Chapter VII

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Nilmani Phukan is a major modern poet in Assamese. There is certainly no doubt that Nilmani Phukan is an outstanding voice in modern Assamese poetry. The huge bulk of criticism on the poet indisputably reveals the fact. He has immense contribution to Assamese literature in the twentieth century. The evolution of poetry of Nilmani Phukan, to an extent, symbolizes the evolution of Assamese poetry during 1970s and 1980s.

The fundamental idea of the theory of intertextuality is that any text is a mixture of references from other texts. It suggests that a text is not a closed system and does not exist in isolation. This is also not simply a matter of influence which passes from one author to the other, but of the multiple and complex relations that exist between texts in both synchronic and diachronic ways. 'Influence' is one mode of
intertextuality. The theory further opens up a view that the act of reading plunges the readers into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning or meanings, is to trace those relations. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. Thus the text becomes the intertext. The idea of intertextuality has been instrumental in the present study as various texts of folklore and other genres contribute to the main texts of many poems of Nilmani Phukan.

Though a large body of criticism on Nilmani Phukan has emerged, the subject regarding the poet's use of folklore from the perspective of intertextuality had hardly been dealt with, and therefore was an open area to explore. The issue of representation of folklore and its study with the theories of intertextuality was evident in academic and critical discussions abroad. But such subjects were yet to be discussed in the study of Assamese literature in general. The area thus necessities further study to explore certain new areas in Assamese poetry with special reference to the poetry of Nilmani Phukan.

The concepts on intertextuality and the traits that the theories of intertextuality carry can also be considered and marked out in folklore.
Some folklorists’ views regarding the role of *imitation* in acquiring knowledge from previous texts have resemblance with the notions of intertextuality. Almost all the major folklorists are in the consensus that folklore genres include epic, myth, folktale, legend, folksong, proverb, riddle, folk dance and many more and, can be interpreted them as texts. When we have considered the idea of type and motif in folklore, we have seen that both are intertextual. A large number of tales and other narratives available among the different communities in the North-East India are found to have identical types and motifs. The idea of motif as a recurring unit occurs simultaneously in many pieces of folklore. This is a kind of intertextuality. It has been seen in the study that folklore is intertextual by nature, or intertextuality can be traced in the texts of folklore. We have seen that there is a relationship between folklore and intertextuality. Thus the combined concepts of folklore and intertextuality have been taken into recourse in dealing with the present study.

Assamese poetry has a long and glorious heritage. A study on Assamese poetry has offered scopes to read Nilmani Phukan as an inheritor of a poetic tradition which comprises folklore and intertextuality as Assamese poetry has a consistent and coherent connection with folklore and intertextuality. Ancient Assamese
literature was basically oral and pastoral songs, ballads and myths made the key foundation of that literature. It is seen that some proverbs and riddles in Assamese may have originated from the pre-Vaishnavite age. It is found in the study that Assamese literature has been embracing folklore from time immemorial. On the other hand, some poets of the pre-Sankardeva era such as Madhob Kandoli, Haribar Bipra and Hem Saraswati, among others, chiefly used themes and contents of Hindu mythology and the Puranas in their poetry. Again, Sankardeva’s (1449-1568) Kirtan and Rukmini Haran Kabya are intertextual in nature. He also wrote Haricandra Upakhyan, Bhakti- Pradip and Rukmini Haran Kabya using materials from Markendeya Purana, Garur Purana and Haribansa respectively. Such tradition continued to the time of modern Assamese poetry. We have read Nilmoni Phukan situating him in this legacy.

