Chapter - I:

Introduction
The concept of ‘nation’ – fairly new to modern theoretical studies, is central to the understanding of any work involving multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies. In his thought provoking analysis of the nation, Ernest Renan observes:

A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. (1990, Pg. 19)

Opening up the complexity of the argument Renan observes that it is solidarity, which essentially binds a nation. The nation in postcolonial terms has come to be identified with feelings of cohesiveness and compositeness and critics have argued that primarily it is a colonial term. Colonizers have often drawn arbitrary boundaries to suit their own ends without really caring for social and ethnic mismatches and the resultant internecine hatreds that have engulfed the social fabric of many third world ‘nations’. What then holds the nation together? Benedict Anderson refers to the nation as ‘an imagined political community (1983, Pg. 6) who share ‘a deep, horizontal comradeship’ (ibid, Pg. 7). The imagination springs from the sense of belonging to a nation in which other members are expected to be culturally oriented through the consumption of the same newspapers and other forms of the media. It therefore follows that it is not social bindings or inter-ethnic solidarity that keeps members of a nation intact. In fact, the nation is constructed, maintained and defended by the idea of a common culture and heritage and in most cases by a common language or its variants. Race, class and gender are most often not invoked in any discussion on the concept of the nation. But the idea of the nation being a western concept is susceptible to destroying the foundations on which it is supposedly based. Firstly,
because it does not encompass the aspirations of the myriad social and fringe ethnic groups; and secondly the idea of a common culture, heritage and language as the cementing factor does not apply in all cases. This is what Partha Chatterjee terms as the 'liberal dilemma’ because nationalism also facilitates illiberal movements, internecine conflicts, political crises and civil war. Chatterjee argues that western colonial powers on the pretext of modernization and progress extended their expansion into the colonies for civilizing purposes. This inversely affected national movements for they tended to appropriate the liberal aspects of Western nationalism. As Chatterjee maintains:

Nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the conditions of the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation could 'modernize' itself while retaining its cultural identity. (1986; Pg. 30)

Chatterjee draws a distinction between nationalism as a political movement which challenges the colonial State, and nationalism as a cultural construct which enables the colonized to posit their autonomy.

Homi Bhabha, another eminent thinker in the domain of postcolonial studies says that the nation is split by what he calls the 'conceptional ambivalence' (LC 1994, Pg. 146) because it is pulled between two incompatible opposites. The first is the nation as a fixed originary essence and second, the nation as socially manufactured and devoid of a fixed origin. According to him:
The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor. (1994; Pg 139)

Metaphor for Bhabha appears to imply some reality, some origin, back there, to which we might return, in terms of a linear, horizontal, historicist narrative, the nation stands for a secure, if nostalgic vision of community. Echoing Partha Chatterjee, Bhabha maintains that nationalist discourses are ultimately illiberal and must always be challenged. In other words, he stresses on the 'imagined' quality of the nation, which comes alive when it is 'narrated' and therefore prone to a pedagogical and / or a performative dimension.

The concept of the nation has also been discussed elaborately by Frantz Fanon who took inspiration from the Negritude movement started by his teacher Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor. Essentially, Negritude was a nationalist movement aimed at glorifying blackness as resourceful, creative and worthy of being celebrated. Blackness was intimately identified with the unique African way of life and both Cesaire and Senghor upheld the sophistication and special qualities of African culture. Deriving his material from such perceptions of African culture, Fanon was at first critical of the Negritude movement and the 'native intellectual'. He appropriated the Negritude movement in his own terms for he maintained that a pan-African solidarity cannot be worked out encompassing the African people of the Caribbean Islands and America who have little or no idea of the real Africa and its traditional heritage. Nevertheless, national culture must be responsible to historical circumstances. As he maintains:

The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope
of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. (quoted in Bill Ashcroft et al ed. *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*, 1995, Pg. 154.)

Fanon proposes a national literature engaged in formation of a national consciousness, in expanding his idea of the nation.

Ranajit Guha is an eminent Indian critic who adds a new dimension to the debate of the nation by opining that anti-colonial nationalism acquires its meaning through the etymology of struggle which is often spoken in a distinctly popular, indigenous and pre-colonial idiom. In his influential essay, *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India* (in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1982), Guha asserts the fact that nationalism simply cannot be understood without locating how subaltern groups contributed to it not at the behest of the nationalist leaders but on their own 'independently of the elite'. Guha's essay calls attention to the ways that contemporary representations of Indian anti-colonial nationalism tend to place the subaltern classes as subject to the whims of the elite. Referring to Indian nationalism, he says that it is:

.... primarily an idealist venture in which the indigenous elite led the people from subjugation to freedom...... The history of Indian nationalism is thus written up as a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite. (1982, Pg. 38)

