

Chapter 4

REPRESENTATION OF ETHNICITY AND TRIBAL LIFE IN ASSAMESE NOVELS

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The tribal communities hailing from the hills and plains of different parts of the state of Assam have made significant contribution towards Assamese culture and society. It would be difficult to imagine the image of Assamese culture without the contribution of the tribal communities. The effect of different tribal languages is felt in the process of the growth of Assamese language and literature and these languages have to a great extent enriched the vocabulary of the Assamese language. Contrary to this phenomenon the volume of literary activities based on tribal life in the Assamese language is not large in quantity. On the other hand, a considerable number of writers belonging to various ethnic communities have played a significant role in the history of Assamese literature. Still, the embodiment of the ethnic communities of Assam and their rich cultural life has not found true representation.

The emergence of ethnic-assertion and powerful nationalistic aspirations in recent years at the level of each of the ethnic communities have been instrumental in bringing changes in several directions causing both positive and negative impact in the socio-cultural milieu and political sphere. One major outcome is the growing awareness among the communities, this awareness has led to the extent of movement for political gains. The phenomena have also led to a lot of literary activities of the writers of the communities centered around their respective languages instead of Assamese language; and hence their contribution to the mainstream has considerably declined. The few others who have been engaged in this process are still continuing, but due to hindrances like language barrier, socio-cultural diversity etc. the efforts have remained piecemeal. Whatever numbers of writing on tribal societies of Assam in various forms of Assamese literature have so far appeared written by authors of both tribal and non-tribal origin we observe several factors in them.

- a. We come across some writings by authors of non-tribal origin who attempt at portraying tribal life and society with a sense of compassion and a feeling of otherness.
- b. Equally noticeable in some other writings in this category is the realization of the political consciousness among certain tribal communities finding expression in several ways.
- c. A few other authors on the other hand have taken up writing on societies of Assam with a dispassionate outlook of chronicling or recording certain social or cultural images of a distinct community belonging to the geographical boundary of Assam.

Simultaneously we come across parallel situations or features in writings of the same category by authors of tribal origin.

- a. A genuinely felt urge to bring to focus distinctive features of lifestyle of his or her community to the domain of a wider community as a form of cultural communication.
- b. A critique of traditions such as religious beliefs, customs, superstitions and their ills, with a sense of realization of the need to bring development to the community to improve the living conditions. This is palpably felt in some of the writings under this category. The writers through their creative expressions also send a political message to the audience.
- c. Writings by some of the tribal authors seem to be a sort of political weapon in which the growing political or ethnic self is increasingly felt. Years of neglect and lack of social and economic development sowed the seeds of discontentment and paved the path of alienation. The writers in question have taken the message to put it on record through literary forms.

The rise of ethnic assertion had sprouted first among the Bodo community living in the plains of Assam. In the beginning of the last decade, Kalicharan Brahma endeavored to awaken the Bodo people to the need of social reform through introducing the Brahma

religion as a reformist faith. With his efforts, the *Bodo Sanmilan* was established. In the meantime, Sobharam Brahmachoudhury and Satish Chandra Basumatary established the *Bodo Students Sanmilan*. These two institutions made an effort to bring an ethnic assertion among the Bodo people through expansion of education, demanding separate constituencies for the Bodos in employment and such other fields of political economy. However the movement did not turn to be completely political in nature. With the foundation of a Tribal League in 1933 that represent all tribes the movement gained a political focus. In pre-independent India, the Tribal League emerged as a strong political party. With their efforts, the tribal communities were enabled to reserve seats in legislative council under state governance. The transition of social awareness to a political awareness among the tribal communities of Assam was fueled by the rising complexities concerning script and language. *Bodo Sahitya Sabha*, founded on 16th November, 1952 placed a demand on authorities to introduce Bodo language in Lower primary schools in Bodo inhabited areas. The students' organizations have been playing the most vital role in the movement of tribal assertion of the Bodo community. All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), one of the most powerful organizations of recent times, came into being on the 15th February, 1967. With the call of ABSU, the language movement resulted in the formation of a new political party, namely Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in a Congress held at Kokrajhar under the presidency of Modaram Brahma in 1967. PTCA demanded autonomous governance specifying a large area on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. Further, they demanded for a separate state namely *Udayachal* for the region. Movement for introducing Roman Script for Bodo language script was another development in this sphere led by ABSU joining hands with the *Bodo Sahitya Sabha*. But before the rising differences between the Sabha and ABSU regarding adoption of a script – Assamese or Roman could be solved, the Government of India thrust upon them the *Devanagari* script to be officially adopted. With the passage of time, under the aegis of ABSU, a tribal assertion movement of the Bodo people became gradually dominant. Demand for a separate Bodoland encompassing the Bodo inhabited areas also became effervescent. In due course, the movement even turned violent. In support of armed struggle, different factions of them founded forces like Bodo Security Force (BSF), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT). BLT led faction through a negotiated settlement with the Government of India and was responsible in the formation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and in the process, Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri and Kokrajhar districts were incorporated to the Council.

Moreover, Bodo language has been recognized as an official language within the Council and an associate language of the state.

Typically, the tribal communities living in the hills similarly awakened with movements for ethnic assertion. The name of the Karbi community comes first in this regard. For the first time, a leader of the Karbi community Samsonsing Engti endeavored to develop an integrated platform in cooperation with the other Karbi leaders to raise the voice of the Karbi people for their rights. For the purpose, he organized a conference at Kothalguri, Nagaon in the year 1942. The socio-political party namely *Karbi Adarbar* was formed in this conference. Complying with the demand of this party, Khorsing Terang was selected as a member in the Assam legislative Council in 1942. *Karbi Adorbar* submitted a proposal seeking autonomous governance to the Bordoloi Committee, instituted under Gopinath Bordoloi to review and suggest on the various issues concerning the Assamese tribal communities during drafting of the Constitution of independent India in 1947. Conforming to the proposal, Bordoloi Committee placed a suggestion before the Constituent Assembly for district level autonomous governance for the Karbi and Dimasa people under Article 244 (a) of the Indian Constitution. As an outcome, the then Sivsagar and Nagaon Districts were carved up to set up the Karbi Anglong (formerly Mikir Pahar) & North Cachar District in 1951. Further, the district was subdivided into separate districts namely Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar. Presently both the districts are under the governance of autonomous councils. A separate autonomous Karbi State has been a long pending demand of the Karbis, which took pace only in the 80's. The call for separate state took momentum with joined movement launched by 'Committee for Autonomous District and Karbi Students' Union with their resolution taken at a meeting held on 17th May, 1986. The struggle for self-assertion is continuing under the leadership of Karbi youths in Karbi-Anglong. Parallel separatist forces coming into existence have fueled the movement for separate state.

The movement for ethnic assertion among other tribes of Assam is not that vigorous in comparison to the Bodo and Karbi communities. However, the fruitfulness of the struggle for a separate Bodoland has no doubt encouraged the other tribes to pursue their demands. It must be noted that the struggle for safeguarding one's own identity and realization of inclusive development has necessarily led to the struggle for autonomous governance. In fact, every tribal community is in favor of autonomous governance at present times. The

government has also approved to constitute autonomous councils. But the question remains whether the autonomy alone has been able to deliver things sought through the struggle for ethnic assertion and the basic issues of the tribal communities like poverty, economic underdevelopment lack of amenities for education and health care have been addressed adequately?

If one tries to find representation of tribal life in Assamese literature, especially in the field of novel, it will be seen that few novels are written to date based on tribal life. In this stream of novels, endeavors to portray lifestyle, standard of living, aspirations & ambitions, customs, beliefs & rituals, superstitions, festivals and pictures of the cultural life of a tribe living in a specific area. These novels portray the life of the communities living in specific cultural and geographic zones and can be categorized as regional novels.

In the context of reflection of Assamese tribal life in novels, the first name that comes is '*Miri Jiyari*' published by Rajanikanta Bordoloi in 1895 in which the life of a tribal community is portrayed. The story based on the love story of a *Mising* couple living in the banks of the river *Subanshiri* effectively depicts the cultural moors of the community concerning its festivals, worship, integrity existence in harmony with nature and environment without any overt political undertone. Many a critic... has pointed out that the story of the novel is not of the *Mising* tribe, rather the characters are dressed as therefore the *Mising community*. However, the effort of the novelist can't be overlooked. The depiction of the *Mising* society's social life including its customs and festivals can't be ignored. In the words of Satyendra Nath Sarma, "*Miri Jiyari* can be termed as a piece of raw gold fetched from the bank of the river Subansiri" (*Sarma*, 2004, 358).

The next novel reflecting tribal life was written by Tarunchandra Pamegam in 1944, *Samajor Sesh Simat*. This novel authored by a writer from the community itself is also based on the lifestyle of the *Mising* community. The following novel of the same stream was *Bidrohi Nagar Hatot* by Kailash Sarma. However, a few number of novels of the same stream could be traced in between the period such as *Kesha Pator Kaponi* (1952) by Prafulladutta Goswami, Navakanta Baruah's *Kapilipariya Sadhu* (1954), *Dawar Aru Nai* (1955) by Jogesh Das and a Tea Tribe based novel *Seujee Pator Kahini* (1959) by Birinchi Kumar Baruah under a pen name (Rasna Baruah) are noteworthy. Among these novels, Prafulladutta Goswami's *Kesha Pator Kaponi* reflects the life of a tribal society to

some extent. In the novel, through the protagonist Borin Kumar, the writer depicts the effect of leftist thoughts penetrating into the minds of the Bodo and Kachari villagers denied of land revenue and they launch a movement. The writer gives a picture of the life of the farmers paralyzed by various issues. The reflection of the life of the Tea Tribes can be seen for the first time in the novel *Dawar Aru Nai* written by Jogesh Das which is based on dire socio-economic conditions caused by the World War-II. How the advent of war transforms human values and deeply damages social life is depicted in the novel. Through the character of Girin, the writer depicts the life of workers at Sukreting Tea Garden changed by the war and also describes the perception of the society towards the tea garden labourers.

Kailash Sarma penned the *Bidrohi Nagar Hatot* (1958) based on the life of the Naga Hills. This is the first ever Assamese novel based on Naga life and society. The struggle for liberation of the Nagaland in the post-independence period is the base of this novel. Instead of covering the overall life of the Naga community, the novel attempts to draw some of the incidents of a youth, Kandarpa with some Naga revolutionaries. *Onami Naginee* and *Dalimir Sopon* are two novels by the same writer written in the years 1963 and 1972 respectively. These two novels are also based on Naga Hills. Through the story of a Naga girl Jasmi, the novel *Onami Nagini* reflects the rural life, cultivation, education system, places, customs, worship, and nature in Nagaland. The basic theme of the novel *Dalimir Sopon* is the political dilemma surfacing in Nagaland during the post-independent era. The political upheavals before the independence and before formation of separate state of Nagaland form the theme of the novel.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharjya's *Iyaruvingam* published in the year 1960, based on the Tangkhun Naga life in Manipur, describes the fallout of the World War-II on the Naga social and economic life and the growth of nationalistic aspiration with assertion of their cultural and political identity among them. The 20th century socio-economic and political upheaval of the Naga people is lucidly depicted in the novel.

In 1960, Lummer Dai, the first novelist from an ethnic community made his entry to the stream of Assamese novels on tribal life. Hailing from today's Arunachal, Lummer Dai wrote the novel *Paharor Sile Sile* (1961) on an ethnic canvas belonging to his own area. Further he contributed to Assamese literature with several novels based on the life of the

Adi society. Some of his noteworthy works are *Prithibir Hahi* (1963), *Mon Aru Mon* (1968) and *Koinar Mulya* (1982). All his novels are centered on the socio-cultural life and issues of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The first novel *Paharor Sile Sile* starts with the love between low born girl Bati and the Village Head's son Jolom. The story proceeds with the struggle for love rejected by both the society and family of Jolom, resulting in the eventual death of Bati and repentance of Jolom. As a debut novel, the writer attempts to describe the nature of Adibhumi, its life, beliefs and superstitions, realization of life and reality which provides a stamp of ethnic life. In the second novel, *Prithibir Hahit*, the love of Kardung and Gosi, marriage of the both and their conflict regarding Kardung's inclination for another girl, namely Liyi, form the storyline. The ugly truth unveiled further in a public meeting (*Kebang*) results in an outburst of anger by Kardung who kills Gosi in the end. The novel describes *Mochup* (the village dormitory) and festivals like *Eur*, *Cholung* and *Delong* in detail. The novelist describes the conflict in public administrative institutions and the simplicity of tribal life. Through the novel *Mon Aru Mon*, the novelist describes the life of an old woman who after losing her kin carries on her life with a dog as her only companion. The novelist tries to unveil the superstitions prevailing in the society at different stages of social life in the novel. It records the reaction of the educated youth like Badang and Ojong towards superstitions. In the novel *Koinar Mulya*, the novelist depicts the darker side of child marriage. Through the rebellious attitude of the protagonist Gumba, and through incidents like school students coming out in her support, the novelist challenges the superstitions and other shades of social life of the tribe. His endeavor for social reform can be seen throughout the novel.

Pashupati Bharadwaj wrote the novel *Simsangor Duti Paar* (1965), based on the Garo socio-cultural life. This novel concentrates more on describing the barbaric incidents during partition. Novelist Swarna Bora wrote another novel based on the life of the Garo community namely *Simchang Nodir Hahi* (1987) in which through the protagonist Deb Choudhury, a young doctor from the plains, the socio-cultural norms of the community, their beliefs, rituals are portrayed. Open minded youth of the plains are shown to be adapting to the life of the hills.

