CHAPTER-III
BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYYA AS A NOVELIST

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, is one of the prominent personality of Assamese as well as Indian literature. He plays a significant role in the growth of Assamese literature by contributing many literary works to almost all the genres of literature. But it is novel for which he is able to get a prominent place in Assamese literature.

The history of Assamese literature can largely be divided into three periods. The first period is known as the Early Assamese period (6th to 15th century A. D.). The second period is commonly known as Middle Assamese period (17th to 19th century A.D.) and the third period is the Modern Assamese period (Late 19th century onwards). The Modern Assamese period has been developed into four different stages namely the Missionaries Period, the Age of Hemchandra-Gunabhiram, Romantic Yug or Bezbaroa’s Age and the Contemporary Period. Among these different stages during the Missionary period, the trend of writing Assamese novel started. In this regards the writings appeared in the pages of Arunodoy such as Yatrikar Yatra, Kaminikanta, Phulani Aru Karuna, Sudharmar Upakhyan etc. are mentionworthy. But the trend of Modern novel had really started with the writings of Padmanath Gohain Baruah.

Assamese novels which came into existence in the pages of missionary literature flourished mostly in the post war period. Like the Victorian age, in which English novels found the height of its Zenith, the post Second World War age in Assamese literature paved the way for its enrichment of novel writing. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya is one of the renowned novelists of this post war period who has developed the Assamese novel to appraise the world. Even
he can be regarded as one of the famous Indian novelists, as the characteristics of Indian literature are almost prevalent in his writings. Bhattacharyya is a social thinker and humanist in its true sense who reveals the desires, wishes, hopes and values of the common people in his writings. Stepped into the literary world as a poet and a short story writer of reformation and social consciousness, later he has switched on to another genre of literature that is novel. Finally he is acclaimed as a novelist. Bhattacharyya is a patriot in the real sense who has strong awareness of life and socio-economic condition of his contemporary society. All fictional and non-fictional writings of Bhattacharyya bear the stamp of social and political consciousness. Like his other writings the novels also reveal his acute sensitiveness for the contemporary political and social issues. Themes like social upset, poverty, untouchability, exploitation, social and political movements, women’s predicament in male dominated society etc are often focused in his novels. In the words of a critic,

Social and political consciousness is the main element of Birendra Kumar’s thoughts and he takes it as the theme of some of his novels.¹

(Trans.)

Depending upon the theme or subject matter his novels can broadly be divided into two groups- Political novels and the Social novels. Gobinda Prasad Sarma has also divided the novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya into two phases in his book Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya: Oupanyasik. These are like the following-

1. Political Novels:

   i) The novels deal with socialism scientifically. (Rajpathe Ringiai, Pratipad, Ranga Megh)

   ii) Novels of patriotism, nationalism, democratic, socialism etc. (Yiaruingam, Mrityunjay, Munisunir Pohor, Kalar Humuniyah.)
1. Non-political Novels or Novels based on Humanity-

i) Socio-economic novels (*Aai, Ballari*)

ii) Novels of evil influence of war on humanity (*Sataghni* and *Kabar Aru Phul*)

iii) Novels based on humanistic thoughts and feelings (*Nasta Chandra, Sinaki Suti, Daini*)

There is no doubt that almost all the novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya are very popular among the readers, but it is his political novels for which provides him a significant place in the Assamese as well as Indian literature. Before going to analyse Bhattacharyya’s position in the Assamese political novels an attempt has been made here to discuss briefly about his political novels.

Political novel, a work of political fiction, is a popular type of social novels. As its name denotes, political novel deals with political events, systems and theories. The political novel often criticizes an existing society or it may present sometimes fantastic reality. The dominant issues of contemporary world which are associated with economics, war, race, gender and justice etc. are employed as recurrent themes in political novels. There are many critics, writers and experts who discuss about the nature of political novel and also define it from different perspectives. Among them Morris Edmund Speare, Irving Howe, Joseph Blotner, Gordon Milne, Michael Wilding etc. are remarkable. Irving Howe in his books *Politics and the Novel* has defined political novel as--

> By political novel I mean a novel in which the political milieu is the dominant setting.²

In 1966 Morris Edmund Speare tried to give an interpretation to the term ‘Political Fiction’. His interpretation is somehow more comprehensive and significant than that of the Howe’s definition. According to Speare--
It is a work of prose fiction which leans rather to “ideas” than to “emotions”; which deals rather with the machinery of lawmaking or with a theory about public conduct than with the merits of any given piece of legislation, and where the main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government.

