

# THREE ASSAMESE NOVELS

## An Exploration of Identity and Difference

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A critical elaboration on the theme of identity and difference with reference to the Assamese novel carries with it the presumption that it could be theoretically underpinned as well as empirically analysed. It would also entail a comparative analysis of a few contemporary Assamese novels, which are stylistically different and deal with different strata of social history. The novels thus discussed also deserve to be considered on the strength of their recognised artistic merit, each novel in its own way making a notable contribution to the development of the genre in Assamese. The power of the novel in these instances is derived from a sense of authenticity conveyed through the narrative and the novelists' command over the sense of an entire topography and landscape while delving deeply into significant periods of social and cultural history with rare insight and creative clarity.

The paradigm of the Assamese novel in the earliest phase was the nineteenth century Bengali novel—the historical novel to begin with—which had its greatest exponent in Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-94) in Bengal. But after writing five historical novels under the inspiration of the Bankim novels, the Assamese novelist Rajani Kanta Bordoloi (1868-1939) carved out a different path for himself, though not in form but definitely in content.<sup>1</sup>

Society in Bengal was by and large, differently structured with an upper crust of landed aristocracy and a dominant caste hierarchy. Thanks to the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance, human relationships and social issues were insistently foregrounded specially in the spheres of literature. The ways in which characters and events evolved in Bankimchandra's narratives was a definite step in the historical sequence of development from the medieval to modern in literature. But significantly, in respect of the Assamese novel, the socio-regional context became more relevant.

Rajani Kanta Bordoloi was the first important Assamese novelist. His forte too was the historical novel. He wrote five historical novels but in his sixth novel, *Miri Jiyari* (1894) the novelist describes, with extraordinary narrative skill, the specificity of the riverine landscape, traditional habitats and customs, in short the whole way of life integral to the life of a tribal community of the Brahmaputra valley. It focuses our attention or rather derives its power from a distinctive, strong and pervasive interrelationship built around the life of a community living close to nature. The narrative is traditional; it is about two young lovers and their unrequited love ending in a tragedy. The novel appealed to its early readers with its romantic theme and its exotic setting; but recent readings have added a new dimension to the theme in the light of its strong evocation of an 'ethnic' or tribal mode of living. This connection is a major preoccupation of the novelist -the external manifestation of it being the constant reference to a kind of symbolism in the narrative of tribal lore and legend. Both the intensity and the particularity of the theme become a strong fictional exploration of identity and difference in terms of historicity and ethnicity.

*Miri Jiyari* (literally, it means a Miri daughter), published in 1948, is unusually evocative of an eco-ethnic social landscape as a kind of scaffolding to a human drama depicting the passionate love of two young lovers, Panei, a Mishing girl and Jonki, a Mishing youth. The story is significantly enacted on the banks of the river Suvansiri, a tributary of the Brahmaputra, mythically and symbolically associated with the life of the Mishing community since time immemorial. The interweaving of the mythical in the human story also reveals its links with the oral tradition. The novelist at crucial points hints that the enacted story is representative of the life of the community and the narrated course of events could have taken place only within the Mishing society or the Mishing community. The bonding of the ethnic and the social, skillfully established in the story, is achieved at the very beginning. The story is outlined below.

Panei, the only daughter of Tamed and Nirima, spends her days in innocent fun and happiness in the company of Jonki, often swimming and rowing together on the river Suvansiri. They are in love. The lovers dream of their further life together. But a time comes, when Panei's father decides to give her in marriage to another young man whose rich parents offer a handsome bride price, a traditional practice in the Mishing society. It is also a custom among the Mishings for the eligible young man to come and stay at his would-be in-

law's house offering his service for two years prior to the marriage. As the eligible groom comes to stay in Panei's parental home, Jonki is harassed and ill-treated and is forced to go to the neighbouring village of Ghunasuti to earn a living. The lovers meet there in secret, consummate their marriage and stay hiding in the forest; Tamed's men chase Jonki there, beat him up severely and forcibly take Panei back to her home. A trial in a court ensues but Jonki is absolved of the charge of abducting Panei. She is given into the custody of her father. But Panei runs away from her home when she learns that her father plans to deliver her bound hand and feet, to the other young man. In the course of her desperate journey fleeing from the clutches of her father, she confronts hardship and much humiliation including an attempted molestation by a drunken young man who happens to be a Hindu and a non-tribal. Here the plot takes another turn: Jonki appeals to Tamed to return Panei to him; the parents at last touched by Jonki's appeal and their daughter's estrangement and suffering agree to her union with Jonki only if she could be rescued. Jonki and Panei are finally united but they fall into the hands of a marauding group of tribesmen from the hills who take them in captivity. Jonki and Panei somehow manage to communicate with each other while in captivity and one day Jonki escapes to the place where Panei is confined and they are about to run away from captivity. But their captors get hold of them and try them according to their primitive law. They are done to death in a most cruel manner, their bodies nailed together and thrown into the river. The grief-stricken parents discover their bodies on the shores of the Suvansiri.

