

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

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1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The novel as a literary genre has demonstrated a great amount of resilience in form, structure and content embodying in it tremendously varied range of subjects, people and societies as “the generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities” (Bakhtin 2008: 3). With its large possibilities as a developing form of narrative or a medium of communication the novel has increasingly engulfed extensive subjects most of which are culturally charged and “it deeply reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding” (ibid: 7). Thus the novel as a literary form and a cultural expression, over the ages since its emergence in the 17th century in Europe, has also increasingly been a very powerful form of illustrating social reality which Ian Watt characterizes as “formal realism” (Watt 1957: 28). In this process of realization or representation of social reality, language again as a cultural tool, plays a tremendously powerful role through the voices of the characters and their situations underlying the concerned works.

“The novelist studies men and women; he is concerned with their actions and their thoughts, their errors and their follies, their greatness and their meanness ; the countless forms of beauty and constantly varying moods to be seen among them ; the forces which act upon them; the passions, prejudices, hopes and fears which pull them this way and that. He has to do, above all, and before all, with men and women. The very first rule in Fiction is that the human interest must absolutely absorb everything else.” (James 1884: 11)

In the process the novel has also increasingly been a very powerful form of illustrating social reality which Ian Watt characterizes as “formal realism.” being the distinguishing feature of the novel:

...a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself. ... The lowest common denominator of the novel genre as a whole [is] its formal realism. (Watt 1957: 28)

In this process of realization or representation of social reality, "...the novelist must write from his experience, that his "characters must be real and such as might be met within actual life." (James 1884: 4)

The novel thus being a social narrative, also relates to the question of the author's point of view- "the question of relation in which the narrator stands to the story." (Lubbock 2006: 89) In his book *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster (2002) examines various points of view and states that the novelist "can either describe the character from outside, as an impartial or partial onlooker; or he can assume omniscience and describe them from within; or he can place himself in the position of one of them and effect to be in the dark as to the motives of the rest; or there are certain intermediate attitudes." (p.55). Mc Keon citing Marthe Robert on the other hand says, "... the novel is no better nor worse than reality. But neither is it a pointless imitation of reality. Or, if reality is permanently beyond its reach, nevertheless it has access to it at one crucial point and that is in its endeavour to transform it." (Mc Keon 2000: 66)

Having said this, it also necessitates a discussion on the novel being a cultural form, as a representation of a certain or a myriad of cultural phenomena to which the novelist as the narrator directs or carries the audience, because "the concept of representation has come to occupy a new and important place in the study of culture. Representation connects meaning and language to culture." (Hall 2003: 15)

The novel as a literary and a cultural form which depicts social groups on many occasions brings to fore the nature of working within the social systems in the voice of the narrator. The novel in portraying characters, situations and 'culturally distinctive' features of groups or communities draws ethnographic images. In such cases the novelist also deals with cultural boundaries and differences that need to be seen. With reference to 'cultural categories with social and group referents' and cultural differences of social groups and communities we are led to consider the notion of ethnicity. "Cultural categories with

social and group referents are the focus of ethnic enquiry. Where there is a group, there is some sort of cultural boundary, and where there are boundaries, there are mechanism to maintain them. These boundary mechanisms are cultural makers of difference.” (Nash 1996: 24) Ethnicity also “refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive.” (Eriksen 2010: 5)

Amidst this ‘culture-scape’ emerging from novels with ethnic images there are other novelists coming from their respective communities who write on themselves in which representation of ethnic life or cultural boundaries and differences find vivid portrayal. There are also other novelists who write on ethnic communities as onlookers. Within the categories of such novels with representation of ethnicity and ethnic life verging on the social realism, there are differences of attitudes of ‘self’ and ‘otherness’ which will be discussed.

The Assamese novel through the passage of more than a century of its history, finds a considerable number of narratives on tribal or ethnic societies authored by writers of both the categories mentioned above. In many of these novels authored by writers belonging to respective communities or outside them, representation of ethnic life and culture, hopes and aspirations, struggle for identity and even frustration and disillusionment finds illustrations as to be seen in the novels taken for discussion in following chapters and many such novels by other authors. Considerable studies have been undertaken by scholars in Assam, in particular on diverse facets of Assamese novel, its history and growth since its emergence in the second half of the nineteenth century. Reference to the critical works like that of Satyendra Nath Sarma (Sarma, 2004, 2007), Gobinda Prasad Srama (Sarma, 2009) and Nagen Thakur (Thakur, 200) may be cited in this regard. Major trends as reflected in a variety of works over the period of its history, interactions with the west in the process of growth, internalization of a western narrative form to the social and cultural mind and life of Assam, portrayal of the composite cultural matrix of Assam and such other literary and linguistic aspects have been taken in such studies. These studies have contributed in widening the understanding of the Assamese novel and its success and sustained growth including its role in the enrichment of modern Assamese literature. However, there are novels that embody ethnic representation providing a wider space for discussion from the standpoints of ethnicity, representation, identity and language.

Keeping the above in view, the present work aims to study the range of representation of ethnic (tribal) life of Assam with its vicissitudes in Assamese novels with particular reference to four acclaimed works by four distinguished writers – the *Yaruingam* by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, the *Bharanda Pakhir Jak* by Umakanta Sarma, the *Rangmilir Hanhi* by Rang Bang Terang and the *Mikchijili* by Jatin Mipun.

It may be remembered that there is a constant flow of interaction and dialogue among these communities of various ethnic stock living in different parts of Assam having most of the time a life of co-existence. This has led to the emergence of many creative writers, and novelists who have taken up ethnic life as subjects of their literary works. The trend started with the *Miri-Jiyari* (1894) by Rajani Kanta Bordoloi and is continuing till today with more and more modern writers taking up representation of such ethnic life in their works given the cultural matrix of Assam in the North-Eastern part of India inhabited by numerous ethnic groups and others.

It is difficult to find out an easy definition of the word ‘tribe’ referring to a community with exclusive lifestyle and a cultural pattern within an Indian context. Taking the cultural, historical, religious and linguistic verities which constitute the official category of tribe in India into account, it becomes even more difficult to describe a tribe as a common category of human groups within the North-Eastern region of India. “Even if one were to accept a term for the purpose, its normative frame may run against numerous contradictions with the strikingly divergent history of every community living in India.” (Dutta 2014: 1) In his article ‘Transformation of tribes and Analogous Social Formations’ B.K. Roy Burman says:

The term (tribe) refers to stage of social formation in an evolutionary scheme of development of technology, knowledge of and capacity for control of the forces of nature, method of transmission of the same, perception of man’s relation with man and with nature and scale of organization of social groups. (1992: 28)

Likewise Majumdar and Madan (1988) have defined tribe as a group with territorial affiliation, practising endogamy, with no specialization of functions, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes, or castes, and above all, conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration. The above definitions concerning tribe

however do not hold good in respect of the diverse ethnic communities of North East India who are politically and administratively described as tribes as they do not necessarily reflect or represent the above criteria. Most of these communities have one or more languages with dialectal variations and are well versed with modern ways of living, having no endogamous practices and having specialized functions at their own level of existence. They are however conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration. Under the given political and administrative system these culturally distinctive communities are described as 'tribe's. Keeping the above in mind the terms 'tribal' and 'ethnic' have been taken in the present study as synonymous. The present study on the novels on the life of and society of ethnic groups of Assam and its neighbourhood, therefore, use the term 'tribe' interchangeably to refer to these communities in view of the fact that they are constitutionally defined as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India under its Article 366 (25) who are scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution. These communities referred to in the study also introduce themselves as 'tribes' under the above provisions of the Constitution. According to the Lokur Committee, the essential characteristics for defining ethnic community as a scheduled tribe which is 'state specific' are:

- a. Primitive traits
- b. Distinctive culture
- c. Geographical isolation and
- d. Shyness of contact with the community at large and
- e. Backwardness (Lokur Committee Report 1965: 7)

The ethnic communities of Assam and North East India, although administratively and politically are taken as 'tribes' under the provisions of the Constitution of India, cannot be described as primitive and backward cultural or civilizational sense. Given economic backwardness, and short of modern development opportunities in some areas, these communities inherit distinct language and culture as mentioned earlier. The question of geographical isolation as referred to the Lokur Committee Report holds good not only in respect of the tribes of Assam and adjoining areas but the entire North Eastern region.

