HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
Chapter-II

Historical Background

We do not find the pure history in a historical fiction. But we can imagine the history after reading such novels. Every social events, war, and period we termed as history when these events become old. Any present war is not history. To be history the events must at least fifty years old. The people of the North-East region have been struggling against various forces from long ago. Novelists of this region try to present such struggle before the readers. Such struggles are prior to the emergence of extremism. In Nagaland context we find A Naga Village Remembered and Mary of Easterine Kire where in the former she writes about the Naga people's struggle with the British and in the latter she writes about the Naga people's struggle with the Japanese. Regarding the Naga people's struggle's with the Japanese, Siddharth Sarma also writes one novel The Grasshopper's Run.

In the same way in Assam's context, prior to extremism is not much remote period. Here insurgent groups emerge after the famous Asom Andolan of 1980's. Jahnavi Baruah's novel, Rebirth expresses an account of the Agitation.

We do not find the pure history in a historical fiction. But we can imagine the history after reading such novels. Every social events, war, and period we termed as history when these were old. Any present war is not history. To be history the events must at least fifty years old. In this regard we can say The Grasshopper's Run written by Siddarth Sarma, Mary and A Naga Village Remembered written by Easterine Kire are historical novels. In these novels we find the description of the period of the British rule in India. We get the description of the freedom struggle of the Naga people in the A
*Naga Village Remembered, Mary* and *The Grasshopper's Run* and the description of the war between the Naga people and the Japanese which became a part of the Second World War.

*A Naga Village Remembered* is an interesting historical novel by Easterine Kire Iralu. She has studied the history of Nagaland well and in the preface of the book we get the mention of some books which she has studied to write the novel.

"Accounts of the siege of Kohima and the battle of Khonoma have been taken from Mrs Cawley's report in Nagas in the 19th Century, Johnstone's Manipur and the Naga Hills and Mackennzie's North East Frontier and Nagaland." (Kire xiv-xv)

The Khonoma village gate is a tourist spot in Nagaland. It bears the memory of war between the British and the brave Naga people. The following passage is taken from the *Tourist Directory on India's North East*:

"The Pride of Khonoma is its ancient bastion approached through a traditional carved gate, up a flight of steep stone steps, and on to the hight point in the village. Here the Naga warrior made their last stand against the British in 1979. A simple white pillar commemorates G.H. Damant, Maj, C.P.Cook, Lt.H.H.Forbes and Sub Maj. Nurbir Sai who died fighting the Nagas in Khonoma."

(Baruwa Ranu 97)

In this novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* we get the setting of Nagaland at the time when it was not an independent land. We get the description of a warrior village. The name of the village is Khonoma. The village is famous for the bravery of
the villagers. They fought very bravely against the British. But at last they had to make a treaty with the British. Their struggle and afterwards the treaty are very vividly described by the novelist. A few extracts from the novel in this regard is given bellow:

"So long as Khonoma is allowed to go unpunished over the murder of Damant, the other villages will make bold to rise against us. The spirit of Khonoma must be quenched." (Kire-82)

This was the decision of the British Government. They fought bravely with the British. But some of them were caught by the Government and were sent to jail. A short description of it from the novel:

"The men who were already serving in the British Government but joined their village men in the attack on shupfu, were given an extra jail term of a year." (Kire 38).

But at last the Nagas were ready for negotiations. Although for some it was a disrespectful matter and they could not pardon themselves for such negations yet they had to give in. They thought about the sacrifice of the dead warriors who fought bravely. The pact would be a betrayal to them. The elders of them pleaded one of the main young leaders named Pelhu for that.

"It is for the sake of our women and children we want you to reconsider. They are suffering so much. There is great mortality and sickness. Is it not better to relent today and live tomorrow?" (Kire 85).
Pelhu, the one of the leaders reluctantly agreed. The peace treaty was signed with the British on 27th March 1880. He signed the treaty on behalf of the other Naga people thinking about the damage which might cause to the Naga people.

Although the novel is about a warrior village yet here we get more about a hero warrior and about his family. The whole village is described with the help of him. In the novel we get many warriors, but Levi is more focused. His son's name is Sato who represented the new generation who welcomes the new religion i.e. Christianity.