The life of the Khasi people is brought to the fore through the novel *U-khun-Jonga* (1973) penned by Amulya Baruah. The novel starts with minute depiction of the psychology of a Khasi child namely Wanlam through his enthusiasm regarding an egg of a hen. The

hardship of the workers of a coal mine also finds place in this novel. The novel goes on to portray the duties performed by the women, their hard work, festivals, and dance & songs.

For the first time, interpretation of Karbi life can be observed in Assamese novel *Puwate Ejak Dhanesh* published in the year 1977. The presence of a wide-encompassing subjects like the mesmerizing beauty of the green hills of Karbi-Anglong, life of the Karbi people, their beliefs & superstitions, aspirations & ambitions, history and possible future make this novel not only rich in content but also representational in nature. The changes taking place in the Karbi community during the pre-independence era is well- interpreted in the second Assamese novel on Karbi life *Rongmilir Hahi* (1981) by Rong Bong Terang. In the words of the writer, the novel is an effort to bring together the Karbi socio-cultural history. The novel strives to interpret the social transformation, conflict among the old and the new generation and the attitude of the people of the plains towards the Karbi people in the pre-independence era.

Jadav Phukan has written two novels centered around the life of the Karbi community namely *Mekokri* (1982) and *Kengwot Kachedong* (1989). The novel *Mekokri* describes how the Karbi social customs bring boundless misfortune to the life of the Karbi girl Mekokri. The conflict between old norms and evolving ideals is also reflected through various incidents. However the novel does not encompass the Karbi social life in a comprehensive manner. On the other hand, Phukan's other novel *Kengwot Kachedong* examines various aspects of the Karbi social life. The novelist writes of forbidden marriage within the same clan through the love story of Dikoy Engti and Lili Engti. By describing the punishment met by the lovebirds, the novelist gives a picture of the old court system prevailing among various ethnic groups. The novel also incorporates agricultural practices among the Karbi people including the Jhum. The Chamankan festival being the celebration of death prevailing in the community also finds a vivid portrayal and gives the novel a distinct representative character. Although not being a Karbi, the novelist's minute observation of Karbi culture. Another novel on the Karbi community written by Paramananda Rajbongshi titled *Unmilir Prithibi* (1992), though small, successfully portrays the changes through the effects of the advent of modern education and other cultural media. The changes brought to the Karbi community by the contemporary political, economic and educational developments are incorporated in the novel which includes different aspects of the socio-cultural life of the Karbi people.

Recently, Ajit Singnar has written a novel titled *Longri Atomon* (2014) based on the efforts of carving out of the district of Karbi-Anglong from the Mikir hills with comprehensive details in the novel. The people associated with the above socio-political scenario of the time in Mikir hills have found a realistic portrayal in the novel.

In the first novel based on the Mising community- *Miri Jiyori*; the trend is further carried forth by novels such as *Somajor Seshot Seema* (1944) by Tarun Chandra Pamegam, *Mising Koneng* (1967) by Bishnuprasad Rabha, *Oiyao* (1987) by Bhaben Chandra Pegu, *Pohprir* (1989) by Ganesh Pegu, *Kumdang Lrichab* (1990) by Dimbeswar Bora, *Subanshirit Relor Uki* (1990) by Swarna Bora, *Mibu* (1992) by Indreswar Pegu, *Mikchijili* (1993) by Jatin Mipun, *Prothom Kukurar Daak* (1997) by Bogaram Nath, *Ghate Ghate Manuh* (1996) by Anil Phukan, *Korha Noir Artonaad* (2000) by Srabanti Pegu.

The transitional period of the post-independent Mising community is captured in the novel *Oiyao*. The novelist goes into details of the superstitions, customs, dance, music, attires, marriage culture, festivals and rituals relating to birth and death through the story of love and marriage between Bijoy and Oiyao. Unveiling various social aspects of the community through the conversations of the character Prabir with the village head, the writer brings social, political, economic, cultural, religious and educational issues of the Mising community to light. Ganesh Pegu's *Pohprir* portrays the Mising society in transformation. Issues like education, communication, agriculture and healthcare of the Mising community are reflected in these novels in the light of the need of urban development in the tribal areas as perceived by the young generation. The microscopic observation of social issues related to Mising social customs and folk culture has given the novel a distinct look of a community in transition. The Novel *Subansirit Relor Uki* by Swarna Bora also describes some of the cultural traits of the Mising people. The novel *Mibu* written by Indreswar Pegu which describes the growing political will and the struggle for autonomous governance in the community. In the novel the movement led by its protagonist Miganko an educated young man. The novelist also portrays some aspects of culture, in terms of traditions in the novel. The socio-cultural life of the Mising people is reflected in Jatin Mipun's novel *Mikchijili*. Written on the background of the Mahfol village of Disangmukh in the Sivsagar district, the novel draws images of modern social corruption, political exploitation, life paralyzed by natural calamities and a lack of education causing backwardness among the rural people.

Yese Dorjee Thongshi, in his novels written on the Arunachali tribes like Sherdukpen and Monpa, has brought a new flavor to this group of novels on ethnic communities. Of the considerable number of works written to date are *Lingjhik* (1983), *Sonom* (1981), *Mouno Oth Mukhor Hriday* (2001), *Shav Kota Manuh* (2004) and *Mising* (2008). The lifestyle of the Sherdukpen tribe is portrayed in his first novel *Sonom*. The novel based on the married life of Lowojang and his wife Sonom portrays a lucid account of simplicity of tribal life, the couple's ambitions, beliefs and festivals that they participate in. An influence of the Buddhist religion also finds a place in the novel. On the other hand, the novelist reflects upon different aspects of social life through traditional marriage as well as other traditional beliefs of the Sherdukpen tribe in the novel. The novelist has placed these facts with utmost sincerity and expressed his desire for changes however indicating dire consequences in going for a rapid transformation.

Ojantir Moh (1987) is a novel based on the life of the Arunachal's Tagin tribe written by Birojananda Choudhury. The theme of this novel is the genuine conflict between old and emerging values. Issues related to prevalent customs among the Tagin tribe like joint family systems, polygamy, women's recognized economic independence and child marriage are raised in the novel.

Two novels written on the life of the Tangsa people of Arunachal Pradesh are *Longkai Thaknang* (2003) written by Kengsam Kenglam and *Patkai Paharor Seujiya Toluwat* (2004) by Wangsam Jongsam. Returning to novels on tribes of Assam, we can refer to Umakanta Sarma's *Bharanda Pakshir Jak* (1992) on the Bodo community written in Assamese. Sarma encompasses a varied range of images concerning the Bodo people including the consequences of low morale of a section of the Assamese people, emergence of ethnic consciousness for political assertion among the young generation of the community, conflict between old and newer perspectives in their social life, ambiguous activities of pro-transformational forces, illegal land acquisition by immigrants. The novel also throws light on other cultural expressions of the community which are discussed later in this Chapter. Likewise, Tirtha Phukan's *Ai-pe Dulangka* sketches a visual portrayal of the Galong community. Dhrubajyoti Bora wrote the novel titled *Seemantor Sur* (1996) draws variegated images of several tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh.

Novels based on life of the Rabhas are *Janong Jinong* (1990) by Rajen Pam, *Nodir Naam Dudhnoi* (1997) by Khagen Rabha and *Dudhnoir Bedona* (1997) by Swarna Bora. The story of the novel *Janong Jinong* of Rajen Pam is based on the failure of love of a young couple. Through the development, the writer gives a picture of socio-cultural life of the Rabha people, their rural agrarian life, folk culture and traditions, dance & music, marriage, worship.

Novels with fundamental inputs from the life of the Dimasa tribe are *Gajaudisha* (1984) by Nagendranath Baruah and *Diyung Nodir Geet* (1985) written by Swarna Bora. How love keeps an un united duo alive and fosters inspiration despite poverty, how threads of a society get perished in a turnabout of civilizational trends are the basic themes of the novel *Gajaudisha*. It gives an account of the hardship faced by the Dimasa people living in the hills of North Kachar. Various traditions of the tribe, prevalent religious beliefs, superstitions, food habits and other socio-cultural elements can be traced in this novel. On the other hand, the novel *Diyung Nodir Geet* seems to aim at portraying a picture of integration and harmony among the communities living in the plains and hills and among Hindus and Muslims. The novel centres around the theme of love and marriage across religious communities purported to create a message of social harmony between Hindu and Muslim communities. The backdrop of communal tension and sportier incidents of violence across the state in the wake of Assam Movement against continued immigration of Bangladeshi nationals to Assam, was the moving force behind writing of the novel. Through the novel a deep concern for social amity and age old communal harmony among Hindu and Muslim communities living in Assam gets reflected. Character like Rahmat, Dhanjit, Rupahi are torch bearers of the message of peace and harmony.

In addition to the above, the following novelists have contributed in strengthening this stream of novels written on ethnicity. life with the representation of the notion of ethnicity and ethnic culture. Dipak Kumar Barkakati in his novel *Dikton* (1998) wriiten about the Mizo people, the principal tribe of Mizoram is the only novel written on that tribe. The only novel written on the Tiwa community is Swarna Bora's *Kiling Nodir Paar* (2001). Assam's prominent tribe Deori has been portrayed in the only novel written by Dhanada Devi which is *O Aai Ibachhi* (2011).

4.1 ETHNIC LIFE AS DEPICTED BY NON-TRIBAL AUTHORS

4.1.2 *Yaruingam* of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and the reflection of Tangkhul Naga life

4.1.2.1 *Yaruingam* – a brief introduction

Yaruingam (1960), a much acclaimed work by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya is a novel that dwells on the life of the Tangkhul Nagas, a Naga community in a state of turmoil and transition in Manipur, a neighbouring state of Assam. The *Yaruingam* has been chosen for discussion in the study taking into account its preoccupation with the rise of ethnic assertion in a neighbouring hill state. Like the other novels discussed in the thesis, the *Yaruingam* not only portrays the issue of growing ethnic unrest, it also brings to fore a series of panoramic images of the culture and society of the Tangkhul Nagas. It also helps us in having a comparative look at the changing scenario of the ethnic communities across the hills and the plains of Assam and North-East India. Moreover the theme of the ethnic struggle for sovereignty no more remains limited to the Tangkhul community along. It sense an universal message of dipper concern for freedom and aspiration for development and progress inherent in the mind of a community.

The entire society of the Tangkhul Nagas is not only the subject matter of *Yaruingam*, it emerges as a speaking figure in the novel along with its characters. It is a reflection of the novelist's encounter with the Naga society as he worked among groups of people and characters who voiced their minds. In the Preface to the novel, the writer says:

I tried to look into the life of the Tangkhul Nagas as when I was staying with them. I looked deep into their hearts as my vision permitted. The effort turned out to be a heavy stone for me. However, my mind was fascinated by something else. It was not the fascination for the pristine life, yet I discovered elements of the new life in my sojourns. (Bhattacharyya 2003: preface)

On request of his college time friend, Rishang Keisingh, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya served as a graduate science teacher in 1950 at the newly founded Ukhrul High school at Ukhrul, a bordering township in Manipur. On the basis his encounters with the community, he wrote letters entitled 'Ukhrulor chithi' (1951) and a short story named 'Aji Biya Parahiloi Gaon Panchayot' in the pages of the *Ramdhenu*. He had the opportunity to

see from close quarters the aftermath of the Second World War that left a massive impact on the Naga Hills community. The seed of revolution was an aftermath that erupted following the Second World War and this also stimulated the freedom Movement in India. That seed of revolution and the accumulated anguish and depressions of the Tangkhul Nagas resulted in armed struggle for sovereignty and this found subtle expression in his novel. That anguish is largely expressed through the characters Videssellie and Rishang. Videssellie dreamt of a free Naga state, Rishang was dejected at the end of the war against the united force and the nation as well.

In *Yaruingam*, we have diverse pictures of two classes of people divided in the name of tribe and ideology. Rishang, the protagonist of the novel, represents the group who believes in the ideology of peace, and his aim is to lead the Naga Hill, with the support of the government of the newly independent India. Rishang, Khating and Phantiphang and many others welcomed the united force in Naga Hill in order to progress toward peace in the region. The United Force, namely the British Army, promised that they would pay compensation for the material losses incurred during war time and establish schools, hospital and transport and communications for them. However, those promises were never kept by the United Force. To add to this, the issue of compensation continued to persist even after India got her Independence. By that time an armed movement had its trigger among the Nagas to form a free Naga state under the leadership of Videssellie. However, the majority of the Nagas continued to press on the issue of compensation before the government. As the apathy of the authority loomed large, the supporters of Videssellie continued to increase in number. In this state of affairs, Rishang and his supporters failed to garner the support of the majority of the government said and on such an occasion they have either failed to convince the people or they have been interfered by the supporters of Videssellie. As a result, a conflict in ideology between the two groups becomes very prominent and it occupies central place in the novel.