The above characteristics are adapted to be criteria for demarcating certain areas of Assam and several other states in North Eastern India with concentration of ethnic groups as

tribal areas. So, under the provision of the Constitution of India these communities like the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Deoris, the Misings, the Karbis, the Dimasas and such others are designated as tribes. Ethnicity and ethnic are taken generally in the present study as culture specific academic terminologies whereas ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal’ are terms having administrative meanings. Several other communities – like the Ahoms, the Koches and several others inhabiting Assam and having an ethno-cultural entity are however not taken under the Constitutional provision of tribes. They are placed under the category of Other Backward Classes (OBC) and granted certain amount of consideration and privileges in respect of economic gains including employment opportunities.

Included amongst the novelists writing on ethnic communities are a considerable number not belonging to tribal life by birth, who wrote novels in Assamese depicting social life of various tribes in meticulous detail. Large amounts of cultural material, such as oral history and folklore, customary laws; social and religious expressions and characteristics of folkloric dimension have found representation in these novels. Over and above the growing sense of ethnic consciousness, hopes and aspirations, a strong sense of political assertion and identity in post-colonial India also find expression in some of these novels. Writers of non-tribal origin like Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Navakanta Barua, Jogesh Das, Umakanta Sarma, Kailash Sarma, Amulya Baruah, Birajananda Choudhary, Dimbeswar Bora, Jadab Phukan, Paramananda Rajbangshi, Swarna Bora have written novels in Assamese portraying social realities of various Assamese ethnic communities and its neighbouring areas, focusing on different tribes including- Bodo, Dimasa, Garo, Karbi, Khasi, Mising, Naga and Tagin. Most of these writers have written their novels when they were staying among these communities for their livelihood and other purposes. There are at times critical responses often relating to the nature of representation or even misrepresentation of ethnic life in some of the novels by some non-tribal writers referred to above. Simultaneously we come across a number of writers of tribal origin like Bhabenchandra Pegu, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Ganesh Pegu, Indreshwar Pegu, Jatin Mipun, Jayanta Rangpi, Lummer Dai, Rajen Pam, Rang Bang Terang, Tarunchandra Pamegam and Yeshe Darje Thongchi and several others who have also contributed extensively to Assamese fiction with portrayals of their respective tribal societies.

The present study is an attempt to identify this vertical line of difference between these two categories of novels in terms of the concepts of ethnicity and representation, growing ethnic nationalism and at times of hegemony and otherness in portraying cultural life of the tribes, in respect of some of the non-tribal writers, in contrast with those writings by writers of tribal origin.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

Pertaining to the research area identified above, the present work proceeds with the following objectives:

1. To analyze the issue of ethnicity and its representation in the Assamese novels that write of ethnic communities of Assam and as a theme against a backdrop of rising ethnic consciousness in the social and political context of Assam.
2. To examine the issue of identity formation revealed through the narratives of four selected novels from well known authors and evaluating the impact of discourses of nationalism, identity and politics of culture in them.
3. To examine the process of capitalization of cultural material in ethnic communities and to discuss meanings for political purpose as found to be illustrated in the novels under consideration.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

The present study is both explorative and descriptive in nature. Since it relates to literary works written in Assamese i.e. Assamese novels where representation of tribal life of Assam and neighbouring areas is explored, it is ethnographic and literary-cultural in approach. Ethnography here is more from the cultural point of view than sociological or anthropological and viewed from the perspectives of ethnicity and representation in cultural studies. Most part of the study is based on secondary material and a close reading of the original texts in Assamese. The theoretical parameters of the thesis have been

drawn on the notions of ethnicity, representation, ethnic consciousness and identity formation re-applying them in analysing the texts under consideration.

