Chapter - VI:

Conclusion
The ethnic discourse in the North East is characterized by the fact that ethnicity is a social construct and thus in principle it is fluid. This fluidity is limited by hegemonic processes of inscription and by the relations of different forces in society. In the context of India’s North East, ethnicity exhibits forces of assimilation and dissimilation because of its inherently heterogeneous nature. In the ethnocritical perspective, the reciprocity of inter and intra ethnic dynamics dictate the level of ‘boundary’ to be maintained and the question of ‘otherness’ in a mutually inclusive social set up. Arnold Krupat puts it in the right perspective when he says that:

Ethnocritical discourse regards border and boundary crossings, with their openness to and recognition of the inevitability of interactive relations, as perhaps the best means to some broadly descriptive account of the way things “really” work in the material and historical world. Ethnocriticism thus wishes to develop and refine dialogic models whose claims to accuracy, systematicity, and knowledge would reside in their capacity, in Anthony Wilden’s sense, to take in more context. (Krupat, 1992, Pg. 26)

The ethnic discourse of the North East dealt with in the foregoing chapters is inevitably, in each particular case, characterized by dialogic encounters in which either inter or intra-ethnic dynamics is brought to the fore. This aspect is highlighted in Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s *Yaruingam* and Yeshe Dorje Thongchi’s *Sonam* and *Lingjhik*, in the intra ethnic dialogics which the authors try to portray in the respective novels to show-case ethnic concerns that characterize a particular social setup. Umakanta Sarma’s *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* and *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* display the inter-ethnic relations of ethnic
groups in which there is a subtle probing into the levels of acculturation and assimilation to be achieved and the need for maintaining the ‘boundary’ on mutually accepted terms. In either case, the discourses display the unique social fabric of the North East and its accompanying concerns which marks a distinctive voice different and separate from that of mainland India. It would be pertinent to mention here that such discourses represent the ethnic dynamics of the region in all its complexity and variety often beyond desired authorial intentions. The nationalistic fervour which gripped the novelists in the period immediately after independence in India had also its accompanying concerns in the North East in which many authors endeavoured to write into the national mainstream. Assamese novelists like Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Umakanta Sarma followed in the great line of Assamese authors who being culturally and linguistically oriented to the mainstream always attempted to portray nationalistic concern in covert or manifest forms. But the discourses in Yaruingam, Bharanda Pakshir Jhak and Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya depict the failure of the nationalistic paradigm while capturing the essence of the ethnic spirit of the North East. A reading of these novels displays the helplessness and loss of authorial directives when characters and situations work independently and assume a position of their own. In critical parlance, new historicism and cultural materialism stress on the author’s position in relation to historical circumstances where, “the role of the author is not completely negated, but it is a role that the author is best only partially in command of” (Bertens, 2003 Indian reprint, Pg. 176). And this best sums up the position of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Umakanta Sarma who were writing in order to consolidate and strengthen the peripheral voices in
relation to the supposed core in the backdrop of Indian independence. In Yeshe Dorje Thongchi’s novels, *Sonam* and *Lingjhik*, the intra-ethnic dimensions of the Brokpa and Sherdukpen societies are portrayed and thus latent ethnic specificities are very subtly brought out. In *Sonam*, the social life of the people of the remote mountains of Arunachal Pradesh is depicted in an effort by the author to demonstrate the intricacies and complexities which characterize the tribal way of life. The overbearing sense of custom and tradition on ethnic life is delineated by Thongchi and the tensions engulfing the particular social life are graphically brought out. The discourse in the novel points out distinctly intra-ethnic stress depicted in the relationship of Sonam, Lobjang and Pema Wangchu in a polyandrous set up. In *Lingjhik*, intra-ethnic tensions based on the polar opposites of young / old, modern education / tradition, clan / society and ethnic assertion / destruction of ethnic beliefs, are variously analyzed bringing out vividly the Wangja and Thongo clan rivalries in the backdrop of fast changing socio-cultural values. Both the novels are characterized by pure and simple ethnic idiomatic diction and expressions which showcase the Brokpa and Sherdukpen ways of life in remote parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Thongchi’s discourse in both the novels while on the surface level attempts to portray the elemental simplicities of intra-ethnic life, at a deeper level the fractured nature of the discourse is all too apparent primarily owing to internal social tensions. It follows therefore that the portrayal of the ethnic complexities of the North East as reflected in the selected works of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Umakanta Sarma and Yeshe Dorje Thongchi betrays the desired intentions of the authors, mainly because of the pulls and pressures of both inter and intra-ethnic dynamics
which defies all attempts of homogenous rationalization. Such unintended outcome is not uncommon but manifests itself in the intricacies of the situations and characters involved. As Sean Burke puts it to illustrate the precariousness of the author:

Nathaniel Hawthorne once sketched an idea for a short story in which a writer finds that his tale takes on a life of its own, so that characters act against his designs, and a catastrophe ensues which he struggles in vain to avert. Two themes would have been unavoidable in this never-to-be-written story: first, the confusion of the aesthetic and the everyday plane, secondly the degree of responsibility an author should take for the outcomes — unintended as well as intended — of his or her work. (quoted in Patricia Waugh ed. Literary Theory and Criticism, 2006, Pg. 488.)

In the context of North East, the confusion arises from the largely preconceived categorization of authors who endeavoured to write into the mainstream without gauging the intensities of the ethnical delineations. Moreover, the intended outcomes are often downplayed and subdued by overt unintended ones, signifying the importance of the ethnocritical perspective which “seeks a position not quite beyond objectivism and relativism but instead somewhere between objectivism and relativism” (Krupat, 1992, Pg. 27). This signals the growth and evolution of ethnic narrative in the North East, distinguished sharply from the mainstream Indian narrative.

The narrative of the North East is informed, supplemented and consolidated by the discourses discussed in the previous chapters in which the institutionalized force of the respective social contexts assume importance. The nationalistic appropriative discourse in Yaruingam sought to be portrayed by
Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya in the light of intra-ethnic complexities of the Tangkhul Naga society, does not succeed and the novel ends without offering any tangible solution to the vexed problem of Naga sovereignty vis-à-vis Indian nationalism. The discourse in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* highlights the failure of assimilative processes that characterize multi-ethnic societies and the degree of acculturation that is to be achieved. However, identity concerns among the tea-garden labourers over the question of assimilation into the greater Assamese community is palpably visible which Umakanta Sarma finds difficulty to control and the fractured nature of the discourse is all too manifest. *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* negates the apparent authorial intention of forging a larger Assamese nationality and the discourse of the novel reflects the even sharper divisions between the Bodo and Assamese communities as the novel ends. The nationalistic humanistic discourse attempted by the author apparently fails because the ethnic negotiation and unity cannot be achieved either through complete assimilation, acculturation or exclusion, “for, as Fredrik Barth, in a classic study showed, the maintenance of ethnic distinctions do(es) not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, and that cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence” (quoted in Krupat, 1992, Pg. 15). Yeshe Dorje Thongchi’s nationalistic ethnic discourse evidenced in *Sonam* and *Lingjihik* marks a distinctive trend in the sense that internal social tensions that characterize the Brokpa and Sherdukpen societies in both the novels reveal the evolution of a simple ethnic discourse set simultaneously against the dominant Assamese discourse in the North East, and the mainstream Indian discourse. Thongchi was using the Assamese language to showcase the
periphery in an attempt to reach out to a larger audience. The subtle and apparently invisible tensions that engulf the tribal society in the two novels reflected in the intra-ethnic dynamics, point to a discourse unique, exclusive and peculiar to the North East. Thus, the North East narrative is an amalgam of discourses in which the concerns and tensions of the region are overtly manifest often oblivious of authorial intentions. In this context, Sara Mills maintains:

... discourse also constructs certain events and sequences of events into narratives which are recognized by a particular culture as real or important events. (Mills, 2007, Pg. 48)