Whatever definition is given by critics, it is a fact that the novel through which political philosophy or ideals is expressed, in which any political or government policy is criticised, in which characters of political leaders or workers are portrayed are called political novels. However, one thing is clear that though politics is the main element of political novels, the theme, or subject matter of political novel is expressed through humanistic emotions, actions and reactions.

In the history of world literature a considerable number of novels are written on the basis of some contemporary political issues. Tolstoy’s War and Peace, Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms, For Whom the Bell Tolls; Maxim Gorky’s Mother, Boris Pasternak’s Dr. Zhivago, Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities, Carlyle’s French Revolution, Camu’s The Plague etc. are some famous political novels. A great number of political novels, written on the background of freedom struggle have appeared in Indian literature. The outer background for many novels are primarily drawn from some contemporary issues. Sarat Chandra Chattapadhyay’s Pather Dabi (1926), N. C. Padke’s Prabasi, Kanailal Munchi’s Sapna Drasta are some remarkable political novels which are based on the theme of India’s Independence movement. In Assamese literature also a considerable number of novelists tried to write political novels in the Post Independence period. Of course it is known that, two Assamese novelists, Dandinath Kalita and Daibachandra Talukdar, tried to write political novels in pre-independence era. Kalita’s Sadhana is regarded as the first Assamese political novel which was published in 1928. In the post Independence
era, in the field of Assamese literature there emerged many Assamese novelists such as Birinchi Kumar Baruah, Pasupati Bhardwaj, Jogesh Das, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya and so on who have made efforts to write political novels taking some dominant political issues of their times like freedom movement of India, terrors and its aftermath of the Second world war, Naga Revolution etc. etc. Among those novelists, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya has been considered as the best political novelist in the history of Assamese novels, because of his contribution to this arena both in terms of numbers of novels he has written and the intensity of expertise, he has exhibited in his depiction.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya unveils his life and his concept of politics through his political novels. His famous political novels such as *Rajpathe Ringiay*, *Pratipad*, *Ranga Megh*, *Yiaruingam*, *Mrityunjay*, *Munchunir Pohor*, *Kalar Humuniah* etc. are written centering round some contemporary political events. In fact, almost all his novels, whether political or non-political, political events can be found. In this context Gobinda Prasad Sarmah has rightly opined-

> Political activities or problems often appear in his non-political novels; the total humanistic works and deeds are also jerked in the touch of the farthest political waves.\(^4\) (Trans.)

All the best novels of Bhattacharyya are based on some distinct situations of the nation which have left an indelible mark in the nation’s history. In *Rajpathe Ringiay*, conflict for getting freedom and the consequent agitated situation, in *Yiaruingam* the traumatic experience of the Chinese aggression, in *Mrityunjay* the mass movement of 1942, in *Pratipad* the labour strike of Digboi which created storm all over India etc. etc. are depicted in a lucid way. Bhattacharyya himself was an eye witness of all these political events which impressed him a lot. So this novelist who is having intense political consciousness expressed the principles of the contemporary political parties,
government judicial system, his own political thinking, the lifestyle of the people who are extremely disturbed by the unstable political situation through his stories and novels.

