PGEG S4 04 (B)

Exam Code : NEL

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

SEMESTER IV

ENGLISH

BLOCK 2

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FEBRUARY, 2019

ISBN: 978-93-87940-93-2

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Printed and published by Registrar on behalf of the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University.

Headquarters: Patgaon, Rani Gate, Guwahati-781017
City Office: Housefed Complex, Dispur, Guwahati-781006; Web: www.kkhsou.in

The University acknowledges with strength the financial support provided by the **Distance Education Bureau, UGC** for preparation of this material.

SEMESTER 4

MA IN ENGLISH

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

BLOCK 2: FICTION

DETAILED SYLLABUS

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BLOCK 2: INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

Unit 9 In this unit, we shall try to discuss the life and works of the Assamese novelist Indira Goswami with particular reference her novel to *Moth-Eaten Howda of the Tusker.* Indira Goswami, popularly known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami, is an Assamese editor, poet, professor, scholar and creative writer. The novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker,* which is also a classic in Indian literature, is based on the nostalgic memories of Goswami’s own experience of the Amaranga “Sattra” (a “Vaishnavite” monastery) situated in Southern part of Kamrup district of Assam.

Unit 10: In this unit, we shall acquaint ourselves with Bina Barua’s novel *Along the High Road* that is the English translation of his novel *Jivanar Batat.* Bina Barua is the pen name of Birinchi Kumar Barua. The narrative of the novel *Along the High Road* is woven round the lived lives of a people and society which

was at the threshold of change brought in about by the conflict between a culture rooted in traditional essence of yore and the reformist zeal ushered in by the nationalist movement in a pre-independent India.

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 6: SAURABH KUMAR CHALIHA: “SLAVES”

UNIT STRUCTURE

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Saurabh Kumar Chaliha: The Short story Writer

- 6.3.1 His Life
- 6.3.2 His Works

6.4 Reading the Story: “Slaves”

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

6.5 Critical Reception of Chaliha

6.6 Let us Sum up

6.7 Further Reading

6.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

6.9 Possible Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

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

6.2 INTRODUCTION

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

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

6.3 SAURABH KUMAR CHALIHA: THE SHORT STORY WRITER

6.3.1 His Life

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

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

Chaliha worked in several educational institutions in Germany before returning to India in 1960 to join the Assam

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

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

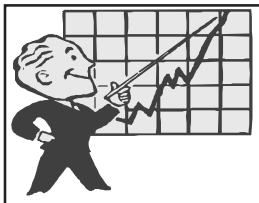
Saurav Kumar Chaliha does not have an official photograph and an official biography. The name is also his pen name. However, for the last six decades, he is known to his readers by this name only. He never directly comes into public lime light and till date, he remains an enigma. The reclusive Chaliha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

6.3.2 His Works

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

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

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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

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

6.4 READING THE STORY: "SLAVES"

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

6.4.1 The Storyline

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.4.2 Major Themes

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

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

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

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

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

6.4.3 Major Characters

There are only two important characters in the story.

Frau Muller:

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

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

The narrator:

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

6.4.4 Chaliha's Narrative Style

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

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

6.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF CHALIHA

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

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



6.6 LET US SUM UP

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



6.7 FURTHER READING

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

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

"Saurabh Chaliha's literary radiance will last forever." Retrieved from: http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jun2611/at06

Websites:

http://www.sauravkumarchaliha.org

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

http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jul0511/state05

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

6.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

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

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



6.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

*** ***** ***

UNIT 7: TEMSULA AO: "THE CURFEW MAN"

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Temsula Ao: The Writer

- 7.3.1 Her Life
- 7.3.2 Her Works

7.4 Reading the Story: "The Curfew Man"

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

7.5 Critical Reception

7.6 Let us Sum up

7.7 Further Reading

7.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.9 Possible Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

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

7.2 INTRODUCTION

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

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

7.3 TEMSULA AO: THE WRITER

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

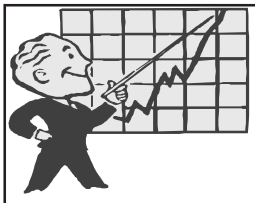
7.3.1 Her Life

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

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

7.3.2 Her Works

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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

