Chapter - II:

Ethnicity and Narration: The Issues Involved
Ethnicity as a term in critical usage has been prone to multiple interpretations primarily centering on the question as to who is ethnic and who is not. Werner Sollors in his essay *Who is Ethnic?* (1995; Pg 219) considers the question in a broader perspective and says that ‘it is a wide spread practice to define ethnicity as otherness’ (Ibid). Ingrained in the term is the notion of the other which is central to any interpretation of ethnicity. Clifford Geertz (1963) has described ethnicity as an activated primordial consciousness not grounded in the demand for sovereign statehood. Ethnic groups range, in various usages, from small, relatively isolated, nearly primordial kin-and-culture groups within which much of life proceeds, all the way to large categories, not groups of people defined as alike on the basis of one or two shared characteristics. Ethnicity as a social phenomenon converges, by imperceptible steps, with related yet distinct phenomena. And it is here that it lends itself to a dual interpretation. One helps us to see similarities amidst differences and the other to see differences amidst similarities. According to Kathleen Kerr:

> Ethnicity has come, therefore, to embody a paradox: on the one hand, it holds out the promise of social recognition of spiritual ties and cultural difference; on the other, it is a fiction produced in the process of nationalization which erases social hybridization. (quoted in Patricia Waugh ed. *Literary Theory and Criticism*; Pg. 363).

Broadly speaking, an ethnic group is a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant
ingredients. A strict ethnic order is thoroughly institutionalised, with clear separating boundaries and a strong ideology. A soft ethnic order has blurred, permeable lines, incomplete institutionalization and an ambivalent ideology.

One issue that is pertinent to mention here is the perception of social order as is held generally valid throughout centuries. History is testimony to the fact that those societies which have withstood the ravages of time and changes of political dispensations have survived mainly because of better social organization and humanistic principles. Societies thrive on mutual exchange and reciprocities, a fact often proved by the disintegration of insular societies. Moreover, more than coercive societal rules, it is the fear or loss, of pain or heightened coercion that keeps members of a society glued together. Socialization of similar standards result in the product of a culture mutually agreed to by constituents of a particular society. Given the norms of what constitutes a society at large, the question that needs to be addressed is whether ethnicity as a term is in consonance with it or not. The etymology of the term 'ethnicity', derived from 'ethnos' refers not just to people in general but also to 'others'. In medieval Christianity, the word 'ethnic' was used in the sense of 'pagan' or 'heathen'. It is only recently that the more accepted meaning of 'ethnic' as peculiar to the question of race or nation emerges. Ethnicity also includes in its scope the terms 'assimilation' and 'dissimilation' which forms the very basis of the term. While 'assimilation' is the break up of intra-ethnic differences to promote better relations and interactions, 'dissimilation' is the process by which intra-ethnic differences are maintained and created around sub-cultural groups. Ethnicity in its broader concept acknowledges intra-ethnic
differences and one ethnic group can be a powerful centre of opposition to a
coercive, dominant culture and yet be a part of a flexible society. Thus, the
'boundary' is the most determining element in the concept of ethnicity as, Fredrik
Barth maintains in his book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (ed; 1969) that it is
'the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it
encloses.' It can therefore be assumed that a broader society can encompass
within its scope various ethnic groups so long the 'boundary' is understood and
maintained on mutually accepted terms. As Barth maintains:

..... categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence
of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social
processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete
categories are maintained despite changing participation and
membership in the course of individual life histories... that
stable, persisting and often vitally important social relations are
maintained across such boundaries and are frequently based
precisely on the dichotomised ethnic statuses. (1969; Pg 10)

The understanding of the 'boundary' will be central to the evaluation of
ethnicity and ethnic identity in the context of North East India, which is relevant
for the purpose of the present study. The seven states of the region are home to
diverse ethnic groups who have often revolted against other groups or violently
defended their own against others. Thus, ethnic upsurges in the region have
been a common phenomenon since the attainment of Indian independence in
1947. The Naga-Kuki clashes in Manipur, the Dimasa-Hmar clashes in Assam and
the Mizo-Reang (Bru) conflict in Mizoram are events in the history of the North
East which may be viewed as strategies of adaptation and consolidation of ethnic
boundaries. The identity of each ethnic group was seemingly threatened by
another dominant group. What jeopardized regional unity was the exploitation and neglect of the minor ethnic groups who had to be merged within the territorial jurisdiction of a larger group. Such political alignments had their share of problems. In this regard, mention may be made of the Kuki, Hmar and Tangkhul communities who are ethnically different from the predominant Meiteis in Manipur. Similar is the case with the Reangs (Brus) in Tripura and Mizoram, the Garos in Meghalaya and the Bodo-Kacharis in Assam. In this connection Prof. Gangmumei Kabui observes:

There is a need for examining the prospect of re-organisation of states in tribal areas of not only in the North East, but in the whole of the country. But the basic question is the tribal rights of self management of their resources and their participation in the developmental programme are to be fully acknowledged and implemented. (quoted in B. Chaudhuri ed. *Ethnopolitics and Identity Crisis*, 1992, Pg 212)

Ethnical mismatches in fixed territorial boundaries have often given rise to violent clashes centering mainly on the question of assimilation and assertion of identity. Even concessions granted to large parts of the region under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution which envisages a considerable degree of socio-economic, cultural and political autonomy, have not yielded the desired results. Colonial rule had also necessitated the movement of people from other parts of the country and erstwhile East Pakistan to the North East, which added another dimension to the social fabric of the region. The tribal-non-tribal and the Aryan-non-Aryan debate have at times attracted maximum national and international attention.
The question of identity is at the root of ethnic assertion movements that have dominated the history of post independence India in the North East. The psychological process of identification refers to a set of related aspects of assimilation. Individuals from separate groups may come to think of themselves as belonging to the same society – a new society, blended from their societies of origin. Shifts in identification however, may be more one sided, with members of one group identifying with the society of another group, or members of the latter identifying with that of the former. All three of these identificational processes may go on at the same time and the nature of their mixture tells us a great deal about the situation in which they occur. Ethnic identities are strongly influenced by the other assimilative processes — by the levels of integration, acculturation and amalgamation. Identity formation is sometimes the major causal influence in the ethnic order, at other times it is more nearly dependent on the levels of integration, acculturation and amalgamation. Along with the various processes of self identification are the assignments of others to insider or outsider groups. Psychological assimilation of others have occurred to the degree that the "other" is believed to be a part of the self. It is often true that self-identification and identification by others are not correspondent. Prejudices on the part of the dominant ethnic groups may prevent the granting of full membership in a society to members of ethnic minorities, even though the latter think of themselves only in terms of the larger society. Oppositely, however, group solidarity among members of a group may block identification even with an open society. Such cases of inclusive and exclusive tendencies have largely defined ethnic identities in the North East. Referring to ethnic minority movements, B.R. Rizvi writes:
Close to the heels of ethnicity comes the concept of ethnic minorities who consider themselves distinguished from the larger societies by showing certain traits.... subjected to discrimination and outright repression by the dominant group in their society, they may respond by seeking to blur distinctions between themselves demanding recognition and better tolerance for their group. (quoted in B.J. Deb ed. Ethnic Issues, Secularism and Conflict Resolution in North East India, Pg. 17)

There may be subconscious as well as conscious levels of ethnic identity, both of self and others. And there may be lack of correspondence between the levels, as revealed by changing circumstances. Thus, as each person has several identities, even ethnic identities are not fixed and unambiguous. Which of various possibilities is dominant at a particular time depends in part on other people, on individual choice, and on the circumstances of the moment. Identities can be inherited, chosen, assigned or merely conferred from some bit of evidence. If one strengthens the definition of identification to make it more than simply a label or category, one can, with Royce (1982), think of it as validated place in an ethnic group. It is not merely ascription. Some ethnic identities have to be achieved; and they have to be maintained by behaviour, by ethnic- “signalling”. Fredrik Barth in his classical work on ethnicity insisted that sending a message about the distinctiveness of one’s identity was not enough. The message needed to be accepted by significant others before an identity could be said to have been ‘taken on’. Identities are therefore to be found and negotiated at the boundaries of the internal and external. In the North East, distinctions between two ethnic groups are often blurred and seemingly non-existent because of a large number
of societal traits which are similar in nature. But the processes of identification of such groups are psychologically ingrained and dominating in nature leading to assertive manifestations:

Ethnic movements in North East India involve the assertion of identity around certain social problems, historic-cultural legacies and political exigencies by way of organising themselves into an ethnic body to concretise their identity. Subsequently they raise a demand for a separate administrative unit comprising the areas where a distinct ethno-cultural group forms a majority. (Rizvi in B.J. Deb (ed.) Ethnic Issues, Secularism and Conflict Resolution in North East India; Pg. 17).

It is more likely that minority ethnic groups feeling unrepresented, perhaps even persecuted, will become more strongly ethnic as their sense of alienation grows. The dominant ethnic groups well represented in the political structures, feel more strongly identified with the state, even chauvinistic about it, as their ethnicity becomes more intense. In the context of the North East, the Bodos, Tiwas, Mishings, Rabhas, Kochs have often rebelled against the pan-Assamese identity thrust upon them by the major and dominant ethnic group. Of late such rebellions have manifested itself in demands for autonomous councils and formation of independent Sahitya Sabhas (literary bodies). On the other hand, in Nagaland and Mizoram the major ethnic groups have always resisted identity and self assertion movements by other or minority ethnic groups. The Ao and Angami tribes have always dominated the political space of Nagaland. In Mizoram, the dominant group, the Mizos have asserted their rights in the political space often by negating or suppressing ethnic minority movements of the Reangs (Brus), Hmars and Chakmas. Although some identities clash – if one grows in strength
the others become less salient-- others are nested into a compatible structure of identities. The smaller, more intimate identities are surrounded by larger and more impersonal ones. It is more likely perhaps that some identities are mutually exclusive or competitive; an increase in the salience of one entails a decrease in the salience of the other. Other combinations however may be compatible, allowing one to build up more complex structures of identity. If this is the most useful way to explore the issue of additive versus substitutive identities, the critical question becomes: With what other identities are ethnic identities compatible or incompatible, and at what levels of salience?