This novel can be said to be a historical novel. Here the writer writes about a Naga village named Khonoma which is based on history as the people of the village fought with the British. As the novel is a work of art so we find that the author writes many things of his own. The writer also predicts about the coming society. Here also we find that towards the end of the novel the British spread the Christian religion with the help of the local people. Regarding the relation between the literature and with its age the eminent critic and author Suresh Chand writes the following:

"The relationship between literature and its age is largely confrontational, the one hand it expresses the ethos of its time and on the other hand, it also tries to go beyond the boundaries of its particular age, coming into conflict with all that restricts its growth and expression. All great literature at some level constantly strains against the peripheries imposed by its particular age." (Chand 43)

NE has its glorious history. Such history inspires the novelists. In Assamese literature the renowned Novelist Rajani Kanta Bordoli also wrote many novels on
Assamese history. So this field has possibility in English novels also. Alexander Dumas remark on historical novel is given below:

"What France is waiting for today is a series of novels and plays based upon history. But, alas! French history is so dull, so uninteresting". (Menon)

But we can say that the history of the different states of NE is not dull but interesting. So we have found some historical novels and we hope to find more from the upcoming writers.

In this historical novel, *The Grasshopper's Run* we get a glimpse of the Second World War. Though the novelist focuses on a revenge issue of Naga people - the killing of the grandson of a Naga chief by the Japanese and subsequently the Naga people along with an Assamese boy Gajen Rajkhowa, who was a childhood friend of the Naga Chief's grandson fought bravely with the Japanese and was able to take the revenge by killing the Japanese who had killed the Naga boy. We get the glimpse of the World War II picture through the events of the novel. The author collects the details of history in order to writing the novel. In the acknowledgement of the novel he writes,-

"Historical fiction, like history, is a collaborative effort." (Sarma acknowledged)

The description of the Japanese army preparation for the war gives us a glimpse of the Second World War. The mentions of various kinds of weapons like Short Machine Lee-Enfield or SMLE, mortar etc, suggest the environment of the war. We can say that the author describes the war environment very real like. While the readers read the novel they will assume that they are in the war field. The author describes,-
'Two men with the mortar, two with the machine gun on our right and one with the machine gun in the left. The mortar pit is the one with the radio.' (Sarma163)

Such a short description is given below:

"He estimated the distance between them. The two machine guns were on each corner, the mortar in the middle and there was a large distance between them." (Sarma 156)

In the novel we find how the Naga people were involved in the World War I and II. It is because of the British Indians had to involve in the war. The world war changes the thinking of the Naga people. They began to hate the war. The author writes:

"When they heard about the war they joined the Army, thinking war is some glorious adventure. But then they found that fighting is just a dirty, bloody, hard thing."(Sarma 108)

The forming of club in the society in Nagaland aftermath of the war is the impact of the world war. This was happened at the time when India was still a British colony. Through the war Nagaland first entered into the world stage which we find in the novel, The Grass Hoppers' Run. The author writes:

'World War I had been the Nagas' first big entry into the world's stage. The Labour Crorps members had seen Europe at first-hand and come back to tell their people about the world. A new consciousness was growing in the hills. The corpsmen and educated young Nagas who returned from the war formed the Naga Club, a political society.' (Sarma 108-109.)
The author gives some answer of some questions which may arise in our mind. For example why did the Japanese need Burma and other parts of the surrounding area? The author gives the answer in the following paragraph:

"For its oil fields and mineral reserves. These oil reserves were part of a vast subterranean reservoir extending into Assam, another area which could be held, it feasible." (Sarma 65.)

In the novel we find two detail sketches of history of Nagaland at that time. The dates are like Kohima in 1944, England in 1934 etc. The dates or sketches may be fictional but they create an impression of reality in the mind of the readers. In the maps we get the detail about the places of the British and Japanese quarters, Naga Villages, Roads etc. Thus the colonial India is seen clearly in the novel.

In the novel, The Grass Hoppers' Run we find a fragment of World War in Nagaland. The historical War's memory is still in Kohima which becomes another tourist spot of Nagaland. In the novel, Surface also we find the hero Amit Singh also visited the place while he went to Manipur. The following lines are taken Tourist Directory on India's North East:

"The Kohima cemetery is serene and beautiful...At the base the upper cross there is an inscription which says: 'Here, around the tennis court of the deputy commissioner lie men who fought in the battle of Kohima in which they and their comrades finally halted the invasion of India by the forces of Japan in April 1944.'" (Baruwa 95),
Mary is such a novel where we find the description of the Japanese invasion. At that time Nagaland was in the hands of the British. Although the whole plot of the novel was set against the backdrop of Japanese invasion, the main focus of the novel was on the life of Mary, the protagonist. However the war like situation is pervaded throughout the novel. An extract from the novel is given below:

"All day long we heard the sound of shelling and mortar-fire and we knew the war in Kohima had not ended." (Kire 68)

War destroyed all in Kohima, Nagaland. People hid in distant places. The British fought with the Japanese to defend Nagaland. A description of war scene is given below:

"The thick forest cover had now burned away and there a few leafless trees dotting the hill. Colourful parachutes hung from the branches of some of the trees. The slopes of Garrison Hill looked as though they had been burnt for rice cultivation, so bombed were they."*(Kire 80)