Therefore, discourses never exist independently of time and space for they are sets of sanctioned statements and intimately related to the society in which they occur. In the North East context, the fictional discourse has always endeavoured to portray the ethnic diversity of the region generally in terms of the national experience. Such portrayals on a much deeper level expose and identify inter and intra-ethnic life of the region in its raw, unrefined and primitivist form markedly different from similar discourses in mainland India. The ideology and social orientations of authors of the region, inspite of their best intentions, often display in their discourses, ethnic complexities with the avowed aim of forging a larger, assimilative unity which more often than not, turns out to be tantalizingly illusive. And as Foucault says, "... discourse is not a group of signs or a stretch of text, but practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972; Pg. 49), the fictional works of the North East vividly signify the practices of ethnic dynamics of the region which systematically informs and represents it. The whole argument is that discourses are culture specific and sanctioned statements in which ego, ideology, subjectivity and identity of the author in so far as they
affect fictional works, plays an important role. In the context of the North East, individual fictional discourses help in constructing the North East narrative, different and distinguished from the mainstream Indian narrative. This aspect finds reflection in Hayden White’s observation that the:

... distinction between discourse and narrative is, of course, based solely on an analysis of the grammatical features of two modes of discourse in which the ‘objectivity’ of one and the ‘subjectivity’ of the other are definable primarily by a ‘linguistic order of criteria’. The ‘subjectivity’ of the discourse is given by the presence, explicit or implicit, of an ‘ego’ who can be defined ‘only as the person who maintains the discourse’. By contrast, the ‘objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator’ (White, 2001 (reprint), Pg. 266).

Subjective interpretations of ethnic situations and complexities of the North East marks the evolution of a distinct narrative pattern of the region in which authors don the mantle of both novelist and ethnographer to portray a particular situation in which nationalistic and humanistic concerns intersperse basically giving credence to the larger social role of the novelists. K.C. Baral’s observation in this context is relevant:

It appears that the ethnographer and the novelist are driven by contradictory desires. On the one hand the ethnographer seeks refuge in fictional narratives to give expression to facts that could not be included in the ethnographic report under the constraints of objectivity and scientific rigour. The novelist, on the other hand, attempts to be an authentic narrator, a realist, a pseudo-ethnographer, taking the mantle of fieldworker theorist. (quoted in Subba and Som ed. Between Ethnography and Fiction, 2005, Pg. 10, emphasis mine).
The fault lines in the North East fictional discourse, revealed in the portrayal of ethnic life is basically because of the authors’ attempt to be ‘authentic narrators’ whereby the ethnographic details are often surrendered for the sake of fictional propriety.

Constructions of selfhood and identity along ethnic lines have been a strong feature in the North East mainly because of the presence of multifarious ethnic groups which collectively constitute a negotiative cultural space. In the pre-independence period, the nationalist feelings of individual ethnic groups were centred round their respective areas of dominance in the form of principalities or self-administered territories which consolidated into intense feelings of subnationalism after Indian independence. This aspect of North East socio-cultural life has found expression in the literature of the region. Fictional discourses have portrayed ethnic dissensions and strife and authors have advocated the need for harmony and toleration with the avowed aim of fostering relations between the North East and the rest of the country. This nationalistic and appropriative stance of authors of the region often betrayed ethnic concerns while attempting to write into the mainstream. It is precisely this preoccupation of authors which accounts for the evolution of a North East narrative with a distinct flair and trend of its own, often challenging and subverting the dominant Indian narrative. In the ethnocritical perspective quoting from Lyotard’s postmodernist postulates, David Carroll writes:

The importance of these little narratives is not only that they challenge the dominant metanarrative and the state apparatus _that would prohibit or discredit them, but that they also indicate_
the possibility of another kind of society. (quoted in Krupat, 1992, Pg. 10)