Ethnicity expresses a basic human attachment, a primordial bond to one's ancestors and one's cultural roots. The emotional intensity of contemporary ethnic nationalisms documents the way ethnic identities can persist, perhaps beneath the surface of awareness, and then surge with energy in a given situation. During pre-independence days, North East India witnessed major upsurges in assertion of ethnic-identity movements. This was sometimes due to the encouragement given by British officers to the tribal society of the region. The Naga Club which for the first time symbolized Naga unity came into existence in 1918. The Kabui Samiti and the Kabui Naga Association were formed in 1934 and 1946 respectively to unite the sections of the tribe in Manipur, Nagaland and N.C. Hills of Assam. The Jadonang movement for assertion of ethnic identity of the Karbis started in the 1920s. The movement for preserving the traditional culture of the Khasis and the Seng Khasi movement was born in 1899. Some plains tribes of Assam formed the Assam Tribal League (later converted to Assam Tribal Sangha) in 1939. The purpose of the all Assam Ahom
Association, which was formed in 1893, was meant for voicing the demands of the Ahoms for their upliftment. The immediate intervening period between pre-independence and post British rule saw the manifestation of ethnic identity movements in the North East which took political colour as new organizations emerged with political aims. The birth of Naga National Council in 1946, marks the beginning of Naga political movement. The movement for the formation of a separate State for the Zeliangrong group of tribes started in 1947. The Mizo Union, the first embodiment of political aspirations of the Mizos, came into existence in 1946 and a few years later the United Mizo Freedom Movement even wanted to merge with the Union of Burma, and two years after the Eastern India Tribal Union was formed to press the demand of the Mizos, the Khasi-Jaintias, the Garos, the Karbis and Dimasas took up the demand for separate hill States. A study of both pre and post-independence assertion of ethnic identity movements in the North East, though largely political in nature is essentially a device for reaffirming presence in the geo-political space of the region. It is also significant that ethnic identity movements have almost always turned into political issues demanding either a separate administrative unit or other political advantages for the concerned ethnic groups. Referring to “nationalisms” of this kind Prof. Birendranath Dutta observes:

Today there are evolving new identities attached to these administrative units – states and Union Territories. Thus we are now witnessing the emergence of a Nagalandese identity, a Meghalayese identity, an Arunachalese identity - over and above the separate identities of the various tribal groups inhabiting these territories—all voluntarily and integrated to Indian nationhood. In fact, new equations are being worked out
and the groups concerned are in the process of obtaining new ethnic configurations to fit their evolving aspirations and interests. (quoted in B. Pakem ed. *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in North East India*; Pg.38)

Thus, the very idea of identity is inextricably linked up with the notion of territorial integrity in the North East where very often than not, inter ethnic discords have been noticed. Ethnic identities have been fiercely and aggressively defended mainly based on power equations in administrative units. A definition of ethnicity based not on a static system of categorization but a state of dynamic equilibrium representing the strategy of convenience or interest alliance, presupposes possible multiplicity of identities. There is every likelihood of a difference between the primordial communities and the relatively modern complex societies so far as the manifestation of ethnicity is concerned, particularly since the former has the tendency of projecting identity *ad seriatim*. This is possible only when the identity as well as the loyalty is by and large singular. The complex societies instead, project multiplicity of identities and consequential loyalties, several among whom can remain latent or manifest at a given point of time.

In the context of the present study, the complex dynamics of ethnicity, that is, all notions of the term vis-à-vis the question of identity will form the very basis of unearthing a narrative for the North East, which is distinct from that of mainland India. This is because constructions of identity in the region are dependent on a variety of factors ranging from primordial to assumed identities. Fictional works taken up for the purpose of the study while portraying the uniqueness of the ethnic set up also explores questions of identity and selfhood.
Post-modern theorists see identity as the key issue for contemporary culture. No demarcation between identities seems possible without one identity being positioned as central, and others as marginal. Identities are not spontaneous or the result of personal will or imagination. What follows therefore is that identities can only be made in relation to one another. Identities are produced in what contemporary theorists have understood as an economy: a shifting interchange of meanings and desires, a perpetual give and take of values and images. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s *Yaruimgam* explores the question of identity of the Nagas from two opposing perspectives. Videsselie epitomises the vision of Naga sovereignty which is set in sharp contrast with the views of Rishang, another Naga. While the former opts for the violent way, the latter, mainly due to his exposure with the outside world professes the Gandhian ideal of non-violence. In Umakanta Sarma’s *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* the clash between the Assamese and the Bodos centres mainly on the question of identity. The Bodos feel that they have been gradually subsumed under the pan Assamese identity through various social and political methods and as such they revolt against it. The author’s second novel included within the ambit of the study studies the question of assimilative identities in a coherent social setting. The novel, *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* explores the unique features of the tea tribe identity as it slowly assimilates itself with the greater Assamese society. The ethnic identity in its pure primordial aspect is revealed in Yeshe Dorje Thongchi’s novels *Sonam* and *Lingjihik* in which the author explores intricately the ethnic elements while reaching out to the evolving sense of a nation.
Closely allied to the concept of identity is subjectivity which is ingrained in the ethnic consciousness and invariably manifests itself in numerous forms. The subjective element springs mainly from an acute sense of belonging to ethnic roots and the desire to articulate such consciousness in a variety of forms. The term subjectivity has in recent times been subject to critical analysis by theorists whose main concern is to analyse what is referred to by the 'I'. In traditional philosophical thought the self was construed as one whole entity virtually indestructible. Freud was responsible to a large extent in the formation of new theories on the subject. According to Freud, the subject was fragmented, split and at odds with itself and its social surroundings. Jacques Lacan, the French philosopher and theorist takes up the Freudian model and extends it in a number of directions, one of the most significant being the subject's relationship with others. What emerges therefore is that subjectivity is neither reducible to the idea the person has of himself or herself nor necessarily an individual confrontation with the powers that be. Subjectivity is rather the material and means of a continuous process of experimentations - inner, familial, social and political. Always social, subjectivity encompasses all the identifications that can be formed by, discovered in, or attributed to the person. Subjectivity is thus at once the tension and representation one has in one's body as the personal, the domestic, and the public fuse with measures of the 'true' and the 'normal'. Clifford Geertz articulated a cultural approach to subjectivity for according to him subjectivity embodies culture not in the simplistic fashion posited by the culture and personality school, but in the sense that people live in a distinct phenomenal world. Subjectivity does not merely speak as resistance, nor is it simply spoken
or silenced by power. It continually forms and returns in the complex play of bodily, linguistic, political and psychological dimensions of human experience.