Against the ideology of Rishang and his supporters, Videssellie and his people demanded a free state for the Nagas. They don't want the Naga Hill to be a part of the British India, or a subordinate state of India. For the all-round development of the Nagas, they want a free state full with all the national characteristics to be called their own. So, in a reply to a question posed by Rishang Videssellie says:

I want an independent Naga state, where an outsider feels what it means to be a born as a Naga. (ibid: 135)

Videssellie initiated a mission of armed struggle relying on the faith of the people as his capital. He encouraged the people in favour of his ideology. When Phantitphang questioned as to how he would fight against the United Force, Videssellie replies:

Is a war fought with guns and helicopters? ... A war is fought by people. If the majority of people conform to our ideology, what do you want then anymore? The people are the kings. A fire burns in the hearts of the people. It is a wonder that the Nagas spent so many years in battle. Our people are well convinced that their hearts will not be peaceful without war. (ibid: 85)

Thus, with the help of various events and circumstances Bhattacharya, the novelist, brought to light the contradictory situation triggered by two ideologies in question. This conflict persists till the end of the novel. However, the novelist has struck the strain of optimism amidst all the odds:

A desire for peace has condensed deep in the hearts of the people and it will somewhere melt because of the some vibrant ray coming from the Sun. (ibid: 26)

About this Nagen Saikia says:

Because of this conflict, *Yaruingam* has become a document of people and the society full of blood and flesh, rather than a bare political history, as it presents the human problem with vividness. Like the vengeance to chop off the heads, the Nagas are equally full of love and kindness too. (Saikia 2013: 12)

The novel is seen to be an effort to capture the emergence of the Naga nationalism. At the same time, the questions to self-assertion, self-identity and self-status have been specifically placed in the novel. The conflicting situation, created by the aftermath of the Second World War and the struggle for independence of India, is the condition for the emergence of Naga nationalism too. In fact, like the events documented in the novel, the armed struggle of the Nagas started during this phase of history. The novelist tries to expose two perspectives of nationalism through the extremists. One of them is the

fondness for freedom, which the Nagas have traditionally got by birth; presented through the character called Najek. The other is a strong sense of nationalism, which is stirred by the influence of English education, Christianity, the Second World War and the freedom struggle of India. Rishang is presented as the representative of this ideology. However, there is a contradictory ideology at work in the personalities of Videssellie and Rishang. Videssellie believes that the Nagas should be a part of the Azad Hind Force led by Netaji and concentrate on creating an independent state for the Nagas through armed struggle, whereas Rishang has strong faith in non-violence ideology of Mahatma Gandhi. By these two characters, the conflict between armed struggle and non-violence has been delineated in the novel. Moreover, the novel incorporates various other conflicts, like the conflict between the old and the new generations, conflicts relating to religions, and the conflict between the educated and illiterate people.

About the assimilation of elements from non-violence of Gandhi and the socialist ideology of Marx, critic Munin Borkotoki, comments on the elements of the non-violence and the ideology of Marx in conflict:

Though Birendra Kumar was fascinated largely by the personality and ideology of Gandhi, he was a committed loyalist to Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, the high priest of political philosophy.... Though Dr Lohia was immensely influenced by Gandhi, yet the influence of Marx was more in him... and a loyalist of Lohia, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya is a Marxist indirectly in this sense. (Borkotoki 2014: 180)

Another major character in the novel is Jiban mastor, a person who is an outsider hailing from the plains of the neighbouring state of Assam. Critics like Satyendranath Sarma (Sarma 2007: 86) and Gobinda Prasad Sarma (Sarma 2014: 148) have described this character as another face of the novelist.

About this the novelist himself writes “There is a difference between the characters in a novel and characters in real life, because the characters are shaped by the imagination of the writer” (Saikia 1997: 89). Through this character, the novelist vents his personal observations relating to the growing political unrest, sense of alienation from India which he cannot put in the lips of other characters in the novel.

Despite what he says, the ideology that influences writer Bhattacharya, and his fondness for the Nagas have been reflected in the character of Jiban Baruah, who dedicates his time for restoration of peace in the Naga Hills. Jiban was deeply led to dejection while seeing the leadership of Videssellie and his supporters, their ideology and agenda for future. Jiban realized, “In the hearts of the Nagas, a concrete sense of Naga-nationalism has spurted” (Bhattacharyya 2003, 170). He visualizes how the negative impacts from this consciousness may play a major role in Naga Hill in days to come. Being one among the Nagas and living with them Jiban understands the diabolic nature of sense of separatism geared by Videssellie and his supporters, and he tries to make Videssellie understand the limitation of his vision repeatedly, though in vain. Paradoxically, that very Jiban Baruah becomes elated in his talk with Rishang:

Jiban looked at Rishang’s face in surprise; instantly, he was fascinated by Rishang’s firmness in thought and courage; Jiban understood that he was in search of such a Naga for long, who thinks himself as part of the greater humanity despite his Naga identity. (ibid: 169)

Through this we have glimpses of the humanist philosophy in the mind-set of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya. Jiban Baruah, who is much influenced by the ideology of Gandhi, had been a son of a retired school teacher in Guwahati. With a view to serving the society, Jiban came to Kohima one day as he had fondness for the hills. He became a teacher there. He felt in love and married Runi, a girl from the hill. Here, we find a similarity between Jiban Baruah and the real life of the novelist himself. Like Jiban Baruah, Bhattacharya came to Ukhrul in Nagaland and became a teacher in a high school. This character is much highlighted by the understanding of Rishang about him. Rishang feels:

He has no stamp of hypocrisy in his face; the face is full of simplicity and sense of confidence. A face of a courageous youth, who left his religion, society and beliefs and accepted a Naga girl as life partner for good, flashed through his mind. Very immediately, his head lowered in respect for him. (ibid: 180)

Sarengla is another major character in the novel. This character, a beautiful girl from Ukhrul, who was once rejected by society and said to be characterless, is poignantly presented by the novelist. The novel starts with a description of the untoward events

meted out to Sarengla. With no escape from life, Sarengla gets involved in social service, works as a nurse in the hospital and moves from villages to village with the peace mission. Though she is repeatedly deceived by the society in love, she does not lose heart and serves the society instead being inspired by the messages of the Bible. Her childhood love with Rishang is by now an impossible task, and she receives peace by submerging herself in social service. She is inspired by the message in the Bible that says “What is superior love? It is that love which inspires the lover to dedicate his life for the society.” (ibid: 112) and searches for peace in the later period of her life. As a victim of the Second World War, the story of this character and her inner conflicts trigger in the mind of the readers a sense of pain.

Another major character in the novel is Khutingla, the daughter of the village headman and beloved of Rishang. Her jealousy of Sarengla reflects a universal instinct of the woman in vividness. Khutingla is a representative of the ordinary Naga girls. She does not like Sarengla visiting the villages in a peace mission with Rishang. For this she rebukes Sarengla too, taking her for her competitor in love. Gradually, she understands her faults and evaluates Sarengla’s simplicity and candid character without any malice. To add to this change of heart, Sarengla tries to ward off all the odds that Khutingla has to face while marrying Rishang. Through the observation of Rishang, the novelist makes distinction between Sarengla and Khutingla:

While looking at Khutingla, Rishang discovers that that ordinary girl has nothing special to be compared to Sarengla. As if the heart of Sarengla is a huge sky and the heart of Khutingla is a small piece of cloud floating there. (ibid: 277)

Through these two woman characters, the novelist expresses the state of helplessness of women in the society. The novelist is successful in recording his compassion for woman and as such he vividly depicts the inner qualities like kindness, depth in love and the picture of a kind and loving mother. As the novelist has modern outlook about woman, he has portrayed Sarengla as one of the most vibrant characters in the novel.

Apart from the above mentioned major characters, there are a gamut of other characters, like Rishang’s friend Khating, Phanitphang, Rishang’s father Iyengmach, the village headman, Phanitphang’s widow mother Sirala, Khutingla’s step mother Warmala,

Christian missionary doctor Dr Brook, Rishang's Assamese college friend at Calcutta Amulya, P. Tambi from Maniour, Abinash from Calcutta, SDO Khaikho and Khutingla's friend Envi. These characters too find sympathetic depiction in respective proportion to the contexts. While they supplement to the fluid narrative, they shine like occasional stars strengthening the totality of the novel.

4.1.2.2 The Tangkhul Naga Society as reflected in the *Yaruingam*

In the *Yaruingam* we find the Tangkhul Naga society, which is already swept by the violence of the Second World War, along with its tradition, religious beliefs and the environment of the traditional Naga society. It is not possible to state, that the story of the novel represents all the Nagas of the then Naga Hill district, as it is limited in scope to the Tangkhul Nagas living at Ukhrul, and a war devastated the neighbouring Naga locality to Manipur. Through the character of Najek, the novelist brings to light the physical description of the Nagas:

His body is like a demon. His lock of hair is dressed like Tangkhul. From the latch behind to the upper portion of the ears, the hairs have been twined. From the lobes of the ears two large ring of brass are hanging. His hair is dense, short and stiff. A garland, made of head-skulls, is hanging around his neck. (ibid: 23)

The economic structure of the Naga society is agro-based. For livelihood, the Nagas toil hard in the paddy fields. In various places of the *Yaruingam* we find descriptions as to how the Nagas cultivate their soil:

Having heard the songs of the girls, Khating felt an urge to go to the paddy-field. He felt in the depth of his heart that life in fact lies in the hearts of these toiling fellows. (ibid: 23)

Deka Chang and Gabharu Chang, two dormitory platforms for the tribal boys and girls respectively, are the traditional inseparable parts of almost all the tribal communities from the North-east. It is an unwritten tradition for the unmarried boys and girls to stay in their dormitories, though there are variations from community to community. In certain tribes, these changs are made separately for the boys and the girls. Sometimes, they share the same chang, and the boys and girls stay separately. Traditionally, these changs are called the primary school for the tribal boys and girls to learn the values of life. There was a time

that the tribal boys and girls used to take up lessons about life from these changs, along with their life partners too. In the beginning of this novel, Rishang places Sarengla, who has been a victim of the war, in a chang. With limited freedom, the boys and the girls scarcely enjoy the right to visit the chang belonging to the opposite sex. In the novel, Rishang, Jiban, Khating and their friends visit the chang where Khutingla and her friends used to stay.

In the pages of the *Yaruingam*, we find glimpses of the rites and beliefs associated with death and how the final rite to the dead is solemnized. The Tangkhul Nagas believe that through the foothills of the mountain called Chiroi, ghosts of the dead reach Kajairam or the heaven. Generally, the souls come out in the form of butterflies and bees, which fly to Kajairam and stay there in peace. Prior to the death of the man, an heir is selected in the Tangkhul society. After the death of a man, the heir has to perform all the final rites, so that the soul of the dead reaches heaven in peace. It is mandatory that this heir should be recognized by the souls of the ancestors of the deceased. The Tangkhul Nagas believe that the ghost of the deceased stays in the village till Kachi Katham or the great feast is offered. So, until the great feast is solemnized, it is a tradition to offer foods, fish and meat on the grave on a regular basis. Like a pious Naga, old Najek requests Yathingkhui and others from his death-bed and others so that a ritual is regularly offered to god Kameo from the day of the final rite till the great feast offered:

I will stay with you till the day of the feast of Kachi Katham. I hope, you will not nag me till that day. (ibid: 72)

The Tangkhul Nagas believe that one recovers from diseases if worship is offered to the god named Kameo. During illness they maintain abstinence from various community festivals. The ghosts and spirits are taken to be messengers of death. The villages hold the belief that the buffalos should be sacrificed in the final rite of the deceased. All these elements are vividly placed in the novel. Regarding the tradition of slaughtering of the heads, the novel says:

Videssellie observed gradually that heads of some dead men are hanging from the front wall of the house. He calculated and uttered silently '21 in total'! (ibid: 91, 92)

Once the people of India used to think that a Naga means a person who slaughters the heads of men. This view is again placed in the novel, through the communication with Chanchal and Shyamoli, whom Rishang happened to meet in his college days at Calcutta:

It means, you hail from a family that slaughters heads of men.’ – Shyamoli uttered in terror.

Rishang got angry, ‘Do not get terror-struck. I am not going to slaughter yours.’

.....Shyamoli said, ‘We have a false belief that a Naga means a person who is expert in slaughtering the head of men. (ibid: 155)

Along with these fatalistic views, the Nagas are known for their social customs relating to good and evil. They prefer magic beliefs and practices to the physical, when they fall ill. So, while Rishang was suggesting to Najek to take an injection from the missionary doctor at the public meeting held at the yard of Phatingphang, as a protective measure against the small pox looming large in the neighbouring villages, the novelist projects the feelings of Najek thus : “Najek is not ready to accept an advice against traditional customs not followed by Nagas for generations” (ibid: 38). When the village headman presents an verdicts in favour of an injection, Najek retorts in dissatisfaction: “You too, in favour of the injection!” (ibid: 38). Again that same Najek becomes angry when he comes to know that Dr. Brook has been invited by Khutingla, to look into the mother of Phatingphang, who has been suffering from fever. The traditional views represented in the character called Najek are demolished in increasing rate by modern outlooks, education and Christianity. Through various events portrayed in the novel, various changes brought to the society due to Second World War are depicted. As a result, Rishang and his people propose to establish the first high school in their village, and that dream comes true through Jiban Mastor, who hails from Assam. Sarengla dreams of becoming a nurse; Khutingla has gone to Guwahati to learn weaving and Rishang has come to Calcutta to get modern education. The novel also presents, negative attitudes regarding the modern outlooks in the society. About this, Najek says in the novel:

Sons! We know what is meant by freedom. The Nagas in their nude state had been very peaceful. We did not have dearth of food. Everything was managed by village production. We did not have any problem with money....sons! It is for these English education and Christianity that have destroyed us all. The villagers got divided into groups. (ibid: 26)

Najek is the representative of the tradition-ridden old society with older values and through him the novelist says that the modernist views and outlooks have become very hard for the old to accept. About Najek, Bhattacharya writes:

Najek can be called the representative of the decaying Naga culture. Such old people have become useless in all societies as they are incapable of accepting the new. (Bhattacharya 2013: 101)

English education and Christianity came to Naga Hills hand in hand. The old people opposed both. Bhattacharya's novel raises the issue of conflict between the neophytes of Christianity and those adhering to their traditional belief system. Although majority of the community embraced Christianity in course of time modern scholarship among the Tangkhuls still critiques the Missionaries perception of the community as 'wild', 'savage', 'barbarous', 'unruly' and 'pristine primitive' heathers demeaning the indigenous belief system.

