of oral tradition.

Moreover, there is change to be seen in every aspects of Naga society. Commenting on this, M. Horam, in his book *Nagas old ways new trends*, (page92)says, "One of the most significant features taking place in Naga society is not only the tremendous social changes that are taking place but also deliberate endeavour by the State Government to change its social structure –specially in the field of economic developments. From the primitive life, they have travelled very far and thus the process which was started, more appropriately after the Second World War, have now received greater impetus, and more effectively after the granting of statehood to the Nagas in1963."

He also affirms that change by saying that "one of the most important factors that bring about the change is due to social unrest developed during the past two decades, there were and are certain number of Naga individuals who were and are discontented, and we may, therefore, safely, classify the nature of social unrest which brings about the change in Naga society as 'man unrest' and 'individual restlessness', the first kind was shown by the armed conflict between the Nagas and the Indian Army which resulted in the granting of a statehood after much bloodshed and hatred

The Theme of Personal Agony

The essay also focuses on Iralu's personal experience as a writer from Nagaland. The very title of the essay is suggestive of some of the important aspects of her own career as a writer. Explaining about the concept of 'prison', she says, "Naga writers face the experience of apathy and more. We have always lived on the periphery. This is my experience; I have been marginalised simply

because I am a Naga, twice marginalised because I am a woman and thrice marginalised because I am a tribal, a member of an indigenous community. This is the invisible prison that I am referring to." Thus, her stance as Naga writer is full of dissatisfaction. There is no publishing house to publish their writings born out of their first hand experience. That results in transforming their own tales by some outsiders, who sometimes distort the second hand experience and go on publishing with full credit. Expressing her dissatisfaction over this issue, she says, "At an international story festival in Delhi, January 2004, the time given to me to speak about Naga literature was one and a half minutes! Throughout, the moderator kept reminding me to be brief. She further stated: "Our truths are being distorted. Our stories are being stolen. Our voices are being silenced. These prisons are man-made and invisible. But they are as real as visible prisons.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: How does Iralu consider the Naga Political History against which she views herself as a writer?

Q 4: What is Iralu's view on the oral cultures of Nagaland?

Q 5: Do you think that Iralu is satisfied as a writer from Nagaland?

13.4.2 Iralu's Prose Style

Iralu's prose style is candid without any hypocrisy and her depiction is based on truth and reality. The ongoing violent situation of Nagaland, which was the aftermath of historical discrimination, is transparently reflected by her writings. This essay is the result of her pain of being a Naga, a writer and being deprived of their due rights. The brazen realities of her hometown make her shed tears of anguish and dissatisfaction through her writings and that results in her exceptionally honest and beautiful writings. A product of her deepest and intense feeling, the essay is strongly worded and her

language is the language from the core of her heart reflecting the realities of her hometown.

13.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF IRALU

Kire Iralu is a poet, writer, and novelist from Nagaland. She is one of the finest story tellers from the region and has written several books in English including three collections of poetry and short stories. Her first novel, *A Naga Village Remembered*, was the first-ever Naga novel to be published. She was awarded the Silver Medal for Best Creative Writing in the All India Essay Contest organised by the Bertrand Russell Study Forum, 1980.

After a trip to Norway, she received information about the International Cities of Refuge Network. In 2005, she took the offer of being put on a program and moved to Northern Norway in March 2005. The one year in a city of refuge, and freedom from a life where it was normal to hear gunshots in the night, every night, and be in constant fear of death has been very positive for her. She has written six books during her stay in Tromsø, of which two are being published in 2006. She continues to pray and dream of peace for her people and reflect it in her poetry. At the same time, she is now able to admit and talk about the long-term damage to her people the years of protracted conflict have inflicted and she has slowly begun to address this in her new writings. While many of the writers in cities of refuge have experienced prison physically, her people and she has been living within an invisible prison for many years, denied freedom of expression, freedom to nationhood and most painfully, freedom to life itself. Iralu has been praised in several blocks for trying to find new ways to help her people, especially the young ones whose future should not be shadowed any longer by the conflict.



13.6 LET US SUM UP

As we come to the end of the unit, we have familiarised ourselves with Easterine Iralu who is an important writer from India's North East. The

essay "Should Writers Stay in Prison" is one of her best reflections on the plight of the writers in Nagaland. Originally delivered as a Speech at International PEN Conference, Tromso: Norway, 6-12 September 2004, this interesting essay will help you to understand many of the problems faced by a Naga writer in contemporary times. Thus, in an essay like this Iralu justifies her sense of being a writer of North East India. In her works, her main preoccupation has been to expose the realities of life the way it is in Nagaland. Besides, the complexities around the colonial atrocities and discrimination, and the in-house rivalry and ideological differences among the Naga brethren fighting for freedom, have shaped her literary mind and works.



13.7 FURTHER READING

Horam, Ringkahao. (1998). *The Genesis of the Naga Political Movement*. Tangkhul Avenue.

Luthra, P. N. (1974). *Nagaland: From a District to a State*. Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Arunachal Pradesh, Shillong.

Horam, M. (1988). *Nagas: Old ways new Trends.* Cosmo Publications.

Chasie, Charles. (2005). *The Naga Imbroglio*. Standard Printers & Publishers, Kohima,

Misra, Tilottoma. (Eds.). (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays.* Oxford University Press.

Web Resources:

http://reviewne.com/easterine-kire-iralu

http://nagas.sytes.net/~kaka/articles/art007.html



13.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Her novel *A Naga Village Remembered*, was the first ever Naga novel to be published… …she has translated about 200 oral poems from her native language Tenyidie into English… … another

novel *Mari,* recounts the true story of a young mother… …*Bitter Wormwood* is another novel on the Indo-Naga conflict… …her other books include *Forest Song, A Volume of Spirit Stories.*

Ans to Q 2: Her works reflect the realities of life the way it is in Nagaland… …the complexities around the colonial atrocities and discrimination… …the rivalry and ideological differences among the Naga brethren fighting for freedom… …she has brought the fascinating and vibrant Naga culture to the rest of the world through her prolific writings that evoke a raw appeal of the age old traditions and scintillating folklores from the deepest corners of the mystic state of Nagaland.