Identity and subjectivity are therefore intricately interlinked with one supplementing the other. Both the constructs are important in our study of the nation because the very idea of the nation encompasses intense subjective feelings and the question of identity. The idea of a common culture and heritage and that of a common language that binds a nation according to Benedict Anderson is largely grounded on the collective identity consciousness that a group of people have. Therefore, inevitably subjective assertions manifests itself in the preservation and defence of the ‘nation’. In the context of India’s North East, questions of subjectivity and identity have always manifested in social, political and literary spheres. Literature of the region abounds in examples of aggressive assertions of identity and protection of the nation. Nation as a concept in the North East evolved with fierce ethnic assertion in the years immediately after independence and the idea gradually led to the evolution of a common national destiny:

We (tribal communities) were not so fully involved in the national struggle for freedom as to enthuse us with the idea of a common national destiny.... But with the political education inherent in a democracy, the sense of Indian nationhood and of our political rights has been growing among us. (Thomas and Taylor, 1965: Pg 93)

This political bonding fostered the growth of nationalistic ideals in the regional context. The clamour for separate political units based on ethnic or linguistic similarities also brought in its wake the insider-outsider and self-other debate.
The Lacanian paradigm of subjectivity which puts the self in the context of the other is clearly evident in any ethnic configuration in the North East. Even in the literary sphere, characters have often displayed aggressive identity assertions mainly associated with the formation of and in the defence of the nation. Authors of fictional works of the region have often reflected the social turmoil and turbulence and ethno-social tensions in their writings. It is only natural that strong and often violent assertions of the individual self championing the cause of a particular group often dominates many a theme in the novels of the North East. But the authors have a wider appeal rising above parochialism, attempting to embody and preach universal human themes. Commenting on the universal appeal of the Assamese novelists, Dr. P. C. Sabhapandit writes:

> The impact of urban life has given rise to some common trends of culture all over the world. Some of the moral and psychological problems faced by modern man in one country today are not very much different from those faced by his counterparts in another country. It is quite natural that some of the problems to which Assamese writers have given literary expression in recent years are not merely local ones. They have a general topical and contemporary interest. Therefore, in some cases the treatment of theme rises above geographical barriers and embraces wider issues. (1988; Pg.229)

The narrative however does not always allow the author to be steadfast in what he/she had originally planned out. Some characters develop a personality of their own independent of authorial directives or intentions, who embody in their own right their individual ethnic aspirations. In the post-independence period there has been a spurt in the delineation of ethnic life worlds in the fictional works of
the region. It would be pertinent to mention here that fictional works in Assamese predates Indian independence and is considered to be the progenitor of other fictional works of the region. The present study is based on selected fictional works of three writers of the region who have endeavoured in their works to highlight and depict the unique ethnic way of life and the levels of assimilation and dissimilation that ethnicity brings in its wake. Some of the other characters in these fictional works display aggressive identity concerns and the desire to zealously safeguard the ideals, which he or she thinks proper. In expressing overt identity concerns, inevitably, subjective elements conducive for preservation of ethnic identity and propagation of the ‘nation’ are essentially present.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s novel *Yaruingam* portrays the Naga aspiration from two diverse perspectives. Both these perspectives are coloured by fierce ideological foundations and objectives and are aggressively defended by two sets of characters. Subjectivity and identity concerns are manifest in both the opposing ideals as to the formation of an ideal Naga nation. It would be worthwhile to briefly focus on the proponents of the two opposite groups who embody in their own rights the vision of a Naga state or nation. It is precisely in their endeavour for setting up an ideal Naga society that their characters are fully brought out by the novelist. Rishang is the proponent of one group, which vociferously advocates assimilist ideals and believes in the principles of tolerance, non-violence and amity. Surprisingly other members of the group- Khating, Phanitphang, Sarengla and Khutingla - all belong to the younger generation of Nagas. Rishang propagates the idea of Naga ‘nation’ as one within the Union of
independent India based on the principles of mutual love, reciprocity and non-violence. The freedom of India becomes an indicator of the freedom of Nagas and their history of violence would have no place in the new Naga society. Rishang is optimistic when he says:

It may be said that the Nagas had never had a tradition of non-violence. The Nagas do know how to fight. But that does not mean that they always go on fighting. Most of their domestic problems are settled through discussion and on the basis of customary practice. So there is a tradition of non-violence also. Many of them are now Christians and believe in the peaceful way of life. I feel that with the spread of education, they could peacefully further improve their way of life. (1984 (tr.) Pg. 158).

Such subjective opinions regarding the Naga way of life heralds the beginning of a new brand of identity formation vis-à-vis the Indian nation. Rishang epitomizes the concern of a section of younger Nagas who feel that violence and hatred have no place in a civil society and the customary Naga habit of violence has not brought any good to them. It was therefore time to change for the better. The changing shifts of Naga identity characterized by Rishang and his group is largely due to the spread of Christianity and the expansion of missionary education and indicates that customary laws must be adjusted accordingly to suit the need of the times. “The warring nation are sinners, aren’t they?” (ibid, Pg 53), enquires Rishang and this sums up his attitude towards the warlike attitude of the Nagas. A subtle analysis of Rishang’s character displays subjective emotion of his concept of the Naga nation which he aggressively defends and propagates with his followers. The very title of the novel is symbolic for Yaruingam denotes
'people's rule' as Rishang maintains, "we need a real people's rule. We should start working out from the people's end. Stay with them, serve them". (Ibid; Pg. 280). The symbolic manifestation of the title of the novel is reflected in the desired status of identity that Rishang and his followers visualize for the Nagas. It is an assimilist one which involves the break up of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic differences to promote better relations. On being asked whether the Naga nation was a separate one or not, Rishang replied:

No! the Nagas are as much Indians as the Assamese or Manipuris. They live in a common territory and under the same administration and share the same economy. Their present and future are bound up with the fate of the country as much as their past was (ibid, Pg. 318)

In sharp contrast to the set of characters led by Rishang and their fraternal ideals, is the character of Videselie and his group who visualize the Naga identity in a different way. Videselie finds favour in his ideals in the likes of Ngazek and his own father Ngathingkhui and others. Videselie's subjective orientation is similar to the concept of Naga pride held by the elders of the society who favour traditional and customary laws to laws and regulations imposed by a sovereign state and the winds of change that Christianity brought in its wake in the hills of Manipur. Videselie's concept of the Naga nation is founded on his experience in the Indian National Army of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and the streak of rebellion against a colonial power inspires and inculcates in him the desire to clamour for a separate and sovereign Naga nation. Referring to the topography of his land, he says.
These hills are man’s original abode. I believe that the Nagas are a separate and distinct nation. (ibid; Pg 273)

And the concept of Videsselie’s nation is founded on violence, hatred and enmity with those who oppose it. The land of the Nagas belongs to the Nagas alone and there cannot be any dispute over it for it must be preserved at all costs, even through violence. The older Nagas who value custom and tradition above everything else also subscribe to Videsselie’s view and look at the winds of change with suspicion. A sovereign Naga nation would be able to preserve and propagate the ethnic Naga way of life and assimilation into the Indian Union would bring subjugation and domination to which the Nagas were not accustomed to. The novelist is able to portray successfully the concept of the Naga nation from two contrasting perspectives but apparently offers to side with the views of Rishang and his group:

He (Videsselie) looked again at the mountains sadly. His heart and mind were set on them, and on the green forests below the blue sky. He also loved the men who lived in the forests. He valued the natural resources of the mountains and forests, the plants and animals. Yet in spite of his patriotic fervour, he was a narrow nationalist who wanted to separate the Nagaland from the rest of the country. (ibid; Pg 275)

Yaruingam thus, is characterised by two opposing ideals, each subjective in its own way and demonstrated by two groups in the novel through which the Naga nation is sought to be projected.

Umakanta Sarma’s novel, Bharanda Pakshir Jhak explores the concept of subjectivity, identity and the nation from two different perspectives typified and propagated by two sets of characters. The novel deals with the Assamese-Bodo
relationship over the years and the forces of disintegration and disharmony that rock the bonding between the two ethnic groups. The novel subtly touches upon the assimilative and dissimilative forces at work when question of protection of Bodo identity arises. The Bodos feel discriminated and threatened against the hegemonistic Assamese dispensation that perpetuates pan-Assamese feelings through dress, language and culture. The vulnerability of the Bodo nation becomes a vital issue and cause for concern and thus rifts begin to appear between the two ethnic groups who have harmoniously co-existed with each other. To add to this was the occupation of Bodo lands by non-Bodo owners and immigrants, and the law of the land did little to assuage the fear and insecurity of the Bodos. Like Yaruingam in Bharanda Pakshir Jhak, two sets of characters representing two separate ideals are depicted by the novelist. The younger and more radical group is led by Alit and Urmila who are vociferously aggressive in their defence of the Bodo nation and are willing to take any steps to safeguard the interest of the Bodos. On the other hand is the group of Ranen, Ranjila and the older generation of Bodos who preferred peaceful methods for obtaining the interest of their community. Alit epitomises the subjective individual, conscious of the threat to Bodo identity and the need to safeguard it at all costs:

We are being seized by the enemy on all sides. So long it was the contempt and negligence of the Assamese ruling class for all the tribes. This neglect has now led to a protest. To a struggle. We are in peril. Yet, even in this critical moment we are indulging in senseless polemics.... A day will come when we shall emerge triumphant: the Bodo will emerge triumphant. (The Bharandas (tr); Pg 131)
The threat posed by the Assamese culture and the erosion of tribal land due to settling down of immigrants and outsiders, deeply affect the likes of Alit and Urmila, who like Videselie in the earlier novel are willing to wage a violent struggle for preservation of Bodo identity. More than the settlers the ire is directed towards the Assamese who through various ways over the years have perpetuated their hegemony on the Bodo people. The subjective outbursts of Alit and Urmila are natural consequences of the act. The threat or crisis of identity is at the heart of the discord in *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* and the seemingly fragile constructs of the Bodo nation fuels intense nationalism in a few individuals. Gradually, of course, this idea is shared by many others and the liberals are soon outnumbered. The fact is that almost everyone regards anomie or, lack of the usual social or ethical standards in an ethnic group, and alienation, as unhappy facts. It seems reasonable to assume that alienated individuals living in mixed societies with high levels of anomie find it difficult to establish or maintain an identity. At this point the argument is that ethnicity is affirmed or reaffirmed as a cure. Acculturation and amalgamation has its point of zenith after which winds of change usher in resulting in intense subjective feelings in the context of the ‘other’. Such changes result from overt hegemonistic intrusions by the majority ethnic group and the seemingly passive acceptance by minority groups, which spurs radicals to take up the minority cause. The Bodo-Assamese equation presented in *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* exhibits such marked tendencies where the identity of the Bodos seem to be threatened. Urmila, a character in the novel holding radical views like Alit maintains:
... We Bodos have been exploited by different communities, organizations, and institutions. It’s none of our lookout to consider what language these exploiters speak. We haven’t instigated anybody against the Assamese. Our problem is clear, so also our purpose. We have only maintained that as the Assamese have devoted themselves to safeguard their language, literature and culture, so have we. If the Assamese stand in our way in this, we take them not as our friends but as our foes. (ibid; Pg 141)

Additive acculturation — the process by which one ethnic group is culturally influenced by another group has its good points but also raises the question about the degree of acculturation and the consequences in the long run about ethnic groups and individuals involved in it. The Bodo-Assamese problem in the novel Bharanda Pakshir Jhak perhaps can be viewed in this light because realization of cultural and other values that are mutually contradictory leads to such cases where only substitutive acculturation is possible.