That the ethnic configurations of the North East necessitate a narrative not in conformity and consonance with the mainstream Indian narrative, often eluded the authors’ grasp and which manifested itself invariably in the fictional discourse through the vicissitudes of ethnic relationships of the region. It would also be pertinent to mention here that the North East narrative is informed, supplemented and strengthened by fictional representations of the ethnic groups of different states of the region. Assamese novels predate those of other states of the North East as a result of which novelists writing in Assamese have portrayed inter-ethnic relations covering the pan-regional domain. Thus, the socio-cultural life of the Mishings, Nagas, Adis, Garos, Khasis and Karbis dominate many novels written in the language. Non-Assamese writers liker Lummer Dai, Yeshe Dorje Thongchi, Jayanta Rongpi and Rong Bong Terang have written in Assamese to showcase the life and culture of their ethnic communities by reaching out to a larger audience. Fictional narrative of the North East immediately after independence is characterized by ethnic concerns centering mainly on questions of identity and selfhood, and at the same time attempted to sustain a tenuous and fragile link with the mainstream Indian narrative. But the geo-political space called the North East had varying degrees of experience of the struggle for Indian independence, as a result of which fictional discourses of the region does not reflect or embody the totality of the Indian experience but exist as a subsidiary or corollary to the more dominant and pervasive theme of ethnicity. Udayon Misra’s observation in this context is relevant:
The idea of “one nation” which gathered strength during the country’s freedom struggle and which was buttressed up during the years immediately following the partition of the country and its independence, received its first jolt in the hills of the northeastern region. This was an area which had been virtually untouched by the freedom struggle and also historically, outside the pale of Indian civilization. (Misra, 2000, Pg. 10).

The equation of the dominant Indian identity with the core of the nation and the location of subordinated ethnic identities at its peripheries is secured partly through differential power over private and public spaces. The mainstream Indian nationalistic discourse never attempted to portray the ethnic life of the North East and stray references in some fictional works written in mainland India about the region, are merged in exotic ideals. It is only appropriate that the North East narrative endeavours to portray the region in its factual context in which ethnic themes predominate often in the light of experiences and encounters the region had with the mainland. Misra’s observation is significant because the unipolar concept of nation, except for certain exceptions, never gained any foothold in the North East and the concept of ‘nation’ was confined to the area of influence of a particular ethnic group. This ‘nationalities’ of this kind dominated the North East in the pre-independence days which took the form of subnationalisms immediately after independence:

The nationalistic feelings of 1930s and 40s which imbibed a lot of rationale for doing away with communalism, today seems to have waned away giving place to a trend of ethnic revivalism which gradually leads to the concept of subnationalism, in other words, strong ethnic feeling. (quoted in Rizvi and Roy, 2003, Pg. 5)
Such ethnic assertions have dominated the fictional discourses of the North East in which subjectivity and identity are prime concerns and the primary cause of inter and intra-ethnic conflicts. In *Yaruingam*, the Tangkhul Naga identity is questioned by two groups of opposing characters in the backdrop of Indian independence and voices of Naga nationalism grow so strong and intense, that the author seemingly loses the appropriative stance. This is manifest in the last part of the novel in which the author refrains from making any direct comment on the issue of Naga sovereignty vis-à-vis Indian nationalism and leaves the novel open-ended for the reader to draw his/her own conclusions. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya is clearly at odds with which the events unfold in the novel, and his protagonist Rishang can only surmise that his son will be the harbinger of new hope for the Tangkhul Nagas. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* though apparently showcases the assimilation achieved through the interaction between tea-garden labourers and Assamese society, there is a visible sense of discord and a foreboding of fracture surfacing in the discourse. Though the second generation of labourers accepts Assam as their motherland and speaks pidgin Assamese, the ethnic boundary is permeable and the levels of assimilation are taken for granted. This accounts for the submerged tension in the discourse which betrays the intentions of the author. Umakanta Sarma’s *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* demonstrates the falsity of the author’s nationalistic humanistic paradigm because he is unable to encompass the aspirations of the younger generation of Bodos vis-à-vis the concept of Assamese nationality in an inclusive negotiative cultural space. Yeshe Dorje Thongchi’s concerns in *Sonam* and *Lingjhik* are purely primordial in which the authors deals with intra-ethnic dynamics without
any ostentations and novelties in a language not his own. While it is apparent that Thongchi has used Assamese to reach out to a larger audience, it is also an attempt to write into the mainstream those ethnic issues with which he was familiar. And in so doing, Thongchi has infused his narrative in both the novels with intra-ethnic specificities which has a distinct flavour and tone of the North East. In *Lingjhik* especially, the narrative is centred on an ancient Sherdukpen custom which splits the ethnic community into the two clan camps, demonstrating the contradictory intra-ethnic pulls which fracture and split the discourse. *Sonam* is more focused in terms of ethnic delineation in which the fortunes and misfortunes of a family are viewed in the backdrop of local ethnic customs. In this delineation, the narrative displays primordial cultural beliefs where time seems to stand still and there is hardly any progression. Yet the intensity of passions and shifts of fortunes of the characters capture the ethnic spirit at its very best. In all the fictional works discussed above, the dissensions, strifes and psychological conflicts, all centre on the question of identity and selfhood in which there is a continuous exchange of ideas based primarily on the preservation of the ethnic order. The whole argument focuses on one important aspect of the discourse in North East – that ethnic concerns predominate and overpower other issues which are merely present as passing references, often deliberately forced by the authors. The 'national’ construct in the North East is thus inextricably intertwined with the inherent dynamics and fortunes of a particular ethnic group and in many cases in its mutually accepted exclusivist ideals vis-à-vis other groups which is variable in nature and not absolute, dependent upon the levels of permeability.
The post-independence Indian narrative was more concerned with salvaging the pride of the nation, shattered in the aftermath of partition and communal violence. It fell upon the authors to consolidate the Indian narrative to construct the nation and evolve a paradigm of its own. The socio-political role of novelists in this phase mainly centered on evolving an Indian national identity which often resulted in the apparent neglect of minor and fringe ethnic groups in the fictional discourses. The preoccupation of writers to recover and sustain the ‘ancient Indian ethos’ (Naik, 2000, Pg. 191-192) attained axiomatic proportions. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar says:

Notwithstanding the peculiar occupational ailments that beset the novelist in India, it is gratifying to note that the novel is a living and evolving literary genre, and is trying in the hands of its practitioners, a fusion of form, substance and expression that is recognizably Indian... (1996 (reprint), Pg. 322-323).

In other words, the post-colonial Indian fiction displayed concerns aimed at a break from the colonial past and an attempt at creating a genre of its own. It is relevant here to quote Misra (2000), again, for his observation that, the North East was unaffected by the freedom struggle and that the region was outside ‘the pale of Indian civilization’, attains significance because the region was embroiled in its own concerns oblivious generally, of the happenings in the mainland. It is only appropriate that the North East narrative should evolve as a genre of its own not only because of the region’s geographical and linguistic exclusivity and uniqueness, but also because identity and ethnic concerns permeate the socio-cultural life of the region. Assam being culturally and racially close to the Indian mainstream, “had a deep and wide-ranging cultural
intercourse with the rest of the Indian sub-continent centuries before the other neighbouring hill regions came to know of the 'mainstream', (Misra, 2000, Pg. 1) and thus was affected to some extent by the freedom struggle. Assamese fictional writers therefore endeavoured to appropriate North East concerns with that of the 'mainstream' in order to strengthen and consolidate the nationalistic paradigm. But such nationalistic concerns never took up centre stage and remained subsidiary and sometimes even insignificant to the dominant thematic concern of ethnicity. The reference of Mahatma Gandhi evoked in Yaruingam and Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya are but deliberate ploys of the authors to further their nationalistic concerns that is basically pacifist in nature and thereby tries to ameliorate the intense intra and inter ethnic conflicts respectively. The concern over violence and hatred in Bharanda Pakshir Jhak also has a Gandhian ideal attached to the discourse in which Devakanta vociferously tries in vain to reconcile the warring Bodos and Assamese. Even the concern of the clan elders over the deteriorating ethnic values of the younger generation in Lingjhik, is disregarded and modern values infiltrate the Sherdukpen society thereby separating the two clans. Thongchi's discourse fails to preserve the traditional, primordial beliefs as the two clans almost verge on violence. The whole argument demonstrates concerns that are unique and peculiar to the North East context which are reflected in the fictional discourses of the region bearing no resemblance in terms of thematic concerns to the discourses of the 'mainstream'. Ethnocritical discourse, in its self-positioning at the frontier, seeks to traverse rather than occupy a great variety of "middle grounds..." (Krupat, 2000, Pg. 25) and this traversal significantly marks out the discourse in the North East context.
The breaking down of ‘middle grounds’ is thus central to the North East narrative which denotes an important shift in position vis-à-vis the dominant Indian narrative. Geographical, cultural and the predominantly non-Aryan origins of the inhabitants of the North East account for the distinctiveness of its fictional discourse in which regional concerns dominate over issues relating to the mainstream Indian experience.