“In the course of proselytizing the natives, the early Christian Missionaries were compelled by the prevailing situations to invent certain legitimizing tools. A fatal tool came in the form of what I call 'savaging the natives'. With the so-called 'civilizing mission' or 'white men's burden' ideology as their invented purpose in colonizing territories/countries outside Europe, the British colonial rulers in India and Christian Missionaries in present Northeast India gave their supposed mission of 'civilizing the savage' the highest premium in their encounters with the Nagas and their neighbouring 'tribes' of present Northeast Indian. (Khongreiwo 2014: 65)

This perception is reflected in the novel. A perusal of the above sentences makes every reader a bit sensitive about the change in the society and the author wonders if all the changes are for the good of the society. This question is not only faced by the Nagas; in fact, it is a universal question encountered by societies in transition across the globe. The novelist is successful here in his effort to bring such anxieties into light.

Over time, Christianity became popular in the Naga society along with modern education. That Christianity also called for social conflicts was vividly presented through the quarrel between Iyengmas, the father of Rishang and Yangthikhui, the father of Khutingla,

regarding a plot to be used for construction of a church. As a result, there is a constraint Rishang and Khutingla have to face in the process of their marriage. Having seen all these, Rishang rejects the proposal of Dr Brook to found the church, soon after the death of Rishang's father:

The church that spreads the seeds of dissensions in the village cannot be the place for the Christ..... for me love is religion, not the church. (Bhattacharya 2003: 182)

The author had personal various experiences of Christianity influencing the society. Apart from the novel, he has written about this in an article named 'Yaruingam- Antaratlot' as follows:

"Many a thinkers do not want to accept the influence of the Bible on the Nagas. However, I perceived that there was influence of Christianity in shaping the minds of the educated youths. Many educated youths think that the kingdom of heaven will be established in Nagaland." (Bhattacharya 2013: 101)

Bhattacharya (2003) describes various events and situations in Iyaruingam that reflect the society, beliefs, the conflicts between the old and the new, the spread of Christianity, the establishment of hospitals and schools, along with the descriptions of the physical surrounding of the Tangkhul Nagas.

At the end of novel, Rishang is physically assaulted by the supporters of Videssellie and he is hospitalized. At this moment, he decided that if the baby conceived by Khutingla becomes a boy; he will be named as Iyaruingam which means 'people's rule'. The author might have cherished a hope that with the coming of new generation their will prevail people's rule in the Naga Hills. The way critics like Satyendra Nath Sarma, Gobinda Prasad Sarma observed, written towards the end of the fifties, this novel does not project any apathy of the writer towards the freedom struggle of India. It is true that nobody had any notion about the blood-sheds that this soil witnessed after India gained Independence. Again, the name Yaruingam reflects the mind of the novelist about the non-violent and democratic ideology he had been fostering.

4.1.2.3 A glimpse into the Historical truth

It would appear that people have differences in view regarding the issues included in the *Iyaruingham* that covers the history of the Naga Hills since the pre-independence time down to the time India got her Independence and its aftermaths. It would also seem that Rishang Keisingh, the ex-chief minister of Nagaland, is the Rishang in the novel, because he was a close friend of Bhattacharya. Again Rishang Keisingh keeps the name of his son Iyaruingham, which is an analogy of what happens in the novel. Similarly, Amulya who became a victim of the communal conflict in Calcutta is based on the Assamese poet Amulya Baruah. Such experiences bring the novel characters closer to reality. About this, Gobinda Prasad Sarma writes:

The sympathy for Rishang cherished by Bhattacharya is not merely the fondness of an artist for his creation. It is but the real sympathy of the novelist to one of his bosom friends. (Thakur 2000: 431)

Again Sarma writes:

Rishang Keisingh is the Rishang, a nationalist and Gandhian fighter in the novel. Similarly, Phizo is the real form of Videssellie, the fellow fighter of Subhash Chandra Bose. (Thakur: 2000: 431)

But, Mrinal Talukdar however writes about this in *Mautam* as follows:

Phizo, Videssellie, Sakhre and other nine persons stood against Gandhi..... Videssellie, a Tangkhul Naga youth from Ukhrul district in Manipur. By nature, he was unruly. (Talukdar 2011: 74)

This view of Mrinal Talukdar negates the view propounded by Gobinda Prasad Sarma. For Talukdar, Phizo and Videssellie are two persons. It is true that the issue of terrorism in Nagaland comes hand in hand with Phizo. The novelist himself writes about Rishang and Videssellie in 'Yaruingham – Antaralot' as follows:

My friend Mahendra Bora wrote that the shadows of the politically generous leaders among the Nagas were found in the character of Rishang. It is true. It is true that at the background of Videssellie, there is the shadow of Phizo. But, it is not the transplant of the

man in reality. So, the characters must be called imaginary because assemble of characters from many persons cannot make a man whole. (Bhattacharya 2013: 101)

Again Bhattacharya writes in ‘Yaruingam – Antaralot’:

The rhythm of the Naga life, which was persistent for generations, was shattered by the onslaught of the Second World War. A section of the Nagas had the wild inspiration to go away from the fold of mother India then. Videsseli is the epitome of this inspiration. Phanitphang is half-educated and he represents the hesitant mind-set of the deprived. The inner minds of many remorseful rebels can be understood from this character. The result of this is very painful. In Risang, the generosity of the Nagas and their sense of Indian nationalism are reflected.... Khating is an easy careerist. Three streams in the mind-set of the three generations of the Nagas are reflected through Videseli, Khating and Risang. (ibid: 101)

The restlessness depicted in the novel appears to reflect the unrest Nagaland has been facing since the days of the British. About this Dr Gobinda Prasad Sarma writes in his book titled *Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya: Oupanyasik*:

Yaruingam, the third novel of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, is a story of conflict between Indian nationalism and Naga nationalism, where Indian nationalism is indicated to be the winner. ... It is exaggerated to say that such a view expressed by this novel published in 1960 has become prophetic in the politics in Naga Hill or India. (Sarma 2014: 72, 77)

The Indian government declared Naga Hill the status of a separate state in 1960. It has an analogy with the events in view in the novel, where an armed struggle proliferated in the Naga Hill under the leadership of Phizo. As a result of these factors, the Naga Hill district was bifurcated from Assam on December 1, 1963 and it was given the status of a separate statehood titled Nagaland. However, their armed struggle aimed at carving out Naga Hills as a sovereign nation state still continues in Nagaland, though in sporadic forms.

4.1.2.4 Conclusion

The place of Yaruingam will be memorable forever in the history of Assamese literature. It is the first Assamese novel that received the Sahitya Akademi Award bringing national acclaim to a literary work centring round ethnicity and depicting political aspirations in a

distinct ethnic community. The political and social issues raised in the novel continue to be relevant and find revalidation in the present context also with the unsolved political problem of the Nagas. The novel stirred a sense of unity at a time, when the entire North-east was rocked with demands for separate statehood. Jiban Mastor, a character in the novel, is said to be bridge of unity in the novel:

I feel for a unity of the hills and the plain. They do not feel that way. I want to stay and die with you in this way. (Bhattacharya 2003: 202)

Though the novelist has respect for the path chosen by Netaji and his follower Videssellie in the novel, his personal bias seemed to be in favour of Rishang, the character who wanted to build a society on the ideology of Gandhi. At the end of the novel such a conviction is expressed by the novelist, through the character Phanitphang in these words:

Now, he has the firm belief that they have a good future if they follow the views professed by Rishang. (ibid: 281)

However, we fail to have a historic view of the life of the Nagas in the *Iyaruingham*, though it is rife with various elements and events from their culture, festivals and beliefs. Despite its limitation, this novel is a reflective document on an ethnic community as it covers the life and society of the Nagas in transition capturing a historical time of the Second World War and its aftermath, the freedom struggle of India and vis-à-vis the Naga society. It replicates the Naga mind, its devastation due to the war, and turbulence shaking the lives of the hill people. About this, the novelist says:

The emergence of the British government shattered the authority of the village headmen... taxes were levied... from that time, a dream for an independent state germinated in the heart of Videssellie, and Rishang had the deep human love of Christ. He lost faith in the war: War is not a solution to any problem, even of compensation and of famine... (ibid: 256)

The novel can also be described as a prologue to the series of the series of movements for ethnic assertion, and the tremors of violence which have continually rocked almost all ethno-centric areas of the North East India. The political strategies adopted by the Government intervened in the troubled situations through granting of statehood.

Autonomous zones too, have not been permanently settled in this respect as it had left many inner issues of social and economic development and demarcation of boundaries to be properly addressed. Despite its limitation in presenting a graphic portrayal of the Tangkhul Naga society taken in entirety, which was not the author's primary focus in writing the novel, it is the first of a comprehensive statement of inner political forces entwined with culture in driving an ethnic community at a crossroad.

4.1.3 The *Bharanda Pakhir Jak* of Umakanta Sarma and the reflection of the Bodos as an ethnic community

4.1.3.1 The novel: a brief introduction

The *Bharanda Pakhir Jak*, a novel written by Umakanta Sarma, is a merited social novel that dwells on the theme of increasing restlessness, deterioration and imbalance in social order, peace and harmony between the Bodos and other neighbouring (Assamese speaking) tribal communities in Assam. Seshakhuli and Sonafali, the two areas in the novel, are represented as the habitus Bodo-concentration. With the Bodos of Seshakhuli, various other communities, including Muslims and Nepalis, have been living for years. Though there is diversity in religion, caste, and language, there persists peace and harmony at Seshakhuli, as the Bodos are tolerant of other religions. According to the priest of a local Hindu temple, there is only one society at Seshakhuli. On the other hand, the Bodos have been being deprived of their rights and progress since pre-independence time, triggering anguish in the hearts of new generation of their boys and girls. The soils under Seshakhuli and Sonafali belt have been occupied by the migrants in increasing rate. A section of Muslims hailing from Bangladesh, and known as Moimansingiya, have permanently settled in the arid riverine land of the neighbouring forests. As a cumulative effect, the land occupation of the Bodos is gradually shrinking. The older generation of the Bodos is however not as anxious as the new generation has been regarding the pressure mounting on them. The old people think that the Moimansigiyas have done a good job by clearing the non-used lands for cultivation. As a result, the numbers of shops and vendor stands have increased at Seshakhuli market, leading to low cost of goods and availability of the products. However, characters in the novel like Alit, Urmila and many others, who are the representatives of the new generation, sense that if the illegal migrants and occupants are not checked in time, it will be a hard job to get rid of them in future. Meanwhile, a section of the worried young Bodos organized themselves at various places and prepared for extreme measures. Gaurinath, the priest of the local Hindu temple, is

very happy seeing this awareness among of the new generation of Bodos. As the plot of the novel proceeds, dissension has grown between the Bodo and the Hindu families for various reasons. One of the causes of this dissension is that the Bodos accepted Assamese as a medium of instruction for many years, but the Hindus failed to perceive the issues continuously faced by the Bodos. The new generation of the Bodos believes that the non-Bodo Hindus have been highly benefitted from various government schemes which are originally meant for them. The non-Bodo contractors are alleged to have grown richer from the money the government had originally allocated for the uplift of the poor Bodo peasants. The educational institutions founded in the Bodo localities are rife with non-Bodo employees. So, the extremist section within the new generation took note of such discriminations and opposed the proposal of Professor Bakul Doimary to establish a college at Seshakhuli. At the same time, Balobhadra Pathak had become very rich, and had purchased many trucks, while erecting a brick industry on the land of Karendra. Ramlal, a clever businessman, has occupied government plots and started businesses while erecting factories. Meanwhile, the new generation of Bodo boys and girls were divided into two groups, triggered by dissensions regarding the environment at Sehshakhuli. Among them some youths, like Ranjila and Ranen, deliberated upon bringing progressive changes through long term preparations. Contrary to this, Alit, Urmila and many others preferred the way through armed struggle. They became so indifferent that they payed no heed to the advice of people like Professor Bakul Doimary, who was for the all-round development of the Bodo society. Ramakanta and Debakanta, two non-Bodo teachers who are committed to the cause of development in the Bodo society are despised by the extremist group. Meanwhile, communal hostility simmered around Seshakhuli and Sonafali. The extremist group of the Bodos tried to use the migrant and the refugees against the local Hindu people. Unknown Bodo youths were seen to pitch at many Bodo households. Some amongst them tried to molest the modesty of the village girls, leading to physical violence between the local youths and the unknown pitchers. The situation further deteriorated, and Alit, the idealist leader of the extremist group, felt the gravity of the situation and went to his camp, to control his fellow colleagues. However, he was severely assaulted by them. The novel ends with Alit's revelation that an extremist group to be formed by him will take toll on people in years to come.

In this novel, growing nationalist aspirations and an urge for social development of an ethnic community in a critical juncture of time, find vivid portrayal through the narrative.

Unlike most other novels it presents an ensemble of multiple narratives within the grand narrative, having diverse events and minor situations which are yoked together by the novelist. The quest for identity assertion grew among the new generation of the Bodo and was attended with political equations emerging from sense of insecurity. The given population pattern has woven the multiple events into a complete whole. In other words, this emerging sense of self-assertion and search for identity is the central focus of the novel. However, the reader's do not find a detailed account of the causes of decadence of the Bodo society, which has been a prey to social apathy for decades. The novelist has left no stone unturned to project the emergence of the ethnic cause, punctuated with the conflict between the old and the new generation and differences and conflicts in agenda in carrying out the reformative zeal. In such restlessness, the novel presents, physical assaults, misunderstanding, rumors, communal conflicts and loss of peace and harmony amongst common people.

