

***CONTEMPORARY PROSE WRITING IN ENGLISH FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST: A  
CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECT WRITERS***

(Dissertation submitted to Nagaland University in partial fulfilment for award of the  
Degree of **Master of Philosophy in English**)

By

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## DECLARATION

I, **Mr. Bulen Chutia**, hereby declare that the dissertation entitled *CONTEMPORARY PROSE WRITING IN ENGLISH FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECT WRITERS* submitted for the award of **Master of Philosophy in English** is an authentic record of research done by me under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. Md. Akhtar Jamal Khan**, Associate Professor in the Department of English, Kohima Campus, Meriema during the period of 2018-19. The work has not been submitted either in full or part to any other university or institute for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or title.

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### **SUPERVISOR'S CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled ***CONTEMPORARY PROSE WRITING IN ENGLISH FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECT WRITERS*** is a bonafide record of research work done by **Mr. Bulen Chutia, Regn. No. 41/2018**, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Camus, Meriema during 2018-2019. Submitted to the Nagaland University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in English, this dissertation has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or other title and that the thesis represents independent and original work on the part of the candidate under my supervision. This is again certified that the research has been undertaken as per UGC Regulations July 2016 (amended) and the candidate has fulfilled the criteria mentioned in the University Ordinances for submission of the dissertation.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Though a good number of writers from Northeast India have been writing prose in English for decades they are deprived of National as well as global recognition. One of the probable reasons behind this may be because of dearth of proper research done on this field. The writers in English from this region, have created a niche remain unnoticed somehow or the other by the historians. In the histories of Indian literature in English written by K. R. S. Iyengar and M. K. Naik, the works of the writers of this region have not been mentioned. K. R. S. Iyengar mentions only Praphulladutta Goswami's *Bihu Songs of Assam* in his book *Indian Writing in English* (2001). M. K. Naik in his *A History of Indian English Literature* (1982) makes no mention of any work by a writer from Northeast India. Another book by him (with Shyamala A. Narayan) entitled *Indian English Literature: 1980-2000* (2001) mentions only two writers from India's northeast. The present work intends to critically examine the prose writings in English from this region and to make an attempt to determine the position of the writers in the sphere of Indian Writing in English.

Some of the noted prose writers from this region are Mamang Dai, Yeshe Dorje Thongchi (Arunachal Pradesh), Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, Saurav Kumar Chaliha, Hem Barua, Indira Goswami, Arup Kumar Dutta, Mitra Phukan, Dhruba Hazarika, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Sanjoy Hazarika, Sanjib Baruah (Assam), Abraham Ongbi Memchoubi, Thingnam Kishan Singh, Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh, Pradip Phanjoubam, Yulembam Ibomcha, Ratan Thiyam (Manipur), Siddhartha Deb, Anjum Hassan, Patricia Mukhim (Meghalaya), Margaret

Lalmuanpuii Pachuau, Margaret Chalthantluangi Zama, Mona Zote (Mizoram), Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Charles Chasie, Anungla Aier (Nagaland), Gadul Singh Lama, Kazi Dawa Samdup, Gyatsho Tshering (Sikkim).

Nationhood, identity, insurgency, ethnic violence, corruption in the bureaucracy, home, migration, exile, memory are some of the dominant themes that the writers of this region deal with. Apart from dealing with some of the core issues of the region, these writers explore through the history and the mysterious ecology of their native states in particular and the region in general. These prose writers from different parts of Northeast India may possess the potential to compete with the writers from other parts of India and abroad in terms of subject matter and way of presentation. Many of them write on universally acclaimed issues.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Love in the Time of Insurgency* gives us an insight into the Second World War and its impact on Northeast India. It shows how this region also became a battle field during that war. This novel is like a ground reporting of warfare and its terror that affected common mass. From this perspective it may be considered to be a War Narrative from northeast region. It not only depicts World War II, but also examines a vivid picture of internal politics during Indian struggle for freedom and insurgencies that were born. Therefore this novel may also be categorized as a successful political novel. Sexual assault of women during warfare is another issue in this novel. Memory and trauma of war among common mass are evident in *Love in the Time of Insurgency*. So this novel may also be categorized as novel of memory and trauma. Love obviously plays an important role here.

Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* in the same way is another great political novel based on partition of India. The trauma and fear in the minds of victims due to partition are depicted quite vividly in the novel. The questions of immigration, nationhood, existential dilemma resulted by partition are hinted out well in the novel by Deb who himself is a victim of the same. This novel may therefore be considered as a Partition Novel too. *The Point of Return* possesses almost all the qualities of partition narrative like other novels of this genre written by Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Amitabh Ghosh etc. But the novel has not received the due recognition in the history of Indian English Literature.

Saurav Kumar Chaliha is another writer in the list whose short stories, though have been written in Assamese and later translated into English, possess unique and extraordinary qualities of blending scientific thought and humanity which reflect the aspects like existential crisis, human and non-human relationships, unclear motifs of human life etc. *The Final Request* by Chaliha is such a story where readers may find out all the qualities that have been mentioned above. He shows the advancements of science and technology and their uses in day-to-day life. Robotic development and human being's dependence on it is depicted well and shows how a person gradually becomes a victim of existential dilemma due to extreme dependence on others. The protagonist of this story wants to end his meaningless life and requests the robot to do it for him. Such types of writings are surely thought provoking. Chaliha focuses on both the human minds and the outward world. He tries to understand the psychological processes in connection with the surrounding. Therefore his works may be categorized as psychological and scientific and at the same time raises certain existential questions. *The Final Request* is a very good example in this

regard. His other works like *Ahaat Daaba*, *Ashanta Electron* etc. may clarify the notions regarding such categorization.

Marriage is a great social institution in India. The bondage between husband and wife is considered to be one of the holistic relationships that have ever existed. But happiness in married life is still a big question in our society, basically in Assam. Being conservative, Assamese society cannot entertain divorce and other sorts of separation between husband and wife. So unhappy relationships are being manipulated and presented before society in good ways fearing the social criticism. At certain point people manipulate the things to show that they are happy enough. Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* is a novel on such issues where a fragmented relationship between a busy collector and his lecturer wife is shown vividly. Time is shown as the greatest culprit in this novel. Husband is always out of station on official duty and cannot give quality time to his wife. As a result a gap in the relationship has been generated that affected the wife more. A serious communication gap has been generated between them during the course of time. As a result wife becomes lonely in the big mansion. This banality in life gradually leads her toward so called unfaithfulness. She starts having an affair with one of their employees. This is a bitter side of truth depicted well in the novel. Barrenness in married life and being deprived of emotional support from husband and with no children even after ten years of marriage may mislead a woman. Such situations are justified in Phukan's writings. The derogatory social mindset in having no children ignoring the state of the woman's mind is questioned in the novel. This is not only a problem in Assam, rather it reflects the Indian society as a whole. Woman's desire to fulfill physical needs is not only a concern of Assam, but it is universal. Mitra Phukan raises a universal issue through her writing like many other writers such as Kamala Das, Gustave

Flaubert etc. All these things happen only because of communication gap, as Phukan depicts. Any problem can be solved through a constructive discussion with keeping the minds open in both sides. But in conservative society like ours we create taboos rather than discussing the issues. Loneliness can kill a person from within and that is what happens in case of the collector's wife. A novel dealing with such appealing issues should gain popularity and importance among the readers across the world. This novel of Mitra Phukan has depicted the social reality in fictional way.

Non-fictional writings from Northeast India are also contributing a lot toward the literary history of this region. They deal basically with the socio-political scenario of northeast. Eminent journalist and social activist Sanjoy Hazarika from Assam in his narratives *Strangers of the Mist* and *Strangers No More* puts forward different unknown facts about this dislocated region. In these two books Hazarika examines old and new struggles, contemporary trends and the sweeping changes that have been taken place and asks whether the region and its people are still different to the rest of India. Critically, he tries to portray the way in which new generations are grappling with old and current issues with an eye to the future. Extensively researched and brilliantly narrated, *Strangers No More* is arguably one of the most comprehensive books on and about India's northeast. Hazarika says:

This is a deeply personal book, for it reflects what I regard as the core issues facing the eight Northeastern states of India: politics, policy, law and disorder, violent uprisings and painful reconciliations, offence and defence, conservation and oppression, history and the

contemporary reality, stereotyping and breaking out of the mould, hope and despair.  
(Hazarika, x)

Again, a large number of continuous illegal immigration from the neighbouring country Bangladesh has posed serious problems and resulted in many religious and communal riots creating a hue and cry among the people of Northeast. Works of Sanjoy Hazarika highlight these issues well in his non-fictional prose writings. The effects of this political facet on the land of seven sisters, immigration from different parts of the country to Northeast, the aversion towards non-Northeasterners, superstitions, and the advent of modernism have been thoroughly discussed, criticised and debated by many socially concerned writers of Northeast India. The depiction of the amalgamation of horror of terrorism, along with socio-political issues and the scenic beauty of this uncontaminated land is perfectly reflected in the works of such writers.

So, this research attempts to reread some important texts by five contemporary noted writers selected randomly from the Northeast and to find out uniqueness of some their important works. Their diverse subject matters hint out the richness of literary tradition of this particular region. Along with the above mentioned issues colonialism too remains aspects comprehending the spirit of Northeast. The Northeast is surely the one area of postcolonial India where the outbreak of insurgency has been more frequent than anywhere else in South Asia and where recourse to armed rebellion has often been the first, rather than the last, option of a recalcitrant tribe or a larger ethnic group. Tensions among the states of Northeast and the central government as well as among the native tribal people and migrants from other parts of India are often witnessed. An

unnecessary killing of innocent people is one of the treacherous impacts of insurgency. These issues get reflected in literature from Northeast.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned aspects, the present research is an attempt to portray the diverse scenario of the contemporary Northeast India that is brought into light through the lens of five such writers: Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (Assam), Saurav Kumar Chaliha (Assam), Mitra Phukan (Assam), Siddhartha Deb (Meghalaya) and Sanjoy Hazarika (Assam).

### **Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya**



Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (14<sup>th</sup> October, 1924- 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1997) is undoubtedly among the pioneers in the tradition writing prose in English from the Northeast. He is one of the most respected Assamese poets, novelists and short story writers of all time. By contributing a good number of novels, poems, short stories, plays, travelogues, biography etc he had enriched Assamese Literature a lot. He was the first Assamese author to receive India's the most prestigious literary award *Jnanpith* for the novel *Mrityunjaya* (Immortal) in 1979. The first novel that Bhattacharyya wrote was *Rajpathe Ringiai* in 1958. This novel is a socio-political analysis of Assam which is set on the events of a single day. His second novel *Aai* (Mother) published in 1958 portrays the effects of modern civilization on simple village economy.

Bhattacharyya's novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* may be considered as a masterpiece among others. It was originally published in Assamese language in 1960 under the title *Yariungam* and was translated into English by the author himself and was published in 1984 by Christian Literature Society, Guwahati. His concerns related to the Second World War, Indian struggle for Freedom and Naga Insurgency amalgamating the other issues of love, feminism, memory, trauma and plight of common people as depicted in *Love in the Time of Insurgency* may draw the attention of the readers overseas. Love is such a strong emotion that thrives even when people are surrounded by violence. That is what the novel is mainly about. This novel examines some very sensitive truths of the battlefield of China-India-Burma during the Second World War. Horrible memories of war, violence, trauma, fear of losing social identity and chastity by the women may also be the major concerns of this novel.

The novel is subtitled as *A Novel as Large as Life Itself* unfolding different aspects of lives of common people during the most difficult time ever for the Naga people. Through Sharengla's character the writer wants to enlighten us how time and situation enslave human beings, basically women. The novel actually shows the readers as to how the wars dismantle everything. The narrative shows how war snatches away chastity of women and makes them helpless in society. Sharengla was abducted and raped by the Japanese soldiers as shown in the novel. But the society was not ready to accept her as before. Even Rishang, to whom she was supposed to get married now in dilemma in choosing social life and Sharengla. The narrative reflects his inner mind:

Maybe, thought Rishang, she wants me to present the flowers to her or at least acknowledge them? But she is no longer a virgin, a voice inside him said. She does not deserve these roses. They were meant for a virgin who was to be my wife. Sharengla will not be accepted by my society, she is no more than a concubine, ravished by another man. (Bhattacharyya, 19)

Such notions and behaviour of so-called educated youth like Rishang may be considered as ill fate for a progressive society. Sharengla could understand his mind through his expressions well:

Sharengla guessed what was passing through his mind. She knew chastity was important for young women of her tribe but, didn't he know she was innocent and she was still attracted to him? She expected a little more understanding from a man. (ibidem)

This novel is widely read even today due to the relevance of the subject matter. Set in Nagaland during the World War II, the novel talks about war, love and life in a large dimension. Therefore it may be read as a political novel too. It draws attention of the mass by depicting insurgency prevailing in Nagaland during that time. But the author himself in a letter to Indira Goswami remarks:

For critics, it is easy to label *Yaruingam* as a political novel, because by dividing the literary works into different categories, they can analyse and dissect them according to their subject matter. It is difficult to divide life into compartments, and politics is just one of the many divisions of life... For writing a novel, we accept only of a particular time

and place, but the reality is like the current of a river. Art selects only a part of the reality and makes it harmonious and beautiful. (Bhattacharyya, 8)

The ecology of the land has references in many places in the novel and the environmental degradation due to the war has also been talked about:

Far away towards the Northeast, the Shiroy peak looked as calm as ever, home to most of the rivers that originated in its many crevices and slopes and flowed through the village and its surrounding areas. (Bhattacharyya, 17)

But that serenity is no more. The war has devastated everything. Sharengla, the lead female character of the novel climbs up to the hill top and notices the hazardous impact of the war on the village:

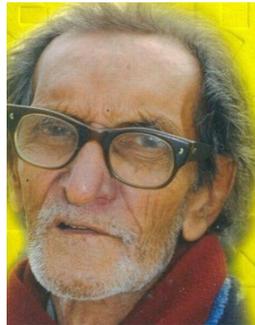
Slowly she climbed a nearby hill and reached the top. She looked at the village at her feet, looking so sad and devastated in the midst of the softy rippling hills, the ribbons of streams and rivers. Some houses were still burning, pigs and chicken scurrying helplessly around. The village church, too, burned. The spire was licked by small shooting flames and bits of burning wood beginning to fall from it. The cross was no longer visible. (ibidem)

Bhattacharyya's most influential novel was *Mrityunjay* (1979). It explores the theme of struggle and commitments of Assamese society in 1942 in pre-independence days against British rule.

This novel brought him the most prestigious literary award *Jnanpith*. Another special novel *Pratibad* portrays the labour movement in oil town of Assam, Digboi during 1938-39.

Apart from these great novels Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya wrote some other great short stories. Like the novels these stories also deal with society, politics and realities of life. *Kolong Ajiu Boi* (1962), *Satsori* (1963) are some examples of his short story collections. His style of writing is very simple and successful enough to bring up the real pictures of life. Bhattacharyya's contribution toward literary field of Assam is unforgettable. He was made president of 'Asom Sahitya Sabha' as well.

### **Saurav Kumar Chaliha**



Saurav Kumar Chaliha (1930-25<sup>th</sup> June, 2011) is the pen name of renowned Assamese short story writer Surendra Nath Medhi. He won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for anthology of short stories *Gulam* (Slave) in 1974. Chaliha worked as teacher in different educational institutions in Germany before returning to India in 1960. He joined Assam Engineering College as a professor of Physics and worked there till superannuation. As a professor of science he tried to popularise his discipline through literature. His effort in fictionalizing scientific theories and technology is praiseworthy. Absurdity and uncertainty in life are other issues that he dealt with skilfully in his stories. Literature is mirror not only to the external social components but it may

sometimes reflect inner realities of human mind. There are lots of examples of the same from literary works all over the world. Short stories of Chaliha familiarises the readers with the internal reality of human minds just by introducing absurdity in them. He wants to make us understand how the human mind may roam around various places by leaving its body at a certain place.

He is undoubtedly among the pioneers of the tradition of writing science fiction, absurd stories, and existential fiction in Assamese literature. Such short stories include: *Ashanta Electron* (1962), *Duporiya* (1963), *Ehat Daba* (1972), *Golam* (1974), *Shesh Anurodh* (1994) etc. *Shesh Anurodh* was first published in Assamese in *Swanirbasita Sankalan* in the year 1994. It was translated into English by Arup Kumar Dutta under title *The Final Request*.

Chaliha's *The Final Request* is such a story where the readers come across the question of existence and humanity. The quest for happiness and real source of inspiration in life is evident in this story. The first ever line shows how nothingness and boredom engulf the narrator, "Nothing yields joy anymore...nothing inspires any longer." (*Heart of the Matter*, 83)

How the humans end their lives in futile quest for completeness may also play a great role in this short story. The writer gives us a message through this story that humanity is above scientific development. The protagonist here creates an advanced robot which can obey most of his commands. It becomes a companion to him. In spite of these he feels incomplete because of existential dilemma. His inability to decide the motive of life leads him to self-destruction. By

portraying human-robot relationship he has enriched the genre of Science fiction in Northeast India.

The same things happen in different ways in Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's wife* (2005). The novel presents existential dilemma, banality, loneliness, boredom and adultery of a sexually unsatisfied wife Mrs. Rukmini Bezboruah of a busy District Collector named Siddharth. Here a conscious reader may find out the wife's quest for meaning in life. She is a law-loving, educated and independent College lecturer staying in a huge bungalow. Yet she has a strong sense of being incomplete and unhappy.

### **Mitra Phukan**



Mitra Phukan (b. 1953) is an eminent writer from Assam. She is also a translator and a columnist. She is a regular contributor to the prominent English dailies. Also being a trained classical vocalist, Phukan, till date, has written the following books: *Mamoni's Adventures* (1986), a children's book, adventurous in tone, about a seven year old girl who lives with her mother (a tea-picker) and her brother; *Chumki Posts a Letter* (1989)- yet another adventurous story of the six year old, whimsical, happy-go-lucky, and sincere Chumki who helps her mother by posting a letter; *The Biratpur Adventure* (1994), *R G Baruah: The Architect of Modern Assam* (2004), *The Collector's Wife* (2005), *Terrorist Camp Adventure* (2003), and *A Monsoon of Music*

(2011)- a novel based on music, that weaves the story of Nomita Shrama, a 26 year old vocalist, along with four other aspirant musicians. Phukan also wrote *Guwahati Gaze* (2013), *Blossoms in the Graveyard* (2016), and *A Full Night's Thievery* (2016)- also based on music, the novel deals with the contemporary Assamese society where traditional ways of life are left behind and the issues like, militancy, witchcraft take a toll on the lives of the characters. *Mamoni's Adventures* won her the UNICEF-CBT award.

In addition, her short stories have appeared in various journals. Her works have been translated into several Indian and European languages. As a translator herself, she has brought the works of some of the best-known contemporary Assamese fiction writers into English. Her widely read column, 'All Things Considered', appears fortnightly in *The Assam Tribune*. She is an active member of Aradhana, an organization that takes music to the underprivileged sections of society, and a founder member of the North East Writers' Forum.

In *The Collector's Wife*, the select narrative, insurgency being the backdrop, revolves around the story of the struggle made by the protagonist, Rukmini, the wife of a district collector. The contrast between the so-called elegant life of Rukmini and her inner turmoil, affected by male chauvinism, is strikingly established by the author. Being a District Collector's wife, her life seems settled and safe in the big, beautiful bungalow on the hill above the cremation ground, undisturbed by the incessant hardships and sufferings of the common people living down the hill. But it is necessary to note that, each time there is some 'incident' or chaos in the district she lives in, the fear and uncertainty that grips the town is also vividly reflected in the life of Rukmini. The turmoil in the nature reflected in the life of the protagonist is a clear depiction of the indirect

relation of man with Nature. By this, the author establishes an eco-cultural connection in the incidents occurring in the lives of the characters.

Rukmini, in the novel is enveloped in loneliness. The lush of greenery and overpowering stench of death are all around her. Though she is the wife of district collector, lives in a huge bungalow, works as lecturer in a college and she has loving in-laws she has a strong sense of being incomplete. Set in the turbulence of an insurgency and protest-ridden Assam, the novel gives Rukmini a ringside view of the abduction and killings by the extremists. Her husband Siddharth is seldom home and is constantly busy with the administrative works. Rukmini's desire to have a child is met with a barrenness of passion in bed. A chance meeting with a tyre salesman, Manoj Mohanty, their blooming friendship and an inevitable moment of physical tenderness bring colour and joy to Rukmini's life for the first time in almost a decade. But the horrors to which she was but a mute viewer quickly seep into her life as Siddharth and Manoj both get pulled into the web of the terrorist violence.

Mitra Phukan has skilfully weaved into the story's fabric both joy and sadness to tug powerfully at the readers' heartstrings. The plot is well crafted and the language is simple and smooth flowing. The author takes the readers through Rukmini's life at a measured pace which allows the readers to fully understand her state of mind.

The Prose writing from this region is not confined to Short Stories and Novels. There developed intellectual non-fictional Narratives covering various major burning issues of contemporary society.

## Sanjoy Hazarika



Sanjoy Hazarika (b. 1954) is director of Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and an award-winning journalist, formerly working in *The Newyork Times*. He is one of them who raise voice against population exploitation, violation of human rights, violation of female rights, corruption, cultural hegemony, immigrant problems and other issues. Earlier he was the director of the Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research at Jamia Milia Islamia. His *Strangers of the Mist: tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* (1994), and *Strangers No More: New Narrative from India's Northeast* (2018) are two such narratives where the readers come across the problems of Northeast India. Other books that he wrote include *Bhopal: The lessons of a Tragedy*, *Rites of Passage: Border Crossings, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh*, and *Writing on the Wall*. These are generally collection of essays. As a columnist and specialist commentator on the Northeast and its neighbouring regions, Hazarika has written and published extensively on the draconian laws like the Armed Force Special Power Act (AFSPA), the Eastern Himalaya, and the freedom fighters from the Northeast.

*Strangers of the Mist* was published at a time when serious work on the Norhteast was still rare. So the book became a standard reference point for anyone interested in this still-misty region. It looks at how common people reacted to imperial, insensitive administrations, politicians and policies. Now, twenty four years later, Hazarika is back to pick up from where he left off. His

latest book *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast* is an ambitious attempt to explain how and where things stand in the Northeast today. Through this narrative Hazarika wants to clear the misconceptions that the national media has about the Northeast. He tries to give true information to them make them understand as to what kind of difficulties that the region have been undergoing. In his own words:

There is another factor that provoked me to make this book as comprehensive as possible: the dominion of short-sighted punditry in newspapers, social and broadcast media. These pundits make laughing stocks of themselves. Mixing up Manipur with Mizoram or Meghalaya or confusing one chief minister with another is not just frustratingly annoying. What is unacceptable is that they make difficult situations worse by taking sides and imagining that they know better without even living in or visiting the areas that they write about, broadcast or discuss. That they don't speak a local language or know people beyond intelligence agents, media persons or political leaders speaks volumes of their incapacity. Poor information is the bane of understanding, especially of a complex region. (Hazarika, xiii)

That is, *Strangers No More* may also be considered as an attack on media too.

## Siddhartha Deb



Siddhartha Deb (b. 1970) is considered to be one of the representative novelists from the region. He worked as a journalist in Calcutta and Delhi and wrote for the *Boston Globe*, the *London Review of Books*, *New Statesman*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. He went to the United States of America in 1998 on a literature fellowship and now lives in New York. His first novel *The Point of Return* was adjudged a New York Times Notable Book of the year in 2002. Set in an unnamed town which is presumably based on Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya, one of the states of India's Northeast, the story of the novel revolves around the father-son relationship. This partly autobiographical novel also delves deep into a world of corruption in the bureaucracy, communal violence and ethnic clashes that have taken place in Maghalaya. The novel also has a few passages from which one may have an idea of the ecology of the region:

In the spring, the gardens flowered from house to house, and in the backyards, along with shrubs and weeds, there were vines of squash, their prickly golden-green skin rough with fiber and indentations and little hollows like a piece of the earth itself. There were butterflies, berries, and rare orchids in the forested walks up toward Laitkor Peak, crabs that scuttled along the slippery, stony beds of streams. (Deb, 257)

Divided into four parts entitled “Arrival”, “Departure”, “Terminal” and “Travelogue” the novel also talks about history, maps and memory. Dr. Dam, the father is ethnically connected to Bangladesh, the former East Pakistan, and who is in search of a ‘home’ in a land where they are a part of a cultural minority. Even after staying in that region for so many years and rendering their service for its development, they are still marginalized and treated as the “other” by the local people. The local people also have their own points of view as they feel that they themselves are being treated as the “other” by the Indian ‘nation’ in many occasions. Thus this novel can be studied with a postcolonial perspective. It is also a saga of the displaced people and the insider-outsider dichotomy. This undoubtedly has far-reaching impact on the ecology. Displacements, communal violence or ethnic clashes greatly influences the ecosystem. Hence *Point of Return* can also be studied as postcolonial writing.

Deb’s another novel *Surface* is also set in one of the regions in Northeast India. This unnamed remote part of India is referred to as ‘the region’. However, a close study shows that ‘the region’ might be Manipur, one of the states in India’s northeast. Amrit, a reporter for *The Sentinel* has been sent to the region by the Kolkata head office with a particular assignment. It is through this journey of the scribe contemporary politics, economics, society and life in Manipur are presented. Through the eyes of Amrit the ecology of the land is also unveiled: “...a national highway that disappeared into the hills of Meghalaya where the green of the river valley gave way to a more ethereal blue.” (Deb, 49)

In some of the prose writings there are beautiful depiction of the landscape of Mizoram. There are also references to Mizo myths and legends as well traditional rites and rituals. This voice of resistance as well as of identity is typical of postcolonial writing in English from Northeast India.

So there may be a great possibility of developing a new and expanding area of English Studies from this region. Research should be done more on this field to encourage the upcoming generations of scholars. The research also aims at analysing and studying new areas, thoughts and ideas as presented in the works of Northeast Indian writers.

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## CHAPTER II

### BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYYA AS PIONEER TO ENGLISH PROSE

#### WRITING IN THE NORTHEAST

The tradition of writing prose in English from India's northeast began not before the independence of India. Besides having rich oral literatures, some states like Assam and Manipur in particular, have literary histories that date back to centuries. Writing in English from Northeast as a discourse of self-expression took shape casually in the eighties and the nineties of the twentieth century. The writers writing in English from this region at present are the first generation of writers. They already have attained a legitimate as well as a powerful voice by articulating their thoughts, feelings and sentiments and by focusing on some of the pertinent issues of the region. The ethos and milieu of their respective communities are some of the dominant preoccupations of these multi-ethnic writers.

Some writers realized the importance of writing in English to let others know about this dislocated land. Its ecology, demography, politics, history and most importantly the people of this region were misunderstood for ages before. To clear some misconceptions regarding the complex territory, writers like Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya came forward to write on this mysterious land. Though he wrote most of his novels in Assamese language he decided to translate his most acclaimed book *Yaruingam* (1960) into English and finally it got published in 1984 under the title *Love in the Time of Insurgency* unfolding many mysterious facts and truths related to then Nagaland, an integral part of Northeast India. It shows the impact of World War II and India's Struggle for freedom on Naga social lives. It farther reveals how the society was split

into two groups with different ideologies under the influence of both Mahatma Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose. How these things disturbed the peaceful rustic lives of Nagaland and turned into a disturbed region.

Bhattacharyya's concerns related to the World War II, Indian struggle for freedom and Naga Insurgency amalgamating the other issues of love, feminism, memory, trauma and plight of common people as depicted in *Love in the Time of Insurgency* may draw the attention of the readers overseas. Love as an important emotion that thrives even under violence. That is what the novel is mainly about. Moreover this novel examines some sensitive truths of the battlefield of China-India-Burma during the Second World War. Horrible memories of war, violence, trauma, fear of losing social identity and chastity by the women are some of the major concerns of this novel.

The novel is subtitled as *A Novel as Large as Life Itself* unfolding different aspects of lives of common people during the most difficult time ever for the Naga people. Through Sharengla's character the writer wants to enlighten us how time and situation enslave human beings, basically women. The novel actually shows the readers as to how the wars dismantle everything. The narrative shows how war snatches away chastity of women and makes them helpless in society. Sharengla was abducted and raped by the Japanese soldiers as discussed in the novel. But the society was not ready to accept her as before. Even Rishang, her fiance, hesitates to accept her as his wife because of social constraints:

Maybe, thought Rishang, she wants me to present the flowers to her or at least acknowledge them? But she is no longer a virgin, a voice inside him said. She does not deserve these roses. They were meant for a virgin who was to be my wife. Sharengla will

not be accepted by my society, she is no more than a concubine, ravished by another man. (Bhattacharyya, 19)

Such notions and behaviour of so-called educated youth like Rishang may be considered as ill fate for a progressive society. Sharengla could understand his mind:

Sharengla guessed what was passing through his mind. She knew chastity was important for young women of her tribe but, didn't he know she was innocent and she was still attracted to him? She expected a little more understanding from a man. (ibidem)

The novel is widely read even today due to the relevance of the subject matter. Set in Nagaland during the World War II, the novel talks about war, love and life in a large dimension. Therefore it may be read as a political novel too. It draws attention of the mass by depicting insurgency prevailing in Nagaland during that time. But the author himself in a letter to Indira Goswami remarks:

For critics, it is easy to label *Yaruingam* as a political novel, because by dividing the literary works into different categories, they can analyse and dissect them according to their subject matter. It is difficult to divide life into compartments, and politics is just one of the many divisions of life... For writing a novel, we accept only of a particular time and place, but the reality is like the current of a river. Art selects only a part of the reality and makes it harmonious and beautiful. (Bhattacharyya, 8)

While republishing the novel in 2005 Katha India Library has remarked by saying that till fifty years ago, the Nagas figured only in census records. But Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, one of the foremost literary figures in Assam, dared to break this numerical-cordon and tell us a story

that had never been told. Thus the novel traces the direct impact of World War II on Nagaland. The novelist paid more attention to the global issues connecting them with the regional ones.

The ecology of the land has references in many places in the novel and the environmental degradation due to the war has also been talked about:

Far away towards the Northeast, the Shiroy peak looked as calm as ever, home to most of the rivers that originated in its many crevices and slopes and flowed through the village and its surrounding areas. (Bhattacharyya, 17)

But in due course the place has gradually lost its that serenity. The war has devastated everything. Sharengla, the lead female character of the novel climbs up to the hill top and notices the hazardous impact of the war on the village:

Slowly she climbed a nearby hill and reached the top. She looked at the village at her feet, looking so sad and devastated in the midst of the softy rippling hills, the ribbons of streams and rivers. Some houses were still burning, pigs and chicken scurrying helplessly around. The village church, too, burned. The spire was licked by small shooting flames and bits of burning wood beginning to fall from it. The cross was no longer visible. (ibidem)

Apart from the love story between Rishang, a handsome and educated Gandhian leader, and Sharengla, a beautiful village girl, the story acquaints the readers with some general characteristics of the then Nagas. So this novel is a socio-political documentation of Tangkhul society of Nagaland too. Though Christianity, education, modernization and globalization have changed the socio-cultural lives of Tangkhul Naga people some of them are still deeply rooted to

their own culture. They feel it to be a loss of identity while embracing new way of life. Ngazek, an old and conservative villager, is an example of such a character who believes that bravery, manhood, aggression, love for war and bloodshed are some of the important features of a true Naga. Non-violence, for him, is waste of time. For him, Videssellie is the right person who does not believe in ahimsa rather stages a ruthless fight against the authorities. Ngazek, in a way, defines what a Naga is by saying: “My choice is Videssellie...Videssellie is a true Naga. I’ve been long in search of such a man”. (Bhattacharyya, 74)

Revengeful attitude is shown as another major feature of the indigenous Naga people. This is shown as instinctive quality that anyone possesses. That is, revenge is a universal quality, not only of Nagas. Through the enmity of Yangmaso and Ngathingkhui in this novel readers may realize the arrogance, quarrelsome and short-tempered attitude of some rustic people. Bhattacharyya narrates, “Yangmaso unconsciously placed his hand on the scar of the old wound, caused by Ngathingkhui’s spear during a fight for the church land. The old feeling of animosity flamed up his mind”. (Bhattacharyya, 97-98)

Rishang, the lead character of the novel on the other hand reveals a different notion about their people. He is shown as symbol of peace and non-violence who tries to educate the common mass from Gandhian perspectives. Unity regardless of religion, culture and colour is the motto of his campaign.