After the war was over, Mary and others saw how their places were destroyed. However after the war new construction was also seen:

"There was no road in the old village before the war. The villagers used the paths between the clan lands. The government decided it was a good time to construct a circular road that ran right round the whole village." (Kire107)
After the war was over the people tried to forget the bad memories of the war. So they indulged in some social activities. The following words from the novels show it clearly:

"These were days of peace and now and people wanted to forget the painful memories of the war so there was a lot of social activity. While the older people were preoccupied with rebuilding the village of Kohima and normalizing life in the town, the younger people just wanted to catch up on the things they had missed out on." (Kire 126)

People wanted peace after the war but their peace was not long lasting after the emergence of the extremist group just after the independence of our country. We will get this in the next chapter.

Prior to extremism was not a good time in Assam also. Assamese people specially the student organisation of Assam raised various issues regarding the exploitation of the State by the centre. In the novel, Rebirth of Jahnavi Baruah we find some short description of the famous Assam Andolan along with the main incident of the story. We get a brief description of the Assam's agitation as the heroine of the novel Kaberi and her cousin directly involved in the agitation. The Agitation was so influential that the people of all sorts except a few involved in it. Specially, the students were involved in the Agitation:

"Those had been the years of Assam Agitation, when ordinary citizens led by young student leaders, still in college and school,
had risen in peaceful protest against their own government.”
(Baruwa 88).

The Agitation of Assam was very big. People have to suffer then and thereafter for some hope of change. There is the description of torture by police on the agitators during Assam Agitation. But the hopes are shattered after the Agitation was over. The aftermath of the Agitation is also written in the novel.

"The same student leaders that led the andolan had formed a political party and entered electoral politics.......But somewhere along the way, this same party had gone the way of all political ones and embraced corruption. (Baruwa 122),

When the result of the agitation was not come as it was expected then after some years insurgent group emerged in Assam. We will find about this in the next chapter of the study in other novels. Jahnavi Barua's novel, Rebirth gives a brief description of Assam's agitation. The heroine, Kaberi and her cousin Bidyut were directly involved in the Agitation. The Agitation was so influential that the people of all sorts except a few involved in it. Especially the students were involved in the Agitation:

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The student groups of Assam act as pressure groups. They raise various issues time to time. They also can get the support of mass people of Assam. In the Assam Andolan almost all people support the movement. We find only about last part of
Assam Andolan in the novel, *Rebirth*. We can see the history of the student organisation in brief in the following paragraph which a writer named Manuj Phukan writes in his book, *Students' Politics in Assam*:

"...the students' organisation of Assam also began giving its priority towards regional issues which became evident when a series of movements were launched by the 'Asom Chatra Sanmilan'(subsequently renamed as All Assam Students' Union in 1967) pertaining to the economic issues as well as the issues related to the protection of the linguistics and cultural identity of the Assamese nation. Some of them were Oil Refinery Movement (1957), Food Agitation (1966), Second Oil Refinery Movement (1969) and 21-Points Movement (1974). Likewise, there were three other historic movements conducted under the leadership of the 'All Assam Student's Union (here-in-after AASU) on the issues of the protection of linguistic and cultural identity of Assam. They were Official Language Movement (1960), Medium Movement (1972) and Foreign National Movement (1979-1985). In all these movements the students of Assam had been capable of mobilising the majority of Assamese masses in support of their endemic demands." (Phukan Manuj 184)

Here in the novel, *Rebirth* we get the Foreign National Movement (1979-1985). Though the date is not given in the novel we come to know about this by the description of the movement.
The Agitation of Assam was a very big historic political event. People have to suffer then and thereafter for some hope of change. There is the description of torture by police on the agitators during Assam Agitation. But the hopes are shattered after the Agitation was over. It was done by the very people who led the movement. But power corrupted them.

In *Khanduma's Curse* of L.W.Bapu also we find reference of politics but that is the politics of old times. We find about a Dzongpon, a high position in society during King's time. The Dzongpon Dorjee Tsongkhapa fell from his glory after the lost of his position. During the Tibetan rule over Monyul the Dzongpons were notorious for adopting corrupt and inflicting cruelty towards their subjects.

In the novels, *ANVR*, *TGHR*, *Mary*, *Rebirth*, and in *KC* we find the fighting spirits of NE people. They fought with the British (*ANVR*), the Japanese (*Mary* and *TGHR*), in *Rebirth* they fought with the Central Govt. and in *KC* they fought with evil i.e. Khandumas. Here we find the feelings of oppression, exploitation in the region, which later on emerged as extremism. This time the dissatisfaction is not for the foreigners but for the Central Govt. which the extremists treat as external force. So they demand not to observe the Independence Day and Republic Day of the country. For them Independence is yet to be achieved.
Works Cited