1.4 LIMITATIONS

As said earlier, the present research attempts to study the representation of tribal life in the Assamese novels. The study excludes other novels acclaimed as milestones in the history of Assamese novel. In approaching the theoretical discourses of ethnicity, ethnic nationalism, identity and language, sociological, anthropological or sociolinguistics considerations are not taken for consideration. So there are shifts from one to another based on relevant issues and contexts of the present research. Those novels have not been brought under the purview of the study as they do not include tribal life as the subject of their work.

1.5 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1.5.1 In Assamese

Although there has not been extensive academic research relating to the area of the present research, some amount of writings mostly in Assamese, on different occasions has appeared in journals, periodicals as well as a few books. Some of the important works in this regard are as follows;

Asomiya Upanyasar Gatidhara 1976, by Satyendranath Sarma, discusses the growth and development of Assamese novel in the period after India's independence to 1970. Here he also discusses about the women novelists and some trends of Assamese novels including those reflecting the tribal life.

Upanyas aru Asomiya Upanyas 1995, by Gobinda Prasad Sarma has discussed the history, growth and development of novel, different classifications of novels, elements of novels and critical discussion of some selected Assamese novels.

Both these books help us in understanding the history and growth of Assamese novel as a distinct form and various trends which developed during 20th Century. These two books find reference in the Chapter 2.

Dr. Birendrakumar Bhattacharjya aru Teor Upanyas 1996, by Malaya Khaund takes into account Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's life and his novels. She takes note how the western influence came to his novels and his political life. The author also discusses some of the characters of his selected novels, the novelist's language and writing style. The book sheds light although not in detail on Bhattacharya's *Iyaruigam* with particular reference to its literary merits – characterization, plot construction and language.

Asamiya Upanyasat Janjatiya Jiban 1999, by Jitanjali Barpujari draws a matrix of the various ethnic communities of Assam and North-East India with reference to Assamese novels in which such communities find place. More a literary study, the work contains glimpses of life and society of some of the communities finding treatment in the novels.

Esha Bacharar Asamiya Upanyas 2000, by Nagen Thakur, (ed.) is a collection of essays taking into account a historical look at the growth of Assamese novel over a period of hundred years and trends found to be grown within the period. The collection also sheds light on some of the major novelists including Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Umakanta Sarma.

Janagosthiya Samasya: Ateet Bartaman Bhabishyat 2001, by Indibor Deori takes into account various social and political issues involving the ethnic communities of Assam and the historical background of the movements for assertion of ethnic identity in India and the North-East since independence. The work analyses administrative and economic questions which are also responsible for the ethnic unrest.

Janjatiya Jibanbhittik Asamiya Upanyas 2005, by Ajit Saikia discusses the Assamese novels written on the basis of tribal life in Assam. For this purpose, he has selected the novels from the period 1885 to 1995. His book analyses the background of the tribal life in Assamese social novels. The author also brings in a comparative analysis of the novels on the basis of tribal life as a literary work and position of the novels on the basis of tribal life in the history of Assamese literature.

Janajati Samaj Sanskriti 2008, by Padma Pator, (ed.) is a collection of articles on socio-cultural history of the tribes of Assam. In this book different authors write about the history of the tribes in Assam, their life-styles, socio-cultural organizations, folk-tales, dress habits, cultural life, religions, marriage rituals, folklore and social rituals. More a study of culture and society, these collections leave out political issues of ethnic assertion leading to ethnic movements cropping up in Assam.

Asamar Janajati aru Sanskriti 2011, by Malini Devi Rabha, (ed.) is a collection of selected articles on tribes of Assam and their culture. In these articles different authors analyse the society, language, literature and culture of the major tribes of Assam.