Moreover, the novelist has not adopted any strategy to advice the story-line with the help of a particular character. In fact, the entire society of Seshkhuli and Sonafali has been elevated to perform like main characters here. Yet, the characters, used to represent a particular situation, have brilliance to draw attention of the readers. Seshakhuli is a village divided into five sectors, (called the suburi or chuk in Assamese) and they are being lived by people hailing from various communities. A sense of peace, harmony and co-operation pervades the entire village. The novel provides a demographic picture of the area with which the narrative is connected. There is a mixed population consisting of Muslims, cast based Hindus, Nepalis and the Bodos. In the Piror chuk of the village, almost one hundred families belonging to the Muslim community live. In Hajo para, almost 150-200 families belonging to Konch, Keot, Haloi, Brahmin and Kalita reside. Similarly, in Ragapara, families belonging to Bodo community and Nepali communities live. The remaining two suburis are the abodes of almost 800-1000 families belonging to the Bodo community. The families of Basiram and Tikaram, living at Ragapara, shifted from their own communities as they were tortured there many years ago. They become assimilated with the life at Seshakhuli. Basiram, Dhaniram, Karendra and Rupnath are some of the characters from Seshakhuli who work for peace and harmony in the village, and as such play an important role in the novel even though they are very simple villagers having no acquaintance with the complex ways of thinking brewing up in the environment. They do not find anything to complain of, occupying the unused lands in the area by clearing the

forest used by non-Bodo people for livelihood purpose. They think that such efforts have helped in economic growth of Seshakhuli and created avenues of public good through opening up shops in and around the village. When the new generation of youths objects to such land occupations, they find themselves at a loss and fail to understand the complex implications. These characters their by represent the traditional simplicity and innocence of the community un-used to the complexities of modernity. They also do not understand the issue of ethnic assertion nor are accustomed to exploitation and deprivation in the hands of the upper echelons of the society.

Alit is on the other hand the leader of the group which is deeply concerned with the question of ethnic nationalism as well as the growing sense of being exploited by non-Bodo inhabitants of the area. As an educated youth Alit represents the mind-set of the young generation of the community. He feels that his people for generations have been a victim of social apathy and deprived of the fruits of the country's independence. He with his group is deeply concerned that the results of development have not flowed to the life of his community. He has seen that in practice, not only the Bodos, almost all the tribes of the North-East are deprived and continue to be backward at all levels of social existence. Simultaneously, the hunger for money and power has its toll not only on the Bodos, but also over all the poor tribes in India. After completion of his matriculation, Alit gets involved in activities to uplift the condition of his community. However, instead of adopting long term measures of development through political negotiations, he started believing that only armed struggle can bring the desired change to his society. And this finds clear revelation in his statement in the novel:

Many years ago Urmila said that we are fishes caught in the nets. Those thoughts are not perhaps at his mind now. But, the net is there and is approaching us nearer than ever. Just a snatch and we will get caught in the net. Please tell me. What are you going to do with this net? Are you going to break it open or get caught up and cry? But, I will try to break it open. I will come out and say; Look at me. I am free now. I have freed myself by force and struggle. My way is the way of struggle. Let it demolish, if it is to be so. It is inevitable." (Sarma 2006: 91)

With a view to strengthening the mass-base of the extremist organisation that he led, he opened the way for the youth of his community in joining the revolutionary group. At the

beginning he was allowed his supporters to collect funds from people by threat or force. Gradually, the numbers of youth with this attitude are out of control. Alit is never mindful of such activities, as he is all set to increase the membership by all means. He says to Urmila:

We need money for organizational activities. So, we cannot think at present if the money comes from the sage of the sinners. You too know that coercion is inevitable in such a situation. (ibid: 117)

It would appear that the author is opposed to such extremist behaviour, and presents another group of youths who want peace and stability among all section of people including the Bodos through a process of inclusiveness and long term measures of economic activities. Ranen, Ranjila, Professor Bakul Doimary and Debakanta (a non-Bodo teacher) are representatives of this group. According to Ranen, the progress of the Bodos will be ushered in with the development in education, health and economy and it can be realised only through a long term planning and activities. Bakul Doimary, a professor of Milanpur College, is a supporter of this group, and he believes that the progress of his community will happen if all the members of his community become educated. With a view to meeting that end, he thinks of establishing schools and colleges in the area. Towards the realization of his objectives he gets to work in association with Ranen and his other supporters. Though not a Bodo by birth, Debakanta, a student of Anthropology and a friend of Alit and Ranen, analyses the situation from a rational point of view, and he tries to present the issues before Alit and Ranen from his perceptions. He says to Alit:

You want a respectful status and progress for the Bodos, so does Ranen. So Ranen speaks of preparation incessantly. But, you speak of force, though you too want that. In the very process of preparation, the gap will be lessened. You want force to prevent the gap. But, preparation is a long term struggle; force is of short term. And it is full of issues. You have chosen a path of odds. (ibid: 107)

Debakanta could visualize the end result of the armed struggle led by Alit. His far-sightedness is seen when he analyzes the situations before Alit and Ranen:

The more limited a war in scope, the more self-centred, neighbor-centred, and finally suicidal will it become. Is not it painful that Assam became smaller in size with comparison to the aspiration of the leaders who dreamt for a bigger Assam? We became smaller than ever, more anxious, more excited. The wars take tolls. If the scope of the toll is not large, the toll becomes heavy on the smaller. (ibid: 108)

Alit however finds to understand the rationale of Debakanta's ideology. He even questions the integrity of Debakanta and Ramakanta, and the head master of Seshakhuli M E School, are called in question, as they are not Bodos. He believes that they are in fever of their hegemony of the non-Bodos on his community with patronizing lip-service towards them. Debakanta and Ramakanta resigned from their jobs willingly to work for peace and progress of the community. Alit is however adamant and he is all set to oppose Debakanta, though the latter is his childhood friend. Alit says:

‘You are no longer needed for the Bodo society. I respect your power of social analysis. One day we will win, the Bodos will win. I will meet you that day. But, you are of no use for us till that day.’ (ibid: 108)

With the path of extremism and the extremist leaders getting out of his control Alit's confidence gets shaken and he realises his faults towards the end of the novel. In spite of his utmost efforts to lead his group to an ideal path, the extremist organization has gone completely out of control with all sorts of ugly violence perpetrated on innocent people and the situation grew to such an extent that Alit was severely beaten up by his fellow colleagues. His agonised feelings find revelation when he says to Ranen:

Ranen, you said once that I had created demons and they would eat up everything, including myself, in years to come. May be you were right. Let them eat me. I no longer think for myself. But, will the demons think what is good and what is bad? Will they be peaceful after eating me up? (ibid: 173)

Debakanta was on the other hand not taken into confidence by the Assamese and once he was attacked by some miscreants as he was delivering a lecture on peace and harmony in the area. Once Tikaram Nepali and Basiram Kachari hailed from other places and became a part of Seshakhuli. Basiram felt deeply pained to have seen spurt of violent incidents in the area and in deep mental agony he lost verbal contact with anyone. Gaurinath Pujari,

who was once loved and respected by all, became physically and mentally ill, seeing the unhealthy situations at Seshakhuli. Soon after the death of Basiram, Tikaram and his family left Seshakhuli for livelihood elsewhere. Violence became daily occurrences around Seshakhuli. Vengeance also took its toll. Meanwhile, that violence spread to Rupaganja and Balur Vitha, where immigrant an Muslim population had a majority. The novelist shows that if the people of Balur Vitha were taken in good faith at the outset, they would have checked the infiltration themselves. On the contrary, Alit and his supporters instigated a split between them and the Assamese. Balobhadra's trucks were set on fire, as he promised employment for the Bodos and supplied goods for construction of the building of the college. Turmoil was heaved upon commercial establishments resulting in a collapse of normal life and the foundation of age-old peace and harmony among the communities.

Gaurinath is a major character in the novel. He is the priest of the local Hindu temple and father of Ramakanta, the head master of Seshakhuli M E School. He is respected irrespective of caste, creed, and by all, and people across communities approach him to take his advice on various issues. About him the novelist writes:

His face is white, bright. His hairs are very white and a perennial smile is stamped over it. All people respect him because there are not many societies at Seshakhuli. Here is only one society – society of Seshakhuli. Here, Bodos, Muslims, and Hindus do not have separate societies... so, all people including Bodos, Muslims and the Hindus, approach him for advice. (ibid: 58)

Gaurinath initially felt very happy, to see the growing sense of social consciousness among the new generation of Bodo youths, though he is not a Bodo by birth. He felt that with the new generation there would be social change among the Bodos and the others as well. The novelist portrays this character with subtlety and a commitment to social wellbeing. Gaurinath says when the youths came to ask for his advice:

Do you know what I have felt? ... I am really happy, because you have become conscious and you have learnt how to think. It will be your emergence. Like a problem leads to many, so does a truth leads to many truths. (ibid: 60)

At the same time, he warns them of dire consequences, if they take resort to violence:

The destruction will be as powerful as the power of the demons. In that state, the notion of win and loss is meaningless. Then, there will be only destruction, and pile of destructions.....the more prosperous you become, the less will be the volume of the age. (ibid: 61)

4.1.3.2 The picture of the Bodo society as reflected in the novel

Depiction of the beauty of rural life finds little place in the *Bharanda Pakhir Jak*, though it dwells on the village life of the Bodos as well as other neighbouring communities, with its principal focus on political issues concerning them. In a certain place of the novel, the novelist presents a snapshot of natural beauty in a symbolic way. He writes:

A dry branch of a tree fell to the ground creating a harsh sound outside. A pair of common myna flew off the tree. Two pairs of swan swam in the pond throughout the day, and arrived at the gate while protruding their necks. Two small pubs of the goat dance at the paddy-field. A piece of black clouds covers the Sun... the pigeons flew up in a line, moved in the sky and returned to the roof of the house. (ibid: 77)

As the political question of ethnicity and ethnic resurgence is the mainstay of the novel, we do not come across comprehensive accounts of the society and culture with colours of the Bodos community. Yet, we have certain glimpses about their life in fragments in the novel. Patriarchal in social practice, the Bodos are farmers by profession. Apart from rice, they produce various vegetables and fruits. Kherai Puja, which is observed on the New Moon day in the month of Kati, is their annual religious festival. Bathou Barai or Sibrai is the presiding deity of this festival, which is observed for the satisfaction of the ancestors and well-being of the community and its agricultural cycle. They raise an earthen platform in the middle of the village, and worship Bathou and attendant gods and goddesses with music dance and animal sacrifices. The incantatory recitations, the music of Kham and Siphung, and Deodhani dance are the fascinating spectacles of this festival. Pigeons, goats and pigs are ritually sacrificed at the worship altar. Some accounts of Kherai Puja are also given in the novel. Moreover, the novel has references to Gaja puja, music and dance of Baisagu festival, Lakhi Puja, Bagrumba dance and several other festivals find occasional references in the novel. As the novel says, in the permanent Kheraisali of Seshakhuli,

seats for Bodo gods are arranged near the platform for Bathou, along with a seat for the Nawab of Muslims. Again, the Muslims also sacrifice a fowl to Bathou. Gaurinath, the priest of the Siva temple comes to visit the puja. Tikaram and his Nepali fellows provide goats, but do not worship Bathou. Similarly, the guests who come to the village on the occasion of the Bathou Puja offer rice, betel nuts and bananas during the worship. Through this, the religious tolerance and social camaraderie of the people living at Seshakhuli has been portrayed in the novel.

There are various forms of marriage prevalent in the Bodo society. There is reference to customary and non-customary forms of marriages in the novel. The customary form of marriage is known as Hathasuni among the Bodos. In this form of marriage, the people from the side of the bridegroom come to the household of the bride and place a silver bracelet, without anybody's notice, upon their roof. After the discovery of the bracelet, both the sides come to one another's house for formality. On understanding of other sides, a date is fixed for marriage. The priest incants mantras of Bathau and blesses the bride and bridegroom for blissful conjugal life. A marriage feast is also offered to the villagers on the occasion of the marriage. Again, Jomai, a drink prepared by the Bodos, is also served. All these are depicted in the novel.

Like other societies in Assam, the Bodos are not free from various superstitions. They believe that ghosts and spirits have influence upon man and evils are incurred by them. In the novel, Karendra and his family face various turmoils. All of a sudden, his house is under fire one day. Then the villagers say explicitly that they are influenced by the spirit called Daina ei and Than Thit. They also believe that the pregnant ladies are possessed by a ghost named Khethra. In the novel, Dhaniram advises to offer Khethra puja to ward off the influence of the spirit from the body of the pregnant daughter in-law of Budunath. Again, the Bodos are seen to be prone to mantra and charlatans, than a medical aid when they are ill. We have a picture of how a new-born cousin of Budunath is treated by tantra and mantra. It portrays a picture of the willo 'o' the wisp, a superstition as the novelist writes:

Uka is also a ghost. One should not go near him because Uka attacks on the eyes, like a blaze, if one goes near him and then the man falls to the ground and a fire burns him from one side. (ibid: 82)

In this way, we find various fragmented pictures of the social life of the Bodos in the *Bharanda Pakhir Jaak*. The novelist consciously presents here how the new generations of people are influenced by modern education and how a process of transition gradually gets in to the society through the educated young generation.

