PGEG S4 04 (B)

Exam Code : NEL

Literature From North-East India (In English and Translation)

SEMESTER IV

ENGLISH

BLOCK 3

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SEMESTER 4

MA IN ENGLISH

COURSE 4: (OPTION B) LITERATURE FROM NORTH EAST INDIA (IN ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION)

BLOCK 3: PROSE AND DRAMA

DETAILED SYLLABUS

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BLOCK 3: INTRODUCTION

Block 3 of the Course entitled Literature from North East India (In English and Translation) deals with three important prose pieces and two important plays written by authors belonging to North East India.

Unit 11: In this unit, we shall discuss the idea of decolonisation in the context of postcolonial societies, through a reading of Hiren Gohain's propse 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: In this unit, we 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: In this unit, we shall consider the Naga writer Easterine Kire Iralu 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: In this unit, we shall acquaint ourselves with the late Assamese playwright Arun Sarma and his much acclaimed play *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya.* This play beautifully addresses the necessary isolation of an artist.

Unit 15 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 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.

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

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?

*** ***** ***

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.

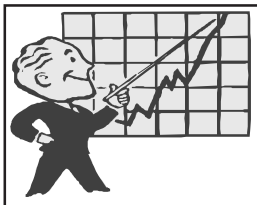
He remains acutely aware that he represents a language that has faced a long history of marginalisation (Kokborok was declared a state language as recently as 1979). While he acknowledges certain similarities between the poets of the Northeast, he is conscious of the trend to view the region as culturally 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

Dev Varman, S.B.K. *The Tribes of Tripura: A Dissertation*. Varman, Directorate of Research, Government of Tripura, Agartala.

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.

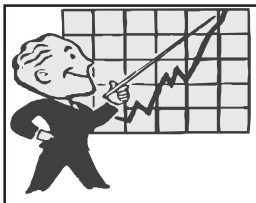
Moreover, there is change to be seen in every aspects of Naga society. Commenting on this, M. Horam, in his book *Nagas old ways new trends*, (page92)says, "One of the most significant features taking place in Naga society is not only the tremendous social changes that are taking place but also deliberate 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 13th 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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Web Resources

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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)

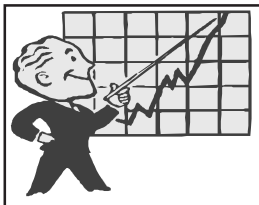
Ritusamharam

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.



15.8 FURTHER READING

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Web Resources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ratan_Thiyam

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)
Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University
City Office, Housefed Complex, Guwahati- 06

Learner's Feedback on Course

Dear Learner,

Regarding the course as mentioned above, we would like to know your opinions and comments so as to improve the quality of self learning materials in future. Please respond to the following statements by ticking the number you feel most reflect your opinion. After completion of the additional comments, please detach the page and send/mail the same to us at the address given below.

The Director, Centre for Internal Quality Assurance, KKHandiqui State Open University
Housefed Complex, Dispur, Guwahati- 781006
(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) to the following items based on your reading of the block:

Sl. No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly 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 Unit 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?

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2. What sort of changes/improvements do you feel KKHSOU could implement to improve the overall quality of the SLM?