From the very childhood political consciousness of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya is very sharp and brilliant. Bhattacharyya is a child of India’s freedom struggle who has witnessed the social, political and economic injustices that prevailed in that time. Bhattacharyya himself says in an autographical writing that –

*I was a child of national revolution and a witness to some of the cruel happenings of the Second World War. As a student, I collected donations for the relief of the striking workers in Digboi in 1939 and also participated in the August rebellion though in a marginal manner. I knew some of the strikers and freedom fighters very closely, I knew the aspirations of the people and their anger at the acts of injustice exploitation and imperialist tyranny. These experiences changed my life and I became wedded to the doctrine of equality which formed the centre of a world outlook. Other auxiliary yet inspirable values like justice, freedom, love and beauty also fascinated me as they fascinated the people of my generation.*

It is observed that the political consciousness of Bhattacharyya is based upon the values like justice, freedom, morality, peace, equality, non-violence etc.. This Assamese writer is a firm believer of socialism. It is felt that he is highly influenced by Marxism. His deep love for his motherland and the Marxian ideology has inspired him to raise his voice for a classless and exploitation free society. The Marxian ideology and deep conviction to socialism is highlighted in his novels like *Rajpathe Ringiyay, Pratipad, Ranga Megh, Sataghni and Mrityunjay*. His political consciousness regarding Indian Independence and socialistic view is very clearly reflected in *Rajpathe Ringiay*. *Bhattacharyya’s attempt to express the political happenings with the help*
of thought and action of Mohan within a single day is noteworthy.\textsuperscript{6} (Trans.)

The novel expresses the dissatisfaction of a few people on freedom achieved after a long struggle through the speech and deeds of the protagonist Mohan. He stands against the freedom and says that it provides liberty to the rich class, the capitalists, landlords, mill owners and the smugglers. The Congress government cannot establish Gandhi’s ideal of socialism. This novel reveals the kindness for the exploited, neglected and discriminated. The socialist attitude of the novelist is expressed through Mohan’s day long activities, rebellious speech, dialogues, thoughts, the incomplete speech among the people, his thinking of freedom and real freedom, the distribution of the announcing leaflets among the people etc. In his \textit{Pratipad} also the influence of Marxism and Socialism on his personality is reflected nicely. Here a revolt is seen against capitalism and colonialism. In his another novel \textit{Mrityunjay} also his socialistic view is expressed through the character of Dhanpur Laskar. Dhanpur here, who is born in a very low class of society raises his voice for a classless society which at the same time is free from all exploitations. Apart from these famous political novels there are many other novels like \textit{Yiaruingam, Munichunir Pohar, Kalar Humuniah} where author’s political consciousness is reflected very nicely.

Bhattacharyya is very much influenced by the leaders like Gandhi, Lohia, Joyprakash and so on. Though like Marx, Bhattacharyya also supports the way of struggle for achieving freedom but he does not take the way of violence. He wants to take up politics as the art of making new man and shaping new society. The novelist tries to establish his own political idealism through his literary works. Perhaps he is the first Assamese novelist who has used directly the contemporary political events as the theme of his novels in a detailed manner. Even he is very much conscious in characterisation in his novels. Characters having psychic conflict have been portrayed for the first time in Assamese
political novels by him. He has not tried only to focus certain feelings or ideals of the characters but also tried to highlight their own individuality as human being.

Bhattacharyya is a great social reformer who always wishes to uproot the failings and frailties of his society. His deep sympathy and love for the victims and the downtroddens of the society are expressed in his novels very beautifully. His novels show his advocacy for social reform. As a great social thinker Bhattacharyya has always raised his voice against the social problems like gender discrimination, untouchability, caste system, etc. His novels whether political or non political deal with the themes like the laborious man, revolution, struggle and social degradation. But behind the writings written on the background of these, the ideals of humanism have also been beautifully described. The evolution of humanism that pervades in the western country influenced the Assamese and other Indian writers as well. For instance, mention may be made to the writings of the Indian writers Premchand, Saratchandra, Mulk Raj Anand, Tarasankar Bondopadhyay, Krishan Chandra etc. In the writings of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya also the aspect of humanism is highlighted in a great manner. Bhattcharyya despite being a writer, is also a socialist and humanist at the same time. His writings bring the essence of his commitment to the society and humanity. In his novels such as Mrityunjay, Pratipad, Rajpathe Ringiyay, Yiaruiningam, Rangamegh, etc. the readers have come across many characters who by their words and works reveal the humanistic attitude very finely. For instance, the humanistic attitude of Gossain that revealed in Mrityunjaya is not merely his personal attitude, but it is the attitude of the novelist also. This kind of humanistic aspects that prevailed in his writings placed his novels in the wide spread scope of the world literature.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya has an extra ordinary talent in creating the background of his novels for which he is able to achieve an exceptional
position in Assamese novel. He narrates the situation with the help of the picturization of the characters and the discourse between them. In this regard Prafulla Kotoky observes--

*Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya has significant proficiency in establishing environment and situation realistically.*

In *Yiaruingam* he narrates nature, activities, life style of the Nagas and the roads and paths of the Naga Hills. In *Aai*, Bhattacharyya portrays a perfect picture of a village where old age, death, decay, diseases, insufficiency, envy, theft, bloodshed, murder etc. can be observed nicely. In *Pratipad*, the realistic picture of different kinds of events, different situations that took place at the time of labour strike at Digboi can also be found.

There is no need to mention that Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya is a realist in its true sense. The story, plot, characters, settings, background, narrative etc. of his novels deal with contemporary experiences. Being a realist, he has the power of narrating each and every small details of life very beautifully. Prafulla Kotoky rightly says-

*Among the Assamese litterateurs of the present era, a few are realist and Birendra Kumar is one of them. In Mrityunjay, his proficiency as a realist is beautifully reflected. Remember the scene of Gossain having tea in the kitchen just before leaving home in the early morning and the narration of how Gossani collected ‘Moran Ginger’, Makardwadj’ and the kisti; the picture of Assamese Hindu’s household system will come into light in front of you.*

This is an example only. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya happen to be an adept explorer of realism with immense excellence in presentation. For this extraordinary skill he has been regarded as one of the most memorable novelists of that era.

In the history of Assamese novel Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya is a genius for his extra ordinary talent of characterization. He is quite efficient in
portraying his characters. Being a liberal and secular human being he loves people with equal importance irrespective of caste, community or religion. Therefore, a tribal girl Dimi becomes the centre of attraction of his novel Mrityunjay. In the words of Dilip Borah--

*Dimi, with the beauty and simplicity of her body and mind dances like a stream of the hills and makes the novel humorous in every moment.*

It is also remarkable that almost all the characters of Yiaruingam, a Sahitya Akademi award winning novel, are taken from the Naga tribe. It is also noticed that characters of different religions, like Goswami, Mohoda Gossain, Nassiruddin, Jebunnissa, Ismile, Dr. Brook, Mr. & Mrs. Flemming, Sandi, Baka etc. have got equal importance in his novels. Anil Chandra Bhattacharyya rightly opines--

*He was having all the qualities of good human being who even used to play ‘tang gutsi’ with the labourers children and thus started his life at Safrai Tea Estate.*

His characters represent almost all the sections of society which is one of the significant aspects of his writings. He has characterized high ranked government officers, political leaders, landlords or English characters as the representative of high class. For example- the leader Choudhury in Ranga Megh, Aikon’s father, a capitalist in Rajpathe Ringiyay, Nalin Duwara in Ballari, Dr. Brook in Yiaruingam, Mr. Higinch, Mr. Flemming, Mr. Gilapsi, Mr. Towler etc. in Pratipad, belong to this class. Again characters like Mahoda Gossain in Mrityunjay, Giasuddin and Chatterjee in Pratipad, Yathinkhuin in Yiaruingam, Basar Mak in Aai, Mindhar in Munichunir Pohar, etc. are representatives of the middle class. To focus the downtrodden, exploited and neglected class of the society, Bhattacharyya portrays the characters like Sandi Ahir, Bodhan, Ismile, Nassiruddin, Ramu, the leper begger Ramachandra etc. in Pratipad,

Bhattacharyya is quite efficient in studying human characters. In the words of Malaya Khaund--

*Study and analysis of human character is an important feature of Bhattacharyya's novel.*  

(Trans.)