One of the salient features of the novel is its clear and poignant language. Through one or two sentences, the novelist draws picture of natural life in the course of the novel. The Sikhala cloth of the Bodos, with its green and yellow colours, is used as a symbol of a ripe paddy field. Again, the soils after harvesting, its fertility and possibility are compared to the relationship between men and the earth. He writes:

Under the piles of the dry hays in the paddy-field, the earth has slept peaceful after her delivery. Only for some time for two months. Then the hungry men will appear, cleave her heart again, and she will be a mother again. Forgetting the pain, the mother will invite the baby again. ...People from various parts will throng with various things, devices, dresses, along with hunger and wonder. After a brief nap, the mother will wake up. Men will become nourished and fulfilled amidst food of the earth and peerless beauty. (ibid: 48)

The language of the narrative is interspersed with Bodo words, sentences and songs with their paraphrases. So, they have become indicative of the environment to which the novel is set. Sometimes, the characters utter English words too, which is indicative of the influence of the modern Education upon them.

Amidst a situation of turmoil and ethnic assertion it is as if harmony, rather than dissension, is the statement of the novel. We discover the importance of keeping the history of coexistence of a multi-ethnic society in Assam. A traditional society in Assam does not have disharmony as has been witnessed in other parts of India. It is dynamics of political process and the politics of cultural hegemony with economic disparities which often trigger off social and communal turmoil and issues. Ethnicity and ethnic assertions are instruments to trigger such agencies of power. The very title of the novel is significant and full of meaning. According to the *Panchatantra*, the mythical bird Bharanda has two beaks. One day, one of the beaks got a sweet fruit and ate it. The other beak getting angry

devoured a poisonous food another day. As a result, the bird died. In this novel, the bird is a symbolic representation bringing the Bodos and the non-Bodos as two beaks of the same body of the social fabric. Like the bird, the future of the society in the novel is dependent on mutual understanding of the two sides. The symbol used by the novelist is prophetic and is relevant in a multi-ethnic social matrix in Assam as well as other parts.

While delineating the social unity, the novelist enlists the help of character named Tikaram. By birth a Nepali, Tikaram mixes with the society at Seshakhuli, and has been living there peacefully. He cannot bear with anyone disparaging the Bodo society. So, he runs amuck when the shop keeper mocks the Bodo boys, who go for collecting fund for Kherai puja. Sarma writes:

Is this society only lived by the Bodos? ... Who are there at Hajopara? ... Who is living at Piror Chuk? ... Like was we are staying at Ragapara. But, all of us live in a single society. (ibid: 11)

This sense of social unity is intensified as Basiram and his people have confirmed faith upon Tikaram and his people. About Tikaram and His people, Basiram says to Rupnath :

If required, Tikaram will die for us, but will not deceive his friend. This far I can tell you. This is not applicable for Tikaram, but applicable for all the ten families with him. (ibid: 4)

Despite differences in religious faith or customs, the groups of people in this region have been living peacefully and when this gets shaken, they have a common thread of harmony.

In such a situation, Debakanta, following advice of Professor Bakul Doimary, undertook peace initiatives and held group meetings at various locations on the need of patience restraint and tolerance. But he too, was stoned and severely injured by the youths from the extremist group. With Ranjila's care he came to recovery, and a deep romantic chord developed between them. Like many people, Ranjila is also very much anxious about the welfare of the Bodos. However, she too, is subjected to humiliation and calumny with rumours spread about her and her past. Presented as an epitome of harmony between the Bodos and the non-Bodos in the novel, Ranjila happens to be the grand-daughter of

Bibhuti Ganguly, an absconder extremist from Bangladesh. He was discovered in an unconscious state in a boat, and Akhil Basumatary took him to his house. Bibhuti recovered in the care of Kadami, Akhil's sister who later on married Bibhuti. Their son Gambhira was the father of Ranjila. At the death of her mother, Gambhira married another woman and Ranjila was almost left abandoned. Later on, she stayed at the household of Satiram, one of her distant relatives at Sonafali, where she had her schooling.

Malicious rumours often lead to misunderstandings among people often leading to havoc in a society which has for ages been an abode of social harmony and peace. Such a situation occurred between the Bodos and the non-Bodos emerging from ethnic assertion which was not founded on a sound historical analysis of social-situations. Through the character of Abdul Miya, a leading person of Balur, the novelist says that social disharmony could not have crept into Seshafali, had there been an understanding of the social problems, disparities and deprivations relating to the people belonging to both groups – the Bodos and non-Bodos. Such an analysis could have been the conditions for development and peace among the locals and the others. Abdul says:

The condition is the locals should take us in faith, and we should be given the status of the locals. Let us too accept ourselves as its locals. If we are locals for once, we will no longer allow people from other country to migrate here. We will check them, whether they are Muslims or the non-Muslims. (ibid: 156)

The novelist has also tried to shed light on the issue of migration causing threat to the ethnic majority of Bodos. And at the same time, he seems to have given a message to the reader how the issue of migration needs to be dealt in years to come. But, the society does not move into the direction as wished by Abdul Miya or the novelist himself. The direction of the political mover went towards making short time gains through inciting the migrants against the Assamese. Once Balobhadra had promised to employ local youths in his factories, and send bricks to the newly founded college for the construction of its building, his trucks are set fire to by the extremists. Ramlal's shop has been plundered by the miscreants. It was Ramlal, who promised to give all the iron- sheets required for the roofs of the college building. In this way, due to false understanding, dissension and conflicts loomed large among the Bodos and the non-Bodos at Seshafali leading to breach of peace and social harmony collapsed. It was the final tragedy of a harmonious society.

(Sarma, Upendranath, Eta Dasakar Gurutwapurna Sristri, Gariyoshi, October, 1993, p.112) The novel on the whole, is thus an image or a pen picture drawn on a society tangled with strife and tension, tradition and transition. Using the motif of a mythical bird, the author observes on the social and political factors due to indiscriminate handling causing damage to the body-politic – like the death of the mythical bird.

It is also a novel of remarkable merit and acclaim by an author who, without being a part of the ethnic community, dispassionately views a situation of ethnic rising accompanied with snapshots of an ethnic social life living in sync with other communities not of same origin. Here different communities live in harmony. A close reading of the novel reminds us of what Raymond Williams says, “The history of the idea of culture is a record of our reactions, in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life.” (Williams 1966, p.32) The novel is thus a commentary on the socio-cultural situation in an ethnic community, as a young generation of it responds to its surrounding environment.

4.2 ETHNIC LIFE AS DEPICTED BY TRIBAL AUTHORS WRITING ON THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES

It has been earlier discussed that in a multi-ethnic social matrix where different communities co-exist and interact with each other, literary minds are exposed to the society and culture of other communities to which they do not belong by birth. Being creative thinkers they respond to lifestyle, hopes and despairs, sorrows and sufferings, and the process of change through which a considerable number of works are in place. When authors capture various images perceived by them. While there may be a sense of ‘otherness’ in portraying the life of other communities, several works are the results of a deep sense of involvement and historical appraisal, as we come across in works like the Yaruigam and the Bharanda Pakhir Jak. The authors of these novels have studied and analysed the problems of the communities from close observations by writing on their own community.

As referred to our Introductory Chapter, we come across another gamut of works penned on social and cultural situations by authors belonging to the communities concerned. Assam with its history - cultural, social and political – since the early medieval years demonstrates a resilience not having compartmentalization in terms of exclusive

communities – be it ethnic, tribal or others – leading to unbridged perspectival differences among communities and the intelligentsia belonging to them. So, not much difference in perception of the state of affairs seems to exist in the works of literature coming of various authors belonging to various groups or communities. Novels authored by literary minds from the ethnic communities in question appear to present more subtleties drawn on the basis close and intimate observations and lived experiences.

Two such acclaimed novels are selected for discussions as a point of special reference in the context of the present study.

4.2.1 The Karbi society as reflected in *Rangmilir Hanhi* by Rongbong Terang

4.2.1.1 *Rangmilir Hanhi* – a brief introduction

Rangmilir Hanhi (1981), by Rongbong Terang, is a remarkable work on several counts. It is a sensitive portrayal of one of the major hill tribes, i.e. the Karbis of Assam by a Karbi author who himself was a Professor of Assamese literature in a govt college (Diphu Government College) in Karbi Anglong. His work accentuates the nuances of Karbi society in all its colour, also documenting the tenors of gradual change presented through the images of the Rangmili village, an area by the side of the Borapani river in the hills. The novel also begins to focus on the agencies of change which have come in between the tradition and modernity, modern education coming with the Christian Missionaries impacting heavily on the indigenous faith and other allied practices. The novel is taking the ethnocentric spectrum of the Karbis opens a passage from their past to the authors present. Here, we find the traditional Karbi society, which comes in conflict with the new society featured by new religious, educational, socio-economic and moral values. To add to this conflict, we have opium and corruptions, two social malaises that have increased the gap of this conflict. In fact, the *Rangmilir Hanhi* is a novel that captures an emerging Karbi society, full of possibilities, power and social problems.

Saraik Terang, the village headman of Rangmili, called the Sarbasa, is the protagonist in the novel. He is for reform and progress, though he has love for the customs of the traditional society. Like the traditionalists, he never believes that the arrival of the British Missionaries and the spread of the modern education are the root causes for the plight and sufferings in the society. Saraik is illiterate, yet he thinks in terms of the education of the new generation of his people, and joins the movement for the formation of a separate

Karbi district led by Samson Sing Ingti, who supports the all-round development of the Karbis. For such new and reformative zeal, Saraik has come in conflict with people like Habe and Pinop, who represent the traditionalist group. Saraik could not establish the school in his village because of the resistance of this group. However, he sent his son Hemai to a friend's household at Kampur and arranged for his education there.

A romantic love affair started between Amphu, the daughter of Saraik, and Klendun Seng Terang of Jirsong. She was silently loved by Klengsarap Waphong Ingti of Jirsong. There are frequent clashes between Klendun and Kelngsarap for no reason at all, but Amphu knows very well that she is the indirect cause of conflict between them. She is ready to get married to an unknown bridegroom of Rangmandur who was chosen for her by her father, though much against her will. She is all set to keep the reputation of the village. The villagers love Saraik for her immaculate grace, so they attended the Karbi Darbar, under Saraik's leadership, accepted Saraik as the village headman even if he was removed from the post of the village headman by a conspiracy hatched against him by Habesikoi. However, Habesikoi has to pay for his evil deeds. The Karbi King becomes unhappy with Habesikoi soon, as he tortures the people and does not pay his due for the regular observances held at the Karbi capital. As a result, Habesikoi is removed from his post. Lorrence Hanse, a Christian, informs Saraik about the news about the formation of the Karbi Darbar and the new Karbi district. Saraik is very happy hearing this news. Though the story of this novel is about the Rangmili village at Wathatlangsu, it is also the story of the entire Karbi hill society.

4.2.1.2 The picture of the Karbi society as reflected in the novel

Along with other parts in India, the socio-economic conditions of Assam are strongly influenced by western education and the modern thought and outlooks towards the end of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, a breeze of change touches the Karbi hill also. The nature of such change is captured by the novelist through the conflicts between the old and the new generations within the community people. The Christian Missionaries came to the Karbi Hill at the first part of the 20th century, with a view to preaching the message of the Bible. They founded churches to spread the religion and schools for the education of the Karbi children. The old section of the Karbi society was reluctant to accept the effort of the Missionaries very easily. They thought that the village would bear the wrath of the gods, in forms of diseases and other plights because of the

Missionaries. But, the efforts of the Missionaries were welcomed by the younger group with reformist zeal, who saw a better future for the community in the efforts through schools and churches opened by the Missionaries. The Second World War, the freedom struggle of India and the successive events of the period inspired many people with dreams and hopes. Some among them formed a Karbi Darbar, covering the Karbi Hill, and they also received co-operation from other parts of Assam. With the coming of the British, the Karbi Hill witnessed tremendous commercial activities. However, a section of shrewd businessmen hailing from various places exploited the people, made enough money and became rich. Opium was circulated by some of them to earn money, leading to a pathetic plight for some Karbis. Some of them even sold their lands to the outsiders, and thus bought disaster to themselves. Some groups of peasants preferred regular cultivation with plough and bullock replacing Jhum in plain areas cultivation and some other started terraced cultivation. A picturesque portrayal of such happenings add colour to the otherwise sensitively drawn ethnic panorama of the narrative. The novel depicts the reformative zeal of Saraik and his supporters and their genuine concern with the plight of their fellow tribal members. At the same time it reflects how people like Habesikoi, and his people, conspire to destroy the breeze of change ushering progress to the Karbis for their personal gains. Depiction of realism of an ethnic society in transition is the key note of the novel. However, that note is made more convincing by the blends of political, socio-cultural and such other factors coming on the way of the Karbi society.

The story line starts in the fourth decade of the 20th century. It is the decade that has signalled tremendous changes to an otherwise innocent and sleepy society. On the one hand there is the freedom struggle of India. On the other hand the Second World War and its demonic effects that tolled heavily on other parts of India. Saraik from Rangmili village has heard the name of Mahatma Gandhi, but he is not familiar with his ideals nor is influenced by him. While going to purchase a gun at the nearby Nagaon town, Saraik heard the name of Mahatma Gandhi from the lips of Karuna Mistry, the shopkeeper, but he did not react to Mistry's words. The name of Gandhi did not inspire any sort of curiosity at his mind. The Karbi Hill was barely influenced by the struggle for freedom in 1942. The Second World War also passed them by. The Karbis heard of the war from outside sources. The world of media was not open to them. The war planes flying through its sky however left the villages with some information about the war.

