Chapter VI

Conclusion

It is beyond any doubt that Nilamoni Phukan has been one of the most distinguished and most renowned poets not only of modern Assamese poetry but also of Assamese literature in general. Nalini Natrajan has observed, “One of the poets who define contemporary Assamese poetry is Nilamoni Phukan (1933). From his first collection of poems, Surya Heno Nami Ahe Ei Nadiyedi (1963), Phukan expresses the loneliness and isolation of modern man in a society that seems to have lost its moorings. Though his poems contemplate society, his poetry embraces the Assamese landscape and takes its themes from the natural and historical. In his other works too, Phukan reflects on a wide range of universal issues such as love, life and death.” (Natrajan, Nalini: 1966. 36) Nilamoni Phukan was born in 1933 at Dergaon, a small town nearby Jorhat, in Golaghat District in a middle class family. He did his schooling at Dergaon and graduated from Cotton College in 1957. He completed his post graduation in history from Gauhati University in 1960. He started his career as a subject-teacher at the Arya Vidyapeeth School in Guwahati in 1964 and after three years of his service, he joined as a lecturer in the department of history, Arya Vidyapeeth Collage and worked there until his retirement in 1992. His childhood experiences in the small, quiet rustic environment of Dergaon later reflected in his works of repute. Formation of his career sprung out from his early childhood, in his ability to see the world with all the objects in nature, in his interest in art, sculpture and fine arts seen all around, in the people around him to which responded with a sensitive and human mind. Besides these, from his childhood, he met a host of towering personalities, which helped in the formation of his mind and career. Among them Bagmibar Nilamoni Phukan, Pitambar Deva Goswami, Ambikagiri Raychoudhury, Mitradev Mahanta, Indreswar Barthakur, Benudhar Sarma, Ramchandra Nath, Binandachandra Barua, Anandachandra Barua, Syed Abdul Malik, Dimbeswar Neog are prominent. He also met several of the prominent Assamese like Debakanta Barua, Shiva Bhattcharjya and Jyotiprasad Agrawala. From his early life, he was greatly influenced and encouraged by his journalist and writer uncle Lakshminath Phukan. His mother was another source of inspiration for him. From his early days when he was at the age of twenty, he began to compose poetry and became known as a poet when he first published his poem ‘Jharuwalir
Gaan’ in the year 1953. He surpasses any extent of writing poetry and excels in the art and style of composing poems than any one of his contemporaries. Phukan took the inspiration of his predecessors Hem Barua, Navakanta Barua, Ajit Barua, Amulya Barua and Maheswar Neog and began to practice vers libre (free verse) in his poetry. Phukan explored the diverse fields of rich Assamese art and culture, opened up new possibilities, and hence found a new trend in the realm of Assamese poetry creating and extending new horizons. By doing so, he established a school of modern Assamese poetry where innumerable modern poets searched for new arena to express their essentially modern thought and complexities of life. In the course of this happenings the most expected and welcomed fact is that the modern Assamese poetry got due momentum and a wide range of subjects, thoughts, approach has came in the way of a variety of brilliant successors. There appeared thirteen volumes of his collected poems, which made him won ten regional and national awards. He is the proud recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for Poetry in 1980 for ‘Kabita’. He has also been awarded the prestigious Padmashri from the Government of India in 1990. Among the many that he won, ‘Raghunath Choudhary Award’ of Assam Sahitya Sabha (1972); ‘Assam Prakashan Parishad Award’ (1977) for his collected poems entitled ‘Kait Gopal Aru Kait’; ‘Jagadhatri Horomohan Award’ (1988) for ‘Loka Kalpadristi’; ‘Kamal Kumari National Award’ (1990) for life time devotion in literature; ‘Chaganlal Jain Award’ of Assam Sahitya Sabha (1991) for ‘Nrityarata Prithibi’; ‘Assam Valley Award’ (1997) for life time achievement in literature; ‘Bhartiya Bhasa Parishad Award’ (2000), and ‘Joshua Foundation Award’ (2001), are his remarkable achievements. Department of Culture, Government of India declared him Emeritus Fellow in 1998 and retained the positing during the period of 1999-2001. Phukan was awarded the highest reward of Sahitya Akademi, its Fellowship in 2002 for his distinctive work in the field of poetry. Assamese poetry has achieved a landmark in the field of world poetry with the new trend established by Nilamoni Phukan. Phukan has brought the treasury of poetic excellence collected from the best of the poets of the world into Assamese poetry and effectively applied them in his poetry.

