Chapter - IV:

Nationalistic Humanistic Discourse:
A Study of Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya and Bharanda Pakshir Jhak
The multifaceted perspectives of nationalistic discourse includes in its scope inter-ethnic relations, assimilation, amalgamation and dissolution of identities but often portrays a marked humanistic principle often ideologically subscribed to by the author. Catherine Belsey in her book *Critical Practice* (1980) while discussing the theme of humanism, refers to the author who can express the reality of experience in a discourse: ‘... the theory that literature reflects the reality of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who expresses it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognize it as true’ (Pg 7). Belsey places her arguments on the central premise that “man is the origin and source of meaning, of action and of history” (ibid) which she refers to as the basis of humanism. Literature is testimony to the fact that humanistic concerns have always found reflection in literary productions highlighting the larger social role of literary artists. The anthropocentric concept of man was the very basis of continental writers until the notion of ‘man’ as a divine creation was disturbed by the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859). In the post-modern period, the basis of humanism has been a consistently turbulent one because as Jean-Francois Lyotard puts it, the horrors of twentieth century betray our faith in the essential unity of the human race. This aspect is particularly manifest in the construct of ‘nation’ where many groups and ethnic communities vie for significant space in literary productions. Quoting Belsey, it can be said that writers represent their experience/s in discourse which others construe as true, highlighting the objectivity of such experience/s. Novelists in the post-modern period have endeavoured to portray humanistic concerns which does not necessarily correspond to the ‘reality’ of experience, but portrays often
the ideological stance of the novelist. The social role of a novelist is interspersed with subjective comments rendering a particular novel as the social document as the novelist sees it. In such delineations, moral and societal concerns are also highlighted particularly when the concept of a 'nation' is sought to be projected. Umakanta Sarma is a prolific writer in Assamese who has a penchant for treating social issues with a humanistic outlook. His novels are testimony to the fact that they represent the complex socio-ethnic dimensions of the variegated life of the North East in all its uniqueness and variety which often showcase the inter-ethnic strife and persecution of ethnic communities of the region. However, it is worth mentioning that the humane concerns of the novelist do not reduce some of his novels to treatises on ethnic tensions. As Patrick Fuery and Nick Mansfield say:

Humanism, in its broadest definition, sees the identification and fulfillment of a universal human nature as the purpose of cultural work. According to humanism, despite differences across time, place, culture, gender, and ethnicity, we all share certain human qualities that both define us and draw us together. These qualities are always at risk from (among other things) political extremism, intolerance, and cultural degeneracy, and it is the role of the humanities to bolster them and ease their way through history. (quoted in Cultural Studies and Critical Theory; 2001 (reprint), Pg. 5)

The role of the author is precarious specially when he is exposed to social turmoils and political discords making it even more difficult for him to pursue his humanistic ideology. In multi-ethnic societies where pressures and pulls are more intense and localized, subjectivity and identity concerns often tend to outweigh or transcend humanistic concerns sought to be depicted by an author. Umakanta
Sarma grapples with such concerns in his novels *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* and *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak*, the two works by the novelist taken up for the purpose of the present study, which depict two contrastive situations of the North East. The fragile constructs of inter-ethnic relationship is visualized by the author from two different perspectives in which *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* depicts a transition from critical inter-ethnic enquiry to one of supposed assimilation and acculturation, while *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* starts off with perfect inter-ethnic peace which ultimately degenerates to strong internecine hatred. Assamese being the predominantly literary medium of expressing the complex ethnic dynamics of the North East immediately after independence was used by Umakanta Sarma as a medium to integrate into the Indian mainstream of constructing a ‘nation’. It is, therefore, a matter of interrogation whether the author’s avowed and zealous nationalistic humanistic discourse in both the novels succeed or betray the intentions of the author.

*Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is Umakanta Sarma’s magnum opus which encompasses three generations of tea-garden labourers who are lured into Assam with promises of bright and prosperous future. The background of the novel similar to some other novels of the region is set in pre-independence India when the tea plantation industry was gaining foothold in Assam due to the encouragement of the British owners. The necessity of cheap labour was mainly satisfied by importing labourers from the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. In the novel, six hundred such people crammed in four coaches of a railway train arrived in Goalanda on 12th June, 1886, for onward journey by boat to Dhubri. The ‘coolies’ were guarded by sardars
zealously so that no one could escape. Banha with four of his family members is part of the group and in a leisurely moment he thought of his father and grandfather who died of starvation and now his sister-in-law and two elder sisters were exploited by the zamindars, how a homeland was only a name for him and he waited with bated breath for the 'golden' land. Banha unites the past and the future through the imagery of land, through an authorial intrusion:

A land of hard earth, with the fields of maize and rice, with corns and vegetables, and rows and rows of trees. This, his homeland was familiar to him. Now, he had left behind this familiar land and come out in search of the golden land, promised to him. And, one had to bear the suffering for a while, before reaching the golden land. (Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya (tr.) Pg. 6)

The utopian dreams turn into a nightmare as one of his daughters go missing as also does Magho's wife, and both cannot be traced. Poverty, stench, filth encompass the entire atmosphere as the 'coolies' wait to be ferried to Dhubri. Even in the gloomy atmosphere, human relationship develop — between Tulsi, Banha's son and Kalondi who is described by the author as:

Kalondi was a slender build. Naturally she was dirty with black patches of mud, like all the rest. This was their mark of identity, identity as tea garden labourers, as coolies. (Ibid; Pg. 18)

The question of identity is raised by the author in the early pages of the novel and developed by him with references to the past life of the labourers. The journey from Goalanda by a steam boat is also beset with human tragedy as many people, men, women and children die because of disease and suffering and the corpses are thrown overboard. The cruise along the Meghna and Padma
thus destroys many a family, the sense of futility is overbearing – 'After all, what would be the purpose of working in Assam gardens, if they lose their young and dear ones in the flooding river before their own eyes' (Ibid, Pg. 25). The lure of earning money and leading a good life in Assam was proving costly which was compounded more by the behaviour of the sardars with their ruthless treatment of the labourers. Banha’s wife also dies during the journey and the human tragedy does not seem to be relenting. The ordeal ended when the labourers reached the lush green Rupahijan Tea Estate surrounded by hills and mountain streams. The river Chadini stands testimony to all the events that are to unfold as the novel progresses. The first encounter of the labourers with the local Assamese people take place, each group wary of the other at first, but they soon converse freely and frankly. The author intervenes at this stage:

Their talk was frank and simple and cordial, Imperceptibly, there grew a bond of amity and kinship never to be shaken. (Ibid; Pg. 56)

The author’s humanistic concerns are demonstrated across the discourse of the novel in varying perspectives. In the display of human relationships, while depicting the plight of the labourers against the sardars, Umakanta Sarma builds up the cohesiveness of the group as they grapple with starvation, insufficient clothing, missing and dead relatives, stench, filth, squalor and constant abuse. The unity of labourers and the capacity to share each other’s sorrows and sufferings even in the midst of insurmountable difficulties marks out the first phase of the novel. Tulsi and Kalondi’s attachment which develops in the background of human frailty and suffering is graphically depicted by the author. The second and the more prominent humanistic perspective is inextricably linked
up with the concern of the 'nation'. The chance meeting of a group of labourers with the Assamese people and their frank exchange of opinions underlie an authorial concern which is reinforced by his comment referred to above. The futuristic and prophetic statement is carried to its logical conclusion amid the twists and turns in the novel. The English characters, like the manager of Rupahijan Tea Estate, his wife and others are introduced by the novelist to serve as a contrast in his avowed aim of consolidating the concept of nation by excluding the English. Mrs. Fedrick's remark to Tulsi – "You are being impudent from the start. You are a scoundrel, a bully, an abominable coolie. You pig", (ibid, Pg. 61) and Fredrick's attitude towards the labourers – "They didn't even resent a beating from him, and they accepted it as something they deserved" (ibid, Pg. 59), is mainly aimed at consolidating the nationalistic paradigm involving the labourers, the Assamese and the Muslims represented by Dehjur and Mansur, to the exclusion of the English. The exclusivist metaphor is strengthened by the author:

There's nothing unusual is whipping coolies even on negligible reasons or in absence of any reason. Old or young, male and female, boys and girls, they are all used to regular beatings. It is part of the garden discipline. (Ibid; Pg. 69)

Exploitation of the female labour force and other methods of suppression and subjugation are used by the owners of Rupahijan Tea Estate as tools against the labourers to demand servitude. At this point in the novel, the discourse not only sharpens the division between the English owners and the labourers, but also reflects on the divide that had cropped up between the older and younger generation of labourers. As the labourers entrenched themselves in the tea
garden attaining some kind of social security, they begin to contemplate on and stress upon their culture and heritage. The apparent neglect of religious customs by the younger generation in favour of economic considerations irks the elders like Banha, Gajanan and others. The traditions and cultural characteristics of the labourers are stressed again and again in the course of the discourse signifying the apparent aims of the author to demonstrate the sense of social security and consolidation they have gained over the years during their stay in Assam. Taking the model of Fredrik Barth (1969) regarding the requisites of an ethnic group, it can be concluded that the tea-labour community in the novel *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* gradually due to their prolonged stay in Assam exhibit marked ethnic tendencies to be designated as a distinct ethnic group. Barth postulates four attributes of ethnic identification which includes biological self-perpetuation, sharing of fundamental cultural values realized in overt unity in cultural forms, making a field of communication and interaction of its own, and, being identified by itself and others as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order. All the four attributes of the Barthian paradigm are manifest in the social dynamics of the labourers in Rupahijan Tea Estate. In the course of the novel, which encompasses three generations, the third generation is invariably born and bred up in the tea-estate. Cultural specificities are clearly pointed out by the author in the form of religious celebrations like Karam Puja and cultural events like the *jhumur* dance in which the labourers very enthusiastically participate. Communication and interaction among them are peculiarly their own in which is reflected those minute specificities which showcase the labourers’ unique social order. That they are designated as
“coolies” by the English owners of the tea-estate or by other employees points to the categorization of the labourers into a distinct group. The distinction in theoretical parlance refers to the ‘boundary’ that social groups maintain for inter-ethnic solidarity. As Roxy Harris and Ben Rampton emphasize in the introduction to their edited volume, *The Language, Ethnicity and Race Reader:*

... ethnicity is viewed more as a relatively flexible resource that individuals and group use in the negotiation of social boundaries, aligning themselves with some people and institutions, dissociating from others, and this is sometimes described as a ‘roUtes’ rather than a ‘roOts’ conception of ethnicity (2003; Pg. 5)

Umakanta Sarma’s overt nationalistic perspective is sought to be reinforced by the consolidation of the labourers in Rupahijan Tea Estate and in the assimilative gestures that the labourers undertake with the local Assamese population. The author illustrates this point with two fine examples drawn from socio-religious and cultural perspectives. While Banha thinks about the Karam Puja to be performed outside the lines where the labourers lived, the author speaks through the old man to demonstrate his assimilative ideals:

Abruptly, the memory of the ‘Nam-Ghar’, the village chapel, they saw years ago, struck him sharply. How strange, he thought; the Namghar too had no walls, the hall was open on all sides. And what’s more, it was also located on the outskirts of the village, and not in the center of the village. Thus, the two situations were alike, the situation in their estate and in the villages nearby . . . (*Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* (tr.). Pg. 103)

The reference to the iconic symbol of Assamese religious identity is invoked by the Namghar and sought to be exemplified in the labourers’ place of worship, a
deliberate ploy of the novelist at forging a larger assimilative unity. The socio-religious metaphor is replicated in a cultural context when girls from the labour community develop a keen liking for the 'mekhla' worn by Assamese women. Timki, Banha’s daughter who wanted to buy a *mekhla* from a village market met with an astonished cry of the shop owner:

Mekhla! A tea-garden girl doesn’t wear it, only the Assamese girls do. You can’t get *mekhla* here. Oh, but wait, it is something like a lungi. Now don’t keep standing, sit down, I’ll show you a number of them, for you to choose from. (Ibid; Pg. 76)

The symbolic appropriation of the mekhla and lungi metaphorically denote a cultural synthesis that gradually sweeps over the labourers of Rupahijan Tea Estate mainly due to their prolonged contact with the local Assamese population. However, such assimilative tendencies are not without a parallel dissimilative stance which simultaneously develops as contacts and social gatherings grow more closer between the labourers and the Assamese. Bhola’s shop which served as a joint for people from all sections of the composite society is also a forum for interaction. During a drinking bout in one such occasion, Tulsi remarks, “I came here intending to relax. But the very sight of these Assamese fellows has been enough to drive me out. I am beginning to dislike them more and more” (Ibid; Pg. 198). Assimilation is a variable process and not an absolute and finality to be generalized in the context of multi-ethnic societies. The tea labourer – Assamese relations in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* displays both assimilative and dissimilative characteristicssignifying the importance of the ethno-critical paradigm. Ethnicity encompasses both these concepts in defining and consolidating the 'boundary'
which is crucial to the analysis of inter-ethnic relations. Prolonged contact and the development of an intimate bond between two ethnic groups often results in attempts at comparison and contrast, and analysis of dominant-minority debates. The tea-garden labourers depicted in Umakanta Sarma’s novel were originally poor peasants in their distant homeland but due to prolonged and continuous stay in the Rupahijan Tea Estate, they develop their unique culture and religious practices which undergoes a synthesis due to the contacts with the Assamese people. Thus, alongside exclusivist tendencies exhibited by some labourers like Tulsi in isolated situations, there is also a harmonious blending in religious and cultural aspects. In this respect, Harka Bahadur Chhetri makes the following observation:

Cultures are enriched by automatic adoption from other cultures. Thus, the present Assamese culture has great influence on other sectorial cultures of the multi-lingual people of Assam ... As there was no particular geographical Assam and Assamese culture in the past, the process of adoption and assimilation created the present culture of Assam in which the multi-cultured gem is presented as the new product. (quoted in Adivasis and the Culture of Assam; 2005, Pg. 86-87).

Multiculturalism also breeds an undercurrent of isolation and hegemonic dislike towards the host culture arising out of a growing sense of individual group identity. The tea-garden labourers even through prolonged stay cannot identify with the land of Assam intimately because the historical antecedents of both the laborers as a group and the Assamese are significantly different. The humane touch of the novelist reflects in the discourse whenever there is an apparent
crisis unfolding in the chain of events and the same is diluted by references to
the smaller incidents of social life and physical frolics of the labourers.

Amidst a variety of characters, Umakanta Sarma traces the history of
three generations of tea-garden labourers from the moment they land in Assam
in search of their ‘promised land’. It is best exemplified by Banha, Tulsi and Arjun
who exhibit the changing world order of the Rupahijan Tea Estate. Banha at first
is nostalgic about the land that he and his family have left behind for Assam. His
son Tulsi has little or no remembrance of the past and the tea estate becomes
his adoptive home. And the twists and turns of fortune of Tulsi are inextricably
linked up with the changes that take place in the tea-estate over the years.
Arjun, Tulsi’s son and Banha’s grandson, who is born in the tea estate signifies
the complete break with Banha’s past and the rootedness in a cultural space
called Assam – ‘our motherland’ (1999; Pg. 341). Banha’s death, Tulsi’s marriage
to Kalondi and Arjun’s birth, all takes place in the tea estate which is symbolic of
the evolution of a distinct ethnic order in the cultural mosaic called Assam. In
course of time, due to continuous contact with the local Assamese people, the
labourers develop assimilative tendencies best manifested in religious and
ritualistic occasions. This furthers the cause of the novelist to display the
compositeness of Assam and carry his ideological concerns forward. The
influence of Assamese culture on the labourers is tremendous as it had been with
other groups:

The Adivasi people in general and Santhals in particular have been greatly influenced by the Assamese culture in many ways.
The influence of education, festivals of the year, social co-
operation, literature and language are the different elements
that have influenced them more or less in different places of Assam. (quoted in Adivasis and the Culture of Assam by H.B. Chhetri; 2005, Pg. 87)

The nationalistic humanistic discourse of the novel thus places human concerns in the backdrop of the evolving sense of a nation. The struggle for Indian independence finds an echo in the novel and it touches the frontiers of Indian experience – the Rupahijan Tea Estate. It is a deliberate attempt on the part of author to integrate the tea-garden labourers with the action taking place in mainland India. The reference to 'Bande Mataram' – the national song of India and to Gandhiji, reinforces the author's agenda through Arjun and Rumni, the two symbolic representatives of the labour community who have no idea 'as to why and how the people want to fight the British' (1999; Pg. 335). The isolated and insular life of the tea-garden is given a wider perspective, the role it should play, however insignificant, in building the 'nation', thereby ensuring a space for itself in the larger mainstream. Thus, when Cheniram, the pot bellied priest says to Tulsi and Kalondi, 'you may as well be reminded that, this is Assam, a land of exorcism and of mantras' (Ibid; Pg. 186), he is ironically articulating the sense of exotica embedded in the psyche of mainland India about North East in general.

The author is well aware of the fact, the articulation of which is necessary to simultaneously perpetuate and dispel the myth of exoticism to define the periphery in terms of a supposed core. Even the periphery has its 'boundaries' which are fragile and tenuous to sustain the pressures and pulls of ethnic assimilation. Referring to the proposed merger of Assam with Bengal, Ratan who is an Assamese says to Bishnath, a labourer:
We live in Assam and so do you. That's why you should know if important changes take place in Assam affecting our life. When I say 'we', this 'we' includes us as well as you. Our prosperity and adversity are inter-linked, and so if the state is inflicted then it is bound to inflict both you and me. (Ibid, Pg. 205)

The fact is that the labourers must be reminded of their larger role in a multi-ethnic set up because issues of importance do not equally touch or affect the two ethnic groups. In the instant case, the threat is the lurking fear of being swamped by the culture and ideology of the Bengalis once Assam is amalgamated with Bengal. The threat encompasses both the Assamese and the labourers whose 'prosperity and adversity are interlinked'. The author very deftly illustrates this fact signifying the growing importance of the tea-garden labourers to be considered as an ethnic group vis-à-vis the Assamese people, and the recognition and legitimation accorded by the major ethnic group to the labourers. This is sought to be reinforced in the discourse by references to inter-ethnic marriage between a labour girl Bishni and Chitta for the latter will “come here with a few friends, wed you, and take you home” (Ibid; Pg. 274).

The blurring of ethnic boundaries to showcase the level of assimilation and integration is most vigorously portrayed in the depiction of Arjun, Tulsi's son, the representative of third generation of labour community who is born in Rupahijan Tea Estate. Tulsi's contention that the labourers and their generations will be coolies is firmly resisted by Arjun – ”I am not a coolie. I go to school. I am a student, not a coolie” (Ibid; Pg. 286) and this notion is supported by others in the novel. The mental orientation of the third generation of labourers undergoes a sea-change for they are willing to be educated and take up professions other
than that of a labourer. But High School education for children of coolies are not feasible, “... the general public outside the garden didn’t want any coolie boy or girl to be admitted into their school” (Ibid; Pg. 300). The effort of the author at forging a larger assimilative identity is thwarted again in the discourse for the apparent complexities regarding the identification of labourers outside the tea-garden, a fact illustrated by an authorial comment:

The first one year in the school, was quite tough, troublesome and insulting to Arjun. He was teased, taunted and even physically tormented most of the time just because he was a coolie, pushing him to the utmost limit of his patience. He sat alone in the last row of benches, and didn’t try to make friends with any of his classmates. He became an object of ridicule because of his speech which was in a mixed-tongue, because of his dress which consisted of a very short half-pant and a blue shirt apparently a wee bit too large for him, and because of his peculiar intonation in reading. (Ibid; Pg. 301)

The assimilation and integration achieved in the tea-estate is not replicated outside it for Arjun is viewed with contempt and ridicule not only by the students but also by his Assamese subject teacher who enquires,”... I am not interested to know if you are coolies or mazdoors. I asked you, what class of Bangal you are, Uriya, Bihari, Chautal or what?” (Ibid; Pg 301-302) But Arjun not exposed to hegemonic ideologies and being brought up in a comparatively better environment than his father and grandfather, replies:

I am sorry Sa’ab... I am not quite familiar with these names. My parents and others too often say that we are Assamese. I believe I am an Assamese. (Ibid; Pg. 302, emphasis mine).
This belief of Arjun differentiates the third generation of labourers from the others, illustrating the intention of the author in bringing about total integration towards the end of the novel. The categorical assertion by Arjun also highlights the change that has come over Rupahijan Tea Estate due to prolonged contact with its immediate outside world. This transformation in Arjun also has its ramifications on the culture and society of the labourers, for his endeavour to become a ‘babu’ was a direct insult to the labour community. Thus, fault lines in the discourse appear whenever the author seemingly attempts to achieve complete and total integration and assimilation. Arjun thus is torn between his identity at school and at home and ‘he was hardly prepared for such a situation, a ghetto of a sort, into the confines of which he had been thrown’ (Ibid; Pg. 302). But his meritorious activities in school do not go unnoticed. Even his Assamese teachers speak highly of him and Rishi Master, the maths teacher is apprehensive that a boy ‘of a rather neglected community’ might be targeted by other boys because of Arjun’s lower status, that of a mazdoor. He offers to help Arjun:

... but your classmates are sure to envy you. As a result, they would try to hurt you with abuses, and if you react, with slaps. Finally, continue your studies at all costs. Should there be any difficulties in respect of money or books, and should you be in trouble in any other way, feel free to come to me any day, any time. I know you’ll rise, you are bright. (Ibid; Pg. 306).

The inter-ethnic relations between the Assamese and the tea-garden labourers are given a new dimension, the factor being the academic merit of a member of the labour community. The overriding concept of humanism is invoked by the
The overwhelming influence of the majority Assamese community results in the gradual appropriation of many cultural traits of the labourers. The significant and dominating acculturation process that manifests when two ethnic groups interact, with the majority ethnic group holding considerable sway over the minority group, noticeable changes occur, often to the strong dislike and consternation of members of the minority group. When Magho says:

All our traditional songs are lost. None would care to sing our 'tushu' any longer. Our Dholak and Madal would soon be disbanded, we are lost, (Ibid; Pg. 326).

he is voicing the concerns of the older generation of labourers for whom culture and tradition are important markers of identity. This idea however is not subscribed to by the younger generation of labourers who opine that such acculturative influences, 'is the way of human progress' (Ibid, Pg. 326). The discourse here clearly oscillates between two contrastive positions portrayed by two generations of labourers, and the author apparently acknowledges both the viewpoints. The trappings of modernization affect the third generation of the labourers who are willing to accommodate the winds of change that are
sweeping over the Rupahijan tea-estate, while keeping the traditional ethnic culture intact, for, as Rumni, a younger generation labour girl says:

... we abandon a few things and welcome others. Yet none can afford to be indifferent to his heritage. For example, we won't abandon *Jhumur*, nor *Tushu* songs. Should you create an occasion, I will dance. (Ibid; Pg. 326).

The primordial ethnic consciousness rooted in traditional beliefs manifests itself even as modernization casts its spell on the labourers. A subconscious identity concern is palpably visible in the urge to associate with ethnic artifacts inspite of the fact that the majority ethnic influence that of the Assamese, has significantly altered and even affected the life of the labourers. In a query by the maths teacher, Rishi Master, about the nature of language that *mazdoor* students speak, Arjun says:

Sir, we don’t have a separate mother tongue. We speak Assamese, our own Assamese which may not conform to standard Assamese in all respects. (Ibid; Pg. 332).

The integration is total and complete and it has taken three generations to achieve such an acculturation. The majority ethnic language is appropriated by the labourers due to larger and more sustained social contact. Towards the end of the novel *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, the discourse is more appropriative than ever before to justify and indicate the ideological stance of the novelist. The humanistic principles are given precedence over feelings of narrow nationalism and sectarian ideals which are harboured by some members of both the ethnic groups depicted in the novel. The viewpoint of the author, however is, mainly mirrored through the life of the tea-garden labourers and his concerns about
their plight in the beginning and their consolidation in the latter part of the novel are carefully delineated to depict the evolution and entrenchment of a new ethnic order in the land called Assam. Through the sorrows, sufferings and calamities that befall the labourers as they land in Assam, Umakanta Sarma has all along the course of the novel meticulously depicted with humane sympathy their concerns and prejudices and their relationship with the local Assamese population.

The nationalistic perspective is accorded in the discourse through the reference to the struggle for Indian independence with reference to India’s national song – ‘Bande Mataram’ and Mahatma Gandhi, which also touches the Rupahijan Tea Estate and affects the labourers. Another striking nationalistic paradigm evoked by the author in the discourse, is the river image. The image of rivers is constantly referred to by the author in order to accord a nationalistic character to a local subject. The North East is thus sought to be merged through the discourse, with the great Indian mainstream, an avowed aim of many novelists of the time, with frequent references to rivers – the uncharted watery mass which knows no boundaries but unites all in the process of their flow. The nationalistic perspective is best described in the following lines, through the river metaphor where the North East and mainland India seem to merge:

The vast land-mass of the country loosened and burst and squeezed itself, as it were, into a ball like the glaring sun. Through the womb, ran a stream like Chadini, which surged upwards to the surface, and sweeping the plains, re-entered the womb, like the river Saraswati. Perhaps it would flow to meet Ganga and Yamuna, or Indus or Kaveri – who knows! The
same spirit of running, rushing and mingling together, on the surface as well as underneath. (Ibid; Pg. 354-355).

Symbolically, the river metaphor signifies the harmony achieved between the tea-garden labourers and the local Assamese population besides giving a 'national' dimension to the situation. It also suggests the composite unity of the 'Indian nation' which ideologically suits the purpose of the author. Discordant and oppositional situations are apparently tackled by the author in the discourse, to forge a larger unity, but the discourse also showcases the fragile unity which often threatens the social structure that evolves out of sustained contact between the Assamese and the tea-garden labourers. Apprehensions in the minds of the first batch of labourers about the land called Assam, are never allowed to take up center-stage in the discourse and this persistent effort of the author, though largely successful, is not without its counterpoints and manifests in the novel too often intermittently not only in the speech and behaviour of three generations of labourers but also in the attitude of the Assamese population. The cultural divide is also sharply delineated with the appropriation largely affecting the labourers in dress, rituals, religious ceremonies and language. The oppression meted out to the first generation of labourers during their journey to Assam, and replicated in the Rupahijan Tea Estate by the English owners and managers and faced with the onslaught of Assamese culture and language, it is very natural for the labourers to perceive a series of dominating influences over them which has a significant bearing on their culture. And often these dominating influences are oppressive in nature, a fact which peeps up in
the discourse of the novel, and psychologically affects some characters. In this connection J. Milton Yinger observes:

An oppressed group may be acculturated to the “ideal” culture of the dominant group while suffering under the “operative” or “real” culture. If the oppressed resent and protest against their treatment, they may be regarded as uncivilized and uncultured while they regard themselves as having been too trusting, too well acculturated to the ideal cultural patterns. (quoted in *Ethnicity*, 1997, Pg. 81).

Apprehensions and doubts plague the minds of the labourers as they come into contact with the oppressive English owners of Rupahijan Tea Estate and also the ethnic Assamese majority. And this palpable undercurrent of resentment and the important question of identity and loss of traditional values are too often voiced by the labourers. The author has endeavoured to dilute such issues by his deft and immaculate handling of the discourse, but the intricacies of inter-ethnic relations often take up center stage to upstage and thwart the humanistic creed of the author. Thus, inspite of the best intentions of the author, the sharp division between the two ethnic groups – the labourers and the Assamese, are visibly discernible in the discourse and when towards the end of the novel Rumni quotes a rhyme:

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Soil of Assam land
Moist and cool
Foot will slip
If you fool. (1999; Pg. 365)
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she is metaphorically alluding to the all absorbing power of the land of Assam to accommodate and sustain while simultaneously stressing the need to maintain
the standards and levels of accommodation and sustenance. It is pertinent to mention here that in the latter part of the novel the appropriative stance of the author is better articulated to suit his nationalistic aspirations. The river imagery, the reference to India’s freedom movement, the acculturation of the labourers and references to inter-ethnic marriage dominate this part of the novel signifying a deliberate attempt by the author to steer clear of inter-ethnic divisions that seemingly threaten the humanistic edifice of the novel and help perpetuate the inter-ethnic divide. Apart from the mutual interactions between the tea-garden labourers and the Assamese, the discourse does not venture into the intricacies of inter-ethnic relations or portray dissensions and strifes. And yet the complex dynamics of inter-ethnic elations are manifest in the discourse and often downplayed by the author by subtle touches of humanism and the overbearing sense of nationalism.

The second novel of Umakanta Sarma taken up for the purpose of the study, Bharanda Pakshir Jhak also portrays the complex relations between the Assamese and the Bodos who have been living together in Assam for centuries. The levels of acculturation and assimilation of the Bodos into the greater Assamese community is probed by the author and ironically towards the end of the novel the division seems complete. The forces of nationalism and deliberate and often forced authorial interventions in the discourse do little to showcase the inter-ethnic unity which the author originally set out to achieve. Foucault’s observation in this context is relevant:

We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an
effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (quoted in The History of Sexuality An Introduction, Vol. 2, 1978; Pg. 100-101).

The discourse in Bhairanda Pakshir Jhak confirms to Foucault’s observation about the fragility and the opposing nature inherent in a discourse inspite of the best attempts of the author to forge a unity through the depiction of the Bodo-Assamese problem. The complexities of the inter-ethnic dynamics and the importance of the ‘boundary’ in Fredrik Barth’s terms are two areas of interest in the novel and even the humanistic concerns of the author are apparently negated in the process. Inter-ethnic solidarity and its preservation has been a theme of many novels of the North East and authors have endeavoured to portray the ethnic mosaic of the region in all its complexity and variety. The social role and the larger responsibilities of these authors lay in depicting humane concerns above the constraints of a complex inter-ethnic set up and the accompanying intermittent discords and strifes that have rocked the region from time to time. The Bodo-Assamese imbroglio in the post-independence phase has been tumultuous particularly because of alienation of tribal land and forests by successive governments in Assam. In 1954, the Assam Tribal League was dissolved and in 1967, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam was formed to fight for the rights of the Bodo-Kacharis which included among others the formation of a separate state within the Indian Union to safeguard their distinct ethnic and cultural identity. It is in this background that Bhairanda Pakshir Jhak was
published in December 1992 when the Bodo agitation was at its peak. In such a highly surcharged socio-political scenario, the literary compulsions of the author and his larger social role allied with the desire of portraying the inter-ethnic relations in the nationalistic perspective, does not reduce the novel to a mere treatise on ethnic tensions. On the other hand, the novel is a wonderful case study of the ethnic tensions which engulf the Bodo society in the face of cultural onslaught of the dominant Assamese community. The spirit of tolerance, amity and interdependence harboured by the older generation of Bodos are challenged by the younger generation, some of whom rise in rebellion against the so-called hegemonistic dispensation perpetrated by the Assamese majority. The ethnic boundary is sought to be redrawn in the new power equation and this forms the crux of the novel. The pacifists and rationalists are increasingly isolated and gradually outnumbered. Authorial interventions and a supposed authorial mouthpiece to douse tensions in the discourse come to nought. Some characters seem to outgrow their designed stature and even situations seemingly spiral out of control of the author, and the sharp divisions between the Bodos and the Assamese attain wider proportions. J. Milton Yinger makes an appropriate remark in this regard:

Although there are powerful forces toward assimilation in many societies, groups can become more dissimilar under some conditions. Cultural lines of distinction that seemed to be fading are sometimes renewed; language differences can increase; and identities can shift back toward ancestral groups. (quoted in *Ethnicity*, 1997; Pg. 41).
The younger generation of Bodos discovers the necessity of reinventing their primordial cultural beliefs in an attempt to consolidate and maintain the ethnic boundary. The intra-ethnic equation of the Bodos is also highlighted in the process and the rationalistic beliefs are increasingly sidelined at the cost of more fundamental ones. It highlights the failure of the concept of a greater Assamese nationality and evolution of a discourse of fracture and mutual exclusion, perhaps ingrained in any fictional work of the North East, negating the concept of appropriation which the author wanted to portray in the novel *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak*.

The description of two villages Seshakuli and Ragapara, and their inhabitants initiates the reader into the novel. The smaller villages in the vicinity and the composite population also find mention in which there are the Nepalese, the Bodos, Koch, Keot and Haloi and some Brahmin families. In the early part of the novel, Umakanta Sarma gives several instances of the peaceful existence of these different communities. Bachiram, a Bodo and Tikaram, a Nepalese is portrayed as the symbol of unity, and their friendship transcends the confines of their ethnic status. The first signs of conflict arise in the novel when the preparations for *Kherai Puja* of the Bodos begin at Seshakhuli. Alit, a younger generation Bodo with his two friends Amar and Rajan approach a non-Bodo shopkeeper for subscription for the puja. The shopkeeper says:

*Kherai-puja* is the concern of you Bodo-Kacharis, ... what have we got to do with that? How am I to pay donation for the purpose? (‘The Bharandas’ (tr.); Pg. 19).
The attitude of the shopkeeper initiates the conflict in the novel and sparks off a chain of reactions in the village. While Alit and his friends find no justification of the shopkeeper’s remark simply because he has been earning his livelihood by staying among the Bodos, the older generation represented by Bachiram is furious about the begging for donations for conduct of Kherai-puja. Tikaram considers the united spirit of all communities living in the area and sees no reason why there should be any opposition for donations for a puja of the Bodos. Gaurinath Gossain, the priest finds nothing wrong with donation seeking and he clearly sides with the younger generation and when the elders complain to him about the incident. Gaurinath says: ‘You look backwards, these young men look forward’ (Ibid, Pg. 22) and this sum up his support for the cause. The drawbacks of the Bodos in their attitude towards other communities are also discussed and Ranen dismisses the issue as an isolated incident, which perhaps does not have the sanction of the other people of the shopkeeper’s community. But he is equally apprehensive because the shopkeepers may be voicing the sentiments of other people. Therefore, the right thing to do under the state of circumstances is to strengthen the ethnic order, ‘to elevate our songs and dances including the “deodhani” dance to a higher standard’ (Ibid; Pg. 24). The discourse here stresses on the importance of the Bodo identity which has been threatened for the first time in the novel. The cultural agenda is pushed forward by Ranen to consolidate the ethnic status of the Bodos by properly codifying them with the help of the priest Gaurinath. The author also very significantly vouches for the nationalistic agenda through Ranen:
This is also the means of upgrading the various other forms and dances of our country. (Ibid; Pg. 24).

The local is attempted to be merged with the national, an effort which was the preoccupation of many authors of the region. But the intrinsic pressures of ethnic specificities are too strong and rigid, particularly in the North East context and signified in the novel through the tensions that develop among the Bodos and non-Bodos. In the process the intra-Bodo divisions – that of the younger and older generations – are laid bare in the course of the novel.

The ethnic set up in Bharanda Pakshir Jhak portrayed by the author is primarily aimed at justifying the nationalistic humanistic discourse and the plot is conceived in this light to demonstrate the ethnic unity that characterize the land of Assam through the relations of the Bodo and Assamese. Umakanta Sarma dons the mantle of both the ethnographer and novelist while showcasing the fragile unity that characterize the Assamese-Bodo relationship which is built up in the novel through a series of tensions and conflicts which seemingly threatens to stray beyond authorial control. The dual role of the novelist is perhaps at the heart of the fractured discourse of the novel. As K.C. Baral maintains:

... there is a real conflict between the ethnographer who wants to preserve the tribal world and the novelist who, according to his own understanding of life wants to transcend that world ... Beyond this contradiction one may look at creative writing as a means of self-quest. We listen to others’ stories and take part in their lives because the other is always present within us. It is in this sense that both the ethnographer and the novelist are moved by the desire of self-discovery through the other.
It is precisely this desire for transcendence and self-discovery which characterizes the discourse of the novel and the author apparently falters in his endeavour for the desired unity and stability cannot be achieved because the 'boundary' acquires greater force and recognition. Every attempt at reconciliation and resolution almost immediately gives rise to another issue, to destroy the inherent harmony that has been the basis of Bodo-Assamese relations as depicted in the exposition to the novel, **Bharanda Pakshir Jhak**. Perhaps the intricate configurations of ethnicity and its accompanying factors exert greater force and pressure to negate all attempts at reconciliation attempted by the author. The next issue of debate is the purchase of 'Bodo land' that of Lerela, by the non-tribal Balabhadra who according to Rupnath, 'cannot legally buy Lerela's land' ("The Bharandas (tr.); Pg. 40). The transfer of land is highly debated and a threat to the existence of the Bodos is perceived in the long run. Urmila says:

> Our complaint is, if land in the reserved tribal belt goes on changing hands to non-tribals, there will come a day when no land will be left for us tribals. (Ibid; Pg. 41).

Both the Bodos and some Assamese sympathizers agree that such steps destroy the fragile unity of the two ethnic groups and as such it must be checked. Such ideas are disliked by the older generation of Bodos like Rupnath, Dhaniram and Bachiram who surmise that 'something is wrong somewhere'. (Ibid; Pg. 41). It is pertinent to note here that in the conversation of the younger generation of Bodos, there is constant reference to the non-Bodos, an indication of the fact
that levels of acculturation and assimilation have reached its zenith and a reverse
trend was clearly visible. The threat to the Bodos is summed up by Ranjila:

Somehow I have the feeling that our old beliefs and strength
can no longer hold us for long. Yet we have not the courage to
find out the flaws in the old protective ring. I feel at a loss. I try
to understand but fail to find a solution. I believe that our old
ways which have sustained us have, at the same time, started
swallowing us ... The other hazard is that the assault on our
prevailing system has come from outside. When the external
force will smash our bastion we shall become all unprotected...
I only feel frightened. So my mind inclines to revolt. (Ibid; Pg. 46).

The tentative enquiry into the Bodo ethnic order and the outside influences
which threaten the Bodo society begin to take deep roots in the psyche of the
younger generation of Bodos. Umakanta Sarma while voicing the concern of this
section of the Bodos, which threatens their identity, intermittently, includes the
appropriative and humanistic concerns voiced by the older generation of Bodos
and non-Bodos like Devakanta. From this point in the novel, when the ethnic
divisions and intense subjective concerns verging on the question of identity
begin to take center stage, the author brings into prominence and greater focus,
the character of Devakanta who espouses the pacifist and rationalistic agenda of
the author and towards the end of the novel, Devakanta assumes the role of the
author’s mouthpiece. His character is conceived as the link between the
Assamese and Bodos as the divide between the two ethnic groups widen.
Devakanta 'is conversant with the ways of life and culture of the Bodo people for
he has studied the social behaviour and the physiognomy and the patterns of
progress and the like of different tribe and communities' (Ibid; Pg. 50). Cultural synthesis is attempted to be delineated through Devakanta who takes a keen interest in the Bodo way of life inspite of his non-Bodo antecedents. But the doubts and identity concerns of the younger generation of Bodos are too overpowering and such ideas begin to be accepted by large sections of the Bodo population. The intra-ethnic divide among the older and younger generations of Bodos are depicted by the author in order to lend a rational touch to the problem of Bodo-non-Bodo debate, but saner voices are gradually relegated to the background as radical views dominate. Such views are given credence by situations which develop in the novel. When the Bodos learn that the forest is being burnt by outsiders for cultivation the likes of Urmila are furious, “those men are certainly from Mymensingh” (Ibid, Pg. 69) summing up the sentiments of the younger generation. Even Devakanta is viewed with suspect inspite of his long association and intimacy with the Bodos. The fact that he is appointed as a teacher in the local High School does not find favour with many for as Urmila says, “I do not envy Devakanta. He is a friend of all of us. But he is a non-Bodo” (Ibid; Pg. 73). The ethnic divide gets embedded in the psyche of younger generation of Bodos and all aspects of social life in the novel, from this point onwards, are viewed in the self-other context in sharply differentiated terms.

The discourse in *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* now directly strays into the intense subjective feelings that dominate the second half of the novel and the humanistic concerns of the author are put at stake by the unfolding of events which howsoever contrived do not serve the author’s purpose. The problem is
inherent in the inter-ethnic issue that is portrayed by the author. To quote Fuery and Mansfield:

One of the problems for humanism is that it must produce a model of the individual that can both embody a continuity and commonality of human nature and identity over and above differences of time and place, as well as engage meaningfully and productively with ever changing real historical events in the material world (2001 (reprint), Pg. 8).

The ethnic mosaic of the North East defies the concerns of continuity and commonality as the ethnic boundary is gradually more violently secured and maintained. The threat to the Bodo culture and identity is not only from factors such as acculturation and assimilation but also due to the continuous influx of outsiders who come and settle on the land of the Bodos. The onslaught on culture is multi-pronged in the novel which has a significant bearing on characters like Alit, Urmila and others. The elders of the Bodo community are blissfully unaware and often unconcerned about such intrusions. The author is at odds in reconciling the intra-ethnic division that is palpably visible in the novel and much of the discourse delineates the intense subjective and identity concerns of the Bodos in a multi-ethnic set up. The settlement of refugees – 'people fleeing from Bengal for fears of life at the partition of the country' (The Bharandas (tr.) Pg. 99) – in the government reserved land raise the levels of Bodo consciousness for an additional problem that besets the community. But the author apparently sympathises with the refugees and imparts a nationalistic dimension because for the refugees, the place 'became a permanent settlement. The place became their new motherland' (Ibid). It illustrates the nationalistic
concerns of the author but at the same time also highlights his inability to comprehend the inherent complexities of inter-ethnic relations. By adding another dimension to the existing divide between the Assamese and Bodos, which tends to attain ominous proportions, the author while attempting to further his nationalistic concerns, complicates the resolution even more. The discourse rarely displays the sense of unity and visibly manifests one of fracture and apparent loss of authorial control. However ethno-critical studies recognise such positions as long as the ethnic ‘boundary’ is maintained on mutually accepted terms. But fictional discourse often for the sake of the plot or the agenda of the author displays the fragility of boundary lines which largely accounts for the conflict which inevitably follows. The Bodos are apprehensive not only of the hegemonistic Assamese dispensation but also has to grapple with the refugees from Bengal:

The young men, the students in particular, showed serious apprehension. There being plenty of vacant land all over the country, why should everyone, including the refugees, select this place only for their rehabilitation? To whom does all this land here belong? Many Bodo people inhabit this area. Does it not prove then that the Bodos are not liked by other men of the country? So they argued and expressed their suspicion of some nefarious design against the local people. (Ibid; Pg. 104).

The concern of the author is also evident in the discourse in which the author himself poses a question about the threat to Bodo identity. Apparently there is no visible solution and the discourse displays the fractured nature even more pronounced than before. When Devakanta says, ‘We all in the North Eastern region are being exploited’ (Ibid; Pg. 111), he is merely voicing forth the
authorial concern of forging a larger unity with that of the Indian mainstream as a whole. The exploitation of the Bodos is sought to be rationalized through the North East metaphor, and it is Devakanta who exposes such concerns. It is ironical that he is gradually identified as a non-Bodo who cannot have a say on the affairs that concern the Bodo community exclusively. ‘It is true that the question of identity cannot be totally free from tradition, but tradition is not absolute’ (Ibid; Pg. 112) says Ranjila, signifying a break from the ideals held dear by the older generation of Bodos. Alit opts for the violent way out, for he considers armed struggle as the means to regain the position and status of the Bodos. Even among the younger generation there is difference of opinion about the means to assert the distinct identity of the Bodos. With the Bodos becoming restless, there are rumblings in the refugee community who have settled and made Assam their home. The nomenclature of villages that have distinct Bengali names are sought to be changed and the insider-outsider debate gains momentum. But the ire of Alit and his supporters are directed towards the Assamese:

It is all very just and proper that Assamese shall be the state language in Assam. Why have you made this simple thing appear unusual? Where was the need to organize meetings, bring out processions, frighten and intimidate people, and to threaten to suppress them? That proves that you’re without self-confidence, that you are shaky about your own position and that you are weak. For lack of self confidence on your part you’ve threatened and challenged us. All right we’ve take up the challenge. This conflict is inevitable. (Ibid; Pg. 123)
The battle-lines are firmly drawn and the categorical assertion by Alit exposes a certain helplessness on the part of the author as the events unfold. The grip on the discourse appears to slip as there is counter provocation from the side of the Assamese, thus adding a confrontationist dimension to the impasse and in the process the situation plunges further into chaos. The Assamese people also harden their stand, ‘those who have nearly settled in Assam should always bear in mind that the Assamese language is their language, and it is their duty to welcome it’ (Ibid; Pg. 127) – and this stance is met with intense opposition as Alit says, ‘so long it was the contempt and negligence of the Assamese ruling class for all the tribes. This neglect has now led to a protest. To a struggle’ (Ibid; Pg. 131).

E. Laclau and C. Mouffe (1985) discussing the political nature of discourse opine that it is inevitably involved in construction of antagonisms and the exercise of power, and postulates three concepts in this regard – social antagonism, political subjectivity and hegemony. The discourse in Bharanda Pakshir Jhak though not an overtly political one, centers around the three concepts which is manifest in the strained relations between the ethnic groups – Bodos and Assamese. The attempts of the author to rationalise the heated debates over questions of identity does not find favour with the Bodos. Devakanta who acts as the author’s mouthpiece finds himself increasingly sidelined as the more radical group of Alit and Urmila, harp on the need of an exclusive Bodo society to the exclusion of all others much to the consternation of the older Bodos who confide that, ‘the old cohesion was no more. People grew suspicious of one another’ (Ibid; Pg. 133). Minor scuffles between two Bodos are
viewed as a conspiracy against the Bodo community and the need for better cohesion and solidarity is stressed. The atmosphere gets vitiated and the battle lines are clearly drawn, the saner voices are rejected and the discourse falls into disarray because of the complexities of the plot. This failure on the part of the author to ensure inter-ethnic peace and harmony as the events unfold themselves, is a testimony of the fact that the North East narrative primarily rests on the exclusive depictions of ethnic communities in which the 'difference' is clearly stated and the ethnic 'boundary' clearly demarcated. Situations and events in the novel transcend the intentions of the author merely because the aim of the author is not to showcase the sharp divisions in ethnic relations but to ensure inter-ethnic peace and solidarity. Ethnic configurations however, in the North East context are not as easily delineated as evidenced by some characters in the novel who seem to outgrow authorial directions and assume an individuality of their own. The more radical Alit and Urmila, or the moderate Ranen and Ranjila display aggressive subjective concerns which are not always conducive for maintaining inter-ethnic peace. Members of the Assamese community also reciprocate in equal measure and the situation turns volatile. Fervent pleas by Devakanta fall on deaf ears and he finds himself ostracized not only by the Bodos, but also by his own community, the Assamese. Umakanta Sarma while depicting the aroused passions of both the ethnic groups pitches Devakanta to rationalize inflamed tempers and further his humanistic concerns:

Devakanta often observed that a close study of the ethnicity of Assam revealed a surprising level of coherence and harmony. People who had migrated to Assam, three generations ago, have so well integrated themselves with the Assamese society
that, unless so reminded the grand children hardly remember that their grand parents were non-Assamese migrants. He believed that if we could give up our ego or racial prejudice, it is still possible to achieve social harmony and integration in Assam. (Ibid; Pg. 167, emphasis mine)

The situation getting out of control of the author is clearly evidenced by the authorial intrusion through the character of Devakanta and the situation is not reversed till the end. The passionate yearning for social harmony and integration in Assam reflects clearly the authorial dilemma over the unfolding of events over which he has seemingly lost control. Bakul Daimary, a college teacher who represents the moderate face of the Bodo community also fails to see reason in the violent outbursts of the members of his community though he sympathises with the Bodo cause. When Balabhadra’s truck is set on fire, his fellow Assamese people sympathise with him and also advise him to rid his business of his Bodo employees for then he will be able to provide sustenance to a few Assamese families in their place’ (Ibid; Pg. 189). The battle lines are clearly drawn and Bachiram’s death signals the complete break with the rational Bodo ideal and the propagation of sharp and distinct dissimilative ideals. Such ideals are fuelled by the concern of the Assamese about their culture and identity:

Our culture is in danger, our language is in danger. This is the state of Assam, its language is Assamese. This is an axiomatic truth. Whoever denies it, denies the whole of Assam as an independent entity. Such a situation is humiliating to Assam. Shall we take it lying down? (Ibid; Pg. 197)

The apparent complexities of inter-ethnic relations prove too strong for a final resolution in Bharanda Pakshir Jhak and this account for the fact that Umakanta
Sarma has left the novel open-ended. The consolidation of ethnic boundaries between the Bodos and Assamese has threatened the social fabric of Assam and Devakanta’s fervent pleas are not heeded by any of the opposing groups. A very stray incident, that of Alit being beaten up by his own community members who tease some Bodo girls, marks the end of the novel, apparently demonstrating the helplessness of the author in bringing about a perfect resolution.

The nationalistic concerns of the author are carefully spelled out in the discourse, in the reference to the epics – the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the composite nature of the Indian ‘nation’. When Ranen says that it was, ‘... Mahamanikya, the Kachari King at whose behest Madhab Kandoli composed the Ramayana in Assamese’ (Ibid; Pg. 109), he is referring to the significance of the Assamese version of the epic which was inspired by a Bodo king and ‘so the Bodo-Kacharis have the right of fostering Bodo culture in the lap of Indian culture and vice versa’ (Ibid). The national epic is metaphorically localized to stress the primacy of the Bodo initiative and right to practice and propagate their ethnic culture. Another epic context is evoked by the novelist in the reference of Ghatotkoch in the Mahabharata. Ghatotkoch was the son of Bhima and Hidimba, a kachari woman. The death of Ghatotkoch in the Mahabharata, which killed many Kauravas is symbolic for the ‘significance of this tale is that the death of one kachari can cause the deaths of thousands of non-Kacharis’ (Ibid; Pg. 110). Thus, the ‘ruin of the Bodos will entail the ruin of Assam, and the devastation of Assam will invite similar fate to the Bodos’ (Ibid), implying the significance of maintaining inter-ethnic peace and solidarity even among growing concerns of
identity and assimilation. Assam as the geographical entity is viewed as the microcosm of India, and it is evident in Devakanta’s remark to Ranjila that:

... I feel ... that there is no such independent entity called India. Punjab, Orissa, Madras, Assam and the like make India. So you have Assam India, Madras India, Orissa India etc. On the same analogy, there is no independent entity called Assam either. Sibsagar, Cachar, Darrang and the like constitute Assam. So you have Goalpara Assam, Kamrup Assam, Darrang Assam and so on and so forth. It’s only a matter of realisation not logic. (Ibid; Pg. 152).

The avowed aim of nation building in the aftermath of Indian independence, the preoccupation of many writers, also affected the North East, especially writers from the Assamese community, a community which not only participated in the freedom struggle but which is also linguistically and culturally linked with mainstream India. But intricacies of inter-ethnic relations, a common feature of the multi-ethnic society of the North East, defy any attempts at reconciliation and resolution in the discourse of the novel because complete assimilation cannot be achieved. The concept of a greater Assamese nationality as envisaged by the author is not achieved because the limits of acculturation process are not realized by the author. The repeated interventions of Devakanta which are too rationalistic and pacifist merely signify loss of authorial control and the discourse charts a path of its own until it ends abruptly without gaining a significant breakthrough in the Bodo-Assamese relations. The failure of the nationalistic discourse, however, is somewhat compensated by the humanistic concerns of the author, which does not merely document the deteriorating Bodo-Assamese relation, but also puts greater emphasis on the saner voices who espouse the
cause of inter-ethnic unity. While it is a truism that the concept of greater Assamese nationality cannot be conclusively and decisively forged, the fact remains that the majority-minority ethnic divide need to be understood in more concrete terms and in the face of ground realities. The discourse in *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* is thus fractured and split mainly owing to the complexities of inter-ethnic relations and as the events unfold, the author seemingly no longer holds his grip on the situations and characters that seem to outgrow authorial intentions.

Referring to the multi-ethnic society of the North East, Prof. Gangmumei Kabui says that ‘this heterogeneity and multiplicity of the social and ethnic groups have been the constraints in the evolution of common regionalism’ (Kamei, 2002; Pg. 66). This is precisely the fact why Umakanta Sarma cannot achieve the pan-Assamese unity by incorporating the tea garden labourers and the Bodos in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* and *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* respectively, in the Assamese mainstream. The nationalistic perspective of the North East is fundamentally different from mainland India owing to the multi-ethnic mosaic which characterize the region and Assam as microcosm of India as sought to be projected by the author in the two fictional works, does not work. Repeated reference to symbols depicting the ‘Indian’ mainstream – the rivers, the states, the epics, the spiritual past, the freedom movement and Gandhiji – are evoked to lend a nationalistic dimension to the novels in an attempt to write into the mainstream. The nationalistic ideal is bolstered by subtle touches of humanism with which the author highlights the dynamics of the inter-ethnic situations. The discourse in both the novels thus betray the overtly nationalistic ambitions of the
author; while in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* the discourse is subtle wherein there is a palpable sense of inter-ethnic discord, in *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* the discourse openly displays inter-ethnic strife and the deep divisions between the Bodos and the Assamese are clearly manifest. Ostensibly, there is an unconscious attempt to exclude the unpleasant aspects of inter-ethnic relations, but Umakanta Sarma is not fully successful in this regard. The discourse in both the novels displays ethnic discord and difference at two different levels but it is never downplayed. In this context, Michel Foucault’s observation is relevant:

> ... in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. (quoted in Rice and Waugh ed. *Modern Literary Theory*, 2001; Pg. 210).

The post-war Assamese novel, particularly during the period of Indian independence deeply stirred the authors who ‘from now onwards, began adopting a realistic attitude towards life’ (Deka, date not mentioned; Pg. 79), and this is an important marker manifested in the portrayal of the ethnic life of the region in its uniqueness and variety. But the social role of the authors in the post-independence phase was primarily aimed at evolving a nationalistic discourse which in the North East context was an attempt in failure, for writers often took the ethnic situations for granted. This accounts for the failure of Umakanta Sarma’s nationalistic humanistic discourse in both *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* and *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak*, because of the consolidation of ethnic boundaries and the blurring of permeable lines between the groups involved.
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