The unrepresented and unheard voices are given prominence by Guha in the context of Indian nationalism set against the failure of the bourgeoisie to speak for the nation. Ashis Nandy narrows down this argument of nationalism by
propagating the theory of ‘post-national ethic’, which must begin by recognizing
the oppressed or marginalized selves in the battle against institutionalized
suffering. Nandy refers to the 1813 legislation banning widow immolation, which
led to an increase in the number of satis. This he interprets as a form of anti-
colonial nationalism, which ironically was biased heavily against women.
Referring to such women, Nandy writes:

In their desperate defence of the rite they were also trying to
defend their traditional self-esteem. (1980; Pg. 7)

The diverse and often conflicting concept of the nation as advocated by
different theorists mentioned above have opened up newer possibilities of
interpreting the concept from the point of view of India’s North East. Nation has
been an important construct in the psyche of the different ethnic groups
inhabiting the North East. The princely states and self administered lands have
since times immemorial developed the notion of a nation so much so that in the
post-independence phase, reorganization of boundaries have caused much
resentment. The concept that Phizo advocated in Nagaland that the Naga is not a
tribe but a nation is an illustration in this regard. Ethnic solidarity is strongly
viewed as an essential for the formation of a nation in the North East and in spite
of political and administrative decisions by the Central Government, this notion
stands paramount. The study will be an attempt to situate this concept of the
nation as evident in Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s Yaruingam, Umakanta
Sarma’s, Bharanda Pakshir Jhak and Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya and Yeshe Dorje
Thongchi’s Sonam and Lingjhik.
The research work includes the hypothesis of constructing a narrative for the North East. Narrative structures our perception of both cultural artifacts and the world around us. The notions of ethnicity will be central to evaluate the narrative in the fictional works taken up for the purpose of the study, Yaruingam, Bharanda Pakshir Jhak, Ejak Manuh Ekhan Araynya, Sonam and Lingjhik. Also of allied research will be the narration of the nation as evident from the fictional works mentioned above. The nation has its own historical narrative which posits and explains its origins, its traditional character and the victories won in its name. As Jonathan Culler maintains:

... the creation of a nation involves the posting of a history; to be a member of this group is, precisely to take certain stories as in some sense your stories, your past. The role of discourse is less familiar, though possibly even more important. Narrative discourse, particularly its structure of address posits an imagined community which is much like a nation, in that it consists of people who have no idea of each other's actual existence but who are constituted as we by the discursive structures of the text. (quoted in Narrative : A Seminar ed. Amiya Dev, 2005; Pg. 6)

The analysis of the narrative in the context of the study is important particularly because our ordering of time and space constitutes one of the primary ways we construct meaning in general. Narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which trans-cultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted. Narrative has played an important part in identity formation for a long time and it has assisted in upholding an absolutist concept of cultural difference, especially in its contribution to the concept of tradition. This identity
created out of cultural difference has developed the concept of nation/nationhood in the North East region of India, quite contrary to the concept adopted in other parts of the country. The North East narrative set against the mainstream Indian narrative will be an attempt to consider the parallel exclusivist / appropriative discourse that fictional work of the region tends to portray. This finds echo in Homi Bhabha’s statement that:

... the narrative and psychological force that nationness brings to bear on cultural production and political projection is the effect of the ambivalence of the ‘nation’ as a narrative strategy. As an apparatus of symbolic power, it produced a continual slippage of categories, like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or ‘cultural difference’ in the act of writing the nation.

(The Location of Culture, 1994, Pg. 140)