Despite playing a major role in the evolution of modern genre, by enhancing the bulk of Assamese poetry, he performed a decisive part in determining the course of Assamese poetry. He took poetry as the medium of expression of his perceptions
and experiences. Critics generally advance theories and principles of poetry in support of their poetic practice. But Nilamoni Phukan is a poet-critic with a different idea of his understanding of poetry and poetics. He is unlike the well-known theorists of poetry like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. This is because he did not propose any principle that would determine his poetic practice. Rather he tried to reorganise his perception of poetry accumulated through his intuition of different genres associated with poetry like art, paintings, craft and culture and his understanding of humanitarian insight manifested in the works of the best poets of the world into a cohesive whole. In addition to this, the best poetic traditions, movements of the world is also evident in his poetry. It is always a fact about his poetry that his poetry is an exponent of his extreme sensitivity towards humanitarian considerations. In regards to his theories of poetic practice, he advanced them in fragments, through the interviews, lectures, autobiographical notes and in his works on art and craft. Such works of him are the strings with the help of which his poetic world can be explored and well understood.

Nilamoni Phukan has an intellectual and emotional appeal to his readers with his unique mode of expression, started gaining reputation from the very beginning of his poetic career. Nilamoni Phukan is a poet of great sensibility. He is very much touched by the minutest happenings that he experiences and portrays them in his poems with the help of concrete symbols and precise images. Thus, he is a man of distinguished personality and he has devoted himself completely to writing poetry. Phukan is always attracted by rustic life of Assam and the cadence that lies in every part of village life. Similarly, he is much attracted by tribal myth and culture. French symbolism greatly attracted him and he used symbols from various resources ranging from natural life of village to the rich heritage of tribal myth and folklore, from the world of art to the history of Assam. Formalists of the West also influenced him. A band of his followers who evolved out of his concept and tendency of modern poetry during the 1960s also contributed to this school of symbol and imagery with precision and economy but that also remain slighter than Phukan’s share. “Nilamoni Phukan is at the forefront of the Assamese poets today. Influenced by the French symbolist poets as well as the imagist and formalists of the West, Nilamoni emphasises the importance of the expression of personal feelings through symbols, images and suggestions. At the same time, he deals with novel ideas and
excels in the subtle analyses of his experiences. This and a very subtle sensitivity raise his poems to a level which is distinctly created by his art. The common themes of his poems are nature, love, death instinct and the basic loveliness of the human soul.” (Lal, Mohan (Chief Editor) Contributor Gobinda Prasad Sarma:2007.3200)

His works lacks conventionality in terms of grammar and lexicon, and love to use colloquial rather than formal, which appeals to the reader immediately. The remarkable quality in his poetry is his use of image fit to the exact framework. His readers have to be very alive to his use of image associations to understand rather complex structure of his poems and relatively simple, touching meaning and to discover in him a sensitive human being. During the 8th decade of the 20th century, he became more and more interested in the cultural heritage and life of common people. His poems changed considerably to assume new shape to portray design of the folk in a delicate manner. The inherent power of the poems of Phukan rests on his use of imagery and metaphorical language. Concreteness of visual imagery employed by him surpasses his use of simple poetic diction. In some of his poems, a tone of urgency is heard as an undercurrent flowing through the core of the poem. In the tone of these poems there revealed essentially accepted life to the entirety.

In Phukan’s poetry life and reality is permeated with a profound sensitivity and deeper perception. His poetry also is polished with an extraordinary artistic ability. He uses particularly Assamese experience in his compositions, which reflect the troubles of society. He draws his images and themes from the Assamese countryside. The tone of his poetry is that of a lyrical poet and his apprehension ranges from the political to the universal, from present-day to the ancient. He uses metrical composition in his poetry, which appears to be uncomplicated, but there are composite pattern of structured elements runs as an undercurrent beneath the relatively simple and attracting surface musical note. He is an individual who lives in a society and he is deeply concerned for society in which he lives. Though his poems range form a wide variety subjects like, planet and star, war and peace, forest and desert, man and rock, life and death, fire and water, and time and space, still he is very much a poet of human beings. Intense humanism is evident everywhere in his poems.