Such identity and subjective issues that form the very basis of novels like Yaruingam and Bharanda Pakshir Jhak is characterised by a narrative which both the authors, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Umakanta Sarma have depicted keeping the nationalistic ambitions in mind. All nations have narratives which keep and inform the hopes, aspirations and the history of a nation. Therefore, a nation is created, established and propagated by the narrative. It is imperative that in most cases one dominant or official narrative may overpower other narratives especially those of minor groups. Such groups often strike back with renewed assertion and vehemence at the centre by realigning the concept of national identity and challenging the very concept of nation prevalent in the
predominant discourse. But as Bhabha (1994) argues that like colonial authority, the power of a national narrative seems entirely confident of its consistency and coherence, but is all the while undermined by its inability to really fix the identity of the people, which would be to limit their identity to a single overpowering nationality. Therefore, the narration of a nation is a two fold perspective the pedagogical and the performative which indicates that the concept of nation is being changed by each narrative. At the same time, narratives have perpetuated oral culture and history and thereby helped identify and maintain the self-image of peoples vis-à-vis others. From the specific that is self-identity, to the general, that is the nation are creation of narratives. Apart from certain common ingredients that constitute a nation, oral myths and legends and histories have always formed a part of the nationalist narrative. A narrative is intricately bound up with human actions and conduct rather than abstract principles. Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that the narrative structure whereby characters’ lives might be narrated such that some of them are intimately known to each other and others are not is analogous to the ‘imagined community’ of a nation. It follows therefore that a nation is not characterised or known by a dominant and all inclusive narrative but informed and supplemented by other narratives of fringe minority groups. In fact a culture cannot be self-contained and full, a postulate put forward by Bhabha:

... no culture is plainly plentitudinous, not only because there are other cultures which contradict its authority, but also because its own symbol forming activity, its own interpellation in the process of representation, language, signification and meaning-making always underscores the claim to an originary,

The post-modern narrative lures a reader into disposition, offering alternatives but no finality. The reader becomes nothing more or less than an excuse for the proliferation of yet further narratives, further dispositions. Therefore, a reader cannot become a fully enlightened and imperialist subject with full control of a narrative, for he himself runs the risk of being disposed or displaced. This accounts for multiple interpretations of the narrative in the construction of a nation where there are spaces for accommodation of narratives representing minority and fringe ethnic groups, which also adds to the concept of nation.

Ethnic narratives uphold the culture, history and the primordial traditional values of a group. They are primarily meant for informing and proliferation of the ethnic values of a group in shared relational contexts. Invariably, ethnic narratives are positioned in terms of the 'other'. The context of the other is central to the understanding of ethnic narratives because apart from perpetuating ethnic consciousness and identity, it also demonstrates the differences with other narratives. Memory, primordial cultural heritage, myths, tales, history etc. comprise such narratives including personal and collective consciousness of a group. In the North East due to the presence of a large number of varied ethnic groups descended mainly from Mongoloid, Tibeto-Burmese and Austro-Asiatic stocks, oral narratives have over the centuries perpetuated the feeling of belongingness and intra-ethnic solidarity. Being the oldest narrative form, orality still continues to uphold and dictate the life and culture of ethnic groups of the North East. In the Introduction to their edited
work *Orality and Beyond: A North East Indian Perspective* (2007) Soumen Sen and Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, commenting on the oral tradition of the North East writes:

Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social organizations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws while being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of contemporary social order. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reform and redress. (2007; Pg (i))

The viability and relevance of ethnic narratives in the context of contemporary times need to be debated specially in relation to ethnic strifes and conflicts that have rocked the North East from time to time. This is not to discount the inherent merit and strength of ethnic narratives but to imbibe and inculcate what is right and proper in a multi-ethnic set up. It therefore follows that ethnic literature absorbs, appropriates and inscribes aspects of the culture of a group, creating new ideas and identities in the process. It also challenges, appropriates and inverts the nationalist or the dominant narrative. The nationalist narrative cannot signify or embody the culture and ethos of all fringe and minority groups. This is evident from the fact that national history seldom mentions or refers to the struggles, the origins or the traditions of the numerous minority groups that inhabit a nation state. It is therefore appropriate that ethnic narratives highlight and propagate the cultural history of an ethnic group often inverting the dominant discourse. Ranajit Guha highlights this fact in his essay *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India* (1982) when he asserts that the dominant Indian historiography imbibes the spirit of nationalism of excluding the
subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country - that is, the people. The elites are the representations or advocates of Indian nationalism, in which the lesser privileged sections are systematically excluded. Such minority sections like women, migrants, the working class, the peasantry, those of a different race or ethnicity often intervene and challenge the dominant representations with narratives of their own. As Homi K. Bhabha maintains in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994):

> We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation *It/self* alienated from its eternal self generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourse of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference (Pg. 148).

Thus, the performative aspect of the nationalist discourse permits the challenge to the concept of the homogenous nationalist discourse and minority and marginalized people are accorded due weightage or opportunity to intervene in the production of the nationalist narrative of itself to itself. Hence, Bhabha argues that 'the national memory is always the site of the hybridity of histories and the displacement of narratives' (ibid; Pg 169). Thus, there can be no common narrative of a nation. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her famous essay 'Can The Subaltern Speak?'(1988) recognises the heterogeneity of the colonised subaltern who has left no mark upon history because it could not, or was not allowed to make itself heard. It is only natural that such voices largely
unrepresented and unheard are now writing back at the nationalistic discourse to make their voices heard.