Ans to Q 3: The essay titled "Should Writers stay in prison?" is about the writers and their inherent problems in Nagaland… … she states that "Curfews and continued periods of gun-fire were all a part of growing up in Nagaland"… …she brings in the idea of prison because as a writer one has to undergo certain inhibitions imposed on him or her by some social factors… …thus, although the essay appears to be a personal one, yet it discloses the social and political history of Nagaland.

Ans to Q 4: Iralu stresses that the Naga society was and continues to be a highly oral society… …people take pride in oratory skill, which is an expression of the agility of the mind… …but there is an overwhelming majority of orators but only a handful of writers… …hence, the writers are under tremendous pressure to document the oral literature and simultaneously direct the path for Naga writings.

Ans to Q 5: No she is not… …she feels that here is no publishing house to publish their works… …this often results in transforming their own tales by some outsiders, who very often distort facts and real experiences… …she refers to her experience in an International story festival in Delhi, January 2004, during which the time given to her to speak about Naga literature was just one and a half minutes.



13.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Easterine Iralu's works reflect on the realities of life the way it is in Nagaland, and the complexities around the colonial atrocities and discrimination, and the in-house rivalry and ideological differences among the Naga brethren fighting for freedom. Discuss.

Q 2: In what ways, can "Should Writers Stay in Prison" be seen as reflections on the plight of the writers in Nagaland.

Q 3: Do you think that the term 'Prison' used by Iralu is symbolic of her own challenge of telling her own story? Discuss how life of a Naga writer is crippled by the socio political forces of her land?

Q 4: "The rich tradition of story-telling and oral literature has huge impact on the present day writings of Nagaland". Discuss this point with reference to Iralu as an exponent of Naga literature.

Q 5: How do the experiences of an insider become so important for a writer like Easterine Iralu? Discuss.

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UNIT 14: ARUN SARMA: *SRI NIBARON BHATTACHARYA*

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Arun Sarma: The Playwright

14.3.1 His Life

14.3.2 His Works

14.4 Sources of the Play: *Sri Nibaron Bhattacharya*

14.5 Reading the Play: *Sri Nibaron Bhattacharya*

14.5.1 Act-wise Summary of the Play

14.5.2 Major Themes

14.5.3 Major Characters

14.6 Critical Reception of Sarma

14.7 Let us Sum up

14.8 Further Reading

14.9 Possible Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the Assamese playwright Arun Sarma.
- examine the innovations brought forth by Sarma into the world of Assamese drama
- identify the major themes and characters of the play
- connect Sarma's philosophy with the various aspects presented in the play *Sri Nibaron Bhattacharya*
- appreciate the play in its nuanced totality

14.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the second last unit of the course. In this unit, we shall discuss the noted Assamese playwright Arun Sarma's much acclaimed play *Sri*

Nibaron Bhattacharya. It is believed that Arun Sarma is the most successful Assamese playwright after Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla in the field of Assamese drama. He is Assam's major contemporary playwrights and is particularly known for his rather unconventional plays, which have some elements of the drama of the absurd in them. Deviating from the traditional practices in dramatic performance, Sarma brought in many innovations in terms of both form and content. Thus, he became one of the most important pathfinders for his successors from Assam in the last decades of the 20th century. *Sri Nibaron Bhattacharya* the play about which we will discuss in this unit was first aired through AIR, Guwahati in around 1964. This play is acknowledged as one of the most remarkable Assamese plays that deals with the timelessness and universality of Art, personified in the play by a dramatist continuously in search of new idioms. This play was first staged in 1967 under the direction of Sri Kulada Kumar Bhattacharya. This unit is thus will help you to discuss the life and works of Arun Sarma as well as the various important aspects of the play in question.

14.3 ARUN SARMA: THE PLAYWRIGHT

In the following subsections, we shall briefly discuss the life and works of this great Assamese playwright.

14.3.1 His Life

Arun Sarma was born in Dibrugarh in 1931. His father, Tilak Chandra Sarma was the then editor of Times of Assam published from Dibrugarh during the 3rd and 4th decades of the 20th century. His mother's name was Narmada Devi. When he only two years old, they shifted to Helem, near Tezpur. He stared his schooling in Chatia High School. Since his childhood, he had been introduced to dramatic activities of personalities like Rohini Barua, Mukti Nath Bordoloi and son on.

Then he was admitted to the Govt. High School at Tezpur. Tezpur, at that time, was the epi- center for theatre under the auspices of great Assamese playwrights like Jyotiprasad Agarwalla,

Bishnu Rabha, Chandradhar Goswami, Phani Sarma, Rohini Barua, Muktinath Bordoloi and so on. Then in left for Cotton college for higher education and successfully completed his ISC in 1950 and took to doing BA. Sarma first started his working life in *The Assam Tribune* as a proofreader. Later he worked as an assistant editor. Then he joined as a teacher in Chaiduar High School. After five years, again he comes back to Guwahati to work as a senior producer at AIR, Guwahati.

Till 1986, Sarma was associated with the Guwahati Station of All India Radio, working first as a Producer and later as a Senior Producer. He headed the Educational Broadcasting Section, and did pioneering work in using radio as a potent medium to supplement classroom education. He even undertook a six-month training on Radio Programme Production in BBC, London, in 1969. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Sarma was instrumental in shaping the Drama section of the Guwahati Station. During this period, he wrote and directed 47 plays and a good number of radio documentaries for the Station as well as for All India Radio's national programme. He also received three international best awards for his documentaries. He also served as Station Director of the Dibrugarh Station of the All India Radio (1986–89) and retired from Government service as Director, AIR, North East Service from Shillong in 1990.

After retirement, Sarma became the founder editor (1990–92) of the Assamese newspaper 'Purbachal', and served from 1992 to 1997 as the Director of the Tea Centre of the Indian Tea Association. In 2005, Sarma designed, scripted and executed a *son-et-lumiere* (sound-and-light show) describing the history of Assam which was played daily at the Sankardeva Kalakshetra in Guwahati every evening.

Sarma carved a niche as a playwright with originality and innovations. Although he cannot be seen as being influenced by any particular writer and thinker, he received his inspiration from the plays of Shakespeare, the commercial plays of Agatha Christi, plays of

Samuel Beckett, Henric Ibsen, Oscar Wilde, Edward Albee and so on. Besides, the influence of writers like Chekhov, Sartre, Camus, James Joyce, Dylan Thomas, and Kafka is also sometimes visible in him.

He breathed his last on 27th March 2017. He was 85 and had been ailing for quite some time.

14.3.2 His Works

Sarma, who strode the arena of Assamese drama like a colossus for six decades, gave a new dynamism to the Assamese drama movement and aligned it with the focal trend of global dramatic literature. Known for his pen-chant for experimentation, Sarma's un-conventional approach in terms of both theme and treatment is borne out by many of his plays.

A prolific writer, Sarma made his foray into the world of drama with his play *Urukha Poja* in 1952 that drew critical acclaim after it was staged at Tezpur and Guwahati. Sarma himself used to acknowledge that the laurels he received from his first play remained a lifelong inspiration. His plays have been broadcast by All India Radio, Guwahati since 1953. In total, he wrote around 45 plays for radio. Some of Sarma's well-known plays are *Jinti*, *Sri Nibaron Bhattacharyya*, *Parashuram*, Purush, *Kukurnesia Manuh*, *Ahar*, *Chiyor*, *Buranji Path*, *Padma*, *Kunti Ityadi*, *Anya Ek Adhyay*, *Poster Agnigarh*, *Napoleon Aru Deserie*, *Baghjaal*, *Chakrabyuha*, *Aditir Atma Katha*, *Chitralekha*, and *Robes of Destiny* (a trilogy in English).

Sarma's novels include *Ubhala Shipa* (The Root Upturned), *Aashirbador Rong*, translated into English as *On a Wing and a Prayer*, *Sankalpa*, *Niriha Ashroy*, and *Baghjaal*. During his long association with AIR, Guwahati (from 1960 to 1986), Sarma also headed the Educational Broadcast- ing Section, and did pioneering work in using radio as a potent medium for supplementing classroom education.

He had a six-month training stint on Radio Programme Production in BBC, London, in 1969. Through the 1970s and 1980s, he was instrumental in shaping the Drama Section of AIR, Guwahati. During this period, he wrote and directed around 45 plays and a number of radio documentaries for the Guwahati station as well as for All India Radio's national programme, and received three international best awards for his documentaries.

LET US KNOW



In 1952, he made his presence felt in the theatre world with his full-pledged play "Urukha Ponja". At the same time, he managed to secure a place as a player artist in AIR, Guwahati. Subsequently, he wrote Radio plays like "Dhumuha Jetia Aahe", "Kakshasyuto" "Daworor Aror Jon" and so on. In 1956, he wrote "Fill Up the Gaps" followed by "Sthawor" in 1958 which is the first science fiction play in the Assamese language. Thus, he wrote around 45 Radio plays and more than 15 stage plays.

14.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY: *SRI NIBARON BHATTACHARYA*

It is to be mentioned that the context of his play Sri Nibaron Bhattacharya is connected with the Baan Theatre of Tezpur. One evening, Arun Sarma peeped inside the Baan Theatre and saw that Phani Sarma was rehearsing and uttering dialogues with his comparatively loud voice against the empty chairs of the Hall. This had an important and lasting effect in the minds of Sarma, and subsequently, he used similar kind of a setting in the last scene of his play *Sri Nibaron Bhattacharya*.

14.5 READING THE PLAY: *SRI NIBARON BHATTACHARYA*

14.5.1 Act-wise Summary of the Play

Synopsis: [Adapted from K M George's *Anthology*]

Sri Nibaron Bhattacharyya, a playwright and stage director, thinks and looks far ahead of his times and lives with the illusion that the world in one day turn to him. His ideas and idioms, too remote from his times, are however ridiculed and reviled. Even for his sons, Dhiren, Upen, Durge and Suren find it hard to put up with him and his apparently eccentric ideas. Nibaron finds a heaven of solace only in his daughter Nandini, who teaches English literature in a local college, and along with her brothers, acts all the role in his plays. Ramesh, a local journalist, is the only other person to have some association with Nibaron's stage ventures.

The story, however, soon spreads far beyond the bounds of these family relations and grows into a universal story, Nibaron himself personifying Time on the broader canvas. His lonely existence in a small and almost inaccessible room symbolises his being out of tune with his time, a rusted lock that shuts his room off the world speaks of his break with the past, his passion for horse riding gives a glimpse of his restlessness of his soul and his indomitable urge to move ahead of his times. He moves so fast that a fall inevitably follows. Then comes Nandini, who represents the eternal woman as a source of inspiration for the artist, to nurse his physical bruises and mental wounds.

Nibaron's mental optimism does not desert him even after scores of his unconventional and innovative plays have failed to stimulate his audience. Still brimming with the confidence that his vision will eventually touch responsive chords in the hearts of his audience, he goes on to stage his latest play, on his sixtieth birthday. He invites a host of his city's intellectuals and plans to initiate them into the inner world of his ideas through a prefatory speech. Even as feverish preparations for the show are on, Nibaron, full of confidence, takes time off to imagine a crowded auditorium listening to him with fascination. However, when the curtail finally rises, he finds him facing only endless rows of empty chairs. The emptiness of his auditorium speaks of the intellectual hollowness of the society

and Nibaron is disappointed. But he soon shakes of his feelings of anguish and goes on to deliver his speech. It becomes his swan song—he climbs a flight of stairs as he speaks and the broken landing at the ending of the stair gives way. The passion to overtake Time takes its toll. On the broader canvass, however, it symbolises the merger of Nibaron's ideas and visions with the timelessness and universality of art. The story however, soon spreads far beyond.

The play is divided into a Prologue, Act I and Act II, out of which the Prologue part is the longest one. The following is an act wise summary of the play.