Some of the original and new themes are found to be used by Nilamoni Phukan in his poems. In some of his excellent pieces, a kind of social duty and
perception is evident. He has often been termed a poet of seclusion. He searches for the words, sounds and melody that is unspoken, unheard and unsung. Some of his other themes are nature, love death instinct, and loneliness of human soul. Phukan had keen interest for traditional Japanese and Chinese poetry and his knowledge of the poetry of these two oriental nations is found evident in his collected works on Chinese and Japanese poetry. Not only did he translate them but also he employed and practiced in his poems the poetic technique and form of traditional Chinese and Japanese poetry. He was closely intimate with them. Therefore, “many of his poems show his intimate knowledge of the traditional Japanese and Chinese poetry.” (Lal, Mohan (Chief Editor) Contributor Gobinda Prasad Sarma:2007.3200) In this way Japanese and Chinese poetry exerted their influence on his poetry with intense personal feelings being expressed by short, concrete and terse poems made with adequate symbols and precise images.

From the above study of Phukan’s images and comparison of his images with the theory and practice of imagist movement, it has been observed that Phukan had a first hand knowledge of influential poetic trends of the world. He himself admits that he is “primarily an oriental poet and not occidental. Of course, many materials from West – from East have affected my poems, unconsciously – through study – through thought and imagination. But as an instance I have not composed any poem by completely discarding my native place.” (Deva Goswami, Ranjit Kumar and Das, Shoneet Bijoy(ed): Second Year, Vol.2, July, 2005.33)

Yet another aspect from which Phukan’s poems can be judged is that his poems seem to suggest the inadequacy of languages as a medium of expression. The poet has tried to express what is inexpressible; he has tried to provide visual experience to the readers with colours and pictures of the world through visual representation with the help of words. In this regard poet-critic Octavio Paz (1914-1998, Mexican poet and writer)’s idea of poetry as found out by John M Fein has been remarkable, “Central to his critical thoughts are the desire to make poetry more meaningful to man and the conviction that poetry must go beyond the text to (and through) the individual’s response. The essence of the poem, he believes, is unwritten, and therefore silent. It is analogous to the pauses in the musical composition that expresses as much meaning as the sound. If the poem ends in silence, the critic is reluctant to intrude with his own interpretation of meaning.”
In the same way, Phukan’s poetry has been marked with his desire to present what is not presentable and in an attempt to use this technique he has made use of silence as a poetic device. In his own words: “...Silence has an important part in Japanese art-culture, in Chinese literature too – even in religion – silence is an important thing....Silence has entered more or less from Buddhism..... The substance of ‘Tao’ is a kind of silence..... An old pond, a frog jumps – the poem ends there. The preceding part is silence. Nothing else is there, the part that following is also silence. Now you have to draw the essence inherent amidst the poem.” (Deva Goswami, Ranjit Kumar and Das, Shoneet Bijoy(ed): Second Year, Vol.2, July, 2005.31) Silence as poetic device has been an abstract idea, which is seemed to be borrowed from Chinese and Japanese poetry by him. The same concept of inadequacy of language has been central to Lorca’s poems too as observed by Christopher Maurer in his introduction to ‘Federico Garcia Lorca Selected Poems,’ “Poetry like Lorca’s exists to remind us of its limitations and of the inability of reason and language to fully “capture” reality or experience. What is most memorable in Lorca’s poetry and theatre is that desire is never fully define, only gestured at, and therefore unable ever to be satisfied. Before desire is defined, it is somehow cancelled by madness, despair or melancholy, by societal indifference, by language, or, more neatly, by death.” (Maurer, Christopher(ed):2001.xix) William Shakespeare too, being a craftsman and great dramatist felt the inadequacy of language as early as in the first decade of the seventeenth century. In the Act V Scene III of his play, ‘Coriolanus’, the moving speech by Coriolanus’s mother Volumnia which has made Coriolanus speechless, has been followed by the stage direction, ‘He holds her by the hand, silent.’ (Primlani, Mohan:1980.886) This seems to suggest Coriolanus’s inability to express his emotions in words making him spellbound. That is why John M Fein in his ‘Toward Octavio Paz A Reading of His Major Poems 1957-1976’ is quite right to find out that “Language is defective but indispensable instrument for conveying what is communicable. Poetry is an ecstasy that both denies and transforms reality; although it can be grasped, it is essential to man’s concept of himself and to the functioning of society.” (Fein, John M: 1986.7)