*Miri Jiyari* is an archetypal story in the older mould. A strongly patriarchal father sacrificing his daughter's happiness or even destroying her life has been a recurrent motif in folklore. There is also a love triangle present: Jonki is also sincerely loved by another young maiden, Dalimi, who however comes to know of the love between Panei and Jonki and resolves to help and bring about their union. The dramatic situation of their love and estrangement, their passion and the suffering are reinforced against the backdrop of the river and the landscape, which symbolize the flowering of their unselfish and innocent love as against the power and will of the collective community and the primitive law. What stands out here is the distinctiveness of the narrative; the sense of a distinct pattern of life in which men and the river are connected together to define an identity. Nature here provides a meaningful scaffolding to human relationships within a particular eco-cultural system.

The development of the regional novel and its multi-dimensional connection with social history can be seen in the difference between *Miri Jiyari* (1894) and *Jivanar Batat* (1944). It is significant that about half a century separates these two major novels in Assamese literature. *Jivanar Batat* received belated recognition as a novel of crucial historical or cultural significance in more recent times. It is yet to be translated into a major Indian or foreign language though it has come to be regarded as a classic; a great Indian novel of the twentieth century. Its author Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-64) wrote this novel under the assumed name of Bina Barua. Besides being an outstanding novelist he was a historian of Assamese culture and an eminent folklorist who did some important pioneering work on both ancient and the folk streams of Assam's history. It is not surprising that his most significant novel has often been regarded as being truly authentic representative of Assamese life and culture.<sup>2</sup>

This particular view of the representative character of *Jivanar Batat*, recorded a year after the novel was first published, has since been elaborated on by other important critics while evaluating the Assamese tradition of novel writing.<sup>3</sup> It is not only because of the intervening period but also for other preoccupations of the novelist that this novel is very different from *Miri Jiyari* or any other subsequent novel both in terms of its thematic depth and narrative expansiveness. Despite its strong regional overtones with the evocative presentation of local ambience and idiom, the novel has a Hardy-like engagement with historical and social realities in the context of an agrarian society deeply attached to the traditional mores of religion.

Significantly, the main character in the novel is Tagar, a woman of purer intent and deeper sensitivity than any other person in the novel. Yet the character is not idealized and from the very beginning represents the strong socio-religious context of the novel set in the heart of the Assamese countryside. The texts weaves a rich tapestry of rural life, with tradition, culture and ecology interwoven into it, interpenetrated at times by the deeper layers of religiosity derived from the influences of new Vaiṣṇavism in the social ethos of an organic community. All these combine to provide the backdrop of a human drama working out through the linear flow of the narrative.

Tagar inherits the best of rural refinement and religious culture of a traditional household in an upper Assamese village. Her father Bapuram Bora is a land-owning rural gentleman of moderate means, deeply devoted to the religious traditions of the countryside. Their

neighbour, the Mauzadar is the most influential man in the locality. The two neighbours are in such good terms that the Mauzadar and his wife treat Tagar as if she is a dear member of the family. The novel opens with a situation of happy conviviality, occasioned by the wedding of the Mauzadar's daughter. The occasion brings Kamalakanta, a young man known to the bride's elder brother, to the Mauzadar's house where he meets with Tagar. Kamalakanta instantly falls in love with Tagar and a day before his departure, he opens out his heart to her and, in an impulsive moment, puts his ring on her finger declaring his resolve to marry her. Tagar's initial reaction was one of disbelief, if not outrage—her entire upbringing and disposition have been in the conservative mould of religious teaching. Yet out of respect for an educated young man, Tagar, deeply sad but trusting, consents and becomes betrothed. In due course the two families also give their consent. Kamalakanta, a brilliant student stands first in his graduation exam and it is agreed that their wedding will take place once he gains employment, preferably in the civil service. Kamalakanta's father Mohidhar, a clerk in the collectorate aims high and succeeds finally in cornering the prized post of a sub-Deputy Collector through the good offices of Manik Hazarika, a Rai Bahadur, obviously very influential with the colonial Commissioner. But a price has to be paid. Rai Bahadur offers his eligible and accomplished daughter Suprova in marriage to Kamalakanta; Mohikanta writes a curt letter to Tagar's father breaking off the engagement. The sudden reversal of his daughter's fortunes makes Tagar's father momentarily distraught but he hardly gets sympathetic support from any quarter. In a desperate bid to ward off malicious gossip in the village about Tagar's association with Dharani Bapuram Bora hurriedly marries her off to a faraway village without her consent.<sup>4</sup>