Strong ethnic assertions in fictional works of the North East have often betrayed the social cause because they inculcate a sense of inflexibility and blindness that prevent actions needed for a particular group’s own welfare as well as for inter-ethnic peace. This theory is based on the premise that in spite of the best attempts at a nationalistic discourse, the North East narrative has failed to stem the scourge of inter-ethnic clashes and internecine conflicts in the region. Ethnocentrism by itself is a truism, natural and self evident, an attitude, to evolve a definite set of evaluative criteria to situate a work of art in such a manner that its cultural affiliations are revealed. Narratives can be presented in a variety of formats and genres and as Roland Barthes has suggested, it can be used for a cross-disciplinary approach to the analysis of stories – an approach in which stories can be viewed as supporting a variety of cognitive and communicative
activities, from spontaneous conversations and court room testimony to visual art, dance, mythic and literary traditions. In the subsequent chapters, the fictional works taken up for the purpose of the study will be analysed in the light of ethno-critical theory to highlight and evolve a distinctive narrative voice unique and peculiar to the North East. Two dimensions of the narrative analyses will be firstly, to establish a parallel exclusivist metaphor, which runs along with the use of an overt inclusive discourse. The apparent failure of the concept of greater Assamese nationality as evident from Umakanta Sarma's "Bharanda Pakshir Jhak, perhaps can be accounted for, by the simultaneity of the inclusive / exclusive discourse. The second dimension of narrative analysis will be to analyse how non-native writers of Assamese like Yeshe Dorje Thongchi was representing his own culture, custom and space by remaining committed to his roots as he reached out to the evolving sense of a nation. Dorje uses the Assamese medium for his novels Sonam and Lingjhik to showcase his tribe thereby inflecting the language with possibilities of innovative narrative and representation. The literature of the North East dealing mainly with issues relating to ethnicity and nationalism, has thrown open fresh challenges for researches into the narrative structures. The assertion and consolidation of ethnic identity vis-à-vis the earlier desire to construct a nationalist narrative forms the basis of this study. Ethnocriticism as a theory has been used as a tool to understand and appreciate the fictional works in which there is an increased tendency of ethnic writers of the region, trying to write into the Indian mainstream. That the nationalist narrative, so long the mainstay of writers of the North East was not in terms of ground realities is borne out by the fact that it has ultimately let loose a
discourse of fracture and mutual exclusion. Narrative as an interrogative mode permits such projections as it excludes systematically what it does not portray.

The next important concept that would be crucial to the research work is ethnicity. Often confused with the term ‘race’, ethnicity refers to a shared cultural identity that has a range of distinct behavioural and possibly linguistic features, passed on through socialization from one generation to another. While ‘race’ is, in a basic definition marked by phenotypical differences that are physical and visible (of body size, hair type and skin colour, for example) ethnicity describes different social and cultural identities, which may or may not be accompanied by such physical differences. According to John Thieme:

Ethnicity is a term that has increasingly been preferred to ‘race’, because it is predicted on less essentialist assumptions about supposedly innate characteristics... Ethnicity can be determined by a group’s or an individual’s perception of family ancestry, language, originary nationality, culture, religion, customs, or more usually a combination of several of these characteristics. (Post Colonial Studies: The Essential Glossary; 2003; Pg. 86).

The term ethnicity has in recent times attained widespread currency due to the rising tide of consolidation of identities along the lines of tribe or community. In the context of theoretical studies, ethnicity encompasses within its scope such terms as nation, people, caste, tribe and such others. Basically derived from the Greek word ‘ethnos’, ethnicity stands for the ethnic quality or affiliation of a group bearing different meanings in varied situational contexts. According to noted columnist and freelance writer of the North East, Patricia Mukhim:

The word ‘ethnic’ is now being increasingly used to identify groups of people who have evolved from their primitive stages
of tribe and clan identity into a more cohesive group looking for a coherent political identity. Ethnicity or ethnic identity have different connotations for scholars and are different from what the ethnic communities understand themselves. (quoted in Problems of Ethnicity in the North-East India edited by B.B. Kumar, 2007, Pg. 97)

Ethnicity describes social and cultural identities and is used in literature in the sense of ethnic consciousness. A primordial consciousness is a prime factor in the formation of an ethnic identity, a feeling of belonging to ancient roots and ancestral heritage. Thus, primarily ethnicity is a psycho-social phenomenon transcending geographical boundaries and manifests itself in compact as well as dispersed areas. The question of ethnicity has engulfed not only the psyche of the different ethnic groups but also is prominently felt in the literature of the North East. Home to myriad ethnic communities, North East India is a virtual mosaic of various socio-cultural traditions, each perceptibly distinguishable from the other in terms of dress, custom, language, and life-style. These ethnic groups have settled in different parts of the region at different intervals of time so much so that it is virtually impossible to identify chronologically the earliest settlers. It is no wonder therefore that ethnic and social upheavals have been reflected in the literature of the region for quite a long time but it is only recently that academic interest is being directed to such works, which is largely due to an increase in translation activities. Important fictional narratives in the genre that can be eminently pointed out are Rajani Kanta Bordoloi’s Miri Jiyari (1984), Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s Yaruingam (1961), Umakanta Sarma’s Bharanda Pakshir Jhak (1992), and Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya (1999), and Yeshe Dorje
Thongchi’s *Sonam* (1981) and *Lingjhik* (1983). One of the landmarks of translation was Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s own translation of *Yaruingam* into English in 1984.