Prologue:

Here we are introduced to Sri Nibaron Bhattacharya, his four sons—Upen, Durge, Dhiren and Suren, his only daughter Nandini, Ramesh and Robin. The characters are introduced in such a way that nothing is left to be known about them except Nibaron Bhattacharya's love for horses and his self-exploration at the end of Act II. Nibaron has specific ways to enter and come out of his rooms, and he has finished writing around 12 plays one by one, and at the age of 59, despite having failed to draw the attention of the general public, he is trying to write out his 13^{th} play.

Act I:

This relates to a course of events of one week ahead of the staging of the play. Nandini is rehearsing a particular scene to be enacted on stage. Nibaron is making every possible attempt at having his play attain success. We get to know that he knows no bounds when he sees a horse, and personally, he has invited around 500 people to watch his play and visited each one of them twice. However, he meets with an accident when he goes to run the horse brought by the 'horse-keeper'. Still, he is firm enough regarding the particular date of his play.

Act II:

This act is based on the events of one hour ahead of 6 the time for the staging of the play. We are surprised to know that no one has arrived in the hall to watch the play till then. However, no one has informed Nibaron about this. Nandidni is of the opinion that they should start the play a little late as not a single spectator has arrived. However, Nibaron is adamant and decides to start the play at the stipulated hour. Before starting to speak out the dialogues, he realises that the hall is empty. However, he decides that he will read out the Prologue in from of the 500 empty chairs. Gradually, reading out loudly the Prologue, he climbs up to the roof of the Hall, which is broken, and sacrifices himself.

14.5.2 Major Themes

Noted Assamese critic Pradip Acharya in his "The Profane Perfection of Man" has stated, "In *Sri Nibaron Bhattacharya* [1961], playwright Arun Sarma gets rid of the invincible forth wall and encounters the audience directly, creating a direct rapport and enforces concentration. The audience, in turn is compelled to look inwards and face a reality it had been shying away from. Sarma thus unobtrusively brings in new ways, not for the novelty of the treatment, though that has its uses, but because the play, which has a message, demands it." However, Sarma cannot be considered a didactic writer. The characteristic endeavour of Sarma's heroes is for lucidity while facing the persistent problem of lapsed communication. Acharya further states that Nibaron Bhattacharya is way ahead of his time. He is a responsible family man and family itself is a veritable community all walks of life addressed.



LET US KNOW

Although Arun Sarma is mostly known for his plays, he has also written many novels, more than 100 articles, 11 translated works, several poems, a number of telefilms and teleplays and so on. Some of the important characteristics of Sarma's plays are—a strong attachment with human values, a search for love, use of silence, judicious use of

symbols, emphasis on characters whose conflicts often set the play in motion and so on. It can also be assumed that in the creation of his characters, the influence of Ibsen is sometimes visible. Through his plays, Sarma displayed the problems of being human, but he also never forgot to leave his own comments.

14.5.3 Major Characters

The following are the important characters in the play.

Nibaron Bhattacharya:

Nibaron Bhattacharya is a playwright. He writes his own plays, enacts in his own plays and even directs his own plays. But both the doors of the room in which he lives are closed. At the threshold, old costumes are dumped and he has to climb that dump in order to go out or come inside the room. Whomever he meets, he talks about his plays and what he dreams of. Another trait of his character is that whenever he sees a horse, he wants to ride it. And just before the staging of his 13th play, he meets with an accident by falling from a horse. The motto of his life is speed, and that is why perhaps, having seen the empty hall, he climbs up the broken staircase and never learns to stop. His falling from the horse is symbolic of the troubles and predicaments one has to undergo while setting out in the journey of life. However, Nibaron is very much confident of himself and what he is doing. According to critic Pradip Acharya, "Nibaron Bhattacharya is way ahead of his times but he is no spoilt brat of civilisation. He is a responsible family man and his family itself is a veritable community, all walks addressed. He also has the daring and the will to reach for a unreachable sky." Through the character of Nibaron, Sarma perhaps addresses the necessary isolation of an artist.

Nandini:

She is the daughter of Nibaron. She teaches English literature in a college. She is the one who can respond to Nibaron's vision as she is too close to her father. She is the one who can control Nibaron and Nibaron too listens to her before embarking on a work. She not

only encouraged her father to carry on with his dramatic activities, but also had great faith on the talent of her father. The personality of Nibaron taught her how to be ambitious in life. However, the fact is that the character of Nandini cannot be considered a developed one in the context of the play. You should note that the playwright Arun Sarma has also written two other plays entitled *Agnigarh* and *Aditir Atma Katha*, and it is in *Agnigarh* that the character of Nandini is developed.

The minor characters of the play include the four sons of Nibaron—Upen, Durge, Suren and Dhiren—all having small businesses, the journalist Romen and his friend Robin, one Horse keeper, and three college girls.

14.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF SARMA

Arun Sarma has been an experimental dramatist who belong to the state of Assam. He experimented with the techniques of European 'Absurd' drama in Assamese drama literature. Through the medium of the absurd drama *Aahar*, he tried to show the emptiness and aimlessness of human life, the hypocrisy in human relationships and loneliness etc. *Purus* is a social drama which providing a sketch of dread in human life. *Napoleon Aru Desirie* is a blend of history, imagination and modernity. Those who have watched his plays would tend to accept the fact that through his plays, Sarma tried to project an important statement about the society or universal human truth. He understood it very well that there is a very intimate relation between drama and real life. Therefore, he tried to establish one or the other serious human conditions through his plays.

In recognition of his contributions to Assamese literature, especially Assamese play- writing, Arun Sarma was bestowed with prestigious awards like Asam Sahitya Sabha (Drama) Award (1967), Asom Natya Sanmilan Award (2001), Sahitya Akademi Award (1998) for the Novel 'Aashirbador Rong' (translated into English titled as 'On a Wing and a Prayer'), Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2004), Assam Valley Literary Award

(2005), Sankaracharyya Avatar Award for Literature (2010), Japan Prize (1980), ABU (Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union), Award (1982), Prix Futura Berlin Commendation certificate (1983) for the radio documentary "All Lips to Smile" and so on.