From then Tagar, the innocent woman, embarks on a journey which changes every aspect of her life. From the day she is made to marry Dharani, the genial weaving instructor from Raha, a village miles away from her own, her fortunes turn irreversibly. Tagar begins a new life in another faraway village: taunted, ridiculed and constantly humiliated by not only her mother-in-law but also by other women of the village. Tagar, a woman of unsullied moral sensitivity takes over the mantle of a daughter-in-law in Dharani's household. Dharani becomes a bit aloof if not indifferent as he joins the freedom movement then fast spreading in the countryside. When Dharani is away from home, police looks for him and not finding him in the

village takes his wife Tagar to the police station. The police officer humiliates her in every possible way but she stands the test with dignity. Having come to know of Tagar's detention in the police station, Dharani rushes in, pacifies an irate mob outraged by the behaviour of the policemen and surrenders himself. Soon, Dharani is put behind bars like thousands of others who are participating in the freedom movement. Tagar, all alone, is left to fend for herself. Her little daughter Kamali is now her sole solace and support.

It is the aspect of womanly dignity that gives Tagar a strong sense of identity and makes her hold her own against adversity particularly in situations like the one at the police station when she is face to face with the demonic agencies of alien rule. But there is an underpinning of protest that soon reappears as she travels home along with her husband who now had plunged headlong into the freedom struggle. Tagar could never forget that she was somehow saved from facing an ultimate humiliation due to arrival of Dharani in the police station, which the villagers too were about to attack. On their way home Dharani recapitulates the incident in his own way and offers a few consoling words. He explains to Tagar how service to the cause of the motherland makes one bear insult and oppression with equanimity. But this is how Tagar's reaction is described in the novel. 'Tagar did not say a word: like the sky heavy with storm clouds, she followed Dharani, looking grave and lifeless. Even after hearing the strain of patriotism in her husband's voice her heart was washed silently by a sense of mortification at the indignities she has suffered'.<sup>5</sup> Tagar remembers at that point how the police inspector's 'greedy look swallowed her from head to feet' and how he threatened to crush her under his feet for all her defiance. It tortured her to recall how, at a certain point of the interrogation, she had almost fainted and, holding her daughter's hand, slumped to the ground.

That an anti-government volunteer and that too a woman should show such delicacy of self-respect was plainly beyond the police inspector. In that encounter he was grossly intolerant to a defenceless woman. But there was a quick shift in his tone as the crowd became restive and Dharani appeared on the scene. But vengeance was burning inside him and later, as the tragic denouement unfolds in the novel, he did unhesitatingly arraign the innocent woman on a false charge and humiliated her by raiding her house on a false pretext.

With Dharani in jail, Tagar leads a forlorn existence and as old memories crowd in, she lives face to face both in her conscious and

unconscious mind with the happenings of the past. She often thinks of her father's cruelty in judging her harshly and without reason. She sheds tears or tries to forget her past or runs away from the 'golden moment in her life which now appears to be grand and alluring like the dome of a temple seen from a distance'.

Dharani returns from jail terminally ill from tuberculosis. Tagar nurses him back to recovery and, only for a brief interlude, Dharani is a loving husband. However, their life remains unfulfilled in more ways than one. Tagar's past too stands between her ailing husband and her happiness. An uneasy feeling returns at times when her ailing husband is beside her:

Notwithstanding what she has been doing all through, Tagar could never take possession of her husband as much or in the way she would have liked. Every time she wanted to enter the inmost core of her husband's heart through her love, something, inside her seemed to stand in the way, offering resistance. It is a hint of something, a memory not yet dimmed that would prevent her from doing so. It came in the form of a commotion in her heart.<sup>6</sup>

From the day Dharani had been out of jail, Tagar had been trying to give her love in abundance. In doing so, she is always earnest, fully realizing that this was what scriptures required of a married woman. Finally, Dharani succumbs to his illness in spite of Tagar's devoted nursing and the treatment provided by a kind doctor who is deeply attached to Tagar's little daughter Kamali. Tagar, now in need of a livelihood, joins a weavers' guild started by the benevolent doctor for the benefit of the poor widows in the village. The lonely doctor, a widower himself gives some time to the guild, finds happiness in helping the distressed women and finds companionship and joy in the company of Dharani's daughter. This gives grist to the village gossip mill and provides the police inspector an opportunity to settle old scores with Dharani's wife and the genial doctor.