The novel with its narrative concerning transitions and their ramifications has historical value. The social services offered by the Christian Missionaries, to spread their religion, have been faithfully presented. The novelist shows that when Moore and Karwell try to set up mission at Karbi Hill in 1896, the Karbis were not annoyed. It indicates that the modern education, knowledge of science and culture, were supposed to be agencies for progress for the Karbis. Again, the tussle for power and accompanying corruption are indicated as some elements standing in the way to progress. It is described that a section of the conservative group reacted strongly against the advent of the Missionaries and their move in establishing schools as detrimental for the Karbis, in the Karbi Hill. However, Saraik Terang is shown as someone supporting the missionary zeal of the Christians. The novelist has been successful in projecting this effort of the missionaries in founding schools so as to eradicate illiteracy and dark superstitions prevailing among the Karbis. Habesik has been drawn as a representative of the darker side of the society, and Saraik is the representative of the reformative zeal. Through the words of Habesik, the aggressive nature of the Christian Missionaries and their influence leads to a disintegration of the traditional Karbi society:

Not a single custom of the Karbis of the Tika area has remained intact after the arrival of the Missionaries. They have forgotten Peng Chajun. Even the custom of the final rites to the deceased, along with the traditional songs and music, has been forgotten. (Terang 2011: 35)

The novelist wants the Karbi children going to schools and colleges. The arrival of Reverend R. E Moore and his colleagues, with their initiatives to establish schools at Tika Hill have been presented with details (Terang 2011: 35, 72). It documents how the Karbis became gradually interested in politics and at the same time participated in governmental activities. As such, some of the leading Karbis who were involved with such moves have been presented in the story of the novel (Terang 2011: 191). The social, historical and political events launched by various organizations for bringing development in the Karbi society have also figured in various places as a part of the narrative. And the resultant product is a message of peace and development fostered by the novelist for the Karbi society and Assam at large. (Terang 2011: 192)

The ancient social values of the Karbis, their simplicity, honesty and truthfulness have been depicted in this novel. At the same time, modern cultures with its negative effect on people and the greed for money and power have been equally shown. The traditions and customs of the Karbis, descriptions of their foods and garments and their behaviour have been highlighted through the author's description of various festivals, like Chojun puja, Chomangkan and Walket. The Karbi society in the pre-independence period is outlined in this novel.

The description of the natural environment in all its colours is one of the salient features of the novel. As the writer is an insider of the tribe, the narrative in the story is interspersed with by descriptions of the pastoral world of the hill in all its bloom. The novel begins with a description of an evening at the Karbi Hill:

It is a dime evening in the month of Fagun.

The cranes have flown through the foot hill to their known destinations. The wild fire has engulfed the distant hills. The breeze in Fagun has carried with it the scent of burning...

As soon as the evening descended, a temporary business is perceived in the forest. The heart of the hill is echoed with the sounds with the wild birds. (Terang 2011: 1)

Again the natural beauty of the Karbi Hill at the advent of the spring finds its place in the novel:

The touch of the spring is event upon the trees at Rangmili. The bright and sweet morning sunshine extended over the Baithalangso valley. The tender green of the trees over the hill were brightened at the radiating Sun. From the neighbouring hills, the sweet tune of the cuckoos and their beautiful songs could be heard. (ibid: 42)

The novelist like a master painter draws series of such images of immaculate beauty of the hills at times with uncontrollable passion and involvement:

The mild stream of Karbi Langpi, which is dazzled by the light of the Moon, started flowing and embracing Rangmili in love- silently. The light of the Moon on the silent nature and the incessant stream of the Borapani keep on expressing about the movement, of a conscious movement. (ibid: 11)

The authority and the influence of the village headman in a traditional tribal society have been recognized since older days. Even in a small society political strife and power struggles come to fore and are evidenced in the novel. The village headman at Rangmili is no exception to this. Saraik, who is loved and respected by all, is the village headman at the Rangmilir Hanhi. In the course of time, Saraik has had to face turmoil with his social position: Habesik and Sarthe Sikari Terang, two rich and powerful men, hatched a conspiracy to remove Saraik from his position. Sarthe Sikari Terang is appointed the new Sarbasa, or the village headman. It is remarkable that Saraik is not moved by that decision. Instead, his simplicity and honesty still fascinate the villagers to his side. Of course, he is not happy as the authority of the village headman has been transferred to a dishonest man. Later on, his house is set fire by people appointed by Sarthe Sikari Terang. He is helped by villagers in tiding over the critical moments. Later on, Sarthe is found to be the culprit behind this affair. The persons, setting fire, have been identified. Yet, Saraik is not angry with them. Finally, Habesik and his supporters were taken to the Karbi Darbar and punished by removing them from power. At this decision, the villagers are all very happy. The novelist writes: ‘The village of Rangmili smiled – a candid and transparent laughter.’ This proves the importance of a headman in a tribal society. A real picture of how the innocent villagers uphold the authority of a headman, the headman’s responsibility and his love for the village, has been presented. The picture of the occasion of Sajun Puja held at the court yard of Saraik is a rare description not often found in Assamese literature. Human feelings and pure joys expressed on such occasions are artistically captured by the novelist here. The descriptions of the festivals come alive in the hands of the master narrator. He writes:

Four branches of a Fongrong tree have been vertically placed at four corners. A platform is raised on them. A ladder has been erected up to the platform.... (ibid: 28)

The site for puja is the neighbouring platform belongs to the god called Sar. An idol made of hay has erected vertically on the platform. (ibid: 28, 29)

The priest, who is a middle-aged man, purified the site by spreading grinded rice. A pure vibe has been created by the incantations to the gods. (ibid: 29)

A hilly life full of simplicity is the background of the novel, with complexities is delineated by the novelist. Unwanted detail and complexities have been ignored in presentation. Even the conflict between Saraik and Sarbasa is not pressed hard in the

novel. The writer is careful in positing himself as a careful and dispassionate observer of the happenings in the ethnic set up of the Karbi society without infusing into it his personal views. However, an empathy towards the welfare and future progress of his own community and a deep sense of concern for the common folk give a humanistic appeal to the narrative within the ethnic frame. The simple life style of a tradition tribal society where the common villagers move about is permeated in every page of the novel. Here, we find anger and anguish; love and other human feelings without artificial blending. The novelist has showed dexterity while dealing with those emotions in a refined language.

Jirsong is an inseparable part of the Karbi society. Regarding the importance of Jirsong the novelist writes:

Generation by generations, Karbi children become young playing Ghila and Latum here (Rongmili village). As soon as they become young, they come to Dekachang, do Jirsong and become Klengdong and Klengchap. They lead the Jirsong traditionally, with aliveness. They play Gagona and Pangshi under the sky of the Jirsong, and accept the responsibility of life. At the end of Jirsong, they become Sarbasa, Biswasa and Pherangke of the village. Jirsong is the matrix of Karbi social life. (ibid: 15)

Opium has invited desperate economic plight to the life of the many Karbi villagers, resulting many households facing unpaid loans and a situation of bankruptcy. To provide an example, the novelist offers a touching description of the family of Lindak Terang, who was once a rich man. In the novel, we have description of how Saraik organized a puja called Sajun at his house, with a view to ensure peace and harmony in the village. In this Puja, the god of the heaven, the Saar god, Harata god and the Sun god are worshipped. As a part of this puja, the young boys and girls go to the hills and collect various herbs. The next day, the site for the puja is purified with plastered rice by the priest. The pig dedicated to the deity is slaughtered, and its heart and the lungs are used to ascertain the future of the village. According to the position of the guests, hamrens are temporarily built. For the women, a rest house called Kuntiri is erected. About eating, the respectable persons are served the heads of the fowls, the leg portions and the lips of the pigs. The capacity of a young girl to serve rice among the guests is thought to be a list of her dutifulness and personality. After such a puja, the Habes can discuss about various issues in the village.

In the same way, the Karbis perform Hemphu Puja before any auspicious work. In the novel, Saraik performs such a puja before his son Hemai goes to Kampur for study. On a stipulated day, the Risbasa of Rangmili village cut a fowl in the neck and leaves it alive. It is believed that the location in which the fowl rests will indicate the future of the concerned person.

In the novel, we have pictures of dances performed on the occasion of Haccha Kekan, their agriculture-based festival. Organized mainly to satisfy the god called Rish, this festival is observed on the day new harvest is brought to the house of village head man. A primary feature of this festival is the distribution of the Jirsong at the touch of two responsible young girls. Then the other girls join them, and a great rejoicing follows with drink, dance and music. In this novel, we come across a detailed description of Chamangkan, a common festival for the welfare of the dead, observed in pomp and grandeur. All the traditional instruments of the Karbis are played on this occasion. People from various walks of life join this, while wearing colourful traditional garments. About this festival, the novelist writes:

From far off places, people came down the hill in groups... the young boys and girls are wearing colourful garments. They have decorated pieces over their bodies. The long tails of the bird called Wajaru began to dance at the long tuft of hair of the boys. A chuckle passed through the teeth of the young girls, who had decorated their teeth with Soik. It is considered to be a fortune to dance with the loved ones, at the prime of age. It is an age, as if not be tired while dancing! The yard during Chamangkan can bring forth the lust of life. (ibid: 167, 168)

Another feature of Chamangkan is the Jambili Athan. The ritual space is arranged and decorated by using five puppet like motifs of Wajaru birds, which are symbolic of the five clans and the five villages in the Karbi society. The Karbis believe that Jambili Athan is the meeting place of this world with the world after. People from all walks of life including those who come from other villages, namely the Klengsarpoi assemble in the Jambili Athan and join this festival. It is a custom to invite people from nearby villages to the Chamangkang festival. In the novel, there is a description of the Chamangkang organized in the village named Urulu. (Terang 2011:167) One of the major characteristics

of this festival is the Ucchepis, a troupe of lady singers who sing songs lamenting the memory of the ancestors. The main objective of this festival is the desire of freedom for the souls of the dead.

Walketer Puja, which is observed on Sukla Astami in the month of Fagun at the capital of the Karbi king, is another festival of the Karbis. Organized chiefly for the well-being of all the villages, this festival is attended by the Pinops and the Habes. Generally, the Habes of Longri and Umlarang represent the other Habes as both of them are prominent in importance. Kathar, an old man and the priest of the king, leads the puja and worships Hemphu, Mukrang, and Rasingja. The first two are gods. Rasingja is considered to be the leading Goddess at Longri. Songs and music are played in this festival. At the end of the festival, the king asks for news about the villages from the Habes. In the novel, we find how the king removes the Habisek of the village named Bi –Henru, as he is found to be guilty. Moreover, here we find various traditional songs and music of the Karbis described in the novel. The richness of Karbi oral tradition including its oral literature comes to play in enhancing the ethnic nuances which resonate throughout the narrative.

The modern administration set up at Karbi Anglong came during the British rule as the passage for modernity was widened in the post-independence era. It was once ruled by a king, called Lindakpa. He was the king among five villages, considered as a small kingdom. The Pinops, Habes and the Sarbasas occupy the positions next in order. The message sent by the king to his subordinates is called kid. It is customary that a king sent kids to Habesikoi and the Habesikoi transfer it to the Sarbasa. A glimpse of the old Karbi society, and its way of administration can be perceived as a cultural memory from this novel.

Moreover, we have detailed presentation of the customs, beliefs and traditions of the Karbis in Rangmilir Hanhi. The Karbis had the belief that before eating anything, the food should be dedicated to the god first. At various places of the novel, we have reference to this belief. The Karbis use specific words to mean the male and the female. Such words are amply used in the novel. They use the suffix Pi after the surname to mean a woman. Again Neng for girls, Phu for males and Ni for married ladies are used endearingly. For example, Saraik is addressed as Phu Kangbura. Amphu addresses her friend Kadam as Neng Kadam. Pherangke and his people call Kachang as Ni Basapi.

Like the other tribes in Assam, the Karbis also consider marriage among the same clan as a great sin. A pot of pumpkin if touched by the father of the bride is thought to be a clear indication of acceptance of the marriage proposal from the bridegroom's side. In the novel, Saraik touches the pot from the bridegroom's side and offers it in respect to Hemphu, a god.

Drinking domestic drinks, rice beer in most cases, form a part of regular food habits among the tribes of Assam. The Karbis call their local wine Harlang. Harlang is considered to be of serious importance in their society. Apart from everyday life, Harlang is offered as a drink on various occasions like festivals. About the relationship between Harlang and the Karbi society, the novelist writes:

Fatika and Laopani have inseparable relationship with Karbi culture. Fatika and Laopani have inseparable relation with birth, death and the marriage. As if the joy of life and its tears have been caged in the pristine of the Laopani. Received as gift in dream, Haralang is the matured germinations of the Karbi culture. (ibid: 19)

Apart from Harlang, we have glimpses of traditional food items as used by the Karbis. Pigs, fowls, shrimps and dried fishes are favourite items. Tobacco, tea, betel and betel nuts, potatoes, arums, rice, salt and chilies are some of the items included in the food menu of the Karbis.

In the novel, the beliefs and superstitions of the Karbis are revealed. According to the Karbi belief, to stumble on the right leg, on the way, is an auspicious trait. Again the ticking of the lizards in the middle of a conversation is supposed to be a positive indication. They pray in supplication to the forest god, when they go into the forest. Similarly, they offer betel leaf and betel nuts to the river, before they cross it. They believe that Moore Sahib, a British, had to die after a tiger attack as he came to Tika Hill and shot at the stone wall at Bi- Sikri. As a result, the entire village has to face the wrath of the god, called Bi- Sikri. However, that wrath is removed when the chief priest of the king offers puja to the god. The Karbi women thought that Saraik saw foot-prints of the tiger at the forest as he frequented. Lorrence, a Christian, purchased a gun, sent his son to school and helped in the formation of the Karbi Darbar. They believe in dreams. Before

the removal of Saraik from the authority of Sarbasa by the Habesikoi, Basapi saw in her dream that her husband had been ascended to that seat and he laughed.