Each and every character of Bhattacharyya is successful in presenting their conduct and racial introduction beautifully through their activity and the ways they speak. His characters have their own features. The tribal characters like Dimi, Sharengla, Khutingla, Nazek, Yengmash have highlighted the tribal features by their behaviour, ways of speaking, manner etc. On the other hand, Mahoda Gossain, and a section of Vaisnavite devotees, through their activities and behaviour set the example of real Vaisnavite devotees. For this type of features the characters are seen as the real characters. Moreover he is also remarkable for drawing characters from the real life. While going through his novels, it can be noticed that he has drawn up such a few eminent personalities who remain in the history of undivided greater Assam. Even the novelist met some of these personalities in his own life. Mahoda Gossain, Bhibhiram, Videshelly, Chatterjee, Goswami, Rishang, Khutingla, Sharengla etc. are some of those well known figures of the political environment of that time. His way of portraying those real characters in his novels is very praiseworthy. Therefore, it is evident here that the way that he employs to portray the characters, after picking up them from different classes of society, profession, religion, customs and tradition or their instinctive nature, helps in establishing him a high class novelist.
As a novelist, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya is very much successful in depicting the women characters. His woman characters bear a separate ideology. The woman characters created by this novelist have both strong and weak personality. Subhadra, of Mrityunjay who is raped by the police-military during the Second World war, Sharengla of Yiaruungam, the victim of the brutal harassment of Japanese army, Jebunnisa of Pratipad, the victim of the white Sahib’s lust, the widows of the martyrs who sacrifice their lives in the freedom movement, Mehrunnisa in Kabar Aru Phool, who is raped by the Pakistani army during the ‘Mukti Sangram’ of Bangladesh, etc. are some example of Bhattacharyya’s suffering women. But woman is not always weak in the eyes of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. He highlights woman as the symbol of power as does in Indian tradition.

In the novels of Bhattacharyya the issues of women has been focussed very distinctly. Bhattacharyya has created some women characters, no matter whether they are weak or strong, educated or illiterate, but they could also make indelible impression in Assamese literature. Sharengla in Yiaruungam, Jebunnissa and Pannu in Pratipad, Subhadra, Dimi, Koli Baideu and Gossani in Mrityunjay, Basar Mak in Aai could transform themselves into the women of reality by their own ideas. Sharengla, a Naga young girl has to loss her society, relatives, love etc. as she becomes whore. But after having lost everything, whatever message of great love she has given to the society is really praiseworthy. Sharengla finds the existence of God in Rishang, who has once been her lover. She always utters the great words of the Bible where Jesus Christ says—

\[ \text{Love each other as like I love you all—sacrificing life for the lover is the great love.}^{12} \text{(Trans.)} \]

This kind of message of great love given by a fallen woman like Sharengla makes the entire woman race felt proud of. Therefore, a critic says—
The writer makes the character a great and unforgettable one by the aspects of sacrifice, humanity and womanhood. The same ideal is reflected in the character of Jebunnissa of Pratipad. Like that a few simple and common ordinary woman could reach the height of extraordinary woman by the acts and deeds for the sake of their own love, country and race. The character of Koli Baideu and Dimi of Mrityunjay, Pannu, Lashmi, Nayanmoni of Pratipad, Shareenga of Yiariaungam etc. have been shaped as the symbol of power and idealism. Dimi is Bhattacharyya’s one of the strong woman characters. Even Bhattacharyya, the novelist urges the characters like Gossani to be as powerful as Dimi. In the novel Mrityunjay Gossain wants to meet Gossani and tell her –

"...this stepping out of yours...it is good, you know. Come out further, come and stand in the same row with Dimi. Then your entity as a helpless woman will be transformed. In your mind will be created the might of an able woman. And that power is the real woman."  