In an ironic twist to the novel, Kamalakanta appears in the novel as the newly posted local revenue official. His wife Suprova, not knowing who Tagar is, calls the latter to teach her a few weaving designs and Tagar keeps visiting her for that errand for sometime. Meanwhile, there is a theft in Kamalakanta's house. The needle of suspicion points to Tagar for none else apparently had much access to his house. The police inspector points the accusing finger at Tagar and the police raid her house. An old ring with Kamalakanta's name embossed on it is recovered inside a box, which bears the name of the doctor. As the police inspector, as conclusive piece of evidence, brings the ring before Kamalakanta, the latter discovers that the ring

was the same that he had put in Tagar's finger in his youthful impulse many years ago. Kamalakanta looks at the ring at first complacently, then in a state of consternation and finally in horror. He sees in it Tagar's innocence, his own past with himself mirrored in it and he falls into a trance.

The novel ends here. The narrative is so authentically detailed that by common consent the novel has been regarded by far as the greatest Assamese novel. While the older critics failed to grasp its essence the more sensitive among the modern critics following the Leavisian mode of criticism have tried to show that the main focus of the narrative brings out a moral vision which imposes a pattern in the novel 'in the context of a particular social process. There is nothing doctrinaire about that moral vision. It pivots round the simple truth of the sanctity of the human fears.'<sup>7</sup> A contemporary reader will perhaps read more into the novel in terms of its particularity as well as its multi-dimensionality as a cultural text.

While discussing the genre of the novel, Bakhtin has identified two important characteristics, which are: the spirit of the process and the in-conclusiveness. This interprets the novel as open-ended and better qualified to represent reality deeply. It has also the potential of representing a plurality or multitude of voices other than the author's or the reader's own. The novel according to this view has an organic rather than abstract logic. A distinction has to be made between the 'novelistic voice' and the real voice, which often speaks through a different language.

One can note in this particular novel the folklore motif and the language with which the narrative begins. Or, one can note that even at particular dramatic points, it speaks through silence. In the narrative, the folk song or the subtle resonance of it obliquely presages or anticipates the fate of a young woman situated in a rural society that was ridden with patriarchy and connected to the positioning of power and privileges. One can recall here Tagar's thoughts in the novel:

At times, Tagar would remember her father's cruel treatment to her; and all alone, she would shed tears. Knowing fully well her character, her ideals, her father had disbelieved her most cruelly. He had fixed her marriage overnight ignoring her inner suffering and without making an effort to get at the truth, just because he wanted to retain his position and prestige in society. For the sake of his own good name and being frightened of gossip and rumour he had sacrificed his paternal love for the child. With a sense of pain Tagar would try to delete from her mind her father's image.<sup>8</sup>



Tagar's stoic silence at several points when she is undeservedly charged by her mother-in-law or accused by the police or on her long trudge back home from the police station after her acute embarrassment and humiliation is more eloquent than words. It will have needed a different socio-religious context in the novel for the silence to be articulated. The following observation has relevance here although it speaks of a different context:

...resistance is determined by positionality and that the factors of race, class and gender affect the form resistance takes in language. Resistance is not always voiced in authoritative or public ways; what is crucial to a feminist dialogics is the idea that resistance can begin as private when women negotiate, manipulate and often subvert systems of domination they encounter. Both public and private discourses are means of cultural resistance and intervention—speech is not always a sign of power or silence a sign of weakness. Rather, the contexts of silence and speech determine gendered relations.<sup>9</sup>

It is significant that Tagar's character is woven more around silence in a novel which is full of chatter, talks and dialogue or chorus-like commentary of a motley crowd. Despite the fact that it was written in the late thirties of the last century, the novel has sustained a realism in which men and women drawn from the common grooves of village life play their roles as they do in real life. Yet, the novelist leaves a good deal for the reader to imagine at the key points of the drama of Tagar's life and indeed possibilities of a wider response to the situation have not been foreclosed.

Older critics, in focusing more attention on the external elements of the plot like the recovery of a signet ring at the end, somewhat in the manner of a medieval romance missed this significance. These critics have regarded the denouement as a kind of device adopted by the writer. The narrative has both verisimilitude and psychological realism. But, in the ultimate analysis the depth and intensity of the novel could be read more meaningfully in the tale of a woman, caught in the web of a particular social and historical context of a transitional society. It is also necessary to understand the full import of the novel through its language with the images and symbols embedded in it. The language thus has the sharpness and precision fit to portray the essence of the folk refrain and the complexity of the theme.

The significance of the novel in terms of certain specificities of life or culture or habitat genuinely reflective of an Assamese identity can be seen in bold relief if the novel is compared to the other

outstanding novels of Indian tradition like Bankim Chandra's *Visavriksha* (1873), Tagore's *Gora* (1910), Sarat Chandra's *Pather Dabi* (1926), and Bibhutibhusan's *Pather Panchali* (1929).

The contrast between the 'novelistic' voice of a character and his or her real 'voice', often the voice of the 'absent' or of the 'other'—which is one of the fictional ways of establishing identity in *Jivanar Bata* comes out more clearly in the author's second novel, *Seuji Patar Kahini* (1957). The character at the centre of the novel, a woman, does not stand for a stable order of traditional values. She is in a way overtly subversive of tradition and represents a marginalized identity, ostracized by the orthodox sections of society. In this case, the element of resistance is embedded in a different eco-cultural background but is sought to be solidly placed at the centre of the story.

Often the identities relating to particular socio-regional context have received a representative character in the Assamese novel. Mamani Raisom Goswami (1941) for instance has intensely focused in her novels on marginalized women within the specific context of hegemonic feudal social structure. In her much acclaimed novel *Datal Hatir Unye Khowa Haoda* (Eng. Version: *The Saga of South Kamrup*: 1988) she has placed the theme of identity in the context of hegemony of power, more specifically of hereditary power of patriarchy and gender inequality. This particular novel, has many 'voices' represented both by the different characters, and by a particular character through gestures of speech. The point is subtly made in the following statement.

Not surprisingly, theorists have said that 'speaking from the place of the other' makes a marked difference in the way women use language. This feminine language is said to be contra logic, 'not conforming to solid male rules of logic, clarity, consistency. In resisting the 'official' language of logic, women's language can become 'depersonalised' and 'pluralised' and decentred, polyphonic or dialogic. Because it is spoken by no one, that is, because it comes from the 'place of absence', a feminine language does not assume the authority of logical discourse and, therefore, escapes the hierarchy of the official language."<sup>10</sup>

Both Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (1924-97) and Mamani Raisom Goswami bring the identity concerns in their different ways to the forefront in different historical-social-regional contexts evolving a specific dialectic that validates difference. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's explorations of the marginalized identities are placed within a more 'universal' human identity. But the unique feature of

his major novels also consists in that his texts handle contemporary political events or ideologies and depict the social and political struggle of individuals and societies in respect of their respective identities. Perhaps his most significant novel is the one exploring the critical area of a Naga identity specially their ideology of armed struggle and insurgency with significant social and human ramifications against the tempestuous events of the Second World War on the eastern front.

Kathleen Raine has called this particular novel, *Yaruingam* (literally, 'people's rule') 'a remarkable revelation' and has described it as 'a novel about a tribal people at the other end of the earth'.<sup>11</sup> Other critics have read it as authentic documentation of Naga life and society.<sup>12</sup> But a closer reading of the text shows that the novel is polyphonic in structure in an interplay of a multitude of voices and responses including the author's own. Within the revolutionary ardour of an insurgency and with a strong political message, the novel deals with the conflict of an opposing scales of values represented by the Christian, the Gandhian and the other, the three main protagonists of the narrative with their three different approaches: violence and militancy being more dominant in this ensemble. By virtue of its creative and imaginative power, the novel is a moving human document. It ultimately succeeds in conveying the unique sense of identity of the Nagas as a community with several other overlapping identities of religion, class and gender inhering into it. In the context of the story the political identity, above all, has attained primacy.

The novel, *Yaruingam* (1960)<sup>13</sup> derives its force and relevance from its authentic depiction of life in a small Tangkhul Naga village during the turbulent period of the Second World War. The story is set in Ukhrul, a Tangkhul Naga village imbued with all natural ambience and idyllic charm which is seen as going through cataclysmic changes.

The impact of the Second World War was of great severity in that small village as it was right on the eastern front, close to the Dimapur-Kohima axis of the Allied Army. The village bore the brunt of both the Japanese attack and the Allied counter offensive. Some young men appearing in the novel took part in the war as armed volunteers on the side of the Allied while all others suffered the harrowing experience of the war. The war struck the traditional village with all its severity, first through a Japanese occupation and then as a result, due to the Allied bombing which destroyed everything in sight and

rendered the villagers homeless. The novelist has been able to grasp the impact of the war in its totality making the small Naga village a microcosm of the larger reality. The novel covers a span of five years beginning with the invasion of the Japanese Army and ending by the time the most catastrophic event of Indian history occurred: the killing of the Mahatma.

In the very first chapter of the novel we have the Japanese soldiers fleeing, hotly pursued by the Allied army. Sharengla an innocent Naga girl, broken and desolate, is cruelly abandoned by the Japanese soldier who had kidnapped her earlier and forced her to live with him. She is bearing the unknown soldier's child. With the droning of the aeroplanes overhead, the soldier runs away and the hapless young woman, with the shrapnel flying all about her, falls unconscious. Rishang, her former lover rescues her and brings her to the village where her house, like her life, lay ruined by the war. Every one in the village shuns her as the fallen woman. But Rishang is an exception. Khutingla, even now a rival for the affections of Rishang, says to her 'had I been in your place, I would have committed suicide' and Sharengla turns to the Bible for consolation.

Sharengla tells Rishang of Videssellie and his dream of freedom for the Nagas and of her conversation with him in the Japanese war camp. Rishang speaks to her of his disillusionment to find his village destroyed by Allied attack, notwithstanding his being a volunteer of the Allied. Villagers now blame Rishang, Khating and Phanitphang for all that happened. Rishang speaks of his path as being different from Videssellie's for he believes in building the life of the community anew through constructive work.

"Videssellie was full of ideas when I met him at our cottage. Those ideas were however beyond my grasp. He wanted to liberate the Nagas like Subhas Bose. He has a fertile brain" Sharengla concluded. "However, I feel your way is easier to understand and follow. It is crystal clear."<sup>14</sup>

Rishang felt that Sharengla had grown mature.

Back in the village, Sharengla meets Khating, son of Ngazek, the Tangkhul elder who is about to join the Army. The father and the son do not see eye to eye. Ngazek's views on Naga ethos, tradition and the desire for freedom of the Nagas are more in tune with those of Videssellie but Khating stands for changing Naga society. Ngazek tells him bluntly. "The Nagas need a different kind of freedom. The Christianity and the modern education are taking us on the wrong path. I want neither the white men nor the black men. I have no love

for the Japanese either. The Nagas were happier when they were naked."<sup>15</sup> Ngazek also does not like his son marrying a Christian girl nor does he approve of his joining the Army.

It is time of transplantation in the field and the girls are singing a love song. But discontentments in the village are growing over the matter of war compensation. There are other problems too. Small pox is breaking out in virulent form and the old guards oppose anti-small pox vaccination. Ngazek is totally opposed to it but his brother Ngathinkhui who saw action in the First World War advocates it. There is also a raging debate over the construction of a Church in the village. Yengmaso, Rishang's father and Dr. Brock plead for building the Church in their chosen place but this is bitterly opposed by the non-Christians led by the same Ngathinkhui.

The War soon comes to an end. Rishang and Sharengla join in a prayer for peace as soon as the news reach them. This arouses jealousy in Khutingla. But Rishang is in love with her and they become betrothed. Soon Rishang has to proceed to Calcutta for higher studies. Dr. Brock has arranged for Rishang to take up evangelical work after his return. Meanwhile Rishang and Sharengla go on a relief mission to treat the small pox infected people in a distant village. Phanitphang, the wayward youngman joins Videssellie.

Sharengla's miseries have no end. Staying in the house of Ngathinkhui as her own house is destroyed, she has to resist his indecent proposal to her to be his co-wife. She shifts to the vacant house of Phanitphang but she can not live in peace there either. Her sympathy is misunderstood by a wayward young man who comes to her craving for her affection. She does not approve of his ways but the circumstances force her into an uneasy relationship with him.

In the second part of the novel the narrative is placed in Calcutta. Rishang is now a witness to the tumultuous political happenings of the freedom struggle now in its last phase and suffers the communal holocaust in which Amulya one of his intimate friends—an idealistic youngman and a poet—dies. He also attends the meetings addressed by Mahatma Gandhi trying to restore sanity to a mad world. The relevance of Gandhian ideas to the Naga situation is brought to the fore in the novel through Rishang's experience in Calcutta and that includes his changing perceptions about the INA, communalism and terrorism which he rejects and Gandhian ideas which he absorbs. His advice to Avinash, his terrorist friend, is quite direct:

"May be I don't know", Rishang retorted. "But it seems to me that the unarmed struggle of Gandhiji has contributed more to the movement than this kind of barricade fighting."<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile disturbing reports of the Naga underground movement with Videssellie marshalling his forces in strength in Manipur and the Naga hills reach him in Calcutta. But he sees quite clearly that the politics of his terrorist friend Avinash is as 'destructive as that of Videssellie'. In contrast he sees Gandhi in action in those critical days of Hindu-Muslim riots and his political education is complete. Finally, Rishang returns home to attend to his father who is critically ill, hurt by those opposing the construction of the Church. At Ukhrul he meets Jeevan, a young Assamese teacher married to a Naga girl who had passed away, leaving a son behind. Their friendship is established by a typical Ukhrul evening, which Rishang comes to experience after a long long time.