1.5.2 In English

The Craft of Fiction 1921, by Percy Lubbock is an important work on the form and structure of novel as an art form. Which has helped in the understanding of novel as a work of art with various characteristics.

The Rise of the Novel 1957, by Ian Watt, is a seminal work on the novel as a literary form and its development since seventeenth century with representation of reality in it.

Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison 1991, by Paul R Brass, taken as a major source for the present work, for the question of ethnicity and its relationship with the assertion of ethnic identity, discusses the issue of ethnic groups and ethnic identity formation, pluralism, regionalism with particular reference to India's situation in the Punjab. The work has helped in understanding the theoretical issues of ethnicity and appropriating the idea of representation.

Rethinking Ethnicity 1997, by Richard Jenkins analyzes various notions of ethnicity, its history and trends.

Sociolinguistics 2007, by R.A. Hudson provides a useful analysis of sociolinguistics. This book provides the newcomer to the discipline of sociolinguistics, a theoretical framework within which the findings of sociolinguistics may be related to the theory of language structure. Hudson has also discussed the varieties of language, relationship between language, culture and thought, speech as a social interaction and linguistic and social

inequality. He has also expanded his discussion of sex differences in language use and the relation between language and thought.

Ethnicity: Source of Strength? Source of Conflict? 1997, by J Milton Yingers provides a theoretical understanding of ethnicity in terms of the growing ethnic conflicts in Assam and India finding expression in various forms of literature including novels.

Cultural Studies Theory and Practices 2000, by Chris Barker provides useful insight on representation and understanding of cultural studies. The work provides a cue in understanding and analyzing the research question from the standing point of Cultural Studies.

The Dialogic Imagination – Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin 2008 (ed.) by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist discusses the novel as an evergrowing literary form that unfolds reality.

Post-War Assamese Novel 1989, by Umesh Deka discusses on the Assamese novels written during the period from 1945 to 1970 covering the development of Assamese novel, the background, themes, technique and characterization of the post-war Assamese novels, language of this period's novels and social realism as reflected in these novels.

Research Methods for Cultural Studies 2008, by Michael Pickering (ed.) has been taken for the methodological part of the present work as various techniques and methods have been introduced in this useful book.

Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts 2000, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin is a useful book for the post-colonial literary theories. It has been taken as the source book for the part of critical study of the present work.

1.6 CHAPTERIZATION

The thesis has been arranged into five chapters which are described below-

Chapter I: Introduction - It discusses an outline of the research plan including the statement of the problem underlining the importance and relevance of the present study, objectives, methods and methodology, review of literature and limitation.

Chapter II: Culture, Ethnicity, Social Realism and Novel as a Cultural Form: Some Theoretical Approaches - lays the theoretical parameters taken in studying the problem of the thesis and a background of the subject. It elaborates the meaning of the key concept like 'culture, ethnicity and representation', 'ethnic consciousness and identity formation' and 'social realism and novel' in keeping with the subject of the thesis.

Chapter III: Assamese Novel and Assamese Culture: Some Historical Issues -

It discusses the following points

1. Growth and development of Assamese novel a short historical note
2. Major trends in post-colonial Assamese novel
3. Major novelists from the tribal communities of Assam
4. Assamese novel as a vehicle of inter-cultural dialogue

Chapter IV: Representation of Ethnicity and Tribal Life in Assamese Novels - It forms the analytical part of the thesis which incorporates discussions on the issues of ethnicity, representations, identity and language finding revelations in the range of novels in question and special reference has been drawn to four novelists namely -

1. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya
 2. Umakanta Sarma
 3. Rang Bang Terang
 4. Jatin Mipun
- in respect of their four acclaimed novels namely –
- a. the *Yaruingam* (1960)
 - b. the *Bharanda Pakhir Jak* (1992)
 - c. the *Rangmilir Hanhi* (1981)
 - d. the *Mikchijili* (1993)
- respectively.

Chapter V: Conclusion. It gives an overview of the findings of the study including a short account of each of the chapters.

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