Nilmani Phukan’s poetry waves together a variety of themes capturing myriad nuances of Assam. He carries a new sensibility into Assamese poetry through his thought, language and style. Nilmani Phukan started writing poetry during 1950s. During the period, ‘make it new’, the motto of literary modernism, was witnessed in Assamese poetry. It led to amazing experiments in Assamese poetry and a new attitude towards a changing world had been cultivated in poetry. The
The poets looked at how modernity brought out uncertainty, crisis, chaos, disorder to life. The influence of such changes is seen in Nilmani Phukan. At the same time, Phukan remains mostly a sensitive observer in meditation like many of his romantic predecessors. Phukan did not entirely move on the road paved by T. S. Eliot and other Western poets. Though Phukan is a modern poet, his sensibility is mainly romantic. Phukan has deep feelings and a tendency to express himself along with imaginative power. This is unique about Nilmani Phukan. He responded to the world with his exclusive insight and took recourse to a new language. He is a sensitive poet; his sensibility rests on different aspects of life and the world: nature, love, paddy field, river, history, folklore, tradition, alienation, trauma, exile and so on. But in the first place, Phukan is a poet of silence. Phukan seeks to explore the pain and sorrow of life through such silence. That pain is not necessarily of the poet's own. Rather he sees the soreness of human life in general. His poems reflect the restlessness and anxieties of modern life. That world is sometimes blurred; reality is vague for him or he compares life to an endless journey. Along with his obsession with the philosophic dimension of life, however, Phukan treats love and nature in a different way in his poems. Significantly, the poet gradually started to treat the
socio-political crisis of Assam and its people. As a poet he became more aware towards society.

Nilmani Phukan extensively uses folk-texts in his poetry. Apart from several other concerns, one of the substantial areas of Phukan in his poetry is his treatment of folklore. It has been explored that Phukan’s poetry bears several folk-texts or folk-allusions. The major fields of folklore which Phukan explores through his poetry are:

- Folk-belief
- Folk-tale
- Bihu-song
- Folk-music/ folk-song other than bihu-song
- Folk-ceremonial occasions and songs

Such elements of folklore render a new dimension in understanding Phukan’s intertextuality as basically the folk-texts in his poetry create the intertexts. The intertextual elements in the poetry of Nilmani Phukan are mainly from folk-texts. Intertexts from different genres and sources also appear in his poems. ‘Buranji’ (History), for instance, one of Nilmani Phukan’s remarkable poems, has a travel motif similar to the central motif in S.T. Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. Similarly the poem ‘Duyokhon Duwar Meli Thobi’ (Keep both the Doors Open) is
a significant example of intermixing texts of history and folk-tradition.
The poet makes association of brutality of the Ahom king Gaurinah Singha who has been regarded as an unkind king in the history of Assam and was held responsible for Mowamoriya Revolution. A text of history gets new dimension in the poem. We have found, in this way, a number of noteworthy intertexts from different genres in the poems of Nilmani Phukan.

There are certain meanings and relevance behind such use of folk-texts and other intertexts. His changing poetic outlook from a poet of silence to a poet speaking to masses is influenced by a renovation of his attitude towards folk-life. He was born in a village, so naturally he has a fine attachment with folk-life and folklore. He knew the bihusongs, wedding songs, folktales and so on from an early age that have been integral parts of folk life. Though initially Phukan showed less interest towards folklore and folk-texts, gradually folklore has become vital inspiration for him. As a poet he has been nourished by folklore and in return, he treats folklore in a wonderful way. Assamese poetry had a good tradition of having folklore; and it has achieved a new horizon in the hands of Nilmani Phukan. His use of folklore is different from romantic nationalism, but is more rooted in ethnic tradition and aspects of self.
Intertextuality of several genres appears in him as a mode of influence. It is not necessarily the ‘anxiety of influence’ of Harold Bloom. Due to his wide study of world literature, art and painting, certain level of intertextuality can be noticed in him. Phukan’s intertextuality is basically derived from folklore. Folk-texts appear as inter-texts in several major poems by Phukan. The remarkable fact regarding intertextuality in Phukan’s poetry is that it extends Phukan’s poetic vision instead of harming the freshness of his poetic sensibility. Although features of intertextuality can be traced in his works, but that does not necessarily raise question to his originality as a poet. In fact, the intertextuality in his poetry enriches Phukan’s texts; it expands Nilmani Phukan’s literary horizon along with opening up the new possibilities to be explored in his poetry.