Arun Sarma, the recipient of the prestigious Padma Shree Award in 2010, is also the first Assamese to have received the Sahitya Akademi award twice.



14.7 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that Arun Sarma is one of the greatest and most successful Assamese playwrights in the Post independence period. He had been engaged with playwriting and introducing new techniques of staging a play for the last 5 decades. He has so far written more that 45 Radio plays and around 15 stage plays, which are important contributions to the history of Assamese literature. The presentation style of each of his plays is different. Nibaron Bhattacharya, the protagonist of the play by the same name, is a playwright himself. He writes his own plays, enacts in his own plays and even directs his own plays. Thus, the play explores the sad end of a dedicated artist who sacrifices his life in search of an ideal, which he never meets.



14.8 FURTHER READING

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14.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q1: Discuss in detail about the life and works of the noted Assamese playwright Arun Sarma.

Q 2: Provide a summary of the play *Sri Nibaron Bhattacharya.* Assess the significance of the play as a modern play.

Q 3: Write a comprehensive note on the character of Nibaron Bhattacharya in Arun Sarma's play. Do you think that the playwright is successful in the portrayal of the character.

Q 4: Through the character of Nibaron, Arun Sarma addresses the necessary isolation of an artist. Discuss.

Q 5: On the broader canvass, however, it symbolises the merger of Nibaron's ideas and visions with the timelessness and universality of art. Discuss.

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UNIT 15: RATAN THIYAM: *CHAKRAVYUHA*

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Ratan Thiyam: The Playwright

15.3.1 His Life

15.3.2 His Works

15.4 Sources of the Play: *Chakravyuha*

15.5 Reading the Play: *Chakravyuha*

15.6 Critical Reception of Thiyam

15.7 Let us Sum up

15.8 Further Reading

15.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.10 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the Manipuri playwright Ratan Thiyam
- examine some of the innovations brought forth by Thiyam into the world of Manipuri drama
- connect Thiyam's philosophy with the various aspects presented in the play *Chakravyuha*
- identify the major themes and characters of the play, and appreciate the play in its nuanced totality

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the course. In this unit, we shall get an opportunity to read Ratan Thiyam's play *Chakravyuha* (Army Formation). This play was written and directed by Ratan Thiyam from Manipur and it deals with an episode from the Mahabharata, the killing of the young Pandava hero, Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna, by seven Kaurava warriors. The play-script evolved in collaboration with the actors during an extended workshop,

which included reading the epics and training the actors in traditional performing techniques and martial arts. Actors were also involved in designing masks, costumes, and properties. The sequence in which Abhimanyu learns martial skills while still in his mother's womb, when Arjuna narrates to his wife the technique to enter the army formation, is presented most effectively. By the time we finish reading this unit, we shall note that Thiyam uses highly stylised movements; fighting sequences for instance are choreographed using movements of Thang-Ta, a martial art of Manipur. The production was highly acclaimed in England, where in 1987 it received the Fringe Firsts Award at the Commonwealth Festival, Edinburgh. However, what is so interesting about the play is Thiyam's use of the epic background to reflect on contemporary political difficulties.

15.3 RATAN THIYAM: THE PLAYWRIGHT

15.3.1 His Life

Ratan Thiyam was born into a family of artistes in January 20, 1948 at Nabadwip West Bengal, Nadia District and brought up at Haobam Dewan Lane, Imphal. His father, Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar was one of the most respected gurus of Classical Manipuri Dance and his mother, Bilasini Devi was a renowned dancer. He grew up surrounded by art and art making but also amid the privations that went with the performative life. Ratan Thiyam is also known as Thiyam Nemai. He is famous for writing and staging plays with the use of ancient Indian theatre tradition and forms in a contemporary context.

A graduate of Dramatic Arts from National School of Drama, New Delhi, Ratan Thiyam is a multifaceted artist. He works as a designer, music composer, choreographer, lighting expert, costume designer, architect and also a playwright, painter and poet. In 1976, he started Chorus Repertory Theatre Company at Imphal and close to a quarter of a century later, it still fascinates audiences with the grace and style of its spectacular canvas. All kinds of experiments

were taking place there and for years, the process of artistic experiments went on. One cannot fully appreciate Thiyam's theatre without understanding his relationship with his repertory company, and with actor training.

Ratan Thiyam's intense and holistic production style—all members are trained in dance, acting, martial arts, stagecraft and design—embraces traditional Manipuri forms as well as other methods, developed over time to support Chorus Repertory Theatre's aesthetic approach. Emphasis on vocal and breath techniques, and in physical stamina and control, provide the means to accomplish impressive aural and movement feats. Thiyam's works are tightly choreographed; his actors must physically push the limits of character. As he has stated: "I have always found human expression more convincing when it is physically portrayed, when there is a body rhythm".

An important functionary of many premier art and cultural institutions of the country, Ratan Thiyam has made a difference at the core level. He is the Chairman/Director of the Chorus Repertory Theatre, Imphal, Member of the Society and the Governing Body of the National Science Museum, Kolkata; Departmental Advisory Board Member of the Education in Arts and Aesthetics of NCERT, New Delhi; Chairman Heritage Foundation, Imphal; Vice-Chairman of the Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Culture, Manipur. He has served as a Council Member of Manipur State Kala Akademi, Imphal; Advisor All India Radio, Imphal; Senate Member Manipur University; Member Manipur University Court; Member of the First Court of Nagaland University, Nagaland; Member of the Governing Council, ICCR, New Delhi; Chairman Review Committee North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur; Member of the Programme advisory Committee of All India Radio, Imphal among other post.

Thiyam has received Fellow & Special invitations from Ford foundation (USA), Japan foundation (Japan), Korean Foundation

(Seoul). In addition, he has made his special study tour in USA, UK, Japan, Hong Kong, Greece, Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, Yugoslavia, Spain, USSR, France, Australia, and Cambodia.