A study of ethnicity in the selected novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Umakanta Sarma and Yeshe Dorje Thongchi thus reveals a narrative which attempts to embody and represent the ethos of the North East. This ethos is ingrained in the fictional narratives of the region in which ethnic issues are central to the delineation, depicting the variety and uniqueness of the region. Since times immemorial oral narratives have perpetuated identity and subjective concerns of the ethnic communities of the North East and this trend is perceptible in the literature of the region, more so in the fictional narratives. Such narratives are always constructed in relation to the ‘other’, in the vigorous interplay of shared relational contexts. Such contexts involve a negotiative cultural space in which two or more ethnic groups meet and interact effecting a transformation of outlook:

Ethno-narratives are a special genre of narratives that involve a transformation of the self and the community, in a mutual interrelationship. In the context of NE-India, such a transformation becomes imminent in the possibilities of redefining an identity and its crises within. Identity claims in North East India emerge from the lived space of intercultural and interethnic conflicts, but it does not evolve into a paradigm of conflict resolution. In an ironic sense such conflict are the
resources for generation of specific identity narratives. (in Bhattacharjee and Dev (ed.), 2006, Pg. 5).

Fictional narrative of the North East is invariably concerned with questions regarding the ethnic situation in which identity and selfhood are important constructs. Authors have grappled with such problems often at the cost of authorial intentions as a result of which situations and characters go out of hand and assume identities of their own. The role of the novelist and that of the ethnographer coalesce to produce the dilemma and in many cases, the novelist does not seem to command the sequence of events as they unfold. The socio-cultural role of the novelist is often defeated at the hands of ethno-identity concerns. Humanist and appropriative stances recede to the background as ethnic concerns take up centre stage. This apparent helplessness is a unique feature of novelists of the North East. The North East narrative attempts to portray at a submerged level the complexities inherent in constructing a nationalistic narrative not oblivious of the multi ethnic reality of the region, where the margin is constantly engaged in negotiations with a supposed core. But the overwhelming ethnic configurations negate and obliterate the very notion of appropriation sought to be accomplished by the novelists. The disintegration of the appropriative Assamese discourse is a pointer in this regard because it gave rise to a parallel exclusivist metaphor working simultaneously. It must be mentioned here that the nationalistic consolidative narrative and the apparent negative fallout was not the result of a scheme or design on the part of the novelist, but somehow it eluded the novelist without his/her realization. The evolution of a North East narrative many also be attributed to the failure of the
mainstream Indian narrative which failed to incorporate and encompass the socio-cultural fabric of the region, a fact that finds expression in Sanjib Baruah’s statement that:

... pan-Indian narratives can also allow for more multiplicity: they can institutionally accommodate other historically constituted collectivities not just within some hegemonic project of nation-building but, by recognizing the notion of ‘dual but complementary political identities.’ (Baruah, 2008 (reprint), Pg. 8)

But the strictly homogenous Indian identity is distinctly manifested in the mainstream narrative leaving no negotiative space for complementary narratives. It therefore follows that, in the light of ethnocritical theory, a narrative pattern unique and particular to the North East is marked out signalling a significant break from the mainstream consolidative narrative. This narrative centering on the concept of ethnicity represents the complex social dynamics of the region in the fictional works, giving due credence to the mutually inclusive cultural space. This is exemplified by the failed attempt of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s nationalist appropriative discourse which the author originally wanted to portray in Yaruingam and also the failure of Umakanta Sarma’s overt nationalistic humanistic discourse in his two novels Bharanda Pakshir Jhak and Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya, as epitomized by the failure of the concept of greater Assamese nationality. Yeshe Dorje Thongchi’s novel Sonam and Lingjhik reflects the evolution of a simple ethnic discourse, set against the disintegrating nationalistic discourse. This may be attributed to the location of the author within what is a homogenous cultural space at the periphery of the larger nationalistic discourse.
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