While picturising the women characters who are active, intelligent, fluent and mentally firm like Dimi, Bhattacharyya says--- *a competent woman does the work of a hundred men.*

Bhattacharyya is very much inspired by the ideals and writing style of the famous western litterateurs Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Maxim Gorky and so on. Even in portraying the female characters Bhattacharyya is influenced by those litterateurs. In the words of Malaya Khaund-

*The stamps of Natasha, the heroine of Tolstoy’s ‘War and Peace,’ ‘Anna’ of Anna Karenina, the character of Sonia in Dostoevsky’s ‘Crime and Punishment’ and ‘Mother’ of Maxim Gorky can clearly be seen in the characterization of Bhattacharyya’s woman characters. The inner conflict of the character Natasha- whom she would accept*
among Anatole, Andrei and Pierre- the clear picture of this confusing state of mind of Natasha is noticeable in the character of Pannu of Pratipad by Bhattacharyya. The two women characters of Bhattacharyya- Sharengla and Jebunnisa are illuminated by the light of the divine love come to the life of Dostoevsky’s repented prostitute Sonia. Like the Mother of Gorky, Basar Mak or Aai had to struggle a lot in life.16 (Trans.)

It is observed that the characterisation of woman characters has been considered as one of the primary matters of discussion in the world literature. Now a days different issues and problems of woman have been highlighted on the pages of fictions. The Assamese novelist, Bhattacharyya is also concerned about the problems and issues of woman. Being an experienced writer he presents woman in diverse backgrounds of the society. As regards to the characterization of real woman characters, he is able to achieve a suitable place in the Assamese novel.

There is no doubt that Bhattacharyya is a multifaceted literary figure of Assamese literature. This prolific Assamese litterateur is able to get a significant position in Assamese literature mainly for two reasons. First, by editing the journal Ramdhenu, he was successful in incorporating the scope of modernism in Assamese literature. Secondly, he is the first Assamese litterateur, who by writing political novel, is able to introduce the Assamese literature to the world literature. Apart from these, in the art of characterisation, creating environment, background, using language etc. he has showed his efficiency for which he will always be remembered in Assamese literature.

Considering Bhattacharyya’s place in Assamese literature, Prabakar Machwe rightly says--

In Assamese, as in all other Indian languages, there were two sets of stock writers amongst novelist: there was the Saratchandra model, who will sentimentally write about the social ills, sad plight of women and paint either a frustrated hero like Devadasa or a rebel like Sabyasachi; or there was the Mulkraj Anand model, who wrote the
Coolie and Untouchable and did in thirties (what Satyajit Ray did in the fifties by putting Pather Pancholi on world filmscene) i.e. the realistic documentary of Indian poverty and deprivation. The reformer and the rebel combined in some novelists like Premchand in Hindi or V.S. Khandekar in Marathi or Kishenchander in Urdu. But with all these pink and red shades of ‘Social change’, the ‘Socialist’, novel was yet not in picture. People in general public, the common reader or ‘a political don swore by some writers who were according to them Indian prototypes of Victor Hugo or Gorky or Lu Hsum or Uptom Sinclair- novelists like Manik Benerji in Bengal’ or Yaspal in Hindi or P. Kashavadevr in Malayalam, or A.N. Krishna Rao in Kannada. But in Assamese the best novels were Jivanar Batot (Birinchi Kumar Borua) or Dawar Aru Nai (Jogesh Das) representing these two schools. What Birendra did was to discard the old moulds and evolve a new pattern of his own in his Iyaruingam, Shataghni’ Ai and Mrityunjaya.17

Everyone must admit the fact that Bhattacharyya is one of the foremost political novelists in Assamese literature to strengthen the base of the Assamese political novel. The most important aspect of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya’s novel for which he is capable of acquiring a commendable place in the history of Assamese novel is his political consciousness. He has been a distinguished personality among the Assamese for his political novels. It would be plausible to consider him as the best political novelist in Assamese litterature.
References:

7. Prafulla Kotoky. op-cit., p.50.
8. ibid. p.54.
10. Anil Chandra Bhattacharyya. ‘Biren Dar Sannidhyat Pasta Dasak Safair Para ‘Kharghulioloi’ *Katha Guwahati*. p. 84. (Tanguti is an outdoor game played with a wooden ball and a stick) and ‘latoom’ (a child’s top)
15. ibid. p.204.