The economic base of the Tangkhul Naga society is agriculture. In the novel, the reference to the jhum cultivation is evident. Such way of cultivation is done in hilly areas which are also known as ‘shifting cultivation’ as the plots of land are cultivated temporarily. Along with paddies, ginger, potato and cotton are also being cultivated. Trade and commerce of such ingredients are

not satisfying. The business of salt is also seen somewhere in this novel. Both male and female are equally involved in the paddy field regardless of age. Cultivation in hilly area is shown as quite difficult phenomenon in this novel. In the novelist's words:

Yangmaso reached the hillock and looked around for Atip. Then he went along a small road, through the dark shadowy patches of an encroaching forest till he came to a hill stream. He crossed it and walked along its bare bank reaching a thicket of shrubs with spotted leaves. From there the hill gradually descended in a zigzag. Atip was not in the potato field. Yangmaso went up the hill. He saw Atip now, working with all her strength.  
(Bhattacharyya, 100-101)

Yangmaso's effort to reach the potato field gives the reader an idea about the difficulties that the Nagas face in agriculture and cultivation. The reference of pigs, dogs and chicken is also important in this novel, as the village economy is directly dependent on such issues as well. Bhattacharyya narrates:

Atip finished her meal, washed her face, then took down the pot from the fire and went out. The squealing pigs rushed to her and "Oh-o, what a noisy bunch you are!" she chided them, laughing. The door of the house was open. This was an opportunity for the dog and the chickens to sneak in and pick up the food on the floor around the fireside...  
(Bhattacharyya, 92)

Such images deal not only with economy but also give vital picture of their daily lives. Moreover the readers may notice different names of agricultural tools and equipments that they use such as, khunti, kor, spear etc.

Dress and ornament may signify identity of a tribe. It presents the tribe's social, cultural as well as geographical environment. The choice of the group of people is also manifested through dress code. In *Love in the Time of Insurgency* readers come across the dressing sense of both male and female of Tangkhul Naga tribal society. The traditional dress for women is known as 'Kachon', a traditional shawl. The narrator describes Sharengla in her normal attire as: "...her Kachon, the traditional Tangkhul red and black shawl for Naga women, slipping from her shoulders" (Bhattacharyya, 14).

Man's dress is also being described through Ngazek's appearance. Hairstyle in Tangkhul tradition and earrings are noteworthy among them. In this way the Kachon on the waist, shawl, a few ornaments and garland on neck and ear are basic dressing style of women whereas men do experiment mainly with their hair.

A glimpse of food habits of the people living in the locality of Ukhrul can be found out from the narrative of the novel. Along with rice the mention of 'pitha' (cake), corn, dried fish, pork and 'zu' (rice beer) can be seen. They have the habit of taking rice cakes with tea. "Sharengla prepared tea for Khating and served him rice cakes." (31) The habit of drinking liqueur is also prominent in this novel: "They ate rice, meat and sauce that the women had brought for the four of them. When they finished Ngathingkhui and Khating had a few sips of zu, the rice beer again" (Bhattacharyya, 39).

Along with alcohol, smoking tobacco is a common phenomenon in the particular region. They consider these things as part of daily life. As the narrator says, "When the zu pot became empty, Varmala took it away, her wrinkled face showing no emotion at all, the tobacco pipe remaining as if stuck to her lips" (Bhattacharyya, 60-61). Among the Naga people eating of pork seems to

be common. The reference to the use of black salt in the society is repeated many a times in the novel. But basically the whole tribal community depends on natural food products.

Tangkhul society seems to be quite systematic in terms of law and order. The village has a 'Khulakapa' (headman). He has the power to decide everything important in the village. Sharengla, after being abandoned by the Japanese soldier Ishewara is now allowed to live in the village, in 'Ngalalong' (girls' dormitory). This is a decision made by headman. He can even change the previous rules when necessary. This is why, most probably, he allows her to stay with the virgin girls even after knowing that she has lost her chastity. The narrative shows how the others are sympathetic toward her as Rishang remarks, "The villagers will treat you with consideration. They are now living in a temporary village. You will be allowed to stay in the girls' dormitory". (Bhattacharyya, 19) That is, during the time of insurgency and war the village law becomes flexible. During that time the entry of male is also allowed in such dormitories, which is generally meant for girls. Bhattacharyya defines 'Ngalalong' as: "...the house of the virgins, a community education centre where unmarried girls were trained in traditional craft and initiated into adult social life". (Bhattacharyya, 22)

The reference to the Panchayat system is also evident in the society as reflected in the novel. As the story moves the readers notice conflicts between Ngathingkhui and Yangmaso on the issue of land for church. The village Panchayat tries to sort out the issue.

Tangkhul society also has gender discrimination. Everything was fine before the Japanese invasion. Works were distributed equally between male and female earlier. There was no question of loss of virginity, rape, abduction of women before. But the advent of Japanese soldiers during the Second World War dismantles everything. The women are at fear at any point

of time now. Sharengla's character is the worst sufferer in this novel as she became the victim of it. The writer states, "And her mind turned and turned on her loss of chastity. With that loss she had lost everything". (Bhattacharyya, 16) She therefore expects that men should understand her situation, especially her former lover Rishang. It was not her choice to be raped, rather she was abducted. "She knew chastity was important for young women of her tribe but, didn't he know she was innocent and she was still attracted to him? She expected a little more understanding from a man". (Bhattacharyya, 19)

Depiction of faith on ghost, spirit, afterlife and other beliefs along with performance of different rituals in Bhattacharyya's *Love in the Time of Insurgency* is noteworthy. The rituals done before and after Ngazek's death manifest their belief systems. They have the belief that the spirit of a dead person does not go directly to the 'Kazeiram' (heaven). The 'Thilakapo' chosen by the person must help the spirit to find the way out to heaven. He should guide it till the Shiroi peak. Videssilie, the thilakapo of Ngazek also does the same in the novel. This is a unique ritual in the society. "The Thilakapo was to act after his death as his representative at the death ceremony and the Kathi Kasham feast, ensuring a smooth journey of his spirit to kazeiram, the heaven" (74). Ngazek was superstitious in nature. When he was ill he did rituals rather than taking help of medical treatments. The narrator remarks:

Ngazek was ill with smallpox. The maiba had already killed a cock to get omens and picked out the lai from the patient's body by kneeling on Ngazek and pummelling him steadily for a long time. The maiba then laid him on the leaves picked specially from a tree that was linked to the disease. (Bhattacharyya, 73)

So the reference to Kameo (God), Kathikasham feast, Shiroy peak, ghost, spirit, Maiba, Lai, Kazeiram etc. may provide enough hints regarding their superstition.

Modernization and the impact of colonialism are apparent in the Tangkhul Naga society. Basically in the field of religion its influence is greater. The indigenous culture and religion has been disturbed by Christianity. The same group of people is now dividing themselves into Christian and non-Christians. A total chaos and discrimination occur in the society due to religion now. So the novel shows that religion may cause social unrest. Even the enmity between Ngathingkhui and Yangmaso is because of a land of church.

*Love in the Time of Insurgency* also deals with question of chastity of women. The notion of maintaining chastity has always been considered as a virtuous tendency especially for the women in the society. Women have always remained a subject of male supremacy; they were presented in a subordinate position in history; a less able, weak, less thoughtful and submitted being. The origin of this so called “chastity” lies in man’s psyche from the very beginning. There is a patriarchal ideology attached to the origin of these narrow concepts like “chastity” which deeply affects not only the women but also the men. Thus it shows women as puppets in the hands of man and if she denies being a puppet and starts to rebel she is expelled from the society. The literary world of Richardson’s *Pamela* too idealizes preservation of chastity as it provides a woman her moral degree and likely it is a way for upgrading her status. In twentieth century, the introduction of Feminist Movement and Feminist Criticism, questioned the basic tenets of chastity and exposed the deep embedded patriarchal ideology in the male psyche.

The character Sharengla in *Love in the Time of Insurgency* felt in the same way when she was forcefully taken by a Japanese soldier, Ishewara. Sharengla’s loss of chastity deeply affected her.

The author presented a true picture of society where woman like Sharengla had no scope to redeem her tragic flaw. She was deeply disturbed and traumatized. Narrative says, “The loneliness was unbearable. And her mind turned and turned on her loss of chastity. With that loss she lost everything.” (Bhattacharyya, 16)

Though she knew from inside she was forced to lose her virginity and not self determined to do it. But the existing social set up of her tribe did not lead her to retrieve her tragedy. It started to haunt her which led her to feel guilty. She took her religion as a means to provide her solace. She lost the hope to start a new life by getting married. She believed by serving people through any means would help her to attain relief. It would also act as a remedy from the sinful practice she underwent in the past. She did not serve the society to get back her dignity but to overcome her guilt. Thus we could see how such narrow social concept could colonize one’s mind and can create a halt in one’s development. It could also eliminate the possibility for a better life.

Such preaching on chastity ruins the mind of women. In such way many women take the path of self destruction. To understand this we can refer to Viktor Frankel’s statement in his book *Man’s Search Meaning*. Viktor Frankel, a psychiatrist, who successfully survived Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II, states Nietzsche’s word- “He who has a ‘why’ to live for can bear with almost anyhow.” (Frankl, 84) This ‘why’ may be vary from person to person, and in case of woman, if their why (remaining virgin) is lost then there is no scope to live for. Sharengla's case is an extreme example how cultural teaching on purity destroys the survivor of sexual assault psychologically.

Furthermore, Jessica Valenti, in *The Purity Myth*, points out that the cultural emphasis on virginity teaches young women that their moral centre is in their crotch, not in their mind or heart. We can see that our cultural emphasis on virginity is a failure because woman is never taught where actually value lies and how to confront misfortune. They are not made prepared if any such tragedy occurs.

The culture tells women that their bodies aren't really theirs; bodies are only to be bargained. In traditional society women are sold into marriage by their fathers and virgins are the most valued goods. A female body is like unexplored colony for a man as she is always projected as an object for male gaze, like a colonizer, man is concerned about holding his supremacy over the body and mind of the colonised. If woman is found to have lost her most precious goods, virginity then there is, for a man, nothing to explore at. The entire premise is found upon the idea that females are commodity for men. Rishang's preference for khatingla over Sharengla is the example of such deep rooted ideology. Rishang, a man of education and liberal attitude, played a role of social reformer in the novel, but his rejection of Sharengla on account of her inappropriate relationship with Ishewara brought out a flaw in his role of a reformer.

She wants me to present the flowers to her or at least acknowledge to them? But she is no longer a virgin, a voice inside him said. She does not deserve these roses. They were meant for a virgin who was to be my wife. Sharengla will not be accepted by my society, she is no more than a concubine, ravished by another man. (Bhattacharyya, 19)

Here his typical ideology is clearly visible and his education and new age learning could not bring any difference to him. For him she has become a fallen woman and he showed his direct rejection to accept her again. Rishang here seemed to be a preacher of David Hume's conception of chastity, according to which chastity is an important virtue necessary for both partners in a marriage relationship to procreate further and to bring stability in human world. Rishang in the novel considered Sharengla an inappropriate match to get bonded in a relation of marriage and labeled her as ineligible partner to procreate. Sharengla expected some understanding from a man like Rishang as they were attracted to each other, but his refusal to understand her situation made him a coward who though pleaded for reformation does not have the courage to break some conventional stereotypes. He chose Khatingla not because he was passionate about her but because she was a virgin, it complimented her to be worthy of his marriage proposal. Thus society equates woman's value with chastity. If not then Sharengla, a virtuous could be accepted by her lover. It brings out the hollowness of societal norms where a notion of chastity becomes more valuable than a person in body.

This rejection was not enough. Confronting villagers was another big challenge for her. Breaking the law of chastity seemed to be an unforgivable offence in the case of Sharengla. She became a victim of unpleasant gaze by the people which signified their contempt for her:

The girls in the ngalalong barely tolerated Sharengla's presence though, as was the custom, they slept together on the long wooden bedstead, ate from common plates worked, gossiped and spent their time together. (Bhattacharyya, 23)

The gaze also signaled at the silent exclusion of her existence from their society. Their outlook towards Sharengla is the proof how they were programmed. They were made to believe unchaste woman has no place in society. This orthodoxical view on chastity made them blind so much that they were unable to see that Sharengla was innocent and instead of pacifying her they treated her differently at the dormitory which did hurt her very much. People like Rishang could only sympathise with her situation but was ignorant of providing solace to her. She was also a pathetic being for Ngathingkhui, his proposal of marriage to her indicated the conscience of a common man like him who thought the presence of a male figure beside her could bring ambition in her barren life.

Your case is unusual. This man was a stranger and the union was forced. And now you are a widow, though pregnant. Our customs allow adoption and polygamy. I could marry you and adopt your child. Your position in the family would be next to Varamla.  
(Bhattacharyya, 114)

His unexpected proposal to her indicates how society declares a fallen woman as an unwanted person who has lost her right to live a normal life. Ngathingkhui's proposal was more of a command than an offer. It showed his forced right over Sharengla as she has lost her reputation after a tragic turnover in her life. Society often provides a prejudiced reaction over woman like Sharengla. She was never admired but only criticized and later sympathized. Khatingla was more of a harsh critic than a friend to her. Her judgement on Sharengla in a conversation with Phanitphang described the gaze which a common woman would look at Sharengla: "This is a loose talk. Do you think every girl behaves like Sharengla?" (Bhattacharyya, 65)

The tendency of relating a fallen woman with any form of negativity is a common thing in society. It brings out the shallow perception of men where they react in an inconsiderate manner when it comes to issue like chastity. Here we could see how personal, social and cultural matters are intertwined and how a personal matter is stretched to provide a social judgement over her and how we imbibe things in our culture from baseless personal accounts.

It is important to notice that men are not judged as women are for consensual sexual activity. In the matter of rape, particularly, there prevails a type of double standardness. While men who force themselves on women go scot-free the women always bear the brunt of the society. If there is any need to impart education then it is, as Valenti states, to let everyone know that one's sexuality is separate from one's morality. In an episode of Anderson Cooper's talk show, Valenti stated, "I think if we want to teach our daughters to be good people, let's teach them to be good people. Their sexuality has nothing to do with that." Moreover, Valenti states that upholding virginity isn't about women's health or well-being. Instead, it is about a regressive, socio-political agenda from conservatives to restore traditional gender stereotypes. The virginity movement really wants from women their submissiveness.

There is a reason why their goal for women is only marriage and motherhood. The movement believes that that's the only thing women are meant for. In this regard Taslima Nasrin's comment can be quoted- In traditional societies, we have a long legacy of men controlling the body and mind of women. Such societies have valorised motherhood and fabricated concepts like chastity. Women have been the victims of these notions for thousands of years.- Taslima Nasrin In this way women are confined to their role of mother. Those who think that a girl is a "damaged

goods” which implies that it denies the power of God’s grace to heal, forgive and transform, she can be defended from biblical point of view. Let us remember that every person on the planet is “damaged goods” needing God’s forgiveness. We were worth so much to the God who created us that He came to buy us back by paying the price for our sin on the cross. Our purity, our wholeness, and our identity can be restored in the redemption of Jesus Christ.

Value is in the purity of mind, and the purity is reflected in action. Sharengla proved to be intelligent by her ability to differentiate between the right and wrong, compassionate by becoming a nurse to the society, and by becoming a source of comfort and guide to Phanitphang who was a confused youth trapped between nationalist sentiments and insurgency, motivator by motivating Phanitphang to save Rishang inspite of sharing the same love interest with Rishang, and most importantly, by becoming a mother to Koncheng, even courageous than any character by refusing to get ruined by the community and choosing koncheng as her sole ambition to live forward. This made her different and a modern woman. She steals attention in the novel as she is more humane than other women characters in the novel. Sharengla chose to live rather than die. She was brave enough to live like an individual rather than depending on a male partner.

Thus it proves that the concept of fallen women has become a myth now. We need to come out of the conventional mode. A woman like Sharengla is more virtuous than passive and rigid Khatingla. A misguided notion of chastity should not be a reason for destruction of one beautiful soul. They are inherently valuable. So we have seen chastity should be maintained in order to bring stability to the society. Sanaubar could not maintain her chastity and it created a disorder in her life, but chastity is not the primary sole of honour and dignity. Culture emphasizes on

virginity, not on purity of mind. If mind is pure then purity will be reflected in the form of action and there is no fear of dishonesty.

Men think that women are unfaithful beings and this view has been prevailing for ages right from mythology to literature. Men put honour on chastity so that they can be dominated. Holding onto such dogmatic view will not make better society. We need to change according to situation. In this context Smart makes a crucial point, she says that sexual assault is a crime and survivors should be supported, not judged. In rape woman has no fault, she can still be pure of heart even after the assault. We all have qualities like empathy, ethics, intelligence that speak to our kindness. Whether or not we are sexually "pure" simply has no effect on our morality. Sanaubar was sexually impure but it did not completely affect her morality. That is why in later part of her life she seemed remorseful for what she had done to Hassan and Ali and took the responsibility of mother and also of grandmother. So a culture that misinterprets virginity is a culture that is awfully bad for both men and women, and that is particularly painful for the survivors of sexual violence. In case of Sharengla, immense support should have come from her lover Rishang, who acts as a reformer in the society but he fails not only as a lover but also as a reformer. He could have accepted Sharengla and could have brought a change to the society that there is nothing pure and virtuous than a pure heart and mind.

War has been fictionalized in a great extent throughout the novel. References to war both Japanese invasion and British invasion during World War II on the soil of Manipur and Nagaland have been discussed many a times in the novel. It was mid July of 1944. The war was certainly going to end when the narration of the novel starts. Ishewara, the Japanese soldier who

abducted Sharengla is afraid whether this end will be satisfactory or not. Now he is in love with her. He is tired of being with war. Not a single party is shown as having morality. Both the parties are busy with showing their power. Ishewara looks at the whole system of fighting as futile. Now he really wishes complete end of bloody war and get settled with beloved Sharengla:

He of course had promised to make that bond permanent. Let the war end, he had always said. And now the war was certainly going to end. But would it end as he wished it to? The invading Japanese army that had reached Imphal was held there by the British and Indian forces of the 14<sup>th</sup> army. Both sides suffer heavy losses. (Bhattacharyya, 13)

The setting was no less than a battlefield. Sounds of firing and bombing were heard everywhere. Rustic life was disturbed badly. People could see devastation with their naked eyes. Increase of fear and agony among common mass were evident in the places. Female protagonist Sharengla's experience regarding such an incident is depicted vividly in the novel:

Then the bombing started. Sharengla flung the ladle and ran to the nearby air raid shelter. The bombs seemed to explode directly over the trench. Houses crackled and burned all around her. She could hear people screaming and shouting as they tried to escape. Then the earth around her began to reel. When she opened her eyes again, she found herself lying between some hedges, on moist, grassy earth. (Bhattacharyya, 16-17)

She got fainted by seeing and hearing such horrible phenomenon. It is unbearable for any common woman to control herself under such situation. Moreover she had to loss her virginity due to this war. This act snatches away social dignity and mental peace from her. Therefore she rightly says, "You have to be a woman to realize what war means" (Bhattacharyya, 32). To understand the mental agony of a common woman belonging to a conservative society one must

delve into the situation of the social orientation of the particular territory. This is what Bhattacharyya tries to do in his this novel. He tries to give the reader every minute details of the village life of Tangkhul people in Manipur-Nagaland border in his narration so that people can understand better.

As the novel based on war, *Love in the Time of Insurgency* is definitely pioneer to this genre from Northeastern region. Many political and historical novels have been written from this place by different writers. But this particular novel will serve as a foundation for all of them. Sharengla had witnessed many incidents related to war. But she had observed the Japanese soldiers very closely. She could see the sufferings of the soldiers. Sharengla questions the use of war and asserts its futility:

They could survive on scanty amounts of food and sometimes only on wild vegetables...They had come on to Indian soil through a difficult mountainous route across the Shiroy range, using elephants to carry essential supplies and weapon and tanks, from the Chindwin valley in Burma to high mountains of Manipur. (Bhattacharyya, 28)

That is the hazardous journey and life style of soldiers is depicted through the novel. Such narrations make the readers realize how a soldier works hard for no reason. Hatred, violence, revenge therefore may lead anyone's life toward difficulties.

Devastation by war, sufferings of the common, trauma and fear of people in moving forward are vividly portrayed in lucid language in the pages of the novel. The destruction of ecology is also evident. According to the narration:

Some houses are still burning, pigs and chicken scurrying helplessly around. The village church, too, burned. The spire was licked by small shooting flames and bits of burning wood were beginning to fall from it. The cross was no longer visible. (Bhattacharyya, 17)

The atrocities of war are shown as so terrible. Entire flora and fauna along with the church are destroyed in seconds. Morality has to surrender before the power of greed. This seed of greediness has been instilled in the minds of Naga people as well. Struggle for freedom in India coincides with the Second World War. By seeing their zeal for ruling and becoming sovereign some of the Naga people were also internally instigated. As a result the group with new ideology started demanding a new and sovereign state for Nagaland just after the independence. The influence of Subhash Chandra Bose and his INA in this regard may not be denied. His violent way of fighting for independence unlike Gandhi attracted many of the nationalists from this region. Sirala, one of the insurgents Phanitphang's widowed mother bitterly observes:

“Oh, the war!” Her tone was bitter. “What are you fighting for, tell me? To sacrifice the little you have, for others? This killing business is terrible.”

“Not all killings, Anee. After all, we have to drive out the Japanese.”

She shrugged. “White or brown, all are birds of the same feather. We thought we could return to our own village as soon as the Japanese evacuated it. But then the sahibs came and bombed it, reducing our houses to ashes...” (Bhattacharyya, 33)

It is true that the war has brought destruction, but it also gave the people of Nagaland an opportunity to rebuild the villages and to modernize Naga life.

Thus, Bhattacharyya's *Love in the Time of Insurgency* has secured a safe place in literary history from India's Northeast. It has importance not only for reflection of society but also for depiction of world politics, war, history, mental situation of Naga people during the great war. Thus this Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel is a successful in portraying the social, cultural, political, religious and economic life of Nagaland during the time of insurgency.

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**CHAPTER III**  
**LITERARY RADIANCE OF SAURAV KUMAR CHALIHA AND ASPECTS OF**  
**MODERNISM IN HIS SHORT STORIES**

Saurav Kumar Chaliha is a famous Assamese short story writer who started his literary career at the age of the Ramdhenu (an Assamese literary period of mid-twentieth century). His writing styles, and perceptions towards life and society reflected in his works, have accredited him a distinct position in the field of literary creation in Assam. Though Chaliha is noted for his writings both in the genres of fictional and non-fictional prose, several of his critics and readers opined that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction in his writings is extremely minimal. Such critics and readers have enthusiastically noted innovative techniques of narration and supremacy of the form, and the act of narration in his works. Besides this, Chaliha is also known for his themes taken from the nuances of the emerging urban life and culture, in sharp contrast to many of his contemporaries who still continued with the portrayal of the rural and the pastoral. Loaded with such features, his writings are generally regarded by his admirers as well as critics as pieces of high literary value and aesthetic sensitivities.

In addition to the above, Chaliha is also accredited with another distinction as an author by virtue of the fact that 'Saurav Kumar Chaliha' is a pen name. There has been a long denial from the actual person in taking the responsibility of his writing in any public forum. The few fragmented interviews of him taken by persisting fans and editors did further speculations about this extremely idiosyncratic author. These interviews, and some of his writings about himself, were testimonies of his repeated denials of having any intellectual refinement or conscious effort to

create any high pieces of art. His resistance to come public was maintained almost till the end of his death in 2011.

Quite obviously, a writer like Chaliha with above mentioned features and qualities received mixed responses and reactions from various kinds of readers. He was a tough and complex author for the readers who relish plot-based conventional stories. In contrast, for the ones who aspire to immerse in new techniques of story-telling, where “the author is not an outsider in his creations” (Tarafdar 2011), Chaliha remained as undisputed champion in telling stories in the most innovative and refreshing manner. On the other hand, several critics and his contemporary writers regard him as an intelligent importer of modern literary practices from West. Some critics commented that Chaliha’s stories are foreign stories written in Assamese language; and they would lose their exotic qualities if translated into foreign language. He is also condemned that most of his stories are qualitatively not better than the typical loose talks in wine shops. But he has originality in thoughts and ideas. This is why, in addition to the negative views and comments of the critics and experts, Chaliha secures a safe palce in Assamese literary history influencing a large number of readers.

A unique fan culture centering on Chaliha and his writings came visible – a phenomenon not frequently observed in connection to a writer, particularly in Assam. A glimpse of this fan culture can be taken from the following facts: A) a website exclusively dedicated to Chaliha and his works was started, and still being maintained, by a group of his informally organized fans. This group of fans is also responsible for the translation of his writings into English and other languages. B) The first day of January every year is observed as a day of good news by his fans because he published his Assamese article *Bhal Khabar (Good News)* in a local daily newspaper on 1st January, 1998. C) Active discussion and exchange of thoughts, views and information

amongst his fans take place in social media. An online group is maintaining such an interactive portal in the site of Facebook.

John Fiske in his article, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom” argued that fandom is heightened form of popular culture in industrial societies. So fandom is a common feature of popular culture in urban society. Chaliha has also created a circle of fans through his works. This chapter is an attempt

- a) To summarize the distinctive features of Saurav Kumar Chaliha, as valued and consumed by his readers and critics.
- b) To analyze the various constructions and images of Saurav Kumar Chaliha as an author.
- c) To understand the fandom of Saurav Kumar Chaliha in the specific context of Assamese literary and popular culture, from the perspectives of fandom studies.

The available literatures on Saurav Kumar Chaliha have mainly been concerned with the literary characteristics of his writings, and occasionally with the life of the real man behind this pen name. The fan culture related to Chaliha or any such writer has not been found amongst the available literature on fandom. It is to be noted that most of the studies pertaining to fandom, celebrity or star system, both within the context of India and beyond, are seen to be inclined towards mass cultural icons like film actors, sports persons or performing artists.

A major concern for traditional critics, students and even some readers is about placing Chaliha within the appropriate historical movement in literature. He is often ascribed as the most efficient storyteller in imbibing the spirit and ideals of European modernism in Assamese literature. Kalyan Nath Dutta, in his book *Some Aspects of the History of English Literature* (2008) views

that 'Modernism' has no such distinct programme. Anything exceptional, deviating from the accepted or traditional way of living, thinking may be even modernism. There is no doubt, departures from traditional ideals or morals in theme as also in the technique of presentation, as in imagery, structure, setting or anything else in case of literature and art. The concept of sexual morality, stream of consciousness technique, action less drama etc. are definitely literary innovations and may be well characterized by the term 'modernism' in literature. Many of these characteristics of modernism have been tried to apply by critics in case of Saurav Kumar Chaliha's writings.

In the book *Asomiya Chutigolpor Adhyayan* (1995), Prahlad Kumar Baruah elaborately discussed about Saurabh Kumar Chaliha's short stories 'Asanta Electron', 'Bina Kutir', 'Ehat Daba', 'Bhraman Biroti' and 'Golam'. It focuses on Chaliha's unconventional use of forms and experiment on forms. Baruah's entire work gives a scope to observe the characteristics of Chaliha's short stories that can be regarded as extremely new. Munin Bayan, one of the critics as well as fan of Saurav Kumar Chaliha in the article "*Sadma Namar Arot Asomiya Galpo Sahityar Ek Bornadhya Bismoy Saurav Kumar Chaliha*" analyzed different short stories of Chaliha regarding modern characteristics. At the same time Bayan mentioned that sometimes his works make modernity to some extent un-decidable. It shows a new way to analyze Chaliha's work from different perspectives which may not only be the modern characteristics.

Kumud Baruah in his article "*Saurav Kumar Chalihar Kathasilpo aru Silpobodhar Tatparjya*" discussed the prose art of Saurav Kumar Chaliha and the significance of his sense of art throughout his writings. It is an effort by Baruah to mark the way of possibilities to enter the internal world of artistic presence of Saurav Kumar Chaliha. Baruah remarks that through the depiction of human life it is not the aim of Chaliha to get rid of the well and woe of life, rather

the circumstance of individual is the main theme of his philosophy. So Chaliha's this reflection makes readers to think about the relation of life and literature.

Another scholar Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami wrote the memorial "Saurabh Chaliha's literary Radiance will Last Forever" in *The Assam Tribune* focusing on overall aspects of him. Goswami talked about two Assamese writers, Ajit Baruah (b. 1926) in poetry and Saurav Kumar Chaliha (1933-2011) in fiction of the forties and the fifties in the twentieth century who introduced their readership to a kind of sensibility rare in its sophistication, subtlety, scope and comprehensiveness. He is of view, "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." (Goswami, 2011). In the article "*Saurav Kumar Chaliha Galpot Nagarik Jiban*" by Harekrishna Deka points out about Chaliha's inclination to represent the 'Death Will' and 'Life Will' as the opposite side of the same coin with reference to the story 'Bhraman Biroti' (1995). On the other hand, critic Prabhat Borah, in the book *Saurav Kumar Chaliha Aru Anyanya Prabandha* (1995) says about the absence of the sense of death in Chaliha's stories which may become deceit for the readers. But at the same time he justifies this view by citing critic Apurba Sarmah's claim that the positive ending of Chaliha's short stories gives the positive view of the writer regarding life. In spite of ultimate depression and exhaustion, the matter of not committing suicide by any character of the stories compels Sarmah to believe Chaliha's story as not deceit. Then it raises the question what can be the significance of this "optimism" in his short stories.

The withdrawal symptom of Chaliha was highlighted by Malini Sen, in the web page *A Walk with Saurav Kumar Chaliha*, where Sen gave an overview of Saurav Kumar Chaliha comprising his biography, illumination of Assamese literary trend and his withdrawal symptom. Sen

mentioned, “The awards may have forced Chaliha to come out into the public eye towards the later part of his life. However, at the functions felicitating the elusive writer, he seemed more like ‘outsider’, deep in his thoughts and in total isolation” (Sen, 2011). Another scholar Upendra Nath Sarmah has said,

Chaliha got Sahitya Akademi award for the Book *Golam*, but he did not go to receive the award. Later it was sent to him by post. The Magor Brahmaputra award was also received by his niece. I never saw before such a huge gathering of spectators in the Magor award giving ceremony. People were becoming desperate to see their favorite story writer; still there was no hope to see him. People were thinking, they would see him at least at the time of receiving the award on the stage. Though he did not go to the stage still he was in the first row of the spectator (Sarmah 2012, 45) (Translated by the researcher)

Such withdrawal symptom is significant which may have impact on increasing curiosity of fans towards Chaliha and at the same time it can help to construct an image of him. Madan Sarmah, in his article “*Saurav Kumar Chalihar ‘Barcarole’ aru ‘Hahichampa’— Pratham Pathar Anubhab*” discussed broadly about Chaliha’s technique of short stories and style of conversation with reference to ‘Barcarolle’ and ‘Hahichampa’. The notable thing of this article is that he mentioned about the influence of Saurav Kumar Chaliha’s story to the writers like him in 1970s. Reading of Chaliha’s stories is different from the other writers of Chaliha’s time. Though Sarmah did not intend to mean the other writers as less significant, but the intention is to make clear that there is something different which give a different taste of reading Saurabh Kumar Chaliha’s works (Sarmah, 2012).

## Characteristics of Saurav Kumar Chaliha's Writings

Saurav Kumar Chaliha wrote more than one hundred short stories in Assamese and translated few into English. The bulk of his stories are contained in a number of anthologies like *Asanta Electron* (1962), *Duporiya* (1963), *Ehat Daba* (1972), *Golam* (1974), *Aji Sukrabar* (1992), *Kobi* (1999), *Janmadin* (2005) *Jonbiri* (2006) and a few other recom compilations like *Swa-Nirbasito Sankalan* (1994), *Rachana Samagra* (1999), *Say Dasakar Galpo*(2001), *Saurav Kumar Chaliha Rachanawali* (2008)etc. His only play was *Abarudha Sahar* (1994). Chaliha's compilations of essays are *Golpo Nahay* (1988), *Bhal Khabar* (1998), *Ekoish Sotika Dhemali Nahoi* (2004) and *Drone aru Gayety* (2007). He won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974 for *Golam* and was conferred Assam Valley Literary Award in 1995. Besides short stories, plays, anthologies, essays and translations, Saurav Kumar Chaliha also wrote for radio talks. Some of his writings have been translated into English, Hindi, Bengali and Telugu and adapted for television productions as well.

Chaliha's short stories and other writings are loaded with multidimensional and complex themes. He has been a 'tough and complex author' for the readers who relish plot-based conventional stories. Absence of plot is one of the unique characteristics of Saurav Kumar Chaliha's stories. The story 'Duporiya' can be cited in this context. Similarly, some of his widely acknowledged stories for bearing such characteristics are 'Asanta Electron', 'Barcarolle', 'Bhraman Biroti', 'Basontika', 'Ira', 'Awaz', 'Selunot', 'Heral', 'Rastar Manuh' and many others. In fact, all his stories invariably demonstrate his reluctance to conform to the structure of traditional plots but in different intensities. The innovative techniques of narration and supremacy of form, and the act of narration are dominant over the plot of these kinds of short stories.

According to some critics, Chaliha has distorted the Assamese language. This observation refers to the fact that Chaliha's language, both in his stories and the so-called non-fictions, is not the typical upper Assam dialect which was standardized for the written Assamese discourse since the colonial times. In contrast, he adopted the emergent colloquial language of the urban spaces of Assam, particularly of Guwahati, which is characterized by frequent code-mixing with Bangla, Hindi and English vocabularies as well as notable shifts in the sentence patterns and punctuations. Along with English words, the use of Bangla words like "moriya hoi utha", "dattor Mari" etc. are pointed by some critics. It is therefore not surprising that one critic called Chaliha's language as *bangalua bhasha* (meaning Bangla-like language). So it is difficult to translate his works into other languages with originality.

While some critics were concerned with Chaliha's deviation from the 'pure' version of Assamese language, others were approving such linguistic shifts. Mohim Borah, another important figure in modern Assamese stories and one of Chaliha's contemporaries said,

As the expression of diverse and continuous forms of mind is impossible through conventionalized narrative structures, the depiction of it is also impossible through standardized words. Before making an allegation against Chaliha for using mixed language, this point has to be noted. The necessity of such language is inherited in the very techniques of short story (Borah 2001, 471) (Translated by the researcher).

Chaliha's stories very strongly demonstrate the technique of interior monologue. In fact, an important feature of Chaliha's storytelling is that his stories are less about the physical world and actions of the characters, but more about their thoughts and feelings. In short stories like 'Asanta Electron' Chaliha have made dexterous use of the technique of stream of consciousness and interior monologue. Regarding this Prahlad Kumar Boruah's view is considerable. According to

him, “Chaliha’s special views about life makes similar expression of thought or view with other distinguished short story writers” (Baruah 1995, 263) (Translated by the researcher).

Regarding the issues of morality and social sensitivity of the author and his texts, Chaliha as a writer holds a significant position. His stories sensitively reflect the realistic cases of individuals posited in specific social settings. In this sense, he demonstrates a high degree of sensitivity towards the human values in the society. Yet, he is not much interested in portraying the macro level issues of the societies at large. Rather, he depicts the intricate nuances of ordinary individuals. In some of his stories and almost all of his interviews, he also deviates noticeably from the moral standards of the elite and middle class Assamese society. For example, in his story ‘Durbin’, he has used Assamese slang words which are unofficially banned in both the spoken and written Assamese discourses in the formal modes. Hiren Gohain even commented that such stories are “slightly better than the wine-shop conversations” and the intention of writing such stories is to “make sarcasm about the high literature”.

Chaliha’s stories present a great sense of social sensitivity. The social, political and economic complexity, tumultuous context of post-independent Assam depicted through ‘Asanta Electron’ is nothing but the representation of social responsibility. In broader sense, most of the stories convey social responsibility from the peripheral level of society. His stories also illuminate the artificial and hypocrite mentality of Indian middle class. Chaliha brought out a kind of cinematic description to Assamese short story which was quite new. His many stories make the description like the images captured by camera or like movie that represents most of the times of human life. The cinematic technique like jump cut can also be noted in Chaliha’s stories.

This writing style was not the only technique used by Chaliha. Some other techniques like repetition of same paragraph in different parts of the story also get prevalence in Saurav Kumar

Chaliha's short story. Here 'Barcarolle' is the classic example of this skill. The intention behind the repetition may be to make the central thought more dominant. These kinds of varieties of skills show that Chaliha did not follow the convention or established structure of short story. His stories and even most of the articles were free flow of his spontaneous thought. Considering all these factors many critics claim that it is very difficult to make a distinction between fiction and non-fiction of Saurav Kumar Chaliha's writing. Depiction of the affliction of modern life is a recurring thread that binds all his stories. In this context the short story writer and critic Kumud Goswami said that Chaliha imported a kind of 'fashionable cynicism' and sadistic tone to Assamese literature. This cynicism and sadness are related to emergent trends of urbanized, industrialized and institutionalized social life in the early twentieth century Assam. Emergence of individualistic life world and the erasure of the collective are powerfully depicted through the lonely protagonists and their mental processes in Chaliha's stories. The inherent discrepancies of modern life, such as supremacy of the material and the artificial, incompatibility between tradition and modernity, are dominant themes that define the narrative world of Chaliha.

Some of the distinctive features of modernist literature are- Individualism, Experimentation and Absurdity. Readers can witness all of them in Saurav Kumar Chaliha's short stories well.

### **Saurav Kumar Chaliha: The Author and His Images**

There are various views regarding Chaliha's works and Chaliha as a person. The numerous views create different images of the author. So, it is an attempt to give a glance on the construction of images of Saurabh Kumar Chaliha by the readers, critics, fans and the author himself and it is an effort to bring out the reasons behind such constructions. For many people

Saurav Kumar Chaliha's writings are too abstract to be comprehensible. This led to his impression of being a writer of complex themes and unfamiliar narratives. The fact that Saurav Kumar Chaliha is a pen name and the real person showed extreme reclusiveness in keeping himself unknown (at least till the last few years of his life) made him an object of general curiosity in the public sphere. Other images about Chaliha can be observed in the following ways:

(a) A creator of high art

Many critics and readers consider Chaliha as a prominent artist. Chaliha's stories are free from contemporary dogmas and the cacophony of literary theories. His short stories pave intellectual thinking and in depth of theme. "Chaliha fashioned an idiom that was 'impure' in its break from the standard literary idiom of the day and sensitized it to accommodate the anxiety, loneliness and restlessness of a 'modern', post-independence generation confronting a world devoid of traditional certitudes" (Goswami 2011). His stories have the internalization of scientific as well as logical observation and glory of life. Intellectual thought gives an extra sensation to his stories.

(b) Someone well-acquainted with western literature

As a short story writer Saurav Kumar Chaliha illuminated the Assamese literature with the considerable influence of great literature of the world. Sometimes Chaliha himself acknowledged the unconscious influence of Georges Simenon. Many critics and readers comment about the influence of James Joyce's Stream of Consciousness. An insightful view leads the literary taste of Chaliha's short stories which demands the intelligence to internalize it. In this context his stories are closer to Kafka. Kafka is Neurotic artist and so with equal importance of the real life,

the obtuse real world or the minute psychological world also gets prevalence in an active way in Kafka's stories which are also found in Chaliha's Stories.

(c) Author's self-image

The image created by the author himself is as much important as the images created by his fans, readers and critics. Chaliha said that he is an escapist. His texts invariably call for a kind of networking with or recourse to other arts like music, architecture, sculpture, painting and cinema. Chaliha never acknowledged about any social responsibility in his writings. He did not write for it, rather he believed in art for art's sake. Chaliha was rarely interested to speak about his writings. He did not want any deeper discussion about his writings and personal life. In spite of knowing all these, people tried to bring him out from his writings which was disliked by Chaliha. So, he informed people very less thing and expressed a pessimistic notion towards the society. But his pessimistic attitude in personal level obviously has a positive image in his writings. Because it illuminates that Chaliha wants the readers to explore him within his writings.

(d) The Real Man

The identity of Saurav Kumar Chaliha is now no longer unknown to public. It is known by all of his fans that he was none but late Professor Surendra Nath Medhi who served as faculty in the Department of Physics in Assam Engineering College, Guwahati. Lakhinandan Borah, in his article "*Egoraki Asamanya Kothasilpi*" said, "His withdrawal symptom helped more in the publicity of his real name behind the pen name" (Borah 2012, 101) (Translated by the researcher). It was even explored during the life time of Saurav Kumar Chaliha. At first he was offended by it. But later there was no way to deny it. So, he no more thought that Saurav Kumar Chaliha and Surendra Nath Medhi were two different persons. Surendra Nath Medhi was born in

1930 in Mangaldoi town under the district Darrang. His father's name was Dr. Kaliram Medhi and mother was Swarnalata Medhi. Kaliram Medhi was a prominent litterateur and presided over the 1919 session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha. According to him, he read one of the stories of his teacher Raihan Sah where one of the characters was "Saurabh". He liked the name and took it as his pen name.

As a student he got involved in politics and was even jailed during the Independence struggle. So he had to write the B.Sc. final examination in Physics from the jail. He completed his M.Sc. in physics from London University. Medhi got chance for research in University of Gottingen in Germany. Because of some problems it was not fulfilled. Though physics was his subject, Medhi taught English in Germany to support himself. He came back to his hometown and took up a lectureship as a professor of physics at the Assam Engineering College in Guwahati.

### **Saurav Kumar Chaliha in Popular Culture**

Some of the tangible markers of the fan culture surrounding Saurabh Kumar Chaliha are to be discussed here, so that the profile of this fan culture can be understood. Chaliha's article 'Bhal Khabar' (*Good news* in English) appeared as a piece of New Year's hope in an Assamese daily news paper in its issue of 1st January, 1998. In this article, Chaliha described his characteristic style, the hopelessness of bureaucratic machineries and alarming erasure of social values.

After 13 years, on 1st January 2011, a group of fans, loosely organized as *SKC Fan Society*, launched a website titled *A walk with Saurav Kumar Chaliha* ([www.sauravkumarchaliha.org](http://www.sauravkumarchaliha.org)) with their aim "to discuss, explore and promote the works of the writer". This website, which is

still functional actively, has been a platform that contains the following tabs, as on 20th May 2014:

- Homepage: SKC's short write-up about himself as an author
- Introduction: A brief biographical sketch of SKC, with list of his anthologies
- Life and Times: Clarification that SKC is a pen name, one radio talk and SKC's Assam Valley Award acceptance speech on 1995
- Original Works: 37 of his stories in Assamese, with details about their original publication
- Translated Works: 46 stories in English and 11 stories in Hindi
- Secondary Works: Previously published writings about SKC by other authors.
- SKC Fan Society: An online registration form for new members who wish to be registered
- Links: Hyperlinks to 7 audio and video productions that include SKC's radio talks and speeches, radio dramas based on SKC's stories and video documentaries on SKC.

In addition to this website, there is another online page called *Saurav Kumar Chaliha Anuragi Sanstha* (SKC fan club) in the social networking site [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) , having 544 members till date. For obvious reasons, this web portal in the social networking site is more active as well as interactive in comparison to the dedicated website on SKC. The members of these fan groups are heterogeneous in terms of their age, gender and profession. The fan cultural activities around SKC are seen to take place mostly through such online activities. However, there are also instances when the fan members assemble in get-togethers for various purposes.

In the history of Assamese literature, Saurav Kumar Chaliha was perhaps the first and foremost author who could exist in popular culture with a large number of admirers beyond the conventional force of the creation of fandom. With an equal importance of both the fiction and non-fictional works, Chaliha was able to be noteworthy to a large number of audiences which adorned him with diverse images such as an object of curiosity, a complex and silent writer, an author of high art etc. But comprising all the images he stands uniquely and incomparably only as Saurav Kumar Chaliha. This image lies on his exceptional outlook which paved the way of exceptional writing style.

The question often comes to reader's mind whether Chaliha is popular among the elder generation or the new generation. It is not an easily perceivable aspect. The problem lies on the clear cut division of the readers of elder generation and new generation. In a general view, he is popular among those readers who are aware, intellectual and thoughtful. In case of Chaliha's contemporary fans, the popularity has to be found out based on their various views or his writings as there was no expanded survey on it. On the other hand in case of the present context it is seen that based on multiple views and discussions of many prominent and influential critics, the new generation regards his writings as complex which needs intelligibility of readers to understand it. Many of them have the inclination to connect his creation with foreign writings as well as trend and '-isms' of literature for establishing the features of modernity. These views and discussions of prominent and influential critics become an ideology for the new generation that must be finding out in Chaliha's writings. So, it is obvious to find many new readers maintaining a respective distance from his writings. The readers who think themselves different from the general readers, who are interested to modern thoughts and analytical perspective, they consider Saurav Kumar Chaliha as favorite of them. But, eventually the numbers of these readers are less.

Now the matter of his popularity is not so important in the quest of recent generation and elder generation. A reader may be from elder generation, but most of the time the eager of the reader to Chaliha's works remains same and the works have been explored from new perspectives from time to time. Considering all these, it is proper to say that Saurav Kumar Chaliha is popular among the new generation.

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## CHAPTER IV

### SOCIO-POLITICAL REALITIES IN MITRA PHUKAN'S *THE COLLECTOR'S WIFE* AND SIDDHARTHA DEB'S *THE POINT OF RETURN*

Contemporary socio-political issues often trigger debate in literary circle from any region. Northeast Indian writers try to draw the attention of the readers by portraying vivid pictures of political unrest and insurgencies. During twentieth century the region had witnessed a great deal of insurgencies, communal riots and uprisings against both state and central governments. Ordinary lives were hampered and people lived in fear and dread. Many insurgent groups like ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland) demanded for independent sovereign states. The impact of partition between India and Pakistan and separation of East Bengal from India affected this region too. Assam Movement hampered the social life of Assam which is reflected in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* vividly. Such movements affected socio-political scenario. The novels of Mitra Phukan and Siddhartha Deb present some such issues.

Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife* explores the socio-political realities in fictional way. Insurgency being the backdrop, the narrative revolves around the story of the struggle of the female protagonist, Rukmini, the wife of a district collector. Her life seems to be settled and safe in the big, beautiful bungalow on the hill-top above the cremation ground, undisturbed by the incessant hardships and sufferings of the common people living down the hill. But it is necessary to note that, each time there is some upheaval or chaos in the district she feels disturbed and apprehensive.

Moreover, Rukmini feels lonely and isolated. Though she has a comfortable life working as lecturer in a college and her supportive in-laws she undergoes strong sense of being incomplete. Set in the turbulence of an insurgency and protest-ridden Assam, Rukmini witnesses the abduction and killings by the extremists. Her husband Siddharth is often on duty and is constantly busy with the administrative works. Rukmini's desire to have a child remains unfulfilled. It is amidst such condition that she meets Manoj Mohanty, a salesman. They developed a strong bond and gradually were drawn to one another.

Mitra Phukan made a dexterous weaving of both joy and sadness thereby making the narrative interesting, intriguing and absorbing. The plot is well crafted and the language is simple and smooth flowing. The author takes the readers through Rukmini's life at a measured pace which allows the readers to fully understand her state of mind.

Mitra Phukan's writings have created a niche in the realm of Indian English Literature through her portrayal of socio-political situations. She presents Assam Movement in her novel *The Collector's Wife*. This discussion intends to look at how she mirrors the social realism in her respective novel.

Contemporary political history (1979-2001) of Assam has been portrayed in the novel. History is replete with the nuances of life. Therefore it is necessary to revisit the past to understand the present. As Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory* says that the postmodernist thinks that the past must be revisited (with irony) and should be experimented. Going back to the past is a trend of post-colonial literature. Assam is a land of various culture, tradition, language, ethnicity, and of course of a rich history. Along with the precision of cultural accumulation the land has also seen

many conflicts, violence, bloodsheds as well as the killings of innocent people. The history perceives the reality and this reality haunts the people of Assam. On the other hand being a part of colonized India, Assamese writers have also the tendency to proclaim their past to furnish a sound voice in the canon of postcolonial Indian literature.

The historic Assam Movement was one of the famous movements in post-colonial India. Such movements were chiefly led by students of Assam (All Assam Students' Union) started in 1979 and officially winded up on 15 August, 1985. By Assam Movement, Dr. Manirul Hussain means in his book *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*, the movement which demands to stop the illegal immigration of foreign nationals to Assam especially from Bangladesh and Nepal, their participation in the electoral process in Assam and the deportation of all foreigners living illegally in Assam. This movement has been highlighted in Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife*. The novel tells the story based in Parbatpuri, an imaginary insurgency- ripped hill town of Assam with a remarkable feel of reality. The protagonist Rukmini Bezboruah sees:

...she looked at the eager, bright young faces of the boys and girls; she couldn't help noticing the facial features and contours before her. The almond eyes, the golden skins of the Mongoloid, the curly hair of the Austric, the dark complexions of the Dravids, the fine features and fair colouring of the Aryans, were all present in the crowd of young faces before her. And they wanted to rid the land of foreigners! (Phukan, 91)

Then another conflict has also come into the forefront of Assam's political settings. With the intention to establish a sovereign Assam, Bhimkanta Buragohain and others have created the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) on April 7, 1979. The government of India banned the organization in 1990 citing it as a terrorist organization. Apparently the government wished to

banish the existence of ULFA. So they played the tricks with the surrendered ULFA members and made the conspiracy to kill the relatives of the ULFA members. In Mrinul Talukdar's *Secret Killings of Assam*, it is mentioned as:

*Secret killings* mean the extra-judicial killings conducted by state government using SULFA members and the security forces in the name of the counter insurgency operations...the most apparent justification for the whole exercise was that it was a tit-for-tat response to the ULFA-sponsored terrorism, specially the killings of their old comrades - the SULFAs. (Talukdar, 23)

It triggers horror and uncertainty among the people of Assam by taking the lives of the innocent people who are supposed to be the relatives of ULFA members. This 'secret killing' symbolizes the darkest period of political history of Assam. Secret killing terrorized and tormented the people of Assam for four years between 1998 and 2001. A kind of horror, uncertainty haunted the people of Assam. Innocent people lived in a ferocious atmosphere.

As mentioned the novel is written against the backdrop of Assam's recent history, it is obvious to ponder a reaction against these political turmoils. It retells the most sensitive issues like immigration, Assam movement, agitation, terrorism, extortion in a very devastating way. It also unfolds the social milieu, the environment gripped with fear, apprehension and hope among the people of Assam during the late seventies and the whole eighties, and since then. Mitra Phukan boldly expresses her viewpoint that in this era of political insurgencies, there are two types of patriotism. One who is actually attached with their homeland, care about homeland, like the

students of DS College and the other who boast of doing patriotic activities like the English lecturer Arnob Chakravarty, who use to do ‘service to the people, *Desh Sewa*’. The novelist seems more conscious about the social and anti-social activities during those days. As she mentions:

One or the other of many terrorist, or pseudo-terrorist outfits that the district teemed with, unashamedly claimed the ‘credit’ for these incidents within a few days...many of these organizations merged into each other, their identities a clone of the most successful one, MOFEH, or the Movement For an Exclusive Homeland. Of course there were also the terrorist-out-of convenience groups, and the fake terrorist, who were little more than gangs of dacoits, thinly disguised as insurgents. (Phukan, 81)

There is also a group of *patriotism*, as if the members of these groups are meant to earn by doing so called *desh sewa* (service to the nation), apparently they are doing *pet sewa* (serve one’s own purpose or means) through setting themselves involved in the abduction of tea estate planter, entrepreneur, big political leader, or they are involved in the cases of extortion, such as “down with terrorism, up with *patriotism*.” (Phukan, 33) The socio-political environment of that time affects the life of the young generation. As the protagonist Rukmini thinks that many faintly delinquent youths of various age, or from another state had jumped enthusiastically onto the insurgency bandwagon, and began to concentrate with a remarkable degree of success, on armed robbery, extortion and kidnapping, as their chosen career. It means that the social and political issues had a great impact on the people of Assam in diverting the youths’ mind and finally degraded them to aimless and inhuman social entity. The society has become almost to an apocalyptic one, like a dystopian society. Again the novel focuses the most touching factor of Assam:

...there were also Surrendered Ex-Ultras, youths who had officially laid down their arms before the authorities, and had been welcomed to the “mainstream” with the blessings of

the government. But it seemed that they found life in this particular mainstream dull. Occasionally, they would let off steam by indulging in acts of mayhem with the weapons that they were officially allowed to keep, for their own protection against their previous cohorts, as well as the victims' kin, that they were from one or the other of the well-known terrorist outfits, before whisking them off to remote forest lands, or relieving them of their valuables. It was a convenient camouflage, more efficient than fatigues in the jungle. (Phukan, 81-82)

The common people like peasants have lost their faith. The tyranny that has been epitomized by the so-called patriots has become euphemistically a totalitarian patriotism. People even fear to pronounce their name in a public place. The common people have been successfully brainwashed into believing that the money looted from them was to further the cause of what was romantically called their "Golden Homeland". The people believe this misinformation and propaganda.

This kind of conflict between ULFA and SULFA is also pervasively evident in Aruni Kashyap's novel *The House with a Thousand Stories*. In the novel Aruni Kashyap has drawn a portrait of a contemporary Assam that is suffused with violence. As the novel is set against a series of extra judicial killing allegedly committed by Indian government during the late 90s in the state of Assam to curb an armed dissent, at the same time the novel subverts the official version of narratives and explores the external conflicts of the human heart. The author has nothing to say to the government policies, but he only concerns the violations of human rights. They have become puppet in the hands of government authority. The novel foregrounds the truth behind the conspiracy. "There is nothing *secret* about the secret killers. Everyone knows who is killing who around the state, who they are working for *secretly*." (Kashyap, 68)

Representation of women in the novel is another important issue. Assamese society at that time was a little bit conservative regarding the women's profession and social identity. Women being one important marginalized class won the sympathy of the writer as they have always been exploited by their male partners in the name of religion or social customs. The political conspiracy has barren their life.

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* can be seen from the gyno-critical point of view. Elaine Showalter describes the term gynocriticism, a criticism which concerns the representation of women characters in the works of women. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwomen in the Attic* (1977) stresses the psychodynamic of women writers and proposes the 'anxiety of authorship'. Like Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* projects a monstrous counter-figure to the idealized heroine. Being a women writer Mitra Phukan has also tried to give more importance in the characterization of women characters than in the male characters. In *The Collector's Wife*, the protagonist Rukmini epitomizes the women's psyche. She is a challenge to the stereotypical character of Assamese society. Rukmini seems patient and tolerant incarnate and sometimes uncomplaining but at the same time; she emerges out as strong individual challenging all traditional taboos. She doesn't want to identify herself only as the collector's wife. She attempts to subvert the traditional mind set of a woman character, which is not centered with the world of domesticity, giving birth, nurturing. She thinks of a 'male ovum donor' when she notices the ad of a 'female ovum donor'. Is that advertisement portraiture of women as an object, a machine of giving birth? Is that the norms of a patriarchal society? Why only husband needs a female ovum donor, wife can also advertise for a male ovum donor. So the dichotomy between the men and women, the strongest versus weakness, masculine versus feminine are skillfully presented in the novel through Rukmini's character.

But at some point we have felt that Rukmini's boldness against the patriarchal norms has been diminished. At the business of day-to-day life with political turmoil and insecurity, she has lost herself. She fails to negotiate with the environment. Through her character, the novelist tries to capture the snapshots of an upper class woman, but suppressed by the traditional norms of society. Of course the other women characters are not fully developed character. It's only Rukmini Bezboruah, who tells the story from her own perspective. So there is a lack of others emotions and others thinking. As she has been portrayed as an upper class woman, the wife of a DC and who was born and brought up outside Assam, some sort of absence are profound in her social concern. She has not gone through the life of common women especially the life of village women, has not concerned about their feeling and their reaction against the contemporary political vicinity. At some point she comes back to the business of a typical married woman, to have babies to erase the disgrace of a barren woman. We have seen her lack of confidence and boldness when she goes to consult with a gynecologist.

...Rukmini was a barren woman...when a childless female took an undue interest in one's offspring, it was time to ward off the evil eye by going home as soon as possible, roasting mustard seeds on an open fire, murmuring mantras over the head of the child whose name was taken by the barren women. (Phukan, 167)

In spite of her married life but somewhere she feels loneliness, ache of losing her motherhood and her own identity. She has an external affair and sometimes goes out with the man to take a break. Through the novel it is clear that the novelist tries to create a place and to earn a place for the women of the society. They need their own identity, not as someone's wife and so on but they think that before all else they are human being. The characters of Oholya-jethai and Rukmini are

truly the picturization of social reality. Apart from the social status, their pain and sufferings have a universal resemblance to all women.

Ecological consciousness of the novelist is also noticed in the novel. The concerns about the social life and the retelling of vital history of Assam itself justify the environmental consciousness of the novelist. The setting of the novel is the Brahmaputra valley. The daily life and the longingness of the common people are entangled with the river. Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* personifies the Red River as a character of the novel. It has witnessed the innuendoes of everyday life from the time immemorial. Sometimes Rukmini sits near by the window of her room, from where she can observe the river and the graveyard. Even when she could not find any solution of this uncertainty she goes back to the woods and communicates with Nature without any words to reconcile her heart and mind as Laurence Coupe says that "Nature is the name under which we use the nonhuman to validate the human, to interpose mediation able to make humanity easier with itself."

By evaluating the novel of Mitra Phukan, we have found an urge to project the society of their contemporary world as it is, not as an idealized way. Going beyond the work we found the microcosm of the suffered people, the victims of vicious politics. The novel can be said to have stuck deep roots in the soil of the society dealing with the contemporary themes, have sought to explore and interpret the Assamese society respectively- class and caste, man-woman relationships, conflicts and protests, resolution and compromise, suffering and exploitation, compassion and brotherhood with the visualization of social realism. In her writings we have seen the accurate representation of life as it really is, 'fidelity to real life', not as a 'fairy tale'. At the conclusion we can say that Mitra Phukan is true social realists.

The other novel that has been taken for discussion is Siddhartha Deb's first novel *The Point of Return*. Set in an unnamed town which is presumably based on Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya, one of the states of India's northeast, the novel revolves around the father-son relationship that has been shaped due to social circumstances. This partly autobiographical novel also delves deep into a world of corruption in the bureaucracy, communal violence and ethnic clashes that have taken place in Maghalaya. It can also be categorised under Partition Narrative. The novel also has a few passages from which one may have an idea of the ecology of the region:

In the spring, the gardens flowered from house to house, and in the backyards, along with shrubs and weeds, there were vines of squash, their prickly golden-green skin rough with fiber and indentations and little hollows like a piece of the earth itself. There were butterflies, berries, and rare orchids in the forested walks up toward Laitkor Peak, crabs that scuttled along the slippery, stony beds of streams. (Deb, 257)

Divided into four parts entitled "Arrival", "Departure", "Terminal" and "Travelogue" the novel also talks about history, maps and memory. Dr. Dam, the father is ethnically connected to Bangladesh, the former East Pakistan, and who is in search of a 'home' in a land where they are a part of a cultural minority. Even after staying in that region for so many years and rendering their service for its development, they are still marginalized and treated as the 'other' by the local people. The local people also have their own points of view as they feel that they themselves are being treated as the "other" by the Indian 'nation' in many occasions. Thus this novel can be studied with a postcolonial perspective where question of identity is a major concern. It is also a

saga of the displaced people and the insider-outsider dichotomy. This voice of resistance as well as of identity is typical of postcolonial writing in English from Northeast India.

Siddhartha Deb's novel *The Point of Return* presents the fractured relationship between an indigenous tribal people and Bengali migrants in the undivided state of Assam, and the dislocated condition of these migrants in the Northeast India, especially in Assam and Meghalaya. It also shows the painful process of cartographic reconfigurations of state boundaries along ethnic lines, and the resultant violence, uprootedness, alienation, and continued memory of loss. The present discussion tries to investigate how the writer traces the lives of the first generation migrants who came to the new land in search of a better life but were condemned to live precarious lives in their adopted homeland. The novel is also about the post-partition generation continues to grapple with issues like displacement, cultural confrontation, and homelessness. At the same time, we have examined how Deb utilizes the mode of memory to tell his story of migration and trauma of loss and dislocation. The act of remembering, the urge to recall and revisit the historical loss, fracture, and trauma are insistent in the text even as it grapples with issues like home, identity, dislocation, citizenship, rootlessness, and belongings in the postcolonial nation-state.

The novel opens with an old man falling down. Dr. Dam takes a "plunge away from the world he had always known" on to the carpet. This fall, the result of a stroke, recalls his earlier plunge: his decision, in 1947, to leave behind his home village in East Bengal in order to emigrate to newly partitioned India. Resident inside the redrawn borders, Dr. Dam works as a veterinary doctor in a local government department until forced to retire on his 60th birthday, when he is packed off with a 'plastic VIP briefcase'. Since moving to India, he had known only temporary places of

various kinds. His son Babu (the rest of the family, and his wife, hardly appear) spends much of his childhood on trains and buses between one town and another. Dr. Dam decides to put an end to this transitory existence and build a house on land he owns in Silchar, an attempt to find a resting place. By the time he moves to this house, he has lost his strength and health as a result of his stroke.

Like most of the post-colonial writers, Deb also deals with fragmented things here. Dr. Dam's collapsing body and a broken-up post-partition northeast India are being portrayed. The novel is not chronological. It refuses to take its characters neatly. Life here is not like that; history does not operate in straight lines. The prologue is set in 1987; part one opens in 1986, but the book works backwards, and the last chapter of the section is set in 1979. The headings of the four parts draw attention to the novel's theme: Arrival, Departure, Terminal, and Travelogue.

After his move to Silchar, Babu starts reflecting on his own version of home. He speaks wistfully of the hill town they left behind, the site of most childhood memories. He recreates its atmosphere and its geography: the police bazaar, the government buildings and the Bihari cobbler where he and his father used to get their shoes patched every Sunday. But, he says that memory is also about what you choose to remember. Slowly, Babu reveals the darker elements and racial tensions of life there. On one of their visits to the cobbler, Babu and Dr. Dam were attacked by demonstrators protesting about the presence of 'foreigners'. He recalls Adolf Hitler, the Nazi leader of the cricket club who prevented non-tribals from playing on the team. When Babu returns for a visit years later, Hitler is minister for youth affairs.

Because of the fragmentary nature of *The Point of Return*, the main story is not always easy to follow. Readers never learn Dr. Dam's first name, and at times the language can seem over-formal. The writer is interested in maps more than people. Yet the novel succeeds in its main

aim, which is to give a voice to the dispossessed, those 50,000 people who fled in the night with bundles on their backs. Dr. Chatterji, a former neighbour of Babu, expresses it forcefully that they are a dispersed people, wandering, but unlike the Jews we have no mythical homeland.

The families of Dr. Dam, Dr. Chatterji, Chakraborty and others who lost their homeland and had to adopt fragmented identity always feel homeless in the new place. The native people also keep on reminding that they are outsiders. They cannot consider them as their own. Teenaged Babu also experiences it while he happens to wait outside the pension office with his father. He cannot understand as to why his father can tolerate these things so easily. He notices that a man while having a cup of tea with them outside the office indirectly tells them to leave this place and go back to their homeland, “East Bengalis crossing the border, back and forth, up and down. Why do they cross the border, hey?” (Deb, 22) The man again insults Dr. Dam saying, “Tell him about it. Tell him about the past. How can you forget about your land?” (Deb, 23) “...You go. Get your money and go through the border again.” (Deb, 25) The surroundings or the environment therefore always compel them to think that they are not aboriginals, no indigenous of the place. So, geographical locations do not separate us, but the mentality of the human does. They may live under the same climate, but distinguished by thought process. Though amalgamated through beyond the boundaries, they are mentally apart. All the negativity is constructed in the minds and comes out to break down the social integrity. Tagore’s concept of ‘universal brotherhood’ is denied even in his own land.

The novel is narrated both by an omniscient narrator and Babu. While Babu is narrating the story he gives hints of migrancy many a times. But the exact location from where they belong to is

unclear. The only data he gives the reader is that their forefathers migrated to the northeast of India somewhere from East Bengal. He writes, “The house my father had built for the family when they migrated from East Bengal was small...” (Deb, 99)

On the other hand the omniscient narrator gives the readers many thought provoking lines regarding the rootless situation of Babu’s family and other sufferers in the chapters like Maps, History etc. S/he makes the readers realise how boundaries are socio-political constructs and how they may lead someone toward crisis of identity. Anyone may experience how the partition of India snatched away their happiness. The place from where Dr. Dam’s forefathers came is not in the political map of India today. But it was a part of this country before partition. It does not necessarily mean that they should be considered as foreigners even after two generations:

Filling up the lines in the application form for a passport that asks for “place of birth of father”, you ask a friend, “undivided India?” “Prepartition India, I think,” he replies. And there the matter rests for a while. (Deb, 210)

The form has options neither for ‘undivided India’ nor ‘prepartition India’. So the sufferers are always the common people who have unclear identity. Due to fragmented identity they have to lose social dignity, mental serenity and self confidence. Dr. Dam’s family is a suitable example of it.

During the narration Babu tries to assemble maps, photographs, and words, call on memory to furnish further details that will impart some sense of where he lived, something beyond a dim

comprehension of remote beauty and even more remote violence. They are of nowhere now. Neither East Bengal nor Shillong nor Silchar embraces them warmly. Only they face negligence everywhere. Even now, in case of the third generation of the migrated ones has to confront the same situation. At the end of an interview by Babu the minister whispers, “*dkhr!* Foreigner.” (Deb, 225) Such kind of discriminations not only frustrates one but also creates anger and fear for the lifetime. The gap between communities widens, and sense of enmity emerges due to such reasons. He feels deeply hurt by own people. This is why Babu’s impression toward native changes for a while and says, “...the whispered word over and over again in my mind, that lifetime for fear. And the first time I walked into enemy country.” (Deb, 225)

Apart from the minister and other common mass the students’ union also arranges protest against the foreigners. Both public and administration are helping them for success. Streets are being closed, curfew has been imposed, and bloodshed happens. Dr. Dam’s colleagues, neighbours, friends, administration all are excited as to what will happen to them. Some are showing sympathy to them, some others are indifferent to the issue. But some are adding fuel to the wound. One nontribal visitor remarks shaking his feet vigorously, “Times are changing, and the government is not going to do anything for your family if something happens.” (Deb, 228) The whole family feels dislocated, alienated and rejected in such situations. The town undergoes multiple strikes, demonstrations, curfews, rallies, extortions, assault etc dividing people insiders and outsiders. Meetings of the students’ union demands merciless sweeping of the foreigners. That is a complete death of humanity. The tribal students’ union is ready to adopt the violent method completely. Even the name of the leader is Adolf Hitler, under the name of tyrant German ruler.

Babu, therefore desires to leave the place forever and hide somewhere else so that the word *foreigner* may not haunt them again. Even it is uncertain to where they will go. They do not know what has been left behind. They undergo a completely traumatic situation. Here Babu reminds, “My grandparents had spoken of East Pakistan, my parents referred to Bangladesh. To me the notion of an ancestral village was quaint and distant...” (Deb, 238)

That is, the root is uncertain. They have no definite homeland. Everything is unclear. Even the memory also becomes shapeless as there is no definite origin. It is quite difficult to accept the alienation in the land where one is born and brought up. The same happens in case of Babu. He becomes stranger at his own so called home. They are compelled to leave. Babu, while leaving gets emotional at the time of departure, “I look at my birthplace, knowing that I will never see it again. I want it to be home for everyone who lives there, for everyone to have a place in it that cannot be lost or stolen.” (Deb, 304) The conductor of the bus closes the door and it moves leaving the town behind forever. Babu, in the last quote, awakens any sensible reader by saying that homely environment is the most desired element where the people live. He conveys the message to the whole human race.

Partition of India is a result of India’s struggle for independence, which is again a result of colonialism. The British Imperial rule taught the Indian bureaucrats how to become self- centred and selfish rather than being emotional. Suffering of the downtrodden after the partition of India in 1947 is therefore neglected. Their voice is being unheard. Even these things are not included in history books. As a result interested people also remain ignorant about such issues. So literature is the only way to bring them into light. Northeast Indian literature too has some

contribution toward this field. *The Point of Return* is an attempt to familiarise unknown issues of the northeast during that period. This novel unfolds the history of the marginalised of this region. By this act of the novelist the victims have been given a little justice. Through this novel readers may realize how dislocation, alienation, rootless feeling, traumatic memories may disturb one both physically and mentally. Dr. Dam's fear, depression, aggression are results of these things. They may affect the social and behavioural aspects. Relationships may also be affected by them. The father-son relationship between Dr. Dam and Babu is not shown as satisfactory in this novel. Father is grown up seeing and tolerating the negligence whereas Babu completely disagrees his father's such attitudes toward different awkward situations. That is discrimination, disintegrity, violence, anger, hatred, greed etc are shown as culprits of the society in the novel.

Both the novels show the contemporary society and politics of northeast India. They successfully present contemporary situations of the region in fictional way.

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## CHAPTER V

### SANJOY HAZARIKA: A STRONG VOICE FOR CURRENT SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES IN THE NORTHEAST

Non-fictions from northeast India contribute a lot toward its literary field. In 1994, the journalist-author-activist Sanjoy Hazarika published *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* which looks at how common men and women have reacted to imperial, insensitive administrations, politicians and policies. Published at a time when serious work on the Northeast was still rare, the book became a standard reference point for anyone interested in this still-misty region. Twenty-four years later, in 2018, Hazarika is back to pick up from where he left off. His latest book, *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast* is an ambitious attempt to explain how and where things stand in the Northeast today. Both the books bear ample evidences regarding northeast.

There had been numerous indications before Independence that India's northeast would be a hotspot of conflict. The Nagas had made a case before the British that they would not like their homeland to be attached to any other territory or country. Subsequently, the Naga National Council (NNC) declared independence a day ahead of India's. In Tripura, communists had already begun a campaign for the end of the feudal regime of the princely state. Failure of the government to comprehend the situation and the consequent implementation of faulty policies only resulted in the spread of the conflict to the other states of the region. By the end of the 1970s, Mizoram and Manipur began to burn; Assam and Tripura followed a few years later. These conflicts were as similar as they were different from each other. Nagas and Manipuris

claimed that they were never part of India and that their territories had been forcibly incorporated. In Tripura, it was marginalization of the tribal communities in the face of the unabated immigration from Bangladesh. In Assam too, infiltration from across the border fuelled insecurity, which was compounded by a host of other factors that were ignored for decades by the Centre. Each had its local factors shaping the contours of the movement, its goals and strategies. There was a need to know these movements in detail and break the stereotypical interpretations that viewed all of them under the same armed movements. Hazarika's essays help in this regard.

*Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* fills the void in reportage and documentation of these myriad conflicts in India's northeast. The narration gives a peek into the origin of the separatist rebel movements, their spread and causes of sustenance. When the book was first published in 1994, it came as a surprise to many that the demand for independence in Mizoram grew out of the mishandling of the famine in the hill state and that the campaign would have actually sorted out had the government been smart enough to deal with the Mizo rebels when they evinced the desire for a negotiated settlement in the early 1970s. ULFA's links with Pakistan and Afghanistan and planning for setting up a base in Bangladesh were also shocking revelations. This book would be immensely valuable to researchers, journalists and anybody who wishes to know more about the Northeast.

One of the most salient aspects of the book is the lucidity of the narration weaved into a pattern that is enjoyable to read. The book is divided into four sections, which are subdivided into chapters. The first section "The Bangladesh Syndrome" traces the origin of the conflicts and gives a detailed description of the immigration from Bangladesh and their settlement in Assam. The second section "The New Rebellions" discusses the spread of the movements, the

responsible factors and the role played by the neighbouring countries in sustaining the separatist movements. In the last, Hazarika gives suggestions to stop the crisis and violence in the frontier zone. Hazarika warns that “savage conflicts” would erupt in the Northeast in the absence of policies on population growth, migration, flood control and agricultural production, sharing of resources and better cooperation; and if they occur, he adds that then even the civil wars in Bosnia, Somalia and Azerbaijan will be reduced to a shadow on the world’s memory.

He comes up with a list of suggestions including development of the poverty stricken regions in Bangladesh to prevent its inhabitants from migrating. Two decades later, the situation has only worsened in the Northeast with more migration, unemployment, ethnic riots and proliferation of rebel groups. According to some estimates there were more than a hundred rebel outfits active in the region by the mid-2000s. Now insurgent groups come in different shapes, sizes and range of objectives with a majority of them were demanding for a negotiated settlement with the constitution. Only nine separatist groups remain in the jungles of Myanmar still campaigning for independence. The insurgency related incidents have also registered a sharp decline in the recent years in the Northeast.

The last section on appendices has nine documents of historical and current importance. Two among them including “Gandhiji’s Advice to Assam” shed light on the chain of events that sought to include the Northeast in East Pakistan and how it managed to extricate itself from the harmful design. Other interesting excerpts are the letters written by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to the state chief minister Bishnu Ram Medhi on the Naga separatist movement and governor Fazl Ali on the reasons why a refinery ought to be set up in Barauni and not in Guwahati.

A few factual mistakes are the only shortcomings in the book committed probably due to paucity of information at the time when the book was written and difficulty in crosschecking facts. These hurdles are usually faced in a conflicting situation. The 1990s was a turbulent decade in the Northeast. ULFA's leadership was on the move and they were fighting for survival. So it was difficult to get access to them.

The narrative also reveals that ULFA already had a presence at the council headquarters of NSCN in Myanmar's Chalam Basti and it was from here that the contact with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was established.

Activist, author, journalist, filmmaker, academician and peacemaker, Hazarika is one of the most authoritative voices on India's Northeast. He reviews how the region has grown in the twenty four years since he published *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*. That book cleared a lot of the mist in which the region was shrouded. In the sequel *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast*, picks up the threads from where he had left them in 1994. Hazarika maps what he regards as the core issues of the eight states of northeast—policies, law and order, violent uprisings and painful reconciliations, offence and defence, conservation and oppression, history and contemporary reality, stereotyping, hope and despair, all their complexities and painstaking details. The book covers a wide range of topics from the racism suffered by the “marginalised” Northeasterners in mainland India and discriminatory violence to border disputes, differences, divided peoples and the repressive Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

The narrative is dense embarking a journey of discovery—of the familiar and the unchanged, of the violated and the alienated, the suppressed and the altered, as well as the roots and shoots of hope and transformation that appear when the strangers in our midst begin to become familiar.

He sets out the issues that require not just our momentary attention, but thorough reflection and engagement.

From the time of Independence, the Northeast has been under the heavy hand of the central government. For all the force and firepower of the state, it has remained largely indifferent to the region. This has heightened the alienation of the Northeast. There are strong undercurrents of hostility which erupt periodically in violence; and, even when they don't, the militant movements in the region serve as a reminder of the deep resentments simmering beneath the calm surface. It is a sort of perpetual, uneasy agreement between the underground forces and the Indian state, including its armed forces which are often in the news for their excesses.

The people are now in coming-out mode. They refuse to be held back and want to find their place in 'mainland India'. Hazarika shows that there is a deeper determination to affirm their rights and dignity as Indians. This is a sign of transformation, of a readiness to assert themselves as the 'new Indians'.

As Hazarika sums it up; the core conditions of the region have changed—a generation of young Indians from this area, exhausted by conflict and bloodshed, by ill-will and stress, now seek to carve a new way for themselves based on the laws and systems of mainland India. This is a remarkable change from an earlier time when their forebears, perhaps even their parents, were involved in political and armed fights for autonomy against India. This is an ambitious effort on the ambitious direction of these 'new Indians'.

The evocative title, *Strangers No More*, hinges on an encounter, an actualization stemming from a familiarity. When the mist no longer looms large, one can see things as they are. We are no

longer to confront strangers inhabiting in a strange land, exotic and different. The book is an act at demystifying the land and the people.

Hazarika travelled extensively along the river through Tibet, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Bangladesh. He is aware of the arduous and incomplete task of documenting the land and the people and knows how deeply personal it can be. Taking up the challenge of putting up stories of legend, imagination, future challenges and perspectives as well as personal experiences into a narrative flow Hazarika makes us embark on a journey through hills and vales, lush forests and rivers and myths of the eight Northeastern states.

He begins with the deaths in conflict in Manipur, and takes up the case of Irom Sharmila and Manorama in the context of AFSPA, an Act dating to 1958. The twenty-four year woman, Manorama, a member of the PLA, a small rebel unit in Manipur with a history of guerrilla warfare, died out of bullet injury in her lower part of the body. She was hit, dragged out of her house, and thought to be raped. Hazarika retorts that everyone knows Manorama's story, but no one knows who killed her. State-based violence has prevailed in Manipur throughout decades. The AFSPA under operation is based on the Disturbed Areas Act, which throws light on the inadequacy of the local enforcement authorities to deal with security conditions. But there are a number of loopholes in its implementation and operational strategies, and also in the roles that the government play, both the state and central. Irom Sharmila, on the other hand, broke a number of hearts when she exclaimed that she failed to defeat New Delhi or revoke the AFSPA by her mere hunger strike that ran for a period of sixteen years. She stirred the hornet's nest by ending her hunger strike in August, 2016. This left many of her followers angry, an act that culminated in her humiliating defeat in the poll. She was able to get only ninety votes in her low-

budget campaign against Okram Ibobi Singh in Thoubal district. As Hazarika points out, nobody seems to consider the other side of the woman.

Nagaland is a tiny state with a population of barely 1.5 million with not less than sixteen recognised tribes in it. Nagaland is protected by Article 371A of the Constitution which gives the state the authority to make its own laws and impose taxes. No law passed by the Parliament is binding on the state and the state legislature has to approve of it and pass it. In this vein Hazarika interprets the idea of shared sovereignty which surfaced in 2012 and has been a part of official documents used during negotiations of different kinds thereafter. The concept acquires a new colour at the face of ethnic mobilization, internal discord among tribes, and the inability to define the position of those indigenous Nagas who are located elsewhere, in other states, who do not wield power in their home state.