In the village, Rishang is all for reconciliation. He finds that Ngathingkhul is not responsible for the wound, to which his father succumbs after sometime. When he sees the village church, he thinks that it no longer symbolizes Christian love. Rishang decides not to devote himself to evangelical work, as Dr. Brock would like him to do. He chooses to serve the cause of Christ in a different way and Dr. Brock thinks it unfortunate that politics should come in the way of every good thing in Naga society. Dr. Brock does not realize that Rishang is in search of an alternative path in politics. He is deeply worried that Videssellie who professes the politics of the gun is getting stronger every day and Naga youths are getting fascinated by the romantic appeal of a guérilla war. Rishang could see clearly that a confrontation with Videssellie was imminent. He was also growing somewhat indifferent to his personal life. When his mother resists his idea of marrying Khutingla he does not react strongly. But the humaneness in him asserts itself sharply when Shrengla meets him to convey Phanitphang's forewarning that the October meeting should not be held as Videssellie in that case would take recourse to violence.

Sharengla and Phanitphang share an uneasy relationship but it is a subject of gossip in the village, particularly whenever Phanitphang comes to his house. Rishang too is not happy about it though he is aware of her deeper spiritual craving which transcends her personal suffering. As for Rishang's love for Khutingla it is warm and human. It has innocence and is tinged with sadness and idealism. But the day Khutingla arrives back at Ukhrul, Rishang is seen leaving for

Huining village. Jeevan too gets ready to go with Rishang. To Jeevan it seems like an epic journey. "The journey upward appeared to him to be almost other-worldly. It resembled the poetic journey of the Pandavas in the company of a dog. His heart leapt up as he thought about it. To Indians the journey symbolized the search for being. The climbing symbolized man's becoming."<sup>17</sup> When they were about to reach the village, Videssellie's armed men ambush them and take them as prisoners with eyes blind-folded for detention. In the detention camp Rishang and Jeevan meet Videssellie who speaks to them of his firm resolve to liberate the Nagas and make them free, when only the 'life will be worth living'. Soon after both of them are rescued by Khating's men.

Rishang's personal life takes on a happy turn as he soon gets married to Khutingla in an Ukhrul Church. They have a happy time together and it is not easy for Rishang to get away from his idyllic world and continue the struggle. Fresh unrest is reported towards the beginning of the New Year. Videssellie's men are starting a violent no tax campaign in the border region and the issue of war compensation is also agitating the mind of the villagers. Rishang realizes the gravity of the situation and feels a sense of guilt for not responding to the people's need promptly. So, he along with Jeevan leaves for the village immediately. Meanwhile, the rebels warn the elders against following Rishang. The situation is becoming tense, because Rishang and those who follow him appear to be surrounded by Videssellie's men. Rishang is thinking of returning early as he has to concentrate on a rally that was planned to be held at Ukhrul and also because his wife wanted him to be back. So, continuing his journey Rishang and his friends visit Cinjiroy, the last Tangkhul village, a rebel stronghold on the Angami territory. They are told to stop there and not to proceed further. Disregarding the warnings, they move and as they are proceeding towards the Phek village, there is a sudden shoot out. Jeevan dies on the spot. Rishang is injured seriously.

The scene now shifts to Ukhrul. Sharengla comes to see Phanitphang at the Police lock-up. Outside, there was Rishang's rally and villagers are shouting and protesting. Soon they became restive. Police arrest some of them, mostly poor and ignorant villagers who did not know why they came to take part in the rally. Sharengla is aghast at the cruelties unleashed all around. She runs to her home. But before she could cross over to the courtyard, dizziness overtakes her. She sees darkness enveloping her and she falls down

unconscious. When she wakes up after regaining consciousness, she finds herself in a hospital with her faithful dog and Jeevan's son whom she had taken as her own. That night, one of the armed men of Videssellie shot Phanitphang dead as he was being taken out to board a police van. That bullet pierced Sharengla's heart. Despite the external turmoil and a raging political debate, Sharengla's experience evokes the tragic depth of broken human ties reinforcing the human core of the novel. There is a suggestion of a solidity of innocence, a residual purity of emotion against the onslaught of time and circumstances.

While the character of Sharengla has a tragic significance in the context of the war, *Yaruingam* is a political novel, going into all the aspects of the Naga struggle as the novelist saw them along two different paths that diverged both in respect of the goal as well as the means to achieve that goal. Rishang is the main protagonist; his gradually evolving vision of a Naga future is embodied in the novel and at the end it is given a Gandhian mould, no less radical than Videssellie's vision, which is not only based on militancy and violence but also on some kind of primitivism. This complex interweaving of two themes in the novel is the reality of Naga life and it will continue to be so till they merge into a single line of a creative human stream abjuring wasteful violence. On the one hand, Shangrela's wrecked life is the author's comment on the war. Naga life in transition is also the microcosm of the larger political reality of India.

