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Portrayal of Tangkhul Naga Society in Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Love in the Time of Insurgency*

Abstract

*Love in the Time of Insurgency* (2005) was initially published in Assamese under title *Yaruingham* in 1960 by veteran Assamese novelist Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. The backdrop of the novel is the Tangkhul Naga society during the time of Japanese invasion in Naga Hills and immediately after the Independence of India. The tragic picture of social life during the Second World War is portrayed here vividly. While depicting the scenario of violence and bloodshed the novelist does not forget to make an overall sketch of Naga society including their general characteristics, food habits, law and justice, festivals, rituals, religion and the condition of women of this particular region of Northeast India. The present paper is a socio-cultural study of Tangkhul Naga society with the help of the evidences that are reflected in the novel.

Keywords: Northeast writing, Tangkhul Naga society, Culture, Ritual, Religion.

## Introduction

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya is an Assamese poet, short story writer and a reputed novelist who received Sahitya Akademi Award (1961) for *Yaruingam* and Jnanpith Award (1979) for *Mrityunjaya*. His first novel *Rajpathe Ringiai* (1958) is predominated by political views. Disintegration of village economy is shown in his next novel *Ai* (1960). He mostly wrote about Northeast India and its socio-political situations. *Yaruingam* (1960), one of the major works of the writer, depicts turbulent social, political and religious issues of Naga Hills immediately after the Independence of India. His work as a school teacher at Ukhrul on Burma border for one and half years helped him to gather enough materials for this novel. This novel was translated into English by the novelist himself and published as *Love in the Time of Insurgency* (2005) of which subtitle is *A Novel as Large as Life Itself*.

## Analysis

Apart from the love story between Rishang, a handsome and educated Gandhian leader and Sharengla, a beautiful village girl the story acquaints the readers with some general characteristics of the Naga people of then society. Though Christianity, education, modernization and globalization have changed the socio-cultural lives of Tangkhul Naga people some of them are still deeply rooted to own culture. They feel it to be the loss of identity while embracing new way of life. Ngazek, an old and conservative villager, is an example of such a character who believes that bravery, manhood, aggression, love for war and bloodshed are some important features of true Naga. Non-violence, for him is waste of time. This is why to preserve the Naga identity, for him, Videssellie is the right person who is fighting for independence not in Gandhian way but in violent method with arms. Ngazek therefore almost defines what Naga is by saying, "My choice is Videssellie...Videssellie is a true Naga. I've been long is search of such a man" (74).

Revengeful attitude is shown as another major feature of the indigenous Naga people. This is shown as instinctive quality that anyone possesses. That is, revenge is a universal quality, not only of Nagas. Through the enmity of Yangmaso and Ngathingkhui in this novel readers may realize the arrogance, quarrelsome and short-tempered attitude of some rustic people. Bhattacharyya narrates, “Yangmaso unconsciously placed his hand on the scar of the old wound, caused by Ngathingkhui’s spear during a fight for the church land. The old feeling of animosity flamed up his mind” (97-98).

Rishang, the lead character of the novel on the other hand reveals a different notion about their people. He is shown as symbol of peace and non-violence who tries to educate the common mass from Gandhian perspectives. Unity regardless of religion, culture and colour is the motto of his campaign.

#### Village Economy

The base of the Tangkhul Naga society is agriculture. In the novel, the reference to the jhum cultivation is evident. Such way of cultivation is done in hilly areas which is also known as ‘shifting cultivation’ as the plots of land are cultivated temporarily. Along with paddies, ginger, potato and cotton are also being cultivated. Trade and commerce of such ingredients are not satisfying. The business of salt is also seen somewhere in this novel. Both male and female are equally involved in the paddy field regardless of age. Cultivation in hilly area is shown as quite difficult phenomenon in this novel. In the novelist’s words:

Yangmaso reached the hillock and looked around for Atip. Then he went along a small road, through the dark shadowy patches of an encroaching forest till he came to a hill stream. He crossed it and walked along its bare bank reaching a thicket of shrubs with spotted leaves. From there the hill gradually descended in a zigzag. Atip was not in the potato field. Yangmaso went up the hill. He saw Atip now, working with all her strength. (100-101)

Yangmaso's effort to reach the potato field gives the reader hint of difficult agricultural life of the people of Naga Hills. The reference of pigs, dogs and chicken is also important in this novel, as the village economy is directly dependent on such issues as well. Bhattacharyya narrates:

Atip finished her meal, washed her face, then took down the pot from the fire and went out. The squealing pigs rushed to her and "Oh-o, what a noisy bunch you are!" she chided them, laughing. The door of the house was open. This was an opportunity for the dog and the chickens to sneak in and pick up the food on the floor around the fireside... (92)

These images deal not only with economy but also give vital picture of their daily lives. Moreover the readers may notice different names of agricultural tools and equipments that they use such as, khunti, kor, spear etc.

#### Dress Code

Dress and ornament may signify identity of a tribe. It presents the tribe's social, cultural as well as geographical environment. The choice of the group of people is also manifested through dress code. In *Love in the Time of Insurgency* readers may trace out the dressing sense of both male and female of Tangkhul Naga tribal society. The traditional dress for women is known as 'Kachon', a traditional shawl. The narrator describes Sharengla in her normal attire as: "...her Kachon, the traditional Tangkhul red and black shawl for Naga women, slipping from her shoulders" (14).