About the novel, Lakhikanta Mahanta writes:

It is not that Rongbong Terang has fulfilled a historic need by writing this novel, he has performed a historic duty also. (Mahanta 1993: 466)

In this effort, like other writers of this genre, Rongbong Terang has tried to go deep into his tribe and brought to light the life, culture and the society of the Karbis in a lucid style. Moreover, he has discussed the contemporary society also. By doing so, he has inspired the reader about his own culture and the society. That *Rangmilir Hanhi* has touched the hearts of countless readers is indubitably true. Perhaps Dr Bhupen Hazarika could sense this many years ago, and in 1982 he sang “Rongbong has reminded the contributions of the Karbis, the smile of Rangmili became all- evident....” (Sarma 1968: 32)

About the relationship between Karbi life and Rangmilir Hanhi, Chandra Prasad Saikia wrote:

In the days to come, when other people will write the social history of the Karbi people, they shall not miss this novel, which offers us an authentic vision of Karbi life as a Karbi writer sees it. (Saikia 2009. 76)

Rang Bong Terang express a similar view while answering a question about the inspiration behind the creation of Rangmilir Hanhi. He says:

My dream had always been to introduce the land and the people of Karbi Anglong to the outside worlds. Rangmilir Hanhi became the medium to make the dream come true. (Goswami 2012: web)

4.2.2 Jatin Mipun’s *Mikchijili* and the Mising life reflected on it

4.2.2.1 *Mikchijili* – a brief introduction

Mikchijili, written by Jatin Mipun, is a remarkable works written on the life and socio-economic conditions of another major ethnic community of Assam, i.e. the Misings, living

on the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. Coming from the community itself, the author focuses on the variegated colours of the Misings – poverty and wealth, illiteracy and exploitations, the politics of development and such other images as he experienced during the seventies in Mahfala village, a Mising dominated village in Disangmukh. Situated to the north of Sivasagar district, it is a large area at the meeting place of the mighty Brahmaputra. The Misings have been living in the Mahfala village for several generations. The novel captures the painful living conditions of the villagers, who are one the one hand devoid of education, and at the same time, they are victims of flood and other natural calamities. These simple villagers are again exploited by modern administrative and political system, tangled with an unfriendly bureaucratic set up.

Baloram Yein, the village headman of Mahfala village, is one of the rich and influential persons in the village. He is a powerful man as he has links with people from Dhakuakhana, Ghilamara, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and Sivasagar. He is a landlord. He has several hundred cows that offer him milk. He has four servants, who look after his household. Though the village is affected by flood, his household remains untouched by flood water. With his large amount of wealth and his political network, he manages political leaders and bureaucrats even though he discharges all sorts of immoral activities and practices including sexual exploitation of women. From his cow-sheds thousands of liters of milk are supplied to the township of Sivasagar. He has illicit relationships with many women in the village. He has two wives in the village with one more in Shillong. Prior to his marriage, he had an affair with Kangkan, a girl from his village who bore him a son. Baloram did not marry her and Deoram, the illegitimate child, was not offered his fatherhood. An epitome of immorality, Baloram's ill reputation is known to all, but nobody dares to say anything in public about him. About him, the novel says:

Nobody had the courage or the will to challenge the influence and reputation of Baloram.
(Mipun 1993: 4)

In course of time, Baloram appointed his first wife's eldest son Deoram, as a keeper in his cow-sheds and got him married to Maneswari, a girl from Dikhowmukh. However, in absence of Deoram, Baloram molests Maneswari's chastity one night. Out of anguish, Deoram commits suicide by drowning himself in flood water. But, Maneswari keeps herself cool after considering the future of her son Dipak and at the love showered to her

by Sarumai, the second wife of Baloram. In course of time, Baloram's business takes a backward turn. After the death of Deoram, the condition of his cow-sheds deteriorates. Now, he realizes his faults committed in life. His sons Jayanta and Ananta follow the footsteps of their father in immoral behaviour. Aruna, his daughter, who stays in the town for her study becomes pregnant. Out of sadness, her mother Sarumai commits suicide. With his deterioration in health and mind as well, Baloram renews all his misdeeds of the past in deep sadness. At the end of the Poorag festival, Dipak and his family left Disangmukh to the town. And the novel ends with a pathetic note, soon after Dipak left the village. Out of sadness, Maneswari comes to the bank of the Brahmaputra, and weeps in reminiscence of Deoram.

Like most of the ethnic groups in Assam the Mising society too, is passing through stages of transition from a traditional set up to that of modern socio-economic conditions, particularly in the post-independence era. Contrary to the Karbi society, as depicted in the *Rangmilir Hanhi*, the Misings are exposed to modernity in terms of economic and political gains flowing from governmental development plans. However, the society is plagued by the forces of corruption and inept handling of development plans which find reflection in the *Mikchijili*. The poor and the uneducated remain where they are getting subjected to economic and social sufferings accentuated by agencies of power. Unlike Terang's *Rongmilir Hanhi* being a holistic cultural expression imbued with humanism, Mipun's *Mikchijili* presents images of a suffering community plagued by ills of money power, wealth and moral corruption which help physical and mental agony on the innocent and illiterate people of the community. In such a situation no ray of hope and liberation from this agonising existence can be perceived in the novel. The narrative becomes more painful as written by an insider.

4.2.2.2 The picture of the Mising society in the novel

The novel presents a pen picture of the cultural traits of the Mising community covering their traditional rites and rituals, customs and beliefs, fairs and festivals and such other ethnic characteristic of the community

The Mahfala village witness events and expression as found to be depicted in the novel including festivals like Aali Aiye Ligang and Porag observed in different phases of agricultural cycle. The novel also discusses the Kebang being the highest administrative

authority of social justice which takes care of all the quarrels and complaints of the village. The Kebang has the right to punish anyone found guilty in judgment. In the novel, various beliefs of the Misings are portrayed. They go to the Mibo to ascertain the future of the society and the individuals. The Morang ghar is the abode of culture of the Misings which provides space for all community occasions. The Chang Ghars, being the village dormitories which are built in lines on the bank of the nearby river are often swept by floods. The descriptions of social customs, agricultural works including rearing of cattle are the mainstay of the riverine community. All of these go into making the novel a representation of any Mising village found in any part of Assam. Since the writer himself is an insider of this society, the descriptions of the events are more lively with full of authentic details. In the *Yaruingam* too, multiple images from the life of the Tangkhul Nagas are found to be spread over the narrative. Although Bhattacharya, the author hails from a community outside the state, the images for a reader appear too subtle and appealing with a sense of involvement of the author with the community. Examples of such subtlety are galore in the entire work.

The community always cherishes a love for rivers, the Brahmaputra in particular, although floods of rivers and the Brahmaputra wreck devastations and untold miseries on them. The Mahfal village, as portrayed in the novel, is also no exception to it. Time and again pictorial images of such miseries caused by floods – the Chang Ghar of Maneswari being swept away, Deoram being drowned in flood water, the villagers shifting to embankments for safety in floods – are telling examples of such miseries as found in the narrative.

Along with the accounts of sexual debauchery resorted to by Baloram causing agony to the victims and pain to readers, the marriage system prevailing in the Mising society consists of two types, they are – regular marriage and eloping marriage. The regular form of the marriage is called Midang. In the Midang of Deoram, Baloram serves the guests with two large pigs, along with a curry of dried fish and Apong. According to the economic conditions, the Midangs are held. If the bride elopes, then it is a custom to maintain Aroo Dar Nam being the custom, in which, the bridegroom's side has to serve physically in the household activities of the bride. Sometimes, altercations surface regarding the degree of this service. Such an altercation is portrayed in the marriage between Jayanta, Baloram's son and Pamili, the grand-daughter of Balibhai. In various

places of the novel, we come across references to the traditional food habits of the Misings.

Aali Aye Ligang is a major festival of the Misings. Basically, an agriculture-based festival, this festival is observed with prompt and grandeur among the Misings. In this novel, we have a vivid picture of this festival. This festival is observed on the first Wednesday in the month of Falgun. However, the preparation about the festival starts from one and two months before. Specifically, the preparation for the Apong is a time consuming task. The Porang Aping, which is packaged in the leaves of kaupat, is kept for the guests. Age Gaser and Mibo Lagok, two traditional garments of the ladies, are brought out of the wooden boxes, called the pera, and the girls wear them on the occasion of Ligang. Again, table and chairs are collected and the guests coming from far off places are seated there. Till the very date of the festival, the entire village gets busy in various activities. On that particular date, they worship Doni Polo, their community God, and pray for good harvesting. They hope that their harvest and their forefathers will be protected and taken care of by Doni Polo. With such a hope, they sow seeds in the soil that they have already cleared. After the worship, the young boys and girls sing Biraug Geet, to the tune of the drum and they dance the Gomrag. The day is observed with festivity, with communal feast with Porang Apin, pork and Por Apong. After the feast, the young boys and girls visit all households in the village, and sing songs and perform dances. The novel has the reference to community restrictions, called the Gena, observed on the occasion of Ligang. About Ali Aye Ligang the novelist writes in detail:

Ali Aye Ligang is the community festival of the Misings. Ali means fruits grown under the soil, Aye means seeds or fruits of the tree, and Ligang means the act of sowing. The word Ligang is variously written like Leegang, Lougang etc. In fact, my phonological research supports that it should be Ligang. (ibid: 52)

The novel documents how certain traditions related to Ligang have vanished over time. It says that the numbers of people versed with the seasonal festival called the Birag Nitam, are fast diminishing. The new generation of young boys and girls are no longer fond of Gumrag. The novelist further says that these days the youth's don't go hunting to collect meat for Ligang, and there is dearth of jungles too. The prime agricultural festival of the Mising is Porag. After harvesting, the young boys and girls of the village organize this

festival. However, there is no fixed month for celebrating it. The novelist writes about Porag observed at Mahfala village:

In the right middle of Mahfala village, near the embankment, a Murung Ghar is erected on the occasion of Porag. The young boys and girls gave young teacher Pradip the status of Dekha Bora and Pramili, the wife of Jayanta, the status of Tiri Bora. Generally, Tiri Bora is allocated for the boys. However, the decision was taken to allocate this status this year to Awanti. Due to the absence of the Mibo, Lambodar, the father of Awanti, is given the status of Mibo in order to carry out the festival. (ibid, 182)

The novel has reference to superstitions of the Mising community also. Witchcraft is such a superstition. The novel presenting such an event describes how, the day Mibo the village priest was going to ascertain the future of Baloram's family, Mibo and Rasaki. A lady, visiting Baloram's house put a packet under the bed used by Kabuli and Maneswari. The next day Mibo digs it up with the help of the villagers and says that it was put in place by Kangkan, an old, unmarried lady, who entertained an affair with Baloram years back. The packet is unveiled upon a young banana leaf. The embodiments, some bits of hairs, bits of the roots of trees, and some pebbles black and white, become sufficient to prove that Kangkan is a witch, and she is asked to appear before Mibo. Then, the Mibo utters some mantras loudly:

This is, this is a female witch. Female witch. I have seen. The spirits have shown this to me. (ibid: 73)

Then he beats her to death. However, the Mibo adopts another strategy here. Her death has been shown as the very act of the possessing spirit.

The Mibo says:

She has gone. She was a diabolic witch. She left and brought the old lady with her. What a diabolic witch she was! She invited turmoil for two families. She has to face the lot in the hand of this Ukkam Mibo. From today onwards, there will be no turmoil in the village, along with these families. The dead body of this old lady should be cremated on the border of the village, near the Brhamaputra. (ibid: 75, 76)

The Mibo is highly respected and taken in awe by the villagers. He is sometimes taken to be an epitome of unknown fear. While, Ukkam Mibo is beating the old lady, Rasaki sees it and reports to Sarumai that she herself saw how the Mibo had himself placed the packet under the bed. Then Sarumai asks her not to disclose the incident. Otherwise, she will be targeted by the Mibo. In the politics of interpreting cultural traits, the Mibo is depicted as an evil incarnate in the novel not taking a traditional practice often held high by the society. Likewise, we come across references to various pujas offered to the evil spirits, in order to appease them. For example, when Kabuli fell ill, Sarumai collects fowl and Apong and invites devotees to pray for her recovery in Yumrang Yu.

The novel also presents images of the fishing practices, dress and garments and funeral rites as observed by the community. In the *Mikchijili*, we have reference to how the deceased is cremated by this community. The dead body is washed, given new cloths, and put under the soil. It is called Moidam. First of all, a hole is dug up in the soil. Then a bamboo shaft is laid upon inside the hole. Then the dead body is put into the hole along with the cloth. Then the person going to perform the final rite places lumps of soil in the hole with his left hand. He is then followed by the others. Then the Moidam is fenced with bamboo, and it is covered with cloths. The umbrella used by the dead is placed towards the head. After this, all people have a deluge in water and then start for their respective homes. In this novel, we have the description of how the rite for Sarumai is executed.

The Misings believe in life after death. It is believed that they see some foot prints of animals, birds or man around the fire-place, and the soul of the dead is supposed to be transmuted the body of that animal, birds and man. The funeral rite for the dead is not immediately solemnized, but done at the end of some years. It is known as Dadgang. The pigs are slaughtered in the name of the ancestors and Donipolo according to the economic status of the villagers. A feast is organized where the villagers, including the invited guests, take part.

It is a custom in the Mising society to invite the aged people to name the new-born babies. On the days of chastination of the new babies, the hosts ask for blessing from the aged people and serve them with Apong. The guests pick up the pot of the Apong and embrace the baby in their laps. Finally, they give him a name unanimously.

Mikchijili by Jatin Mipun is a very powerful Assamese novel that poignantly encapsulates the Mising society as a whole. The social life, traditions, various practices, beliefs and superstitions have been beautifully presented in this novel with copious detail.

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