However, Hazarika begins “A Troubled Peace in Mizoram” with an anecdote of an idealistic young fighter, Sangliana, an Indian Army Brigadier’s son. Sangliana left his home and his college in Shillong to join an underground rebel group in the Mizo Hills. Despite being an Army officer’s son, Sangliana had felt the sting of discrimination. Under the *Operation Jericho* which came to being on 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, an army of around 20,000 men captured the treasury, government offices, and the AIR in Aizwal. Sangliana was a part of the band. Roughly forty years later, the man lives and still believes in the rights of the Mizo to a separate homeland.

While talking about Assam and other neighbouring states, Hazarika looks at the connections among ULFA, NSCN, and NDFB in aiming for a futile political authority, autonomy, and developmental goals in certain regions of the Northeast. The armed groups in Assam and the Northeast as a whole depend on an access to camps in Myanmar, and a collaborative agenda to

amass funds and weapons. The way the Centre pushes the peace process and other participatory avenues further decide the involvement of the rival groups.

In *Strangers No More*, the core issues that Hazarika examines at length are- politics, policy, law and disorder, violent uprisings and painful reconciliations, offence and defence, conservation and oppression, history and the contemporary reality, stereotyping and breaking out of the mould, hope and despair. He believes that these problems can be solved by developing a deep understanding of political and economic structures, of other cultures and points of contact, and with shared responsibilities. Hazarika concludes in a positive and futuristic note. Thus, at the end, he opines that reconciliation and change can happen not because they are the right things to do, but because we want them to happen. We cannot give up.

The chapters in the book do not follow a thematically coherent order. The author flags problems and concerns that deserve reader's attention: the damage that AFSPA has wrought over the years, the issue of child miners and ecological damage in Meghalaya, dams and environmental destruction in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, and the need to address post-conflict trauma in Mizoram, Assam, Nagaland.

The AFSPA remains Hazarika's major obsession as mentioned earlier and that concern appears in the book throughout. Hazarika provides an insider account of his experiences at the Justice Reddy Committee to review AFSPA, 1958 where he was member. He is clearly dismayed that the Government had failed to repeal the Act as the Committee had recommended. But, he takes some satisfaction in his own contribution to the Committee's decision to recommend the repeal of the Act. He quoted M.K. Narayanan, the then National Security Adviser as complaining:

When we picked Reddy, we thought he was a ‘safe’ judge. General V. Raghavan would represent the army’s interests; Dr. Nakade was a friend of the Home Minister and P.P. Shrivastav was a home ministry person. Sanjoy Hazarika was in a minority. How were we to know that he would turn everyone to his side? Now, we are stuck with a report we can’t implement.

This remark also nicely illustrates Delhi’s cynical strategy in managing the turmoil in the Northeast through the past decades.

Incidentally, the Manipur valley, which saw the most dramatic protests against AFSPA, has been out of the Act’s purview since 2004 – a fact Hazarika does not mention anywhere – and it’s unclear if this makes any difference to the situation either way.

Elsewhere, Hazarika gives a compelling account of his role as a go-between in the 1990s to facilitate the peace talks between the Indian Government and the NSCN (IM) (Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland). He also recounts the story of the Mizo insurgency through his personal experiences. Hazarika is no admirer of the MNF (Mizo National Front) leader Laldenga who comes off as self-serving, cowardly and unsure of himself and what he wants throughout. Hazarika suggests that Laldenga was not initially serious about independence, and his taking up arms has more to do with settling scores with the Mizo Union, whose leaders had allegedly thrown him out of his clerk’s position in the district council for fudging accounts. Interestingly, this picture of Laldenga bears striking similarities to accounts given by some Zo (Mizo) leaders in Manipur who accused Laldenga’s MNF of cowardly betrayal and worse which, in turn, precluded their united struggle for Zo reunification.

He argues for the Indian government to apologize for the deep wounds inflicted during the Naga and Mizo insurgencies. He expresses discontent to the justice and closure that still elude the victims of the Nellie Massacre and such other killings. He stresses the need for reconciliation and dialogue amongst groups, saying it is precisely the internal fighting and chaos that augments the state's control. Hazarika is a sensitive writer who feels deeply about these issues. But his concerns are too many, too scattered. The prose is so meandering and tends to jump from one topic to an unrelated other as mentioned earlier. Some stories will sound dated, and at times, repetitive.

This is perhaps the most definitive book on India's troubled region- the Northeast. While it may be argued that the geographical and socio-political heritage may be responsible for some issues that plague the region but it is also true that most of the political scenarios have been forced upon the Northeast. But the area has still tried to make the best of it. Sanjoy Hazarika's book is an amalgamation of political and social commentary on this region. He discusses almost all topics in detail giving a rich purview of the region's political landscape and how the Indian state should go forward.

Among the many committees set up by the central government to develop northeastern region was the Shukla Commission in 1996. The four basic deficits in the Northeast that this committee noted were a basic needs deficit; an infrastructural deficit; a resource deficit; and most important, a two-way deficit of understanding with the rest of the country which compounds the others. This sums up the situation so that over two decades since the report was written, though there is now a sense of being Indian, the trust deficit remains. This lack of trust keeps alive a sense of uncertainty and unsettledness. So, building bridges between people of the Northeast and the rest

of India should be the way forward. It has begun, with people taking baby steps by taking up employment in the rest of India. The rest of India, too, has a duty to integrate all Indians, including those from the Northeast and being the elder of the two, the rest of India needs to take the initiative.

There is much in the book that resonates with non-Hindi heartland readers. For instance, Hazarika points out how history textbooks in northeast teach about British rule, Mughal rule; their own history is obliterated, causing yet more heartburn. This is the case across the country; regional histories are sought to be obliterated and only the one 'national', that is, Delhi-centric narrative, rules. While Hazarika comes down on the Delhi bureaucracy, he reveals how he got a role in what is usually called Track II diplomacy. His route was through a great uncle, the former Congress party president, D.K. Barooah, of the unforgettable quote 'India is Indira, Indira is India'. Then, too, he cites meetings with top bureaucrats to whom a common person had no access, but they briefed him routinely.

While an ethnic violence happened in Assam involving Bodo tribal groups and Muslim settlers more than 50 people died and over 400,000 were displaced. Many politicians and media analysts blamed the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. Everybody agrees that illegal migration is a problem. But Hazarika writes that in the current conflict, he does not think there is really a specific role that illegal migration has had. He argues that people are using phrases like 'illegal migration' and 'Bangladeshi influx' very loosely. But a Bangladeshi is somebody who has come to India post-1971. Then what about those who came before 1971, he poses question.

The conflict is really rooted in control over land and natural resources. In the Bodo areas every group is actually a minority. There is no group that has a physical majority. The Bodos themselves represent about 35 per cent of the population, the Muslims are about 20 per cent, the other two major groups—tribals and non-tribal, are another 30 per cent, and then the Assamese Hindus, the Bengali Hindus and the others. So what is happening is that it is politically much more difficult to deal with this issue than to talk about something that nobody disagrees on. There is a lot of anger, lot of bitterness, lot of suspicion and lot of mistrust. It becomes much more difficult to resolve when we develop mistrust. Then the potential for violence grows.

He says that the basic issue in Assam has always been control over land. Political power and community power derived from possession or lack of land. If we look at all the conflict in the region—almost every single conflict in the region, political, social, anything, goes back to this basic premise, and the assertion of identity based on that. It really does not matter who is on that land, if they are of this religious group or that ethnic identity, it all comes back to control over natural resources.

Assam has had a very tragic history of conflicts and riots going back to the 1950s and 1960s, it is not just the 1980s, it goes back in time. The politicians are taking advantages and have harvested this ill feeling between each other, and we are now in a situation where ordinary people are suffering more often. Cycles of violence are becoming sharper and more extensive and affecting large number of people. Tolerance levels have reduced. What has shown up very clearly in the latest incidents is that people do not really know how to live with each other. They do not know how to trust each other. There is always this feeling that the other side is going to grab our land,

or come and do something illegal and harm our people, etc. Hazarika raises these issues so vividly in his narrative.

He adds that the people who talk about the border and fence have not even visited the border. They do not know that we cannot fence the rivers. There are over 40 rivers from India that flow into Bangladesh. People do come through them. It does not mean that there any Islamic conspiracy to diminish population and overwhelm groups politically—it is just a simple law of migration. All of us are migrants. We have come from elsewhere; our forefathers have come from elsewhere. We live somewhere else, and we will go somewhere else tomorrow. And that's how it is. But the question is how much of this movement is illegal, that is, across international borders without documents and how much is internal migration, which is a right of every Indian under the Constitution. Of course, we do need far better border management. There are statistics to show that there has been out-migration from Bangladesh into the northeast of India. That is indisputable. It is a fact. Hazarika argues that not every Muslim who is there is a 'Bangladeshi illegal migrant'.

On this regard he gives suggestion to the government that it needs to stop making statements that can erupt volcano. It does not really build public confidence in its capacity to deal with the situation. Governments cannot build trust; it is the civil society, scholars, youth groups, community leaders who can. So he has another suggestion to set up counseling centres for the process of building trust for those who have gone through trauma. We have had almost seven decades of conflict in the northeast and there's not a single proper counseling centre.

So both the books by Sanjoy Hazarika are must-read for those that would like to understand the ground realities of the Northeastern states, from socio-economic and political perspectives. He uses his exemplary narrative style to tell the stories that otherwise might go untold. The author not only highlights the issues that are being currently faced by the people of the Northeastern states, but also, provides suggestions and effective solutions to these issues. Hence, the books can be treated as handbooks for political leaders, non-governmental organisations, activists and specialists that are working at grassroots level, to get a holistic view of the Northeastern states of India, and in turn, help them to focus on the betterment of the people in these states.

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## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

A good number of writers from Northeast India have been writing prose in English for decades. They have created a niche which remain unnoticed somehow or the other by the historians. In the histories of Indian literature in English written by K. R. S. Iyengar and M. K. Naik, the works of the writers of this region have not been mentioned. K. R. S. Iyengar mentions only Praphulladutta Goswami's *Bihu Songs of Assam* in his book *Indian Writing in English* (2001). M. K. Naik in his *A History of Indian English Literature* (1982) makes no mention of any work by a writer from Northeast India. The present work tried to examine some of the prose works in English from this region and to make an attempt to determine the position of the writers in the sphere of Indian Writing in English.

The first chapter of this dissertation introduces the topic of research. It also possesses brief discussion on the literary background of select writers along with a view on their select works. The attempt in each chapter was to find the diversities of subject matters that the select writers deal with. The select works were *Love in the Time of Insurgency* by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (Assam), some short stories by Saurav Kumar Chaliha (Assam), *The Collector's Wife* by Mitra Phukan (Assam), *The Point of Return* Siddhartha Deb (Meghalaya) and *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* and *Strangers No More: New Narrative from India's Northeast* by Sanjoy Hazarika (Assam).

In the second chapter entitled “Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya as Pioneer to English Prose Writing in the Northeast”, one of the prominent authors of Assam Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya has been discussed. His novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* had been taken for detailed discussion. It gives us an insight into the Second World War and its impact on northeast India. It shows how this region also became a battle field during that war. This novel is like a ground reporting of warfare and its terror that affected common mass. From this perspective it can be considered to be a War Narrative from northeast region. It not only depicts the Second World War, but also examines a vivid picture of internal politics during Indian struggle for freedom and insurgencies that were born. Therefore this novel may also be categorized as a successful political novel. Sexual assault of women during warfare is another issue in this novel. Memory and trauma of war among common mass are evident in *Love in the Time of Insurgency*. So this novel can also be categorized as novel of memory and trauma. Bhattacharyya pioneered the genre of novel in English from the region.

The third chapter dealt with “Literary Radiance of Saurav Kumar Chaliha and Aspects of Modernism in His Short Stories”. He is another writer in the list whose short stories, though have been written in Assamese and later translated into English, possess unique and extraordinary qualities of blending scientific thought and humanity which reflect the aspects like existential crisis, human and non-human relationships, unclear motifs of human life etc. *The Final Request* by Chaliha is such a story where readers may find out all the qualities that have been mentioned above. He shows the advancements of science and technology and their uses in day-to-day life. Robotic development and human being’s dependence on it is depicted well and shows how a person gradually becomes a victim of existential dilemma due to extreme dependence on others.

The protagonist of this story wants to end his meaningless life and requests the robot to do it for him. Such types of writings are surely thought provoking. Chaliha focuses on both the human minds and the outward world. He tries to understand the psychological processes in connection with the surroundings. Therefore his works may be categorized as psychological and scientific and at the same time raises certain existential questions. *The Final Request* is a very good example in this regard. His other works like *Ahaat Daaba*, *Ashanta Electron* etc. may clarify the notions regarding such categorization.

The fourth chapter was about “Socio-political Realities in Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* and Siddhartha Deb’s *The Point of Return*”. Both the novels are socio-political novels. Through *The Collector’s Wife* Mitra Phukan has depicted the social reality in fictional way. Its narrative revolves around the backdrop of different insurgencies in Assam. The novel gives us hints regarding Assam agitation, terror of ULFA, secret killings and many others. Another novel *The Point of Return* by Deb is also a great political novel based on partition of India. The trauma and fear in the minds of victims due to partition are depicted quite vividly in the novel. The questions of immigration, nationhood, existential dilemma resulted by partition are hinted out well in the novel by Deb who himself is a victim of the same. This novel may therefore be considered as a Partition Novel too. *The Point of Return* possesses almost all the qualities of partition narrative like other novels of this genre written by Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Amitabh Ghosh etc. But the novel has not received the due recognition in the history of Indian English Literature.

The fifth chapter introduces the readers with non-fictions in English from the region. Non-fictional writings from Northeast India are also contributing a lot toward the literary history of

this region. They deal basically with the socio-political scenario of northeast. Eminent journalist and social activist Sanjoy Hazarika from Assam in his narratives *Strangers of the Mist* and *Strangers No More* puts forward different unknown facts about this dislocated region. In these two books Hazarika examines old and new struggles, contemporary trends and the sweeping changes that have been taken place and asks whether the region and its people are still different to the rest of India. Critically, he tries to portray the way in which new generations are grappling with old and current issues with an eye to the future. Extensively researched and brilliantly narrated, *Strangers No More* is arguably one of the most comprehensive books on and about India's northeast.

Again, a large number of continuous illegal immigration from the neighbouring country Bangladesh has posed serious problems and resulted in many religious and communal riots creating a hue and cry among the people of Northeast. Works of Sanjoy Hazarika highlight these issues well in his non-fictional prose writings. He is not questioning only the act of immigration, but also criticises the inactivity of the central government. The effects of this political facet on the land of seven sisters, immigration from different parts of the country to Northeast, the aversion towards non-northeasterners, superstitions, and the advent of modernism have been thoroughly discussed, criticised and debated by many socially concerned writers of Northeast India. The depiction of the amalgamation of horror of terrorism, along with socio-political issues and the scenic beauty of this uncontaminated land is perfectly reflected in the works of such writers.

So, this research was an attempt to reread some important texts by five contemporary noted writers selected randomly from the Northeast and to find out uniqueness of some their important works. Their diverse subject matters hint out the richness of literary tradition of this particular region. Along with the above mentioned issues colonialism too remains aspects comprehending the spirit of Northeast. The Northeast is surely the one area of postcolonial India where the outbreak of insurgency has been more frequent than anywhere else in South Asia and where recourse to armed rebellion has often been the first, rather than the last, option of a recalcitrant tribe or a larger ethnic group. Tensions among the states of Northeast and the central government as well as among the native tribal people and migrants from other parts of India are often witnessed. An unnecessary killing of innocent people is one of the treacherous impacts of insurgency. These issues get reflected in literature from Northeast.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned aspects, the present research was an attempt to portray the diverse scenario of the contemporary Northeast India that is brought into light through the lens of five such writers: Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (Assam), Saurav Kumar Chaliha (Assam), Mitra Phukan (Assam), Siddhartha Deb (Meghalaya) and Sanjoy Hazarika (Assam).

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