In the present research, the influence of imagism in the poems of Nilamoni Phooakn has been studied. The word ‘influence’ seems to suggest, according to
Nilamoni Phukan ‘creative inspiration.’ The explanation of the word as offered by the poet himself in an accompanying interview with Hiren Gohain is that, “No successful poet of the world has been free from several influences from the predecessors and in such a way a poet becomes associated with tradition.” (Gohain, Hiren: 1994.191) The study reveals the fact that Nilamoni Phukan had keen interest in the poems of different nations of the world written in different languages. Because of this interest in him, he was encouraged to translate poems of other nations. Hence, his poetry can be judged as an exponent of an assimilation of a variety of art, culture and poetic tradition of the world. Thus he can be considered a poet not only of this part of the world but also a poet of the world with universal subject matter as the essence of his poetic practice and his poetry representing hope, aspiration, fear, anguish, of every citizen of the world. Nilamoni Phukan has advanced some original observations regarding his compositions and poetry in general. He possessed the necessary qualities and minute observation of a good poet-critic. He has established a close relationship of poetry with painting. His works of art and craft, Lokalpadristi and Rup Barna Bak are the results of his extensive study of art and paintings and his ardent love and interest in folk culture and folk literature has added to his genius as a poet. The significance of life mystery, the sensation of ecstasy, the turbulence of desires in the subconscious, moving, spirited and touching- this sort of synthesised poetry was never experimented and composed in Assamese literary history before Phukan. His incessant search for the new and the novel, abundant exploration of new form and technique and his enormous reading has contributed to his use of effective personal words. His inventive talent with his continuous search for a new form has established him as a successful poet.

To conclude, as it has already been discussed, creating images in the mind has been an inherent nature of human beings. Poetry being an expression of intense feelings of humankind has been keener on producing images than other forms of literature. The Imagists exploited this creativity of human imagination and tried to theorise it by attributing it new form and technique. Nilamoni Phukan too, by his good understanding of the greatness of poetry and perception of human experiences, has made a journey through the world of poetry. In doing so, he came in contact with heterogeneous elements of poetry and a big world of great poets. He took materials from them whenever he feels the necessity to express his feelings. He not
only took materials from them, but also experimented with them to create a fresh and original trend with novel form and technique. Therefore, it can be said that the practice of imagism as propounded in their doctrines by the ‘School of the Imagists’ has also affected the poems of Nilamoni Phukan to a certain degree, a fact which has been understood by the analysis already made in the preceding chapters of this study. However, it can’t be said that this influence has been extensive. This influence can be termed as the sense of tradition as asserted by T. S. Eliot in his seminal essay ‘Tradition and Individual Talent.’ From a detailed study of his poems, it has been observed that symbolism also influenced his poetry to a certain extent. Apart from symbolism, the principles of art movements like impressionism, expressionism, and surrealism also influenced him in terms of his use of artistic technique latent in his poetic creations. However, with all the influences on him from a variety of sources, he has stood out to be a poet of original practice and he has directed the human being towards deeper understanding of life. His poems have indicated positive aspect of life and hope in this modern world of dried up feelings and negativity. They represent human conviction and universal faith as presented by the works of many of the great poets of the world, a realisation resultant of his long experience and profound insight:

“For that mere reason won’t you plant
A scented plantain again”

(Barua, Krishna Dulal (Trans):2007.79)

Life goes on with all its happiness and misery:

“There at times with a shriek
In what agony it lies
In what fury what ecstasy
The dancing earth”

(Barua, Krishna Dulal (Trans):2007.81)

The essence is in love in a world of hatred and anarchy:

“Once the door is opened
A world of love is seen
Eternally revolving”

(Barua, Krishna Dulal (Trans):2007.77)