The research work aims to interrogate the notion of ethnicity in selected novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Umakanta Sarma and Yeshe Dorje Thongchi. This will be done with the help of current theoretical developments like ethnocriticism which is basically an offshoot of the post-modernist trend in theory. The notion of ethnocriticism pre-supposes a multi-cultured society and is basically an interrogative model more concerned with difference than opposition. One of the leading exponents of the theory of ethnocriticism, Arnold Krupat says that:

> Ethnocriticism is the name I give to a particular perspective as this is manifested in the level of critical writing. On the pedagogical or curricular level, the ethno critical perspective manifests itself in the form of multi-culturalism, a term I take to refer to that particular organization of cultural studies which engages otherness and difference in such a way as to provoke an interrogation of and a challenge to what we ordinarily take as familiar and our own. (quoted in *Ethnocriticism*, 1992, Pg. 3)

Ethnography since its inception was inevitably a part of literature since it entailed a practice of cultural investigation dependent on the methods of ‘participant observation’. Ethnocriticism therefore inevitably forms a part of cultural studies starting as early as the 16th century in the form of “voyage narratives” recounting European explorations of the New World. The concept of ethnocriticism is consistent with a recognition and legitimation of heterogeneity rather than homogeneity as the social and cultural norm. Central to the concept of
ethnocriticism is ethno history, which pre-supposed the existence of the ‘frontier’. The idea of the ‘frontier’ is the main tenet of ethno-historical studies which is not defined in the progressivist evolutionist manner, as the farthest point to which civilization has advanced, marking a clearly discernible line between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Rather, in a more relativist manner, the frontier is understood as simply that shifting space in which two or more cultures encounter one another. James Clifton puts it in the proper perspective when he says that, “a frontier is a social setting” (1989), not a fixed or mappable, but rather, “a culturally defined place where people with different culturally expressed identities meet and deal with each other” (ibid). Thus, ethnocriticism is fundamentally concerned with differences, rather than oppositions, and so seeks to replace oppositional with dialogical models. It inhabits a space at the various frontier points where the disciplines of anthropology and literature, literature and history and history and philosophy meet and interact.

The study proposes to focus on the selected novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Umakanta Sarma and Yeshe Dorje Thongchi in order to understand the representation of ethnicity in the literature of North East India. It would be pertinent to mention here that Bhattacharya’s Yaruingam, Sarma’s Bharanda Pakshir Jhak and Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya and Thongchi’s Sonam, have been translated into English. The other novel by Thongchi, Lingijihik will be studied in its original Assamese version involving collaborative translation of selected excerpts of the novel to uncover latent ethno-cultural dimensions. Collaborative translation means translation activities with the help of collaborators whose language is the one in which the original work has been
written. The concept of translation as research methodology was first put forward by scholars like Arnold Krupat and Denis Tedlock for whom collaborative translation was basically a method to uncover and understand the hidden dynamics behind any cultural or literary narrative. Scholars like Jerome Rothenberg (1972) identify collaborative translation as a mode of not only translating the overt narrative but also the idiomatic and attitudinal specificities that exist in the gap between the printed lines. This is what Arnold Krupat (1992) basically means by good translation that “privileges the translator's ability to rise above fidelity to the letter of the original style in the interest of capturing its essence or spirit.” The most important assumption underlying collaborative translation or what can be termed as ethno poetic translations is that translation is also inevitably criticism. Krupat argues that bad translation can also be good criticism, establishing the ground that translation by itself is an act of criticism. There is always a context in which translation takes place, always a culture from which the text emerges and into which a text is transposed. Ethno poetic translation, instead of reverence for the language into which a work is being translated basically reveres the spirit of the original language and the culture and concerns it represents. In the subsequent chapters, an attempt will be made to analyse the different approaches to the question of ethnicity and identity in the North East, as reflected in the selected works of the three authors mentioned above. This will be done by grounding it against the apparent nationalistic ambition to generate larger identities as is reflected in the works of the concerned authors. The study will also consider how successful the authors are in their apparent aims and objectives of consolidating a larger national narrative in
the light of ethno critical theory. It will also consider whether the narratives generate a dynamics of their own that goes against the apparent authorial intentions. An interesting aspect would be to interrogate if authors like Dorje Thongchi look to their primordial cultural assets to define and consolidate what Werner Sollors had termed as “boundaries”. The radically realignment of social realities in novels like *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* by Umakanta Sarma is another aspect that will be explored particularly as the author comes to terms with the changing dynamics of nationality and the emerging assertive discourse.