Man's dress is also being described through Ngazek's appearance. Hairstyle in Tangkhul tradition and earrings are noteworthy among them. In this way the Kachon on the waist, shawl, a few ornaments and garland on neck and ear are basic dressing style of women whereas men do experiment mainly with their hair.

### Food Habits

A glimpse of food habits of the people living in the locality of Ukhrul can be found out from the narrative of the novel. Along with rice the mention of 'pitha' (cake), corn, dried fish, pork and 'zu' (rice beer) can be seen. They have the habit of taking rice cakes with tea. "Sharengla prepared tea for Khating and served him rice cakes" (31). The habit of drinking liqueur is also prominent in this novel: "They ate rice, meat and sauce that the women had brought for the four of them. When they finished Ngathingkhui and Khating had a few sips of zu, the rice beer again" (39).

Along with alcohol, smoking tobacco is a common phenomenon in the particular region. They consider these things as parts of daily life. As the narrator says, "When the zu pot became empty, Varmala took it away, her wrinkled face showing no emotion at all, the tobacco pipe remaining as if stuck to her lips" (60-61). Among the Naga people eating of pork seems to be common. The reference to the use of black salt in the society is repeated many a times in the novel. But basically the whole tribal community depends on natural food products.

### Village Justice System

Tangkhul society seems to be quite systematic in terms of law and order. The village has a 'Khulakapa' (headman). He has the power to decide everything important in the village. Sharengla, after being abandoned by the Japanese soldier Ishewara is now allowed to live in the village, in 'Ngalalong' (girls' dormitory). This is a decision made by headman. He can even change the previous rules when necessary. This is why, most probably, he allows her to stay with the virgin girls even after knowing that she has lost her chastity. The narrative shows how the others are sympathetic toward her as Rishang remarks, "The villagers will treat you with consideration. They are now living in a temporary village. You will be allowed

to stay in the girls' dormitory" (19). That is, during the time of insurgency and war the village law becomes flexible. During that time the entry of male is also allowed in such dormitories, which is generally meant for girls. Bhattacharyya defines 'Ngalalong' as: "...the house of the virgins, a community education centre where unmarried girls were trained in traditional craft and initiated into adult social life" (22).

The reference to the Panchayat system is also evident in the society as reflected in the novel. As the story moves the readers notice conflicts between Ngathingkhui and Yangmaso on the issue of land for church. The village Panchayat tries to sort out the issue.

#### Condition of Women

Tangkul society also has gender discrimination. Everything was fine before the Japanese invasion. Works were distributed equally between male and female earlier. There was no question of loss of virginity, rape, abduction of women before. But the advent of Japanese soldiers during the Second World War dismantles everything. The women are at fear at any point of time now. Sharengla's character is the worst sufferer in this novel as she became the victim of it. The writer states, "And her mind turned and turned on her loss of chastity. With that loss she had lost everything" (16). She therefore expects that men should understand her situation, especially her former lover Rishang. It was not her choice to be raped, rather she was abducted. "She knew chastity was important for young women of her tribe but, didn't he know she was innocent and she was still attracted to him? She expected a little more understanding from a man" (19).

#### Traditions and Rituals

Depiction of faith on ghost, spirit, afterlife and other beliefs along with performance of different rituals in Bhattacharyya's *Love in the Time of Insurgency* is noteworthy. The rituals

done before and after Ngazek's death manifest their belief systems. They have the belief that the spirit of a dead person does not go directly to the 'Kazeiram' (heaven). The 'Thilakapo' chosen by the person must help the spirit to find the way out to heaven. He should guide it till the Shiroi peak. Videssilie, the thilakapo of Ngazek also does the same in the novel. This is a unique ritual in the society. "The Thilakapo was to act after his death as his representative at the death ceremony and the Kathi Kasham feast, ensuring a smooth journey of his spirit to kazeiram, the heaven" (74). Ngazek was superstitious in nature. When he was ill he did rituals rather than taking help of medical treatments. The narrator remarks:

Ngazek was ill with smallpox. The maiba had already killed a cock to get omens and picked out the lai from the patient's body by kneeling on Ngazek and pummelling him steadily for a long time. The maiba then laid him on the leaves picked specially from a tree that was linked to the disease. (73)

So the reference to Kameo (God), Kathikasham feast, Shiroi peak, ghost, spirit, Maiba, Lai, Kazeiram etc. may provide enough hints regarding their superstition.

### Religion

Modernization and the impact of colonialism are apparent in the Tangkhul Naga society. Basically in the field of religion its influence is greater. The indigenous culture and religion has been disturbed by Christianity. The same group of people is now dividing themselves into Christian and non-Christians. A total chaos and discrimination occur in the society due to religion now. So the novel shows that religion may cause social unrest. Even the enmity between Ngathingkhui and Yangmaso is because of a land of church.

## Conclusion

Bhattacharyya's *Love in the Time of Insurgency* has secured a safe place in literary history from India's Northeast. It has importance not only for reflection of society but also for depiction of world politics, war, history, mental situation of Naga people during the great war, condition of women as well as the religious set up of Tangkhul Naga society residing at Ukhrul area. So this Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel is a successful in portraying the socio-cultural life of Nagaland during the time of insurgency.

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