With regard to the situations in the novel—the actualities of war, insurgency and the overlapping nationalist struggle for freedom, the novelist has a clear vision. His engagement is neither entirely ideological nor academic. He has neither mystified identity nor has situated it in the story in other than human terms but there is no doubt that a strong awareness of it emerges from a sustained dialectic of different political ideologies in the novel. An understanding of the larger ethos of the political struggle within the Nagas leads one beyond identity affiliations or its overt political ends. The vision of the 'People's Rule' has ultimately to be embedded in the concept of a larger or more universal human agency. This is the core of a vision that directly runs counter to colonialism as well as other kinds of political or cultural hegemonism often imposed on the smaller identities by the nation-state.

The exploration of identity could be multi-layered: it can have more than one kind of relationship with truth or social reality as



embedded in a novel. It depends on the particular historical context as to which of the identities the novelist would settle for in respect of foregrounding it or foreclosing it in terms of the human situation in the novel. Anti-colonialism or the anti-imperialist struggle is an important preoccupation in this particular novel and in the later novels. It is manifest in the novelists' exploration of political identities in retrospect, emerging out of the freedom struggle (*Mritunjoy*: 1970) and a significant working class movement (*Pratipad*: 1970) of the thirties of the last century. These novels are artistically satisfying because they effectively and concretely embody social and political identities. Indeed the three major Assamese novels across a century, namely *Miri Jiyari* (1894) with its eco-cultural background, *Jivanar Batat* (1944) as a mirror-image of Assamese culture and society with a deeply authentic tone and *Yaruingam* (1960) depicting the struggle for the political rights of a small Naga community have brought out the issue of identity and difference more concretely and demonstrably than perhaps in any other tradition of the regional novel in India. The entire process achieves certain fruition in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *Dantel Hatir Unye Khow Howda* (1988), a novel in which gender identity has emerged as the central issue.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. His earlier novels dealt with authentic historical material. *Miri Jiyari* has not only 'problematized' the bonding of the ethnic with the social in so different a manner that it could not have been situated within the traditional mould of the nineteenth century Assamese society. In a more traditional Assamese society, the levers of power, caste, class or gender would operate differently.
2. Banikanta Kakati, the foremost literary critic of the earlier literary period and a contemporary of the novelist, extolled the 'the writer's wide and intimate acquaintance with all phases and features of Assamese social life in their light and shade, giving it the stature of classic'. Also see Lalit Kumar Barua, *Birinchi Kumar Barua: Makers of Indian Literature*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi: 1999. p. 20.
3. Hiren Gohain, *Sahityar Satya*, B. K. Barua, Gauhati, Barua Agency, 1970. pp. 139-41, and Bhaben Barua: *Jivanar Batat: The Story of a Society*, B.K. Barua Commemoration Volume, Gauhati, All India Oriental Conference, 1966.
4. The inner meaning of the opening lines of a folk song points significantly to a girl's plea to her father not to send her in marriage to a place faraway

from home against her wish; this is actually something that happens in the story.

5. Lalit Kumar Barua, op. cit., 1999. p. 60.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-64.
7. Bhaben Barua, op. cit.
8. Lalit Kumar Barua, op. cit, pp.60-62.
9. Diana Price Herndt: "*The Dilemmas of a Feminine Dialogic in Feminism,*" in *Bakhtin and the Dialogic*, Dale M. Bauer and Susan Juret McKinstry, Eds. The University of New York, 1991. p. 3.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
11. Kathleen Raine: *47 Poulton Square*, London SW 35 DT dated November 23, 1994: personal letter to the novelist.
12. According to the noted critic R. K. Dasgupta the novelist presented the Nagas 'as part of the human situation in the country' with 'imaginative sympathy and understanding which go into the making of a great work of art'. V. K. Gokak, another distinguished critic commented *Yaruigam* deals with the problems and beliefs of the Naga people and the Naga revolt for freedom. It also gives an incidental picture of pre-partition communal riots in Calcutta. It opens a new world of customs and behaviour pattern even to the Indian reader'. Cf. *Yaruigam: 'People's Rule'*, Christian Literature Centre, Guwahati, Christian Literature Centre, 1984.
13. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, *Yaruigam: Peoples Rule*, Guwahati, Christian Literature Centre, 1984. p. 10.
14. *Ibid.* p. 19.
15. *Ibid.* p. 31.
16. *Ibid.* p. 157.
17. *Ibid.* p. 209.