Hitherto confined to the geo-political lexicon, its purported geographical exclusiveness from mainland India, the North East has of late attracted maximum academic attention. Media, politics, literature and overall a ‘North East consciousness’ have fuelled this trend. Presently constituted of seven states – Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh – the region is home to myriad ethnic communities and this constitutes the mosaic, which is unique in its own way. Mainly due to the region’s common borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Bhutan and a narrow stretch often called the ‘chicken neck corridor’ with mainland India, the North East exhibits cultural and ethnic characteristics distinctly different from those of other parts of India. Referring to this distinctive identity Prof. Gangmumei Kabui says:

... despite the impact of the contact with Hindu Kingdoms, the conquering Ahoms, the invading and migrating Muslims and the British Colonial administration, the tribes (of the North East), more or less preserved their distinctive identity. The North East has emerged as a distinctive regional identity in India’s national
Because of its geographical location in the Indian union, the North East has always received not so favoured attention in socio-economic and political spheres. The British policy towards the region was marked by segregation of tribal areas combined with harsh application of laws. Tribal resistance to British imperialism continued in certain pockets of the region even after the advent of Christianity and missionary education. The task of the nation builders in the post-independence phase at consolidating national identity vis-à-vis the North East was a tardy exercise as it involved bringing diverse ethnic groups under the pan-Indian domain. Reorganization of states in the region under clan and linguistic basis was neither scientific nor did it foresee the problems that were to arise in the future. The lack of far-sightedness and practical wisdom of political planners is manifested in the collective use of the term North East in India’s social and political life. That the region constituted of seven states with diverse ethnic backgrounds and comprising people from Aryan, Mongoloid and Austro-Asiatic stocks is unique in itself, the very basis of the term North East has of late come under severe scrutiny. ‘The term Northeast India points to no more than the area’s location on India’s political map’ (2007, Pg. 4), says Sanjib Baruah and he is of the view that political exigencies necessitated such a nomenclature:

Northeast India has been known this way since a radical redrawing of the region’s political map in the 1960s. It was a hurried exercise in political engineering: an attempt to manage the independentist rebellions among the Nagas and the Mizos and to nip in the bud as well as pre-empt, radical political mobilization among other discontented ethnic groups. From
today's vantage point this project of political engineering must be pronounced a failure. (quoted in *Durable Disorder*, 2007 (reprint), Pg. 4)

It is a failure because the aspirations and the political effects of such reorganization on the ethnic tribes, which inhabited the region, were not taken into account. Amalgamation of different ethnic groups into the national mainstream was attempted at various political levels, most often than not, without the desired levels of success. As a result, simmering tensions in covert or manifest forms have always threatened the social fabric of the region often resulting in bloody and internecine conflicts. Prof. Mrinal Miri views this phenomenon as ego-centrism with each ethnic group 'promoting and attempting to sustain an egocentric view of the world.' In his words:

.... we have an incredible multiple of egocentricities arrayed against each other: the Assamese against the Bodos and the Mishings and the Karbis; the Karbis against the Dimasas; the Nagas against the Meiteis; the Tangkhuls against the Aos and the Angamis; The Khasis against Garos and so on. (quoted in B.B. Kumar ed. *Problems of Ethnicity in the North-East India*, 2007; Pg. 5)

It is no wonder therefore that literature of the region has since long portrayed graphically the ethnic way of life by highlighting the unique customs and values adhered to by different groups. Fictional works of the North East especially espouse questions of ethnicity and nationalism because the two terms are often used conjunctively when assertion and aggressiveness are concerned. Rajani Kanta Bordoloi's *Miri Jiyori* (1894), Medini Mohan Choudhury's *Tat Nadi Nachil* (1977), Prafulla Dutta Goswami's *Kecha Pator Kopani* and Birendra Kumar
Bhattacharya’s Mrityunjay are representative novels in this regard. Other novels dealing with exclusive ethnic way of life are Kailash Sarma’s Bidrohi Nagar Hatot (1985), Anami Nagini (1963) and Dalimir Sopan (1972) each dealing with the Naga way of life. All the abovementioned authors are Assamese dealing with the romance of ethnic life. The first non-Assamese writer who came to prominence for writing novels in Assamese was Lummer Dai, an Adi from Arunachal Pradesh. His first novel was Paharor Shile Shile (1960). His second novel Prithivir Hahi (1963) is a faithful depiction of the social customs, institutions and faith of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh. Joyanta Rongpi a Karbi writer’s novel in Assamese, Puwate Ejak Dhanesh (1977) deals with the apparent simplicity of the Karbi people who are exploited by the people from outside the North East who set up business in the land of the Karbis. Another novelist in this genre, Rong Bong Terang’s novel Rongmilir Hahi (1981) shows a consciousness of the Karbi tribe and a concern for its welfare, but it does not go out of the bounds of art. In the context of India’s North East region, ethnic representation in literature promotes belief in the unique value and rightness of one’s own group needed for the group’s own welfare as well as for peaceful inter-ethnic relations. All the three novelists included within the ambit of the study, in their own distinct ways uphold this particular belief.

The first novelist taken up for the purpose of the study is Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya. Born in 1924, in a village called Dhekiakhowa near Jorhat in Assam, he taught journalism in Gauhati University besides being a prolific writer in Assamese writing mainly poems and novels. For some time he held the post of Vice President of the Sahitya Akademi. His poems are a pungent criticism of the
present day social order. His chief novels dealing mainly with social and political problems are: *Rajapathe Ringiyai* (The Call of the Highway, 1957) depicting the life of a young revolutionary who wants to set right the wrongs of society. *Ai* (Mother, 1961) is a novel based on the author’s experience of village life in which the central character a widowed lady is built up upon the author’s own mother. *Yaruingam* (People’s Rule, 1960) based on the Tangkhul Naga community of Manipur and set against the backdrop of the Japanese invansion of Manipur during the Second World War, won for Bhattacharya the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1961. Other important fictional works by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya include *Satagahi* (The Multi-pronged Weapon, 1965), *Pratipada* (The New Moon, 1970), *Kabar Aru Phul* (Sepulchre and Flowers, 1972), *Ranga Megha* (Coloured Cloud, 1976), *Pakhi Ghora* (The Winged Horse, 1980) and *Kalar Humaniyah* (1982). The 1979 Jnanpith Award for literary excellence was won by Bhattacharya in 1979 for his novel *Mritunjaya* (The Conqueror of Death, 1970) which is based on the Quit India Movement. The novel narrates vividly the heroic guerilla activities of the Indian revolutionaries who rose to sabotage the war preparations of the Allied Powers in Assam and on the Burma front. His novels are portrayals of character in uncommon situations such as the Naga movement for independence under Phizo, the Indian National Movement under the war conditions in 1942, the Chinese aggression in 1962, the struggle for independence in Bangladesh in 1971 and the tribal strike of the employees of the Assam Oil Company in Digboi. His novels are more concerned with men as a group or community, having a common ideal of motivation. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya has made his mark in the genre of Assamese short stories also. His short stories generally have a
cathartic effect and he invariably treats of his themes on a larger canvas. As a creative literary journalist, he gave a new direction to Assamese poetry and fiction. He translated Rabindra Nath Tagore’s short stories which gave him a high place of honour in the literary world. His prose works include 'Sri Aurobindo (a biography), A Survey of Assamese Culture (1826-1976, in Assamese), Humour and Satire in Assamese Literature (1982) and A Peep into the Assamese Culture of last 150 years (in Assamese, 1978). Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya remains one of the immortals in Assamese literature.

Umakanta Sarma, the second novelist whose two fictional works will be taken up for the study is a prolific writer of Assam who has a penchant for treating social issues with a humanistic outlook. Most of his novels deal with the variegated ethnic life of Assam and the resultant mutually inclusive tendencies of ethnic groups to forge a larger identity. Also of interest in Sarma’s works is the demonstration of the uniqueness of each ethnic group and the growing feeling of some to assert their identities often with confrontation and violence. Born on the 1st of March 1918, Umakanta Sarma had a brilliant academic career before obtaining an M.A. in Philosophy from Calcutta University and an M.Ed. from the University of Illinois. He served as a lecturer in St. Edmund’s College, Shillong and Handique Girls’ College and B. Barua College, Guwahati. Umakanta Sarma also held important administrative posts under the government of Assam. His important fictional works are, Uranta Meghar Sha (The Shadow of Flying Clouds, 1960), a compelling story of an honest young man driven from one tragedy to another by a ruthless destiny; Ranga Ranga Tez (Blood, Red Blood, 1968) is a novel based on the freedom struggle of 1942; Simsanger Duta Paar (The two
banks of Simsang, 1965) is a novel on the tragic exodus of thousands of tribal people from the then East Pakistan to India; *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* (A Crowd and a Forest, 1986) is about three generations of tea garden labourers, their journey and settlement in Assam and the trials and tribulations the labourers face which apparently ultimately leads to a harmonious integration into the greater Assamese society. Sarma received the Assam Publication Board award, the highest literary award of the state for this novel in 1989; *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* (A Flock of Bharanda Birds, 1992) is an apt narration of the present day distress and suspicion amongst different groups of people leading to suicidal quarrels. Umakanta Sarma's other literary endeavours include writing essays, critical writings, drama, short stories and translation works. He was recognized as an outstanding author by the Assam Sahitya Sabha, which conferred on him the prestigious Kalaguru Bisnu Prasad Rabha Award in 1991. The Bharatiya Bhasa Parishad selected one of Sarma's novels *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* for the Parishad's Literary Award for the year 1994. Some of Umakanta Sarma's novels are written under the pseudonym Pasupati Bharadwaj and the sole concern of the writer is the depiction of, or the promotion of human values above everything else. It is precisely for this reason that his fictional works are not mere treaties on ethnic problems, rather they highlight the importance of upholding inter-ethnic solidarity.

Yeshe Dorje Thongchi, a writer of Arunanchali origin is the third author whose two fictional works, *Sonam* and *Lingjihik* are included within the ambit of the research work. Thongchi was born in 1952 in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. He graduated from Cotton College, Guwahati before
obtaining an MA in Assamese from Gauhati University. A widely acclaimed novelist in Assamese, Thongchi began by writing poems in his younger day. He is a man of wide ranging interests and simple living. He has held senior administrative positions under the government of Arunachal Pradesh and is presently the Secretary, Culture and Tourism of the State. Thongchi’s claim to fame mainly rests on his two novels Sonam (1981) and Lingzhik (1983) for which he is widely acclaimed and the former has also been made into a successful film. He is credited with investing Assamese fiction with diction pure, simple and rudimentary yet having the power to appeal to readers. A writer of merit with a strong sense of social commitment, Thongchi is a well known figure in the literary world of the North East. His fiction cannot be taken as mere commentaries on Arunachal’s tribal life, for he often transcends to artistic heights as his novels demonstrate. It is worth mentioning that Thongchi uses Assamese in a very different way than in the way an Assamese writer would use it. His is a style of understatement as opposed to the elaborative figurative and theoretical medium of the Assamese writers. Thongchi uses Assamese as he would have used his mother tongue: understated and functional. For they do not state the obvious and language is a synecdochic medium that brings into the visible edifice a shared context. It is left for the readers to try to uncover and share Thongchi’s context. He demonstrates how Assamese can be used in a different way in a different context thereby inflecting the language with possibilities of innovative narrative and representation. Thongchi’s literary merit was recognized by the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore which awarded him the Bhasa Bharati Samman Award for 2003-04 for his novel Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday
(Silent Lips, Murmering Hearts). He also received the Sahitya Akademi award for the same novel for the year 2005. Thongchi’s portrayal of pure ethnic life in a language, which is not his mother tongue, will be studied to being out latent ethnic specificities.

The first novel of the research work is Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s Yaruingam (1960), a novel set against the backdrop of Indian independence in the World War II period, which explores the movement in the hills of Manipur for a sovereign state for the Nagas. The novel basically deals with the upheavals in the Tangkhul Naga society during the period. The Tangkhuls mainly concentrated in the hills of Manipur adjoining Nagaland are split on the issue of Naga sovereignty. The ascendancy of Phizo in the mid 40s followed by the propagation of the idea, ‘The Naga was not one tribe, but a nation’, finds echo in the novel. Videsselie epitomizes the vision of Naga sovereignty, which is opposed by Rishang, another Naga, but with a different outlook. While the former opts for the violent way, the latter professes the Gandhian ideal of non-violence. Thus, inevitably both the opposing ideals enter into a conflict. Videsselie maintains:

I want an independent Nagaland where a Naga can feel that he is somebody and can be his own master. Life will then be worth living. (1984 (tr.) Pg. 273)

But Rishang has other ideas:

I don’t want the Nagas to live and die as Nagas... I want each of them to become a complete human being. He must be able to transcend his limited tribal personality and live as a proud member of the great Indian family. (Ibid)
However, the hint towards the end of the novel is that though it is Videsselie who appears to have won the battle with his arms, it is ultimately Rishang who would win with his ideal of non-violence and goal of welfare of the people.

The second novel of the study, *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* (1992) focuses on the symptoms of gradual erosion of mutual respect and trust between the Bodo and Assamese communities who have been living together harmoniously for hundreds of years in Assam. The name of the novels is symbolic, meaningful and indicative of the theme that the novelist wants to convey. The *Bharanda* is the name of a fabulous bird, described in the *Panchatantra*, having two mouths but one belly. One day one mouth ate up a sweet fruit without sharing it with the other. In retaliation, another day, the other mouth secretly swallowed a poisonous fruit, as a result of which the bird died. The study is symbolic of suicidal retaliation. The majority Assamese people and the Bodos symbolize the two beaks, in which the latter feel frustrated, deprived and oppressed under a pan-Assamese hegemonistic dispensation. But even the Bodo community is divided on the issue of a Bodo homeland. While the older generation is accommodative and harboured lenient views, the younger generation could foresee greater perils. Urmila who belong to the latter category harbours strong views:

Our concern is that we, the Bodo-Kacharis feel like facing some danger. If the non-Bodos can solve the problem of the Bodos, there can be no objection from us. But if it’s the non-Bodo who is at the root of the problem, then the question becomes more complicated. (1992; Pg 108)
In analyzing the conflict, the novelist has focused on problems of land, frequent arrival of refugees and immigrants, arrival of unscrupulous businessmen and the total indifference of the government. The younger generation grew impatient with apprehension of losing their identity and culture along with their land.

*Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* (1986) by Umakanta Sarma, the third novel of the study, endeavours to present a lively and authentic picture of the norms, practice, doubts, confusions, culture and tradition related to the living situations of the tea-labour community. The story unfolds around a crowd of thousands men, women and children, who deluded with a promise of a golden Assam left their ancestral home with the dream of a bright future. The novel deals with three generations of tea-garden labourers, their sufferings, oppressions, diseases and deaths and the inhuman treatment meted out to them so much so that they are led to believe that their destination must be equally harsh and inhospitable. Tulsi, a character in the novel says:

... but I have a feeling that everything hereabout is bad, the sardars are bad, that white man is a scoundrel, and, I am afraid that the land called Assam must be equally bad. (1986; Pg. 29)

But the author with deep pathos and empathy has drawn vivid images of the soft and endearing feelings and emotions of these sturdy people who defy pains of punishment with joyous songs, attractive dances, enjoying love and also frivolities. When contacts with local people started in course of time, the labourers came closer to the Assamese society forming a bond of anxiety and love till they merged with it. Arjun, Tulsi’s son sums it up:

This is indeed a wonderful land. An unknown land to start with, hordes of new arrivals strike roots in this place and soon begin
to feel that ‘when all is said and done, this is a blessed place’. Then along with passage of time, all of them new and old, work together, eat together, sleep together, and announce – this is our land, our mother land. (1986; Pg. 341)

Yeshe Dorje Thongchi’s novel Sonam (1981) 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 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 familiar with. The novel mainly revolves round the lives of two people Lobjang and Sonam in which the former has to stay away for long durations at a stretch for ferrying dairy and woolen products. During one such absence, Pema Wangchu, another youth of the locality, often visited Sonam to give her company and later the affairs was confessed to Lobjang by Sonam. Lobjang thought it was better to entrust his wife to Pema Wangchu when he was away on business. Due to some misunderstanding later, Sonam deserts Lobjang with her two children to live with Pema Wangchu. Lobjang during this period suffers intense pain and contemplates:

Is it possible for a man and woman to live together their whole lives and not have a different of opinion, or quarrel with each other? ... Every person has his individual self, his own identity, so it is only natural that there will be misunderstanding and disagreement. (2001 (tr.); Pg. 85-86)

Towards the end of the novel, however, both the husband and wife are re-united and Lobjang passes away. The novel is a wonderful testimony of the desires and
wants of the common Brokpa people, their pride, repentance and the tremendous influence of the Buddhist way of life.

The second novel by Thongchi, *Lingjhik* (1983) analyses critically the division that has crept into the Sherdukpen society between the old and the new values of life. Prem Tashi, the son of Kejang and Lamdoima is criticized by his friends for not getting married according to the custom of the land. It was the Sherdukpen custom to marry the maternal uncle’s daughter and vice versa. When Kreema Lamu, Prem Tashi’s sister was sought to be married to his maternal uncle’s son Dorjee Chewang, Prem Tashi opposed it and spread the rumour that Chewang was a eunuch. To take revenge for the dishonour, Dorjee Chewang demands dowry as per custom. It was inappropriate to demand dowry in the lifetime of the estranged wife’s mother. The turmoil almost led to violent clashes between the Wangja and Thongo communities to which both the opposing parties belonged. On the advice of the elder members of both the communities, a stone monolith (*Lingjhik*) is erected. The erection signaled the breakdown of all future relations between the two communities:

> Representatives from both the clans went through the ritual of touching the stone and infusing it with the oath: "We swear by the stone that from today all relations between our two clans, that is the Thongo and Wangja, ceases to exist and should this sacred oath be violated by any one from the two clans, then let the stone cast its evil spell on him". (1983; Pg. 138)

Towards the end of the novel Kreema Lamu becomes a doctor and meets Dorjee Chewang who is a compounder and a dramatic twist in the tale result in their reunion and subsequent destruction of the monolith.
In the light of the above discussion, the present study proposes to explore and analyse the different approaches to the question of ethnicity and identity in the North East as reflected in the selected works referred to above by the authors Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Umakanta Sarma and Yeshe Dorje Thongchi. This is sought to be done by grounding it against the apparent nationalistic ambition to generate larger identities as is reflected in the works of the concerned authors. The study will also consider how successful the authors are in their apparent aims and objectives of consolidating a larger national narrative. It will also consider whether the narratives generate a dynamics of their own that goes against the apparent authorial intentions. It would be interesting to interrogate if authors like Dorje Thongchi look to their primordial cultural assets to define and consolidate what Werner Sollors had termed as 'boundaries'. The final attempt will be to analyse how later works like *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* by a novelist like Umakanta Sarma comes to terms with the changing dynamics of nationality and the emerging assertive discourse that was radically realigning social realities.
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