

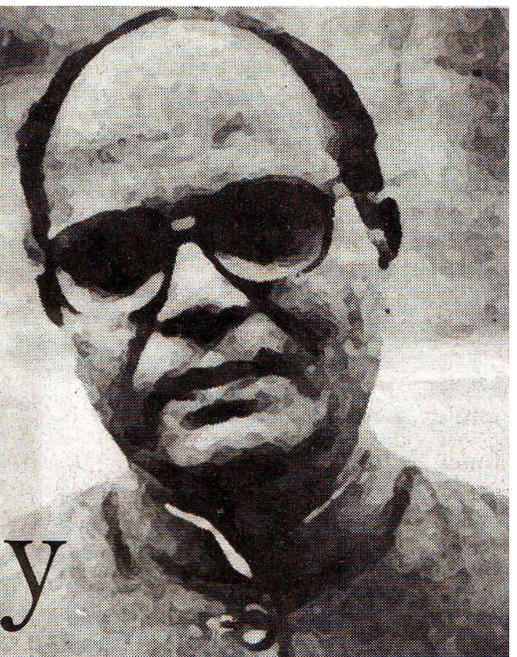
Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (1924-1997) occupies a unique place in the history of post-Independence Assamese literature. After Rajani Kanta Bordoloi (1877-1940), the father of the Assamese novel, no other writer in Assam has earned as much popularity as Birendra Kumar did. He is perhaps the only writer in Assam who sustained himself for quite some time solely on his writings. His contribution towards Assamese literature is immense, as exemplified by his numerous novels, short-stories, poems, dramas and essays. In the last four decades of his literary career, Birendra Kumar was able to influence a whole generation of intellectuals of Assam.

The contemporary events, which created waves in Assam's as well as the country's political life, were taken by Birendra Kumar as themes for most of his novels. Whatever he has written has come out mostly from his personal experience. For example, *Rajpathe Ringiai* (Call of the Highway, 1955), his first novel, describes the events taking place on the first Independence Day of India in 1947 as seen by his revolutionary young protagonist, Mohan. *Pratipad* (First Moon, 1970) deals with the labour agitation in the oil town of Digboi in 1939. *Sataghnee* (Hundred-edged, 1965) has its backdrop in the Chinese aggression of 1962. *Kabar Aru Phool* (Graveyard and Flowers, 1972) is based on the liberation war of Bangladesh. *Iyaringam* (People's Government, 1960), for which he got the Sahitya Akademi award, speaks about the genuine feelings of the Naga people shattered by World War II. Birendra Kumar portrays the naked picture of the disintegrating structure of Assamese rural society and its socio-economic dimensions in his novel *Ai* (Mother, 1960) and *Munic-hunir Pohar* (1976). *Mrityunjay*, his Jnanpith award winning novel, is based on India's freedom movement in Assam.

India's freedom movement is one of the epoch-making chapters in her political history. A number of novels in various Indian languages were written against that background. In

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# Canvas of humanity



this regard, Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan* (1860), written against the backdrop of the Indigo Movement in Bengal, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Ananda Math* (1872), with the all-Bengal Sanyasi revolt as the central theme, constituted the first step towards production of movement-centric literature in India. That was only the beginning of a move which has brought about a significant thematic change in Indian literature. If we go through the history of world literature, we shall find its pages replete with countless works of great writers built on specific important events. Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863), Earnest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Maxim Gorky's *Mother* (1907) to name a few, are examples of such works.

*Mrityunjay* contains a real picture of the last stages of India's freedom struggle, i.e., the Quit India Movement. Terrorist activities that took place throughout the country in the wake of the Quit India Movement also occurred in Assam. The novel contains a realistic account of such activities. Like in some other parts of the country, a section of the people in Assam, too, lost faith in Gandhiji's non-violent method and indulged in violent activities on the lines of Subhas Chandra Bose's guerrilla warfare. Many of the leaders of the armed struggle were basically Gandhian and devout Vaishnavites, who believed that God resides in every living being, yet, they took to arms and sabo-

tage only for the sake of the country's freedom.

*Mrityunjay* is a reflection of the young Birendra Kumar's response to and association with India's historic freedom movement. In his preface to the novel he writes: "The genuine impressions have been given here from the memorable events of the last days of India's freedom movement. This is not a historical account. The events took place in our lifetime. I have taken the theme from the events... This novel is the story of that particular period when people sacrificed and struggled for the country's freedom. I am giving an insight into the minds of those who really understood and got involved in it." In 1942, World War II was at its height. Allied forces had gathered in Assam in preparation for their fight against the Japanese forces in Burma. Now, the fury of the freedom movement was directed against the war efforts of the British government and its allies. The freedom fighters tried to blow up bridges and railway lines. A detailed picture of the horrifying situation created in Assam by World War II is also depicted in *Mrityunjay*, *Iyaringam* and *Pratipad*. His political or radical motive is very clear in *Rajpathe Ringiyai*. In this novel, the workers are critical of the newly earned independence as they found themselves in conditions not in any way better than what it was before. They shouted in Hindi *Ye azadi juthi hay, desh ki janta bhu-*

*ki hay*. In these words, we find the echo of Jayprakash Narayan's following speech (incidentally, JP was Birendra's political *guru*): "But freedom of *Swaraj* had come by then to mean much more to me than mere national independence. Free India to me meant Socialist India and *Swaraj*, the rule of the poor and downtrodden." At the same time, one of Birendra Kumar's protagonists, obsessed with the dictum, "Liberty is not a thing that you are given as a present," muses over its implications (*Rajpath Ringiai* p77). The following lines reveal the true incident that motivated Birendra Kumar to create his first novel *Rajpath Ringiai*: "One of the most important days of my life was 15th August, 1947. That day was a day for self searching for the hero of my first novel *Rajpath Ringiai*. He cannot reconcile himself to the partition of the country, and finds the day wanting in the fulfillment of promises and hopes the Independence movement gave. He induces workers and tribals, to take to peaceful struggles again to realise the dreams of the unfinished revolution." In portraying the characters of his novels, which are moulded from earthly dust and are symbolic of real life, Bhattacharyya's extensive experience and deep insight come to light. He has efficiently sketched characters varying from farmers and labourers to high ranking white *sahibs*. Birendra Kumar's characters' broad outlook has made them colourful and impartial. Rejecting the assumption that foreigners and the well-to-do were devoid of human sympathies, he has presented the appealing characters — the Flaming couple and Higgins Sahib in *Pratipad*, Dr Bruce in *Iyaruvingam*, Choudhury, the politician in *Ranga Megh* and so on. All his characters are lively and earthly — men and women of flesh and blood. This is so because they are born out of real experience. The author's idealism has found expression in characters like Mahada Goswami, Dhanpur and Rup Narayan in *Mrityunjay*, Rishang and Jeevan in *Iyaruvingam*, Chatterjee in *Pratipad*, and Rajat in *Ai*. Such characters are described by English author and crit-

ic Marjorie Boulton as "a mouthpiece for the author's own view." The predicament of the characters adds beauty to the novels. Circumstances, environment and often, a sense of duty are instrumental in creating inner conflicts in human beings. Pictures of such mental strife in *Mrityunjay* are comparable to the ones which Valmiki portrayed in the *Ramayana*, of Rama's inner conflict prior to Sita's banishment to the jungles in order to uphold the honour of the family and the throne, or the "to be or not to be" situation projected by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*. The message of the novel is that he who lays down his life for the freedom of his motherland attains peace. Motivated by this profound ideology, the characters get involved in guerilla warfare. Yet, the feeling of guilt pricked their conscience and created mental distress. Being compelled to involve himself in the violent movement, Madhu Bhakat, a Vaishnavite, suffered pangs of inner conflict. Madhu's feeling of remorse has been treated by Bhattacharyya in a unique language — a soul stirring description of one's mental agony: "If a train is toppled, it is not just the engine that will be wrecked, many lives will be lost. The *Mahapurusha* (Sankardeva) said Rama resides even in the souls of dogs, foxes and donkeys." This hesitation and struggle is also apparent in the main protagonist of the novel Mahada Gosain (Goswami), the chief of the guerilla group, and Rup Narayan, an educated youth. Although they realised that death was imminent, the weakness of these duty-bound death-defying heroes for their homes and families often surfaced in their hearts. Gosain could not escape from his inner conflict until his last breath. The "neither here, nor there" feeling has been highlighted by Rup Narayan, who is torn between violence and non-violent struggle. Although this educated young man paged through world history and decided upon guerilla warfare as a viable means to attain liberation, the sight of the numerous corpses caused in him a mental conflict as to which was superior — the path of violence, which he had

opted for, or that of non-violence. The inner conflict of *Mrityunjay*'s female character Subhadra, a victim of inhuman torture at the hands of the police and military personnel during the Second World War, is equally evident. This symbol of neglected womanhood was driven to suicide by her feