Chapter - V:

Nationalistic Ethnic Discourse: A Study of Sonam and Lingjhik
The fundamental construct of ‘nation’ in discourse is a much debated issue because nationalistic discourse is fraught with the ambivalence of creating and propagating the notion of a nation and at the same time encompassing the aspirations of the subordinated groups including minorities and fringe ethnic communities. The dominant discourse of a nation while perpetuating nationalistic ideals, often negates and appropriates the peripheral voices not only because they do not embody and justify the nationalistic discourse but also because there is an apparent threat posed by counter-discourses. But such peripheral voices also inform and supplement the idea of nation, a postulate articulated by Homi Bhabha as the performative dimension, that is, a national culture must be endlessly performed and continually rehearsed (1994). Thus, the nationalistic discourse should be informed, supplemented and consolidated by discourses of marginalized groups who also share ‘a deep horizontal comradeship’ (1983) and who constitute an integral part of the national culture. The challenge to the nationalistic discourse thus arises from the performative aspect as the discourses of the margins constantly engage in enacting the arbitrary range of symbols, and which needs to be ‘continually rehearsed’. These enactments reveal different experiences and representations which Bhabha says are often excluded from the nationalist discourse. In the Indian context, Ranajit Guha (1982) opined that nationalism cannot be understood without ascertaining how the subaltern groups contributed to it on their own independently of the elite. It is therefore apparent that the dominant national discourse is always challenged by the counter-discourses of the nation’s peripheries, a fact which is relevant in the context of the North East discourses vis-à-vis the Indian national discourse:
Nationalism offers a cultural resistance to the West, while tribal development in India faces the discourse of nationalism that tries to appropriate them within the nation state. (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 2008, Pg. 126)

This notion of appropriation is central to the ethnic delineation of the North East in its fictional discourses which has a distinct pattern of its own. The pattern is inherent in the complexities of ethnicity as a social and cultural construct in the North East. Moreover, the ethnic situation in the region is characterized by high levels of assimilation and acculturation so much so that the ethnic boundaries are often blurred spurring dissimilative forces mainly centering on the question of identity and selfhood. Authors have to grapple with such complex dynamics in delineating the ethnic situation of the region and at a subconscious level the author—ethnographer is severely at odds in reconciling concerns relevant and appropriate to both the roles in a single discourse. The obvious result is that the fictional discourse displays fissures and gaps, and characters and situations stray out of authorial directions and charts their individual courses. This aspect is a marked feature in any fictional discourse of the North East. Yeshe Dorje Thongchi is a powerful voice from Arunachal Pradesh who has endeavoured to present the unspoilt ethnic life of the simple people who inhabit the higher reaches of the state and in the process has showcased the intricacies that lurk in the facade of apparent simplicity of the ethnic people.

The first novel by Thongchi taken up for the purpose of the study is *Sonam*, a discourse which intricately focuses on the ethnic Brokpa way of life where the yak-centred economy sustains life in the high and remote mountains of Arunachal Pradesh. The ethno-social turmoil, family discords and the practice
of polyandry permeate the entire story of the novel and is a faithful representation of the way of life in which the author is most intimately familiar. The high mark of the discourse is that there are no ostentations or unnecessary display of emotions or moral turpitude and the entire novel is very simple and dramatically presented. Recounting the factors responsible for writing the novel, Thongchi in the Author’s Note to the English version of the novel maintains:

... I was prompted to write Sonam the idea for which came suddenly after hearing tales from late Sonam Tsering, a peon in the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Bomdila, Arunachal Pradesh... In the midst of work, he would narrate the innumerable anecdotes of his life. My attention was drawn in particular to an anecdote on the plight of men amongst the shepherds living on the high mountainous regions of the Himalayas who shared a common wife. (Thongchi, 2001 (tr.), Pg. 6)

'Men' is perhaps a generic name for all the incidents in the story revolve around Sonam, the female lead and the turmoils that overtake her due to the social customs of her community. Thongchi makes it clear that his focus will be on the plight of the people in the higher reaches of the Himalayas who share a common wife. And in this delineation, in which he traces the fortunes of three primary characters, he is able to expose the intra-ethnic specificities in the tensions that engulf Sonam’s family. In this sense, Sonam can be considered a domestic novel with a strong ethnic element and Thongchi is successful in portraying the characters who are regulated and dictated by tradition and ethnic conventions. The 'frontiers' of Indian experience reflected in the topography of the state of Arunachal Pradesh in its higher reaches in the winter, provide the background of
the novel where the Brokpas live a very harsh life. The uneven topography and extreme weather conditions are reflected in the lives of the characters who are equally sturdy and tenacious to withstand the vagaries of life. Lobjang is a trader who has to stay away from home for long durations – either in his farm which was situated at the top of the Choksum hills or for selling dairy products in distant lands. His wife Sonam ‘enjoyed the reputation of being the most beautiful woman not only in her own village but also in the entire Sakteng–Miruk region’ (ibid; Pg. 15) and Lobjang was indeed very fond of her and missed her during his absence. Lobjang’s mother had died after his marriage without becoming a grandmother, for he was too preoccupied with providing for and maintaining his family after his father’s death. Lobjang cannot also take his wife to the farm:

It is not that he had never thought of taking Sonam with him to the farm and staying together, many a time the idea in terms of a simple solution to all his problems did occur to him, but he was aware of the implications such a decision might involve. If Sonam was taken to the farm and they start living as husband and wife the sanctity of the place would be violated. Any physical intimacy with the wife would incur the displeasure of Sungmu, the household deity of wealth, whereby good fortune would forsake the place and epidemics would break loose upon the animals of the farm. (ibid; Pg. 15)

The ethnic customs are directly introduced and in the course of the novel they seem to dictate and regulate the lives of the characters. Once, as he was returning from the farm, the thoughts of his beautiful wife crossed his mind as he was away from her for long twenty days. When Lobjang reached his house, he was momentarily taken aback for there was no light in the house but in the dark
interior, he could hear two voices. As he was about to call his wife, a door opened and a youth of the village Pema Wangchu emerged and asking irrelevant questions to Lobjang disappeared into the darkness of the night. Lobjang was intensely shaken by the sight and removing the dark thoughts of his mind he saw in the doorway a feminine face, his wife. The change in Lobjang’s thoughts is expressed very vividly:

> Involuntarily there flashed through his eyes the picture of a snake, which he had seen a few days ago, thrusting its head out through a hole in the ground and making licking sounds with its tongue. (ibid; Pg. 16)

Lobjang’s thoughts are reinforced by the picture of the bed laid out by the fireside to accommodate two people, the blanket, the pillow, all bore the ‘distinct impression of two bodies, and it was clear that the bed had been recently occupied’ (ibid, Pg. 17). The chaste image of his wife is shattered and he felt the intense urge to take out his sword ‘and cut his wife into pieces’ (ibid) but socio-ethnic customs prohibited such an act:

> Religion, culture and tradition borne by his people through the centuries and many generations forced him to accept the situation, to discard the path of violence and submit to the ways of peaceful co-existence. (ibid)

Later, it transpires in the conversation of husband and wife that, during the long absences of the former, the latter feels insecure because the boys of the village trouble her, and even Pema Wangchu did not pay any heed to her warnings. The system of polyandry was prevalent in the society of the Brokpas and therefore Sonam can get married to Pema Wangchu. Not only can Lobjang and Wangchu share a common wife, but also in the process, the security and honour of Sonam
can be maintained. Both husband and wife settle the proposal before Lobjang embarks on a business trip with his friend Kejang with the intention of trading their merchandise for rice, millet, barley and maize. During the trip, Kejang apprises Lobjang of the rumours circulating in the village about the relationship of Sonam and Pema Wangchu. Lobjang says that soon Pema Wangchu would join their household as co-husband of Sonam. But the problem lay in Pema Wangchu’s caste which was different from Sonam and Lobjang. Rumours fly thick and fast and Kejang is sceptical:

He (Pema Wangchu) is a boy coming from a different caste altogether, and for this there will be practical difficulties in later life. Say for instance, when children will be born into your family, to which caste would you say they belong? (ibid; Pg. 26)

Such questions leave Lobjang disturbed and as he returned from his trip home, he sees Pema Wangchu standing on the verandah of his house. Inside the house, both of them are served fermented liquor by Sonam, but in his heart, Lobjang seethed in jealousy only to reason with himself, ‘to what avail this senseless jealousy? If one is to live in the world one must learn to make compromises and adjust to situations’ (ibid; Pg. 28). This adjustment is legitimized by Lobjang by asking Pema Wangchu to take care of his farm so that the former can rest for some time. It is the signal that Pema Wangchu is accepted in the household. But Sonam’s father Ngoiru and Wangchu’s father Tsewang decide to take the consent of the village council before going ahead with the proposed marriage. In the council, both parties put forward their arguments after which the verdict is pronounced. Pema Wangchu can become the second husband of Sonam but he must leave his caste and adopt Lobjang’s
title, and Tsewang would disown his son Wangchu and disinherit him of his property. Soon afterwards, Sonam and Wangchu are married, and Lobjang goes away to his farm.

The simple life of the Brokpas is vividly portrayed by Thongchi in which the essential ethnic order which regulates the lives of the people is subtly brought out. Nothing outside the customary laws are allowed to prevail but the discourse upto this stage of the novel displays the tensions that underlie socially accepted customs. This is best manifest in the psychological probings of Lobjang's mind as he contemplates a world with Wangchu as co-husband of his wife. But circumstances are so forceful and against him that he has to yield to the situation unfolding before him. The tensions in the mind of Lobjang are apparent in the discourse, for it is not out of his free will that he has agreed to Wangchu's induction in his household but it was the pressure of circumstances to which he had no option but to yield. Thus, ethnic customs prevail over individual will signifying the importance of ethnicity as an important construct in the North East. As the details of a shared life are discussed, Wangchu is entrusted with Lobjang's farm to look after the cattle. Lobjang decided that both he and Wangchu would take turns for staying equal days at home. During one such stay, Lobjang cannot sleep apparently troubled by the developments that have taken place in his family and even Sonam in her sleep does not reciprocate the gestures he make towards her. Later when he decides to go on a business trip to Tawang, he proposes to take Sonam and her younger sister Tsering Dolma with him for it would be a pilgrimage also to the great monastery at Tawang. On the way, they are joined by Thupten and his wife, who were Lobjang's permanent
host and friend of the area called Bumkhar. The visit to Tawang provided a great pleasure and comfort to the party, ‘...Lobjang and his companions finally left Tawang, with a mind and heart full of peace and happiness’ (ibid; Pg. 50). As Pema Wangchu consolidated his position in the house and there seemed to be perfect harmony among the three members, ‘hardship, sorrow and mistrust descended upon their small world’ (ibid; pg. 51). The reason was the killing of a sheep by a snow leopard in Lobjang’s farm and Pema Wangchu’s return from the farm leaving the cattle at the mercy of the feline. Lobjang is disgusted with Wangchu’s behaviour and gets ready to leave for the farm at night, but for Sonam’s insistence leaves in the early hours of dawn. After ascertaining the loss and the events that took place on the farm from his friend Tikoro, Lobjang swears at the leopard which appears again the following night to take away Dambu, the pet dog of Lobjang which guarded the cattle. Pema Wangchu had brought Dawa, Tikoro’s brother for trapping the leopard but all in vain. The death of his dog is deeply mourned by Lobjang, ‘Dambu is dead, and with his death, life in the animal farm at Choksum hills also seemed to have come to an end’ (ibid; Pg. 64).

The simple idiomatic discourse employed by Thongchi reflects his intense subjective experiences shaped by his exposure to the ethnic life of the Brokpas which he so graphically delineated. The events of the novel follow the pattern of a traditional fictional discourse with minor twists and turns that affect the lives of the main characters. In Sonam, Lobjang, Pema Wangchu and Sonam are affected not only due to ethnic customs that have an overwhelming presence on their lives, but also in the elemental passions that inflict normal human beings. In
their daily lives, they resemble the simple rustics which Thomas Hardy has so vividly pictured in his Wessex novels, with their typical human failings and weaknesses. But the discourse in Sonam is disturbed in its smooth flow intermittently, in the mental orientations of the character of Lobjang which is the main undercurrent of tension in the novel and which manifests through his character. Thus, when Sonam gives birth to a baby daughter, Lobjang is overjoyed at first but as he comes nearer to the baby, obvious thoughts cross his mind:

He was not sure who might be the real father of the child. Pema Wangchu or he? Perhaps it might be Pema Wangchu’s child as he was now spending more time with Sonam... With great effort he suppressed his doubts over the fatherhood of the child, as it mattered no more after he had accepted Pema Wangchu as his co-husband. Whoever might have sired the child, it was their child equally now. (ibid; Pg. 67)

His thoughts are soon dispelled by Sonam who swears by the child and says that it is indeed Lobjang’s daughter. The village Lama christened the baby Rinchin Jangmu. But the birth of the daughter did not bring Lobjang any happiness or prosperity. He had already lost fifteen sheep and two calves to the snow leopard which was causing havoc in the Sakteng-Miruk region. To add to this was the drought like situation which affected the neighbouring areas and consequently cattle fodder and cereals became difficult to procure. ‘In such troubled times Lobjang became a father for the second time. Their second child was a boy’ (ibid; Pg. 73), but the drought affected his daughter who refused to touch milk or milk products. Somehow he could procure some twenty kilos of maize powder which lasted about two months. In the meantime, the prophecy of the village
Lama about Rinchin, that she is the reincarnation of somebody very close to Lobjang’s family, came true when the little girl would say that she was called Dambu (Lobjang’s pet dog) earlier and how she was dragged away by the snow leopard. When the drought induced crisis blew over, Lobjang is faced with another problem, for Pema Wangchu to pay off an old personal debt had sold a cow to Ngawang from Mirok village. As it is, for a small amount of maize and food grain, he had already bartered off two cows and now Pema Wangchu’s apparent lack of concern for the family also resulted in the loss of another cow. Lobjang was really concerned:

If things went on like this, a day would come when it would be difficult to make both ends meet. Lobjang, for the third time realized how true the words of his friend Kejang were, who had warned him against taking Pema Wangchu into his house. Lobjang decided that the time had come to give Pema Wangchu a stern warning (ibid; Pg. 77)

Even Lobjang’s insistence that Wangchu should stay on the farm during the former’s illness goes unheeded. It is here that sharp divisions crop up between Lobjang and Pema Wangchu over the issue of who was spending more time in the comforts of home. A heated argument ensues and Lobjang turns away Wangchu from the house. But the family discord continues with Sonam accusing her first husband of being unnecessarily harsh on Wangchu. Already troubled by his own sickness and exhaustion due to the verbal duel with Wangchu, Lobjang can no longer control himself and inflicts some physical wounds on Sonam in a fit of rage. Though he repents later, Sonam prepares to go to her father’s house
with her two children but Wangchu persuades her to go with him to which she reluctantly agrees.

The first part of the novel exposes the unique ethnic customs of the Brokpas through the triangular relationship of Lobjang, Sonam and Pema Wangchu. Thongchi very intricately stresses on the rule of the ethnic order which regulates the lives of the simple people, but the discourse exposes the tensions that develop as a result and affects the characters. On the surface level it would appear that Lobjang and Sonam's conjugal life is marred by the socially sanctioned system of polyandry, but at a deeper level it also exposes the frailties of human character and the fragility of human relationships. Thongchi's subtle handling of ethnic and human issues impart to the novel a rare charm of its own. During the period of separation from his wife and two children Lobjang in a state of despair contemplates:

Is it possible for a man and woman to live together their whole lives and not have a difference of opinion, or quarrel with each other? There are people who in spite of differences share a common existence. Every person has his individual self, his own identity, so it is only natural that there will be misunderstanding and disagreement. (ibid; Pg. 85-86)

He further surmises on his married life, how for a simple quarrel, his wife went to live with Pema Wangchu indicating the fact that his wife did not really love him, 'the thought of Sonam not loving him made Lobjang experience a stabbing pain somewhere down in his insides' (ibid; Pg. 87). He became sick and thought of Pema Wangchu who could look after the farm on Choksum hills in his absence due to his sickness. On being informed of Lobjang's sickness neither Wangchu...
nor Sonam visited him. From the farm he goes home to find that nobody has entered it since he deserted it. He feels a great abhorrence for the whole of womankind, 'no woman shall ever be allowed to enter this house' (ibid; Pg. 91). Only when his daughter Rinchin Jangmu and his son Tashi would grow up, would they be welcomed into his house. The psychological effect of separation from his wife has affected Lobjang very intensely, and the discourse displays the rift that threatens to separate the family permanently. As Lobjang recuperates, he gradually comes over the depression and becomes the cause of joy and jubilation, when he along with his friend Tikoro hunts down and kills the snow leopard which terrorized the livestock of Sakteng – Miruk region. This was reason enough for a celebration in Lobjang's house as per Brokpa customs. Pema Wangchu and Tsering Dolma help in the celebrations but Sonam is absent due to her sickness. This is interpreted by Lobjang in a different light, 'he felt bad and could not believe that Sonam would be in such a state, that she could not even walk a few yards to come to his house' (ibid, Pg. 102). The behaviour of Lobjang moves his sister-in-law, Tsering Dolma who confides in Sonam, 'you have committed a great mistake for which senior brother-in-law will never forgive you. He is a nice person. One of the best in this world' (ibid; Pg. 104). Misunderstandings crop up between Lobjang and Sonam who privately accuse each other of being unreciprocative without understanding their individual concerns. At the same time, Sonam understands the difference between Lobjang and Pema Wangchu during her stay in the latter's house where she felt like a prisoner, being disliked by Wangchu's parents and even by Wangchu himself. She could not even escape from her predicament and the depression deepened
on her and she took to bed not to recover again. Her crisis is aggravated when she learns that Lobjang even after knowing about her plight refuses to visit her. He insists:

I will see the sick person in my house. If she is my wife then let her be removed from her present place and brought to my own house. (ibid; Pg. 109)

Sonam is thus brought to Lobjang’s house in an unconscious state. Her pale face evaporated his pent up anger and he wanted to seek forgiveness from her. It was not until midnight when Sonam regained consciousness and the customary belief indicated that the person would either recover or die. She felt thirsty and wanted Lobjang to quench her thirst, after which the full implications of her name are brought out by her:

My name is Sonam, and Sonam means the lucky woman. I have been worthy of the name for I have found a husband like you on whose lap I am dying peacefully. (ibid; Pg. 112)

She dies almost immediately as she utters these words. Lobjang neither cried nor displayed any emotions and in due time, Sonam is cremated. Pema Wangchu is however inconsolable in his grief and he remained in his grief for many days. People of the village conjectured that it was indeed Wangchu and not Lobjang who loved his wife truly. Wangchu leaves Lobjang’s household leaving the two children with Lobjang for Sonam had confessed that they were indeed Lobjang’s children. In such a depressing situation Tsering Dolma offers to look after the two children and says to Lobjang:

It is the expected duty of a woman to raise up children so there is really no need for any concern. Besides my father and mother are there who are grand-parents of the children. So
don’t think that you are the only person who has a right over motherless Rinchin and Tashi. We have a equal right to look after them. (ibid; Pg. 116)

Tsering Dolma even refuses to marry so that she can to look after the children of her sister and during this period Lobjang develops a deep attachment with his children. His parents-in-law wanted him to marry his sister-in-law, Tsering Dolma, and start a new life, but Lobjang refuses the offer. He offers to go to Tawang and start a new life there with his two children ‘and dedicate their lives to the service of the great master Lord Buddha’ (ibid; Pg. 122). Tsering Dolma also gets ready to follow in his footsteps for as her father, Ngoiru says:

If the world is to survive, man and woman must live together, because it is they who create life. So go ahead and without fear begin your new life, -- keep the world alive, -- nobody has the right to destroy it. (ibid; Pg. 124)

The novel ends on an optimistic note, on a primordial ethnic belief as to how life should be perpetuated on this earth. It also highlights the indestructible nature of the world and the role human beings should play in its perpetuation. The simple ethnic elements acquire a universal tone.

Thongchi is indeed a powerful writer in Assamese who has used a language which is not his mother tongue to demonstrate the life of the Brokpas, which may be construed as an attempt to write into the mainstream to showcase a peripheral subject in the ‘Indian’ imagination. The diction is pure and simple without unnecessary ornamentations and rhetorical verbosity and Thongchi’s concern is purely to delineate the ethnic Brokpas in their socio-cultural mooring but at the same time depict the vicissitudes of human life which cares for no
earthly boundaries. The intra-ethnic order of the Brokpas and the overbearing influence of Buddhism on their lives impart to the novel a distinct philosophical charm. It is also manifest in Lobjang's intense speculation about the twists and turns of his fortune which has a universal human significance. The discourse therefore goes beyond pure ethnic concerns and is, as a result a significant addition to the North East discourse. Such parallels can hardly be drawn in the entire gamut of the mainstream Indian fiction where essential concerns are interspersed so intricately with socio-ethnic customs. The credit to Thongchi goes on account of such delineation through the three main characters in the novel.

As Arnold Krupat maintains in a different context:

Indigenous literature is that type of writing produced when an author of subaltern cultural identification manages successfully to merge forms external to it, but pressing upon, even seeking to delegitimate it. (Krupat, 1989; Pg. 214)

Ethnic assertions in the fictional discourses of the North East serve as strong negotiative mediums whereby authors simultaneously respond to local and national entities in a chronotope. And Thongchi is no exception. His is a strong voice for ethnic assertion.

The second novel by Thongchi taken up for the purpose of the study, Lingjhik analyses critically, the division that has crept into the Sherdukpen society, between the old and the new values of life. In so doing, the intra-ethnic dimensions are clearly exposed by the author and ethnic customs become the cause of hatred between two clans, and the discourse bears the distinct stamp of such a division. The socio-ethnic customs come into sharp conflict with the values cherished by the younger generation due to education and government
employment. And the tension in the discourse is palpably visible often negating the appropriative stance of the author. Prem Tashi, the son of Kejang and Lamdoima is an Extra Assistant Commissioner who along with some other officials, who were non-locals, was having an evening hangout when the topic of his sister, Kreema Lamu’s marriage props up. His companions resent the fact that they were not invited to the marriage. Prem Tashi says that the marriage took place without his knowledge, because the groom’s party came one day and carried his sister off. He goes on to explain to his astonished companions that it is the Sherdukpen custom for the bride to be carried away and be kept in the groom’s house for three days after which she is returned and thereafter on an auspicious day and time she is taken back by the groom’s party with much fanfare. It also transpires during the conversation that the groom Dorjee Chewang who is a Health Assistant, is the son of Prem Tashi’s maternal uncle, Penje. This disclosure is the cause of much merriment among his companions and the cause of Prem Tashi’s banter. Enraged, he storms out of the party ignoring the pleadings of his companions and contemplates upon the fact that he was not consulted regarding his sister’s marriage. He decides to break the marriage, come what may. The very opening of the novel introduces the reader directly into the conflict that is to unfold due to the rash decision of Prem Tashi. Penje, Prem Tashi’s maternal uncle, and his wife Ajom had no daughters but eight sons and so yearned for a good bride for the eldest son. The eldest son is married to a girl, but relationship between wife and parents-in-law sour and so they leave Penje’s house. Penje and Ajom’s second son, Dorjee Chewang is now sought to be married to Kreema Lamu, the youngest daughter of Penje’s sister.
Lamdoima. Thus, when Kreema Lamu was returning to her boarding school in Bomdila from her village after the puja holidays, she is picked up by Penje’s men to be married to Dorjee Chewang as per Sherdukpen custom. Prem Tashi cannot accept the fact though his parents relent, and so he writes a letter to his father. As per contents of the letter Penje and Ajom along with his sister Kreema Lamu reach his house. In the meeting that ensues, Prem Tashi clarifies his opposition to the marriage of his sister to Dorjee Chewang:

> It makes me sad to say so but I have no alternative but to say it. Dorjee Chewang is not a proper male, he is a eunuch. I cannot destroy the life of my sister by handing her over to such a person. (1983; Pg. 32)

Such a disclosure by Prem Tashi shatters both Penje and Ajom and the atmosphere of the meeting suddenly turns grave and sombre for no one could ever think of such a fact about Dorjee Chewang. Ajom, his mother retorts to Prem Tashi’s remark, ‘...all my sons bear normal body parts and features. You are telling a lie. It cannot be so, no, never... (ibid; Pg. 33). Prem Tashi tries to pacify the situation:

> If the longing and desires of Kreema cannot be fulfilled by Dorjee Chewang, she might later on take recourse to such a step which may bring dishonour and shame on the family and the clan. (ibid; Pg. 34)

But Ajom is sceptical and asks Kreema Lamu who has already spent sixteen days with Dorjee Chewang, whether the latter is a eunuch. Kreema does not reply to her repeated queries, which makes Ajom believe that indeed her son is a eunuch.
The discourse is the novel thus displays signs of tension and fracture from the exposition which is consolidated by the breakdown of the marriage between Kreema Lamu and her maternal uncle’s son Dorjee Chewang according to Sherdukpen custom. Thongchi’s effort at delineating the simple ethnic assertive discourse succeeds in so far he is able to depict the Sherdukpen way of life where tradition coexists with modern education and its effects symbolized by government jobs held by Prem Tashi and Dorjee Chewang. But the fissures in the discourse arise because of intra-ethnic concerns in which a division takes place between two communities. Such a division is aggravated by the fact that both the parties belong to two separate clans. While Prem Tashi is from the Thongo clan, Dorjee Chewang belongs to the Wangja clan and the dispute that arises between two families manifests in the larger context of inter clan rivalry later on and threatens a permanent divide. The tension in the novel that engulfs subsequently is captured in the split in the discourse, often apparently without the author’s intention. This fact has been an ingrained feature of the North East narrative. Thus, afterwards, Prem Tashi contemplates on the whole situation – what if Dorjee Chewang is not a eunuch? and what will be his reaction when Chewang will realize that for this reason his marriage has broken down. Prem Tashi is full of remorse not only for his actions but also for his sister Kreema whom he offers to take with him for her further studies. Kreema also agrees to the proposal. It is during her stay in Prem Tashi’s official quarters that she deeply contemplates on her situation because she herself realizes that she has transformed a lot after her brief sixteen day stay with Dorjee Chewang. During those days of stay she never realized what it means to be a eunuch; neither did
she know the actual meaning of the term. But the word tormented her endlessly and she becomes restless as if imprisoned in her own self, for she is torn between her present existence and the events that took place during the past few crucial days of her life. Ultimately, she takes a resolve:

I have to live imprisoned throughout my life. My life will pass like this. No, it will not. I will not let it pass like this. I must do something. What shall I do? What can I do? What will be better for me? Teaching? Nursing? It is better to be a doctor than a nurse. Yes, I will become a doctor. Why can’t I become a doctor if I study well? Certainly I can. After I become a doctor I will conduct researches to unearth the meaning of the word eunuch. (ibid; Pg. 73)

Kreema’s stern resolution yields fruit for she passes her matriculation exam in the first division and leaves for Guwahati to pursue further studies. Meanwhile, Dorjee Chewang is injured and admitted to a hospital where his father and mother go to visit him. He enquires about Kreema but fails to get a suitable answer from his parents. He learns about the actual events from the conversation of the patients in the hospital, and once he is discharged, goes home full of remorse, grief, anger and intense hatred about the situation into which he has fallen. He contemplates revenge, that is, demand ‘ga-dhan’, a sort of bride price from Kreema’s family which is sanctioned by Sherdukpen custom, but seldom practiced. His father Penje is sceptical about it and even Norbu Chiring, the college going youth of Dorjee Chewang’s Wangja clan contemplates on its consequences in the present day context. According to him:

... their (the old generation) way of thinking was significantly different from us (the new generation). The rules considered
appropriate by them were implemented and people of subsequent generations have blindly aped them without giving it a thought... But how long can we hold on to such worn out customs? Times have changed considerably and most importantly, changes have also infiltrated into our society. We cannot remain oblivious to the changes taking place outside our society and chart our own path. (ibid; Pg. 87-88)

The battle lines in the Wangja clan are clearly drawn because the reformist Norbu Chiring does not want to dig out past customs for the sake of avenging a wrong. Moreover, a family dispute may have far reaching consequences on the society as a whole. Dorjee Chewang and Norbu Chiring have a heated argument, but the former is adamant about going ahead with his plan. Accordingly, Penje and his son Dorjee Chewang alongwith twenty-five persons of the Wangja clan reach Yokmu village, where Prem Tashi’s house is located. In an isolated moment Dorjee Chewang asks Prem Tashi why the latter spread such a false rumour against him and caused the breakdown of his marriage with Kreema Lamu. Prem Tashi replied indifferently that Chewang was not suitable as a groom for his sister. Chewang now becomes adamant about taking revenge. And the revenge is sought in the form of ‘ga-dharl’ which according to the Sherdukpen custom cannot be demanded during the lifetime of the estranged wife’s mother. Lamdoima is indeed furious about the demand made by her brother Penje’s family for she could never think that her brother could take such a step when she was still alive. The shock is too much for her and she loses consciousness. But the acrimony between the two families shows no sign of receding with the demand of ga-dhan from Penje getting stricter. Lamdoima curses her son for her precarious condition, conjecturing that perhaps it was because of some fault of
her past life that she was suffering in the present. Kejang in an assertive tone wants Prem Tashi to pay the *ga-dhan* from his own earnings. And the mother is full of curses for her son:

> It is better not to have a son like you. May your life be full of sorrows and troubles and the kind of suffering you are inflicting on me in my old age, may your sons and daughters do the same to you when you grow old. I curse you, as your father and maternal uncle also do, let sin physically afflict you for causing the separation of Dorjee Chewang and Kreema. (ibid; Pg. 110-111)

An ethnic custom has become the cause of bitter hatred between two families which threatens to engulf the entire community and attain wider significance in intra-ethnic relations. The churnings in the Sherdukpen society begin with the concept of *ga-dhan*, a legitimate demand but sacrilegious when demanded during the lifetime of a mother. Most of the household items will be taken away by Penje’s men as *ga-dhan* which is a direct insult to Kejang and Lamdoima. The concept of *ga-dhan* as Penje clarifies is taken after the death of a woman for her children and until the same is taken the woman remains the property of her own brothers. It is only after *ga-dhan* is given by the children that the woman becomes the property of the husband and son/s. The ancient ethnic custom has polarized the two families and also the two clans – Wangja and Thongo. The issue of *ga-dhan* becomes a matter of serious quarrel between Penje and Kejang’s clan members regarding the household items to be taken away. The saner members appeal for calm and the issue is hotly debated. The author intervenes at this stage:
Some people opined that, “over the ages there has existed cordial relations between the two clans and we cannot ignore this fact. We still maintain that such cordial relations should continue even now. The enmity between two households cannot become the cause of enmity between the two clans.” (ibid; Pg. 128-129)

The appropriative stance of the author is reflected at this stage and there is a desperate urge to ensure intra-ethnic peace. But ethnic specificities overpower the discourse and separation between the two clans is imminent because of the rigid posture adopted by some members from both sides. A customary law threatens a permanent divide. Educated youths of the second generation are sceptical about worn out customs and they felt it was irrelevant to fight over such petty issues. One of them says, “... enmity will entail no benefits for us but will destroy us all. There is no parallel to living in peace. I plead with folded hands, please abjure violence” (ibid; Pg. 134). The discourse displays the tensions apparent in the strained relations of the two communities and the author desperately tries to douse tensions that develop through the speeches of certain characters or through authorial intrusions. There is clearly evident the ideological position of the author vis-à-vis the conflict that ensures in the novel. But in spite of the author's best attempts, the rational forces are outnumbered and the radical voices take up centre stage. Dorjee Chewang demands the erection of a lingjhik or stone monolith which he has already brought, as a mark of permanent separation of the two families. According to Sherdukpen custom, lingjhik is erected to signify territorial boundaries or as a mark to commemorate a significant decision taken by the community such that later generation can...
remember the decision and uphold it. Such resolutions are meant to be upheld by future generations for negation of the same would entail ill luck and misfortune. The implications of the title of the novel are brought out by the author and significantly, the dissension and divide of the two clans are marked out in the title itself. Historicity is sustained through the monolith and the ethnic associations are strengthened by its presence. The erection of the monolith is a socio-religious affair with elaborate rituals, symbolizing the importance the Sherdukpen attach to it. The erection is an occasion for drinking locally distilled liquor together, by members of the Wangja and Thongo clans, for the last time, “after which not only will we not drink together but tread different paths” (ibid; Pg. 139). While apparently such an act ensures peace between the two clans, it also exposes the cracks that appear which threaten the ethnic edifice of the Sherdukpen society, depicted in the novel. As an elder says directing Prem Tashi and Dorjee Chewang:

Today’s generations have all gone to dogs. Instead of ensuring the well being and renown of their own village and clan after being educated, they come to the village to create quarrels and dissensions. (ibid; Pg. 139)

Prem Tashi however expresses hope, when in a soliloquy he confides to the fact that sooner than later the lingjihik has to be destroyed. It also signifies the authorial intention of forging intra-ethnic solidarity threatened by a custom, which is more regulatory in nature than when it is strictly enforced. Ethnic pressures are therefore central to the split in the discourse, which manifests too often and defies any tangible solution. The two clans stand at opposite poles merely because two families wanted to settle their individual scores. The wider
ramifications of such a dispute have entangled the entire Sherdukpen community who are unwillingly drawn into the conflict. The lingjhik has vertically divided the community into watertight clan camps, which is viewed by the older generation and some members of the new generation like Norbu Chiring, as mutually destructive. The lingjhik claims its first victim in the form of Lamdoima, who shattered by the payment of ga-dhan during her lifetime, becomes frail and weak until she succumbs to death. But she gets her son Prem Tashi married to a girl called Langa, before her death. Prem Tashi suffers intense pain and grief during the period immediately after Lamdoima’s demise, which is compounded by the grief of his sister, Kreema Lamu. He confides in her:

I confess I am guilty. I have played with your and mother’s lives. If somebody has wronged, it is me. Father and maternal uncle are not to blame. You know Kreema, I thought very high of myself. Instead of opening my eyes, education has made me blind. The glitters of the outside world further thrust me into the world of darkness. Considering myself highly educated and highly placed having a derogatory attitude towards others, I had begun to look down upon my society. (ibid; Pg. 161)

Modern education is thus viewed as antithetical to ethnic customs, a fact conceded to not only by the village elders but by Prem Tashi himself. He takes his old father on a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya and Tawang for performing the rites of his mother as per Buddhist doctrines.

Meanwhile, Kreema Lamu becomes a doctor and incidentally is posted in the Government hospital in which Dorjee Chewang is the compounder. Dorjee Chewang is entrusted with escorting, Kreema from Bomdila to the hospital at Dirang. The one and a half hour journey revives old memories as Chewang
becomes nostalgic about the affair he had with Kreema in the past. But now everything seemed so different. At Dirang, the past intimacy between Chewang and Kreema are revived gradually with each respecting the other not only because of their official positions but also because of their estranged relationship. Minor misunderstandings centering on the ego however persist between them. It is during this time that Norbu Chiring takes an interest in Kreema Lamu and comes close to her and even proposes marriage. In the meantime, one day Dorjee Chewang is seriously injured in a fight with the SSB jawans and he had to be shifted to the Civil Hospital in Bomdila for better treatment. Kreema Lamu during this time takes casual leave to ensure that Chewang recovers very fast. She even takes up a temporary posting in the Bomdila Civil Hospital so that she can personally supervise the treatment of Chewang. Prem Tashi along with his wife Langa also pay occasional visits to Bomdila to enquire about the health of Chewang. Prem Tashi has already given up his job and entered into social service; he is presently the Vice President of the District Council. The great change that has come over Prem Tashi’s character is described by the author very vividly:

He did not even harbour any ill-feelings towards Dorjee Chewang now. Even though he could not tell it, in his innermost thoughts he wished that Dorjee Chewang and Kreema Lamu should become united. This is because he knew that Dorjee Chewang was not incapable. It was he who made Dorjee Chewang a eunuch. (ibid; Pg. 177)

Prem Tashi undergoes a drastic change in his character. The romantic idealism which he harboured in his earlier days for transforming his society was no more
in him. He realized that society needs many years before it can be transformed, because all societies are built upon values and solid foundations. His rash decision at spreading rumours about Dorjee Chewang to prevent the latter’s marriage to his sister proves very costly as it greatly affects the lives of Chewang, Kreema Lamu, Lamdoima, Kejang, Penje and many others. However, shorn of his myopic idealism Prem Tashi has no objection now to the marriage of his sister, Kreema Lamu with Dorjee Chewang even if the former is a doctor and the latter, a mere compounder. It later transpires that Chewang had picked up the fight with the SSB jawans because they had insulted Kreema. This disclosure endears Chewang even more to Kreema. When Norbu Chiring is confident of getting Kreema’s hand, he offers to talk to her brother, Prem Tashi about it. But she says to Norbu:

Yes, it was a mistake on my part (to have evinced an interest in you). If you wish, you can marry any girl of your choice. Because there are many girls who love you. But Dorjee Chewang has no one, he is alone. Apart from me he has no one to look forward to. That is why he needs me, needs me greatly. I have a mind to give him company, to be with him in his happiness and misery, lifelong, please forgive me (ibid; Pg. 181-182).

Kreema also refutes Norbu Chiring’s contention that Chewang is a eunuch for no one can be a better judge of a husband than one’s wife. Having resolved to marry no one other than Chewang, there is one obstacle to be surmounted. The lingjhik erected as a result of the breakdown of the earlier marriage of Chewang and Kreema, has to be dismantled. As long as the monolith remained, the union was not possible. Prem Tashi takes the lead, and on the appointed day of its
dismantling, appeals to all the people present to forget past differences and
forge a unity which existed before its erection. Moreover, the lingjihik symbolizes
the presence of jealousy, hate, anger, enmity and myopic vision of the two clan
members which would perpetuate as long it stood in its original place. Some
elders in the congregation opined that destruction of the lingjihik would entail
harm to the community, because even though it seems lifeless, it is full of life.
Therefore, the very act of erection and its subsequent destruction, both are
detrimental to the community at large. Thus, elaborate rituals are conducted
before the lingjihik as a sign of repentance and penitence and after the priest had
finished the rites, Chewang hands over a hammer to Prem Tashi to break down
the monolith. The novel ends here signaling the dismantling of barriers that
stood between the two clans – the Wangja and Thongo.

The discourse employed by the author in the novel is centred on the very
title, signifying the importance of the lingjihik in the Sherdukpen way of life. The
ethnic belief also forbids its dismantling because its very erection is expected to
be judged in the ramifications it would entail on the society. The discourse
displays the inherent tensions that engulf the Sherdukpen society and vertically
splits the community into two clans. Thongchi’s purpose to highlight the social
customs of the Sherdukpen tribe in an attempt to consolidate the nationalistic
discourse marks out a distinct trend of its own. This is exemplified by not only
the ethno-social marker but also by references to the Indian mainstream and, in
one case, government service is shown as the bane of all evil that befalls the
Sherdukpen society. The discourse thus displays the primordial ethnic beliefs set
against the changes taking place outside its immediate sphere of influence.
Numerous incidents in *Lingjhik* point to the fact that modern education and government employment have made deep inroads into the traditionally conservative Sherdukpen society, thereby influencing it and affecting it to a great degree. The outside world is thus pitted by Thongchi, in direct contrast to the ethnic world. Prem Tashi and Norbu Chiring best exemplify the new spirit, which, on one hand endeavours to modernize the ethnic traditions, but on the other hand threatens the very edifice on which the ethnic society is based. And this ambivalence is clearly manifest in the discourse, often oblivious of authorial intentions. Inevitably, the older generation share opposite views with the younger generation. The discourse also presents the intense psychological turmoil that affects characters like Prem Tashi, Kejang, Lamdoima, Kreema Lamu, Dorjee Chewang and some elders of the community. These psychological probings are centred on the polarities of tradition and modernity, the old order and new order, ethnic specificities and their mode of adherence. Thongchi has very subtly delineated these polarities to symbolize the necessity of change and the restraints involved in it. The notion of appropriation is also sought to be achieved in the discourse through the depiction of 'Indian' education which is ironically set against the ethnic tradition of the Sherdukpens. As an elder says:

> Today’s boys and girls after receiving Indian education are bent on doing away with rules and regulations, and our own cultural values. This is a cause of remorse for us. According to me, there exists no rule in our society which is fit enough to be cast off. Since our forefathers have followed such rules down the ages, we must also do the same. (ibid; Pg. 21)
The society depicted in the novel is at odds with Indian education because it directly interferes with the age old customs and conventions held sacred by the SherdukpenS down the ages. The tension in the discourse is intermittently exposed because of such interventions. Another aspect of the appropriative stance of the author is the reference to the great epic *Mahabharata*. When Kreema Lamu is troubled by the thoughts of the breakdown of her marriage to Dorje Chewang due to the latter being a supposed eunuch, she repeatedly reads the episode in the epic in which Shikhandi is depicted: “Sometimes she opened the *Mahabharata* and read about Shikhandi’s story. After reading the story she related and compared Shikhandi and Dorjee Chewang” (ibid; Pg. 72). Thongchi also refers to the puja holidays in the educational institutions which is normally ‘for a period of roughly one month’ (ibid; Pg. 85). These references to the mainstream, outside the ethnic world depicted in the novel, are primarily meant to reach out to a wider audience. But Thongchi localizes the novel in his known geographical locale by constantly referring to the rugged topography of Arunachal Pradesh. Three chapters of the novel – Chapter 1, 6 and 8 begin with characters tumbling and falling down, alluding to the rocky terrain of Sherdukpen land. Moreover, there are numerous instances in the discourse where tumbling is associated with physical pain and suffering often leading to metaphorical allusions to events in actual life. Penje, Prem Tashi and Dorjee Chewang tumble and the physical act of tumbling has serious psychological repercussions on them. Thongchi not only refers to the rugged topography of the land but also intricately links the landscape with the minds of the characters. *Lingjhik* can thus be analysed as a deeply localized novel having a universal human appeal. The
discourse in the novel is basically an affirmation of the ethnic belief system of the
Sherdukpen, where the question of identity and its associated concerns are
carefully analysed. The *lingjhik* sustains historicity and is a symbol of the ethnic
Sherdukpen belief in the primordial aspects of its culture. As Thomas Hylland
Eriksen says:

> Ethnic symbolism referring to the ancient language, religion, kinship system or way of life is crucial for the maintenance of ethnic identity through periods of change. Generally speaking, social identity becomes most important the moment it seems threatened. Several factors may constitute such a perceived threat, but they are always related to some kind of change (2002 (reprint); Pg. 68)

The change is sought to be enforced by the effects of ‘Indian’ education and
government employment in *Lingjhik* which result in growing identity concerns.
Ironically, education is depicted as the bane of all evil which afflicts the
Sherdukpen society and plunges it into disorder. Towards the end of the novel,
the discourse again refers to the subsequent unity of the two clans achieved
through destruction of the *lingjhik*.

Yeshe Dorje Thongchi in both his novels, *Sonam* and *Lingjhik* showcases
cultural nationalism and self assertion set against the nationalistic critical
discourses. It is also very significant that he uses Assamese to write his tribe – its
custom and culture into the evolving nationalistic paradigm. Thongchi closely
inhabited and subscribed to a nationalistic idiom but unlike other writers, who
tried to depict the other’s way of life, he was representing his own custom,
culture and space by remaining committed to his roots as he reached out to an
evolving sense of a nation. The discourse in both the novels which apparently conveys the intra-ethnic specificities, at a deeper level lays bare the fractured nature of the discourse. While in *Sonam* it is manifested in the conflicts that arise because of the system of polyandry affecting the lives of the three main characters significantly, in *Lingjhik*, the tension between the Wangja and Thongo clans is clearly marked out. The psychological probings in *Sonam* displays vividly the fissures in the discourse which is stabilized only towards the end of the novel. In *Lingjhik*, modern education and traditional ethnic beliefs are at loggerheads, which accounts for the split nature of discourse. In either case, Thongchi attempts to consolidate the ethnic boundary through intra-ethnic tensions in an attempt to reinforce identity concerns:

Processes of social inclusion and exclusion, and forms of ethnic incorporation, have been described in relation to interaction and social integration. Such a perspective does allow for an investigation of the symbolic aspect of ethnicity – the ethnic identity – yet this dimension is generally seen as a concomitant, or even an effect, of social process, individual utility to social functionality. (ibid; Pg. 59)

The ethnic dynamics of the Brokpa and Sherdukpen societies, through the social interactions and stress on ethnic markers, mark out a distinctive trend – the primacy of primordial beliefs as the absolute rule of life. It is to be mentioned here that Thongchi is not merely cataloguing ethnic culture and customs but implying a deeper meaning to the entire gamut of intra-ethnic relations. The churnings that take place in the societies in both the novels are a testimony to the challenges that afflict ethnic communities over the ages. The rationale that Thongchi advocates is one of incorporation and adjustment to ethnic beliefs such
that the primordial spirit and trust embedded in such beliefs are not disturbed. It is striking, therefore, that in both the novels; the ethnic order is reinstated towards the respective ends inspite of the pressures and pulls which threatens the very edifice of socially sanctioned customs. There is thus considerable artistic merit in such representations. Thongchi’s use of Assamese is very different from that of native writers of the language because it is coloured by basic specificities and ethnic terms in this untranslated forms. This uninhibited and idiom free use of the language captures the ethnic spirit at its very best marking a distinct trend in Assamese fictional discourse. Thongchi’s style is thus characterized by a certain degree of understatement as opposed to the figurative, ornamental and idiomatic language used by native, Assamese writers. This analysis of Thongchi’s style is clearly manifest in the discourse of Sonam and Lingjhik. The author shows how Assamese can be used in a different way in a different context thereby inflecting the language with possibilities of innovative narrative and representation. It is thus a significant addition to the North East narrative not only because of ethnic delineations but also because of the unique handling of the Assamese language by Thongchi. Thus, Thongchi’s discourse can be perceived as writing back to the supposed core by inverting themes and concerns prevalent in the mainstream Indian discourse:

This inversion of the dominant discourse prioritizes nation-from-below as a possible alternative position that is subordinated from a position of nation-from-above. The nation-from-below expresses itself not through the state conduits but by striking against an established harmony by way of extreme means. The affirmation of a subaltern ethnic group negates the state and
designs an expression for itself in order to make it visible. (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 2008, Pg. 246)

Thongchi's context can thus be understood in the light of the ethnic configurations of his known world, the peripheral subject set against the nationalistic discourse. The discourse in both Sonam and Lingjhik are fraught with the pulls and pressures of ethnic situations that have overbearing presence and affects the lives of the characters. This feature, unique to the fictional discourse of the North East, manifests itself often obvious of authorial intentions. In Sonam, the socially sanctioned custom of polyandry not only splits Lobjang's family but also leads to intense philosophical speculations in the two characters – Sonam and Lobjang. Clearly, Thongchi is not able to bring about a desired ending to the novel because he suggests alternatives rather than a concrete resolution. Likewise, the discourse in Lingjhik is also one of intense stress manifested in the rivalry of two families which spirals into an inter-clan divide. The author though, brings about a sort of conventional ending to the novel, cannot apparently control the forces that shake the ethnic world of the Sherdukpons. Therefore, the discourse in both the novels is characterized by primordial ethnic beliefs which are threatened and challenged by forces and circumstances which the author finds difficult to control. It is in this sense that Thongchi’s discourse in both the novels exhibits the marked characteristics of the North East narrative.
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