7.4 READING THE STORY: "THE CURFEW MAN"

7.4.1 The Storyline

The night curfew was still on following the trouble in Nagaland. The hostility between two warring groups—the Indian Army and the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7.4.2 Major Themes

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

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

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

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

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

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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

7.4.3 Major Characters

Satemba:

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

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

Jemtila:

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

Sub Divisional Officer:

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

7.4.4 Ao's Narrative Style

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

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

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

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

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

7.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION

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

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



7.6 LET US SUM UP

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

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



7.7 FURTHER READING

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Gill, Preeti. (Ed.). (2010). *The Peripheral Centre: Voices form India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Zuban.

Misra, Tilottoma. (Ed.). (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India. Fiction.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

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

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



7.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya: Life and Works

8.4 Reading the Novel

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

8.5 Critical Reception of Bhattacharya

8.6 Let us Sum up

8.7 Further Reading

8.8 Possible Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

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

8.2 INTRODUCTION

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

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

8.3 BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYA: LIFE AND WORKS

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

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

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

LET US KNOW



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

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

8.4 READING THE NOVEL

8.4.1 The Context

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

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

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

8.4.2 Brief Summary of the Novel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rishang's views on the movement take a different stand now as he becomes aware of the people's efforts to win freedom from the British. He now believes that "it is time for constitutional struggle"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One morning they arrived at Cingjiroi, the last Tangkhul village bordering the Angami territory. While Rishang talked to the people, his movements were being monitored by Videsselie's men James, Zamphang and Rishang's friend Envey. They had orders to shoot Rishnag and his followers if they moved beyond Cingjiroi. Envey was aware of the deadly nature of their mission and the danger that his friend was in but he was convinced that Rishang was wrong. When his men inform him that Rishang and Jivan were going as far as Phek, Envey decides that it is time to warn Rishang. Videsselie has been camping near the border. Jonathan warns Rishang that Envey has been monitoring his movements and has been instructed to shoot. Rishang, however, believes that Envey would not shoot a friend. He decides not to withdraw the campaign. Moving towards Phek the party reaches a hillock where they decide to rest awhile. Suddenly there were two rifle shots—one hit Jivan who dies on the spot; the other hit Rishang on his calf and his head hit a stone after which he became unconscious. Almost immediately there was an exchange of fire and Jonathan realises that there was an encounter between the police and the rebels. Rishang is at home recovering from his wounds where he thinks about Jivan. He realises that his peace mission could be called a success only when "the Nagas accepted the peaceful way and when Videsselie gave up his armed struggle" (236). Before he is shifted to the hospital in Imphal Sharengla visits him and he tells her that she should look after Koncheng now that his father is no more. Khathingla arrives to meet her husband and tells Sharengla that Phanitphang wanted to see her. Jonathan too comes to inquire about Rishang's health and informs him that the villagers are ready to present a petition to Khaikho. Khathingla tells Rishang that she is pregnant with their child. Her husband tells her that is the child is a boy he should be named Yaruingam, meaning "People's Rule" (241).

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

8.4.3 Major Themes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8.4.4 Bhattacharya's Narrative Style

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

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

8.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BHATTACHARYA

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



8.6 LET US SUM UP

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



8.7 FURTHER READING

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

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

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

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

8.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Indira Goswami: Life and Works

9.4 Reading the Novel

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

9.5 Critical Reception of Goswami

9.6 Let us Sum up

9.7 Further Reading

9.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.9 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

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

9.2 INTRODUCTION

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

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

9.3 INDIRA GOSWAMI: LIFE AND WORKS

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

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

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

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



LET US KNOW

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Important Works of Indira Goswami

Fiction:

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

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

1980 Ahiron

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

1980 Budhosagor Dhukhor Geisha Aru Mohammed Musa

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

1989 Udaybhanur ChoritroNangoth Sohor

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

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

Autobiographies:

An Unfinished Autobiography

Biography's New Pages

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What motivated Indira Goswami to start writing?

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

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

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

9.4 READING THE NOVEL

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

9.4.1 The Storyline and the Context

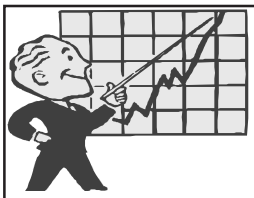
Set in Assam of Northern India during the 1940s, this novel projects the tragic dilemma of three widows—Durga, Gossainee and Giribala who are seen struggling against the oppressive patriarchal ethos and the male-cantered religious setup that relegates women to subservient roles after the demise of their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

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

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

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

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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

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

9.4.2 Major Themes

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

Experience of the 'Sattras':

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

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

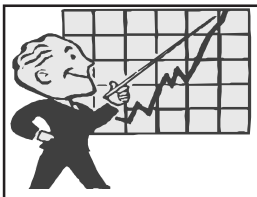
Plight of the Widows in the Brahmin Society:

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

Crumbling Tradition and the Emergence of Change

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

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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

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

9.4.3 Major Characters

There are three major female characters in the novel.

Durga:

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

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

Saru Gossainee:

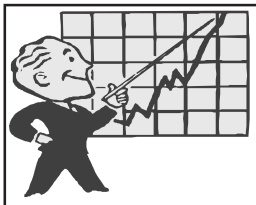
Saru Gossainee, the widow of the brother of the 'Sattradhikaar', is also a victim of the orthodox "Sattra" culture. She owns some acres of land and has low-caste cultivated by some villagers who hold her in high esteem for they consider her very religious and virtuous. But, they cheat her in paying revenue,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

Giribala:

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

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

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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

9.4.4 Goswami's Narrative Style

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

9.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF GOSWAMI

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

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

He further states:

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

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

The Awards Received by Indira Goswami

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

Other Important Awards

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



9.6 LET US SUM UP

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



9.7 FURTHER READING

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

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

Web Resources:

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

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

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

9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



9.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction

10.3 Bina Barua: Life and Works

10.4 Reading the Novel

10.4.1 The Storyline

10.4.2 Major Themes

10.4.3 Major Characters

10.4.4 Barua's Narrative Style

10.5 Critical Reception of Barua

10.6 Let us Summing Up

10.7 Further Reading

10.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

10.9 Possible Questions

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

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

10.2 INTRODUCTION

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

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

10.3 BINA BARUA: LIFE AND WORKS

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

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

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



LET US KNOW

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

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

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

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

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

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

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

10.4 READING THE NOVEL

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

10.4.1 The Storyline

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The second chapter opens with the following epigraph:

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

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

The epigraph to the third chapter reads thus –

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

10.4.2 Major Themes:

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

Moral Vision:

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

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

Conflict between Tradition and Modernity:

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

Folklore:

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

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

Marriage and Family:

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

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

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

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

Condition of Women:

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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

10.4.3 Major Characters:

The following are the important characters of the novel.

Tagar:

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

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

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

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

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

Kamalakanta:

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

Dharani:

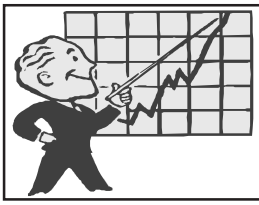
The Weaving Instructor Dharani marries Tagar – he appears very happy in the beginning when Bapuram Bora announces his decision to marry off his daughter to him. It appeared to him as he has received a wealth of fortune in the form of Tagar–"A beggar has got all the riches without asking even. Moved by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

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

10.4.4 Barua's Narrative Style:

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

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



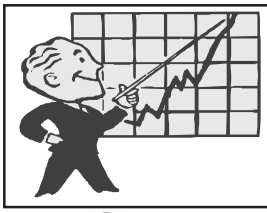
CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

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

10.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BARUA

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

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



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

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



10.6 LET US SUM UP

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

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



10.7 FURTHER READING

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10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *Asomor Loka Sanskriti.*

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

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

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

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

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

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



10.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

*** ***** ***



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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?