The nationalistic discourse in the Indian context has always favoured or represented the aspirations of the mainstream multitude disregarding the rich cultural and variegated life of the minorities and ethnic groups. Fictional works written and published during and after independence in the country embody the Indian ethos in its totality, an attempt at consolidating the nationalistic discourse. Consciously or unconsciously authors have endeavoured to picture the compositeness and uniqueness of Indian culture and history which have over the years developed into an axiomatic universal. Commenting on the literary atmosphere immediately after independence, M. K. Naik writes:

The post-independence Indian scene with its curious criss-cross of rapid socio-political changes in a country where tradition still remains a strong force has presented a stimulating spectacle which has naturally evoked a variety of reactions from its writers, including nostalgic idealization of the immediate past of the days of the freedom struggle, a strong desire to re-discover one’s roots in the ancient Indian ethos as also to examine this ethos afresh in the light of westernization, and satirical comment both on the darker side of the freedom movement and its aftermath and the decline of values in all spheres of life in the present. (*A History of Indian English Literature*, 2006; Pg 191-92 (Reprint))

This pan-Indian narrative sustained the ideology of authors by delving into and trying to recover and sustain the Indian ethos. Invariably, marginal and peripheral groups have remained largely unrepresented and unheard in the process. Social, political, character based and psychological novels in India have
always concentrated on the national mainstream by portraying themes and concerns that have helped perpetuate the nationalistic discourse. Hardly have issues important to the periphery been the central theme of any fictional work written in mainstream India. The case of North East India is a pointer in this regard because the multitude of fictional works written in mainland India hardly ever mentions the region in its actual factual context. Even if it is rarely done, the exoticism far exceeds the real situation. This is because such fictional works portray the socio-cultural and ethnic milieu from a different space in which lived and ground realities hardly matter. A case in point is Mulk Raj Anand’s *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) which has as its locale a tea garden of Assam - Macpherson Tea Estate in which the author traces the fortunes of Gangu, a poor Punjabi peasant from a village near Hoshiarpur, who lured by fabulous promises migrates to Assam in search of a better future. Assam is pictured as the exotica in the novel in which Gangu can turn his fortune round. It is another issue that Gangu is shot dead by a British officer who tries to rape his daughter—the eldorado thus turns out to be not so fabulous. Referring to the locale of the work, M.K. Naik says, “The one saving grace of the novel is the imaginative description of the plantation scene.” (ibid; Pg 157, emphasis mine). This ‘imagination’ of a plantation scene in Assam is vastly different from the ‘real’ scene portrayed by authors like Umakanta Sarma in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* (1986) and *Seuji Pator Kahini* (The Story of the Green leaves, 1959) by Birinchi Kumar Barua.

This is because Sarma and Barua, both domiciled in Assam must have had a first hand experience and exposure of the tea garden community owing to
the abundance of tea-gardens in Assam. Moreover, their concern was the plight of the tea garden community, the twists and turns in their fortune which accounts for the verisimilitude which both the authors have been able to portray very vividly. Mulk Raj Anand was more concerned with the ills of a caste ridden society and the tea-garden is depicted as a sort of utopia for the supposed upliftment of Gangu. Arundhati Roy’s Booker Prize winning novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) refers to Shillong which is conceived of as a place very near to a tea garden in Assam — fictional, because Roy was clearly evoking a peripheral imagination in the minds of the readers. Amit Choudhuri’s novel *Freedom Song* (2001) also evokes Shillong as a locale, as a metaphoric image to depict the cold mornings the place is associated with. Referring to the depiction of Shillong in the two latter novels, Parag Sarma says:

... Shillong as a spatial locale grows no further in both the novels. Perhaps, it is a name casually dropped to generate a sense of the exotica, the pride in being somehow linked to the peripheral limits of the Indian experience. This name-dropping is symptomatic of a limiting of the frontiers of the Indian experience to the notion of the great Indian mainstream. (*Assam University Journal*, Vol. II, No. I, Jan 2007; Pg 31)

Therefore, the mainstream Indian narrative has never endeavoured to mirror or depict the North East experience in its actual, factual context without exoticising it. Writers of the Indian mainland rarely stray beyond the known limits of their familiar world from which they draw their sources for fictional works. This may be attributed to the perceived homogenous space called the North East which is largely a result of political engineering and embedded in the psyche of the Indian mainstream as the exotica. But it must be pointed out here that ‘an official region
does not necessarily imply a regional consciousness corresponding to it’ (Baruah, 2007 (reprint), Pg. 4) and therefore the delineation of the region in the pan-Indian narrative does not encompass the diversity inherent in the region in its true light. Such exotic depictions are fuelled by misconceived notions about the region perpetrated in the main land through such descriptions as:

History and geography have combined to make the Northeast, homeland to Mongoloid India. (Verghese, 1996, Pg. xi)

It is only appropriate that the cultural mosaic called the North East must evolve its own narrative to dispel and also challenge the misconceptions inherent in the mainstream Indian narrative. Thus, the North East India fictional narrative is markedly and distinguishably different from the mainstream Indian narrative because of the region’s unique geographical location and socio-cultural milieu allied with diverse ethnic social set-up.