Apart from doing theatre Ratan Thiyam has also been invited and participated in many of the important National and International events including International Theatre Conference, Novisad (Yugoslavia), East-West Encounter, Mumbai (India), International Seminar on Greek Tragedy, Delphi (Greece), Indo-Soviet Conference (Moscow), International Seminar (Poland), Indo-Greek symposium (Greece), India-Greece 2000 years of Cultural Exchange symposium, New Delhi (India), International conference on "Culture of Peace: The experience and experiments", New Delhi (India) and so on.

Ratan Thiyam has directed more than 50-productions of original, adaptation and translated plays and produced world class productions including *Chakravyuha* (The Wheel of War), *Urubhangam, Uttar-Priyadarshi* (The Final Beatitude), *Blind Age*, *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* (My Earth, My Love) and *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills One Valley) which are known as masterpieces in the world theatre movement. In addition, his productions achieved most prestigious awards including "*Indo-Greek Friendship Award* (Greece), 1984"; "*Fringe Firsts*, 1987 from Edinburgh International theatre Festival"; "*Diploma of Cervantino International theatre Festival*, 1990".

15.3.2 His Works

His works profess a deep concern for social welfare and spiritual yearnings in the midst of the political chaos in the modern world. His plays infuse rationalised and multifaceted analysis of myriad perspectives. Using ingenious theatrical stagecraft, his plays are tinged with literary beauty and meaning. Most of Ratan Thiyam's plays are thematically indianised and are profound plays with universal appeal.

His works are strongly influenced by Natya Sastra, an Indian theatre style propounded by Bharata during the second century B.C., as also ancient Greek drama, and the Noh Theatre of Japan. His approach to theatre has been shaped by years of study under the tutelage of several major exponents of the traditional Manipuri performing arts. Thiyam is also known for his use of traditional martial arts, of Thang-Ta in his plays, such as in *Urubhangam* (Broken Thigh), of Sanskrit playwright Bhâsa itself based on an episode from epic, the *Mahabharata*, which along with *Chakravyuh* (Army Formation) is considered one of his finest works. In 1986, he adapted Jean Anouilh's "Antigone" as *Lengshonnei*, a comment on the personal behaviour of politicians, failing to handle political situation in the state. *Uttar Priyadarshi* (The Final Beatitude), an adaptation of Hindi verse play by playwright and poet Agyeya in 1996, based on a story of redemption of King Ashoka, a man's struggle against his own inner dark side and a plea for peace, knowing its impact on future generation. The play has since travelled to many parts of the South Asia, Australia and the US. His play *Andha Yug* (The Blind Age), known for creating an intense and intimate experience, around the epochal theme, was famously staged in an open-air performance, at Tonga, Japan, on 5 August 1994, a day before the forty-ninth anniversary of Atomic Holocaust in Hiroshima.



LET US KNOW

His list of important plays includes the following:

Chakravyuha

Uttarpriyadarshi (The Final Beatitude)

Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama (Nine Hills One Valley)

Ritusamharam

Andha Yug (The Blind Age)

Wahoudok (Prologue) Ashibagee Eshei

The name of Ratan Thiyam is connected with the Chorus Repertory Theatre, which was established in the valley of small hill state, Manipur that is surrounded by the great nine-folds of mountains guarded by mighty tribes on the top in the easternmost part of India in April 1976. Located on the outskirts of Imphal, Manipur's capital city, Chorus Repertory Theater's two-acre campus has been slowly built (and six times rebuilt after disastrous monsoons) to accommodate a self-sufficient way of life, with housing and working quarters for the company. It is now and important regional and national centre for contemporary theatre. In 2001, its 25th anniversary season, the company dedicated its first permanent theatre, a 200-seat auditorium designed by Ratan Thiyam with space for set construction and storage.

Thiyam's 1984 *Chakravyuha*, performed more than 100 times around the globe, thrust the company into the global spotlight. With *Uttarpriyadarshi*, equally acclaimed as a masterpiece, Thiyam continue his examination of the human condition, expanding his explorations of war and power to embrace the search for enlightenment, reconciliation and peace. Equipped with its most outstanding performances in many International festivals in India and abroad, this repertory has been able to earn many prestigious awards in Indian and abroad.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Comment on Ratan Thiyam's works?

Q 2: What is Thiyam's Holistic production style?

15.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY: *CHAKRAVYUHA*

As the title of the play suggests, this is a play based on a story of the Indian epic *Mahabharata* in which Abhimanyu was killed through the device of a Chakrabehu or Army Formation by the Kauravas during the war of

Kurukshetra. When asked by Samik Bandyopadhyay if Thiyam first have the concept of the play and then start exploring the play as a play to build upon, Ratan Thiyam states that this happened till the *Chakravhyuha*. However, his emphasis as a theatre director is on the firmness or the firm idea behind a play like this. Although the playwright has used lot of innovations in the production of the play, he never deviates from the original storyline. Instead, he provides the contemporary relevance of how certain myths are used in the present times.

15.5 READING THE PLAY: *CHAKRAVYUHA*

Manipur has always felt isolated from the rest of the country. There is a feeling that their 'country' was 'annexed' to the Indian Union after the unfair dismissal of a fairly elected government under the Manipur State Constitution Act 1947. Manipur lost its suzerainty to the British in 1891 after the Manipur War of Independence but was not annexed and internal governance remained in the hands of the monarch. Its relations with the neighbouring Myanmar have always been tense. An independent kingdom, Manipur defeated Myanmar twice. The Myanmarese overran Manipur between 1819-1826, a period which the people refer to as 'Seven Years of Devastation'. *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* takes off from this period of humiliation and destruction, a time the Manipuri people find impossible to forget.

Violence has been one of the most important thematic renderings of Ratan Thiyam as a playwright from Manipur. It is violence that brings Ratan's central characters to questioning themselves or discovering themselves. In his interview with Samik Bandyopadhyay Ratan Thiyam stated, "There are many problems in Manipur. There are many drawbacks in the citizens also. The problems of economic distribution and political power and authority, and the failure of a authority to cope with it make me question the existence of an individual as well as the society, which is in transition. It's very restless. And to the global situation, the sheer speed of life, the problems of communication, the mechanization, the technological advances—and I am asking myself again and again; where do II stand as an individual? I feel a whole burden of anxiety. Talk of peace, talk of war, or talk of struggle, I feel that an individual is trapped. With all these things, as an individual, I have to

take a position against the violence going on, against the corruption, against the system. Talking about the system, as a theatre worker, I have always felt it my duty to attack this system. If the system is doing harm to society, then I also suffer because of it, and as a theatre worker it is my duty to protest against it. That's how all the war themes have come up. If you think Karna, Karna is Ratan Thiyam—as far as identity is concerned. Karna was born to a family, but he lost his identity. He was educated, he had a lot of talent, but he couldn't come up to the mark of Arjuna. Nobody cared about what happened to Karna. That is how the question of identity comes in. That is how I find the contemporaneity of Karna."

Then Ratan moves onto another issue. He says,

"Think of the kind of violence there is today in different systems. There is genocide of a community. You arrest 2000 women and put them in prison and they become victims of thousands of soldiers who rape them, and do not allow them abortion—so they feel that the enemy is growing inside them. And they are asked to give the children to the enemy. There are many ways of committing genocide. It is not always a war with tanks and armour, there can be many levels of violence. It is a case of one human community, and doing tremendous harm to ordinary people who are not concerned with politics, whose only crime is to be part of the community into which they are born. I feel that there must be a place to say and also to show that human being were not just born to kill each other, they were also born to love each other, to embrace a religion, to embrace a friend from a different religion."

Therefore, from the above it is very much apt to state that violence and the question of identity are inextricably intertwined in Ratan Thiyam's perception of reality, Manipuri and global. He told Samik, "When doing a production, I have t choose a theme according to my own thinking that should have some link with reality." Thus, one of the persistent themes, along with violence, that Ratan pursues is that of an individual trapped by the powers to participate in the violence—more as a scapegoat than as a victor or victim—under a spell in which he is divested of his identity, rising at the end to seek his lost identity and may be to have a glimpse of it.

In *Chakravyuha,* the play that shot Ratan into international limelight, his concern for the youth and its continuous betrayal by the older generation is predominant in the depiction of Abhimanyu. The 15 year-old son of Arjuna trustingly enters the Chakravyuha created by Drona. His uncles Yudhisthira and Bhima are aware that he does not know how to get out of the martial configuration, but they provoke his sense of daredevil courage and Abhimanyu succumbs. Does he, as the epic portrays, dies a martyr or is Abhimanyu a scapegoat? In the play, Abhimanyu asks himself: "Am I a martyr or a scapegoat?" Abhimannyu is a scapegoat because Yudhisthira wants to win the war and the loss of Abhimanyu is nothing to him. In this sense, Ratan Thiyam shows how a small war vanishes into a larger war.

However, Ratan is also pointing to the political powers in Manipur that, to further their own ambitions incite youth to suicidal acts in the name of heroism.

Duryodhana the Kaurava is seen as a contemporary man, a materialist. Thiyam states: "We live in a materialistic world so how can any Duryodhana, a man who has fulfilled his duties as a king, find this absolute truth (of the Gita)? He is systematic, calculating and aware of the course of events. Truth for him stems from this concrete reality. He is logical and critical. The more critical you are and the more inward looking, the more you suffer. Duryodhana has to suffer and die." (*Chakravyuha–Pre-text and Performance Text*: Kavita Nagpal).

In *Bhasa's Urubhangam and Karnabharam* too Ratan seeks the voice of Manipur and gives it his own tongue within the reality of alienation. The scene where Kunti 'floats' Karna across the stage to be gathered by Radhe, a memorable moment in Indian theatre, echoes the divide between the 'royal' society of the mainland and the Manipuri identity. This estrangement is manifest in the occupation of sacred Meitei land by the Indian Army (Assam Rifles and the restrictions on visiting the site of the monument to martyrs in the war against the British. The criticism that Ratan's choice of themes is to project style and use traditional performance forms as spectacle is far from his intent. He plucks appropriate forms and instruments from his heritage to serve the content and it is the content, theme and concern that are paramount.

There are a number of traditional narrative forms in Manipur that have been used as teaching exercise for the Chorus actors and are directly and indirectly used in speech patterns. Wari Leeba is the narrative form used to recite the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. It draws pictures in words, syllables, via variable intonation and enunciation with the aid of gestures. Both the epics are distinctly bound within the Manipuri ethos. For instance, when the Wari Leeba narrator describes the Pandava Bhima, he will enumerate the type of food a strong man would eat in Manipur. Lairik Haiba Thiba is another narrative form where two characters carry the tale; one narrates the original tale and the other provides its interpretation, the modulations of speech and pitch patterns create their own drama. R. K. Bhogen who plays Drona in *Chakravyuha*, Ashoka in *Uttar Priyadarshi*, the Sutradhar in *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* etc. has mastered the art of both narrative forms to perfection.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What is Thiyam's purpose of using mythical stories for a play like *Chakravyuha*?

Q 4: What is the basic question raised by Thiyam in this play?

Q 5: Name some of the narrative forms used by Thiyam in this play.

15.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THIYAM

Writer, director, designer, musician, painter, and actor, Ratan Thiyam is best recognised today as one of the most important theatre makers on the international scene. The son of Manipuri dance masters, for a time Thiyam studied painting before turning to writing. He has written short stories, novels, poetry and plays. Writing led him to theatre. "I started reading plays," he said. "Besides writing reviews, I felt the need for professional training." In 1971, he enrolled at the National School of Drama in Delhi and gained a reputation as a powerful director and actor. In 1976, he returned to Manipur and founded the Chorus Repertory Theatre.

Ratan Thiyam's theatre typically reflects a quest for enlightenment, reconciliation, and peace by examining the human condition through an

exploration of war and power. He has directed more than 50 plays, original scripts as well as adaptations. *Chakravhyuha (The Wheel of War)*, catapulted him onto the world stage in 1984, was awarded the Fringe Firsts Award of the Edinburgh International Theatre Festival in 1987 and Diploma of Cervantino International Theatre Festival, 1990 (Mexico). Since then, as has already been stated, this play has been performed more than 100 times around the globe.