The study attempts to construct a North East narrative, a narrative different from that of the Indian mainstream based on the depiction of ethnicity in the selected novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Umakanta Sarma and Yeshe Dorje Thongchi. Therefore, ethnicity will be central to the understanding of the narrative to showcase a trend unique and peculiar to the region. Narrative in the oral tradition has been a dominant mode in the propagation of ethnic ethos since times immemorial. Folk culture, music, fine arts and ethnic history has been imbibed in oral literature of the North East so much so that almost all aspects of ethnic life are dictated by it. Fictional narrative of the region is also testimony to the fact that it has endeavoured to portray faithfully the ethnic life of the region in all its variety and complexity. Owing to the presence of a large
number of ethnic groups, fictional works of the North East have invariably portrayed the cultural mosaic and more often than not there is an inherent plea for more moderation and more toleration. This is manifest in those fictional works which portray different ethnic societies in which to protect inter-ethnic solidarity, the writers attempt at an appropriative discourse which expectedly is aimed towards a nationalistic agenda. Fictional writers of the region taking a cue from the socio-cultural events have portrayed ethnic dissensions and strife and even advocated the need for inter and intra-ethnic solidarity, in their fictional works. Other novels of the region have focussed on one ethnic group bringing out the uniqueness that characterise the particular society. In either case, the narrative attempts to portray nationalistic aspirations, an attempt at merging into the appropriative Indian discourse. However, inspite of the best attempts of the novelists, the fault lines appear negating and often obliterating the very notion of an all inclusive discourse. It is worth mentioning that writers being creative artists having a social agenda have always played a crucial role in conflict resolution by advocating the message of peace, brotherhood and amity. This is highly relevant in the North East particularly because of the rise of identity movements and consolidation of inter-ethnic boundaries that have characterised the region since independence. Being the oldest narrative in the written form, early Assamese fictional writers have catered to the pan-Assamese agenda by bringing smaller and minority ethnic groups under the blanket of an Assamese identity. This appropriative discourse so long the mainstay of Assamese writers had a parallel exclusivist metaphor working simultaneously. The novelists’ agenda was defeated as the inclusive narrative often strayed beyond authorial intentions
to negate the very notion of appropriation. Even characters seem to develop an identity of their own in voicing the concerns of their communities. As Bhisham Sahni maintains in a different context:

There is little that is predetermined as the writer moves along. He often gropes his way forward, impelled by his increasing involvement with the theme he has chosen. The original concepts, hazily conceived earlier, begin to come out in sharper outline; characters begin to assume an identity all their own. One thing suggests another and new dimensions begin to be added to the narrative. Sometimes, while writing, one feels that things are beginning to go out of hand. Characters, though fictional, begin to grow independently and seem to exercise their own volition. (quoted in Amiya Dev ed. Narrative: A Seminar, 2005; Pg 60)

The failure of the concept of greater Assamese nationality perhaps can be accounted for by the simultaneity of the inclusive/exclusive discourse. Assamese writers as well as other writers of the North East have always endeavoured in their writings to foster the nationalistic agenda but the failure of the appropriative Assamese discourse has necessitated the evolution of an ethnic discourse to portray the ethnic life of the region in all its complexity and diversity. Ethnic narratives better represent the social dynamics represented in the fictional works of the region because such fictional works often highlight the uniqueness of one ethnic group or pit one group against the other in a mutually inclusive social set up. Therefore, in the light of ethno-critical theory, a distinct narrative pattern unique to the North East is clearly discernible because of the presence of a parallel exclusivist metaphor which runs along with the use of an overt inclusive discourse. Umakanta Sarma’s apparent aim of forging a greater Assamese
nationality in *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* cannot be realised because the theme of the novel strays out of the novelist's grip and towards the end of the novel ethnic divisions stand sharper than before. It is to the credit of the novelist whose humane concerns do not allow the novel to be a treatise on ethnic discord. But the battle lines between the Assamese and the Bodos are clearly drawn in the novel and the liberals and pacifists are increasingly sidelined. Even the author's supposed mouthpiece Devkanta, who advocated peaceful coexistence and mutual harmony is neglected and all his logic for tolerance and sympathy rejected. Here, it can be discerned the characters and situation betray the nationalistic ambitions of the author. However, Umakanta Sarma is successful in his novel *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* in his intentions of forging a perfect unity among the majority Assamese community and the tea garden community who come to settle in the Rupahijan Tea Estate. In the second novel Sarma is successful in the portrayal of a pan-Assamese agenda exemplified by the amalgamation of the tea garden community into the greater Assamese society. The apprehensions and concerns raised by the first generation of labourers regarding the land called Assam are gradually dispelled towards the end of the novel when it becomes the 'motherland' of the second generation who willingly accept and embrace the pan-Assamese identity. But the narrative at the beginning of the novel forebodes an impending catastrophe waiting to unfold. It must be remembered that *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* (1986) was written much before *Bharanda Pakshir Jhak* (1992) which largely accounts for the humane touch of the novelist in the former novel.
This touch in the narrative is singularly missing in the latter novel. Ethnic narrative, therefore, place the 'other' in its scheme of things where difference and opposition helps in the construction of identities. Identities are created in connection with the other, more so in fictional narratives of the region. This concept of the 'other' is situated in both inter and intra-ethnic relations – in Bharanda Pakshir Jhak it is the Bodo-Assamese equation while in Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s Yaruingam, it is the division in the Naga society itself. Intra-ethnic issues also dominate Dorje Thongchi’s novels Lingjhik and Sonam; both the fictional works delineate the intra-ethnic divisions that have crept in the Sherdukpen and Brokpa societies in the remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh. What emerges from the discussion is that the fictional narrative of the North East can be accommodated as an ethnic discourse as earlier hegemonistic narrative by design or otherwise, could not accommodate the myriad characteristics of the land and its people.
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