Ratan Thiyam's many awards include the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1987; Nandikar in 1992; La Grande Medaille (Paris) 1997; International Man of the Year, 1998-99 in the field of Theatre and Humanism, conferred by the International Biographical Centre, Cambridge; B.M. Shah Award 2000; Ganakrishti Award 2002; and the B.V. Karanth Smriti Puraskar 2004. In 2006, he received the One India One People award and Madhya Pradesh government's Rashtriya Kalidas Samman award, one of India's most prestigious cultural prises. He received Padma Shri in 1989, one of the India's highest civilian honours but returned it in 2001.

In recognition of his contributions of the field of drama, his name has been chosen to receive the Asian Cultural Council's 2007 John D Rockefeller Award. The important contributions made by the Chorus Repertory Theatre in bringing the performing arts of Manipur and of India to the attention of international community have also been acknowledged by the trustees.



15.7 LET US SUM UP

Ratan Thiyam has reached a level in his career as a dramatist and as a concerned, conscientious citizen of North-east India that no account of the Northeastern society can be complete without recalling his name. He is one outstanding north-easterner who has earned glory for the region. As far as the dramatic circles are concerned, his name is now familiar in almost all countries in the world. A former painter and proficient in direction, design script, and music. Thiyam is often considered one of the leading contemporary theatre personalities of India. Thiyam is the founder-director of the "Chorus

Repertory Theatre" (1976) which is located on the outskirts of Imphal, Manipur. His works shows a deep concern for social welfare and spiritual yearnings in the midst of the political problems in the modern world. His plays infuse reason and multifaceted analysis of many perspectives. Using hardworking theatrical stagecraft, his plays are mixed q with literary beauty and meaning. Most of Ratan Thiyam's plays are much indianised and are profound plays with universal appeal.



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Web Resources:

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15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOU PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: His works profess a deep concern for social welfare and spiritual yearnings in the midst of the political chaos in the modern world… …his plays infuse rationalised and multifaceted analysis of myriad perspectives… …he used ingenious theatrical stagecraft, and his plays are tinged with literary beauty and meaning… …most of his

plays are thematically Indianised and are profound plays with universal appeal.

Ans to Q 2: All members are trained in dance, acting, martial arts, stagecraft and design… …embraces traditional Manipuri forms as well as other methods, developed over time to support Chorus Repertory Theatre's aesthetic approach… …emphasis on vocal and breath techniques, and in physical stamina and control, provide the means to accomplish impressive aural and movement feats… …his works are tightly choreographed; his actors must physically push the limits of character.

Ans to Q 3: His purpose has been to highlight the firm idea behind a play like this… … although the playwright has used lot of innovations in the production of the play, he never deviates from the original storyline… …instead, he provides the contemporary relevance of how certain myths are used in the present times.

Ans to Q 4: His main concern has been the betrayal of the youth by the older generation… … the epic Mahabharata portrays Abhimanyu as a martyr but is he also a scapegoat?... …Ratan Thiyam is pointing to the political powers in Manipur that, to further their own ambitions, incite youth to suicidal acts in the name of heroism.

Ans to Q 5: Wari Leeba is the narrative form used to recite the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*… …it draws pictures in words, syllables, via variable intonation and enunciation with the aid of gestures… …when the Wari Leeba narrator describes Bhima, he will enumerate the type of food a strong man would eat in Manipur… … Lairik Haiba Thiba is another narrative form where two characters carry the tale; one narrates the original tale and the other provides its interpretation, the modulations of speech and pitch patterns create their own drama.



15.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: How does the story of Abhimanyu's death in the *Mahabharata* help the playwright to reflect on contemporary issues? Discuss with reference to *Chakravyuha.*

Q 2: Ratan Thiyam is most popular for his use of innovative techniques in drama. Discuss with reference to Thiyam's holistic production style.

Q 3: How is Ratan Thiyam connected with the development of the Chorus Repertory Theatre of Imphal, Manipur?

Q 4: Do you think that the main focus of Thiyam in a play like *Chakravyuha* is on the predicaments of the youth and their continuous betrayal by the older generation. Discuss.

Q 5: Which are the narrative forms used by Thiyam in this play? Also discuss Thiyam's holistic production style.

*** ***** ***



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Name of the Paper:
Course Code:

Centre for Internal Quality Assurance (CIQA)
Kalidasa Kanya Havelock State Open University
City Office, Howrah Complex, Howrah- 00

Learner's Feedback on Course

Dear Learner,

Regarding the course as mentioned above, we would like to know your opinions and comments on as t
quality of self learning materials in future. Please respond to the following statements by ticking th
feel most reflect your opinion. After completion of the additional comments, please detach the page
the same to us at the address given below.

The Director, Centre for Internal Quality Assurance, KKHaveloack State Open University
Howrah Complex, Dhipur, Howrah- 711000
(E-mail ID: ciqa@kkhsou.in)

1. Approximately how many hours did you spend for studying the units in the course?
2. Please give your opinions (by √ mark) in the following items based on your reading of the block.

SI. No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree
I.	The SLMs of the course fulfil the learning objectives set out in the beginning of each unit			
II.	The units of the SLM could satisfy my academic needs and expectations			
III.	The Units writers have excellent knowledge about the course contents			
IV.	Language and contents of the units were presented at a level which I could readily understand			
V.	Ample opportunity for participation in the activities provided in the units			
VI.	Used enough illustrations (Diagrams, tables etc.) for conceptual clarity			
VII.	Quality of content is engaging, relevant, and up-to-date			
VIII.	The self-check questions are very helpful			
IX.	The Possible model questions and the answers to check my progress have benefited me a lot			

Additional Comments: *Please feel free to provide your open comments*

1. Which aspects of the SLM, according to you, worked well?

2. What sort of changes/improvements do you feel SHOULD/ could implement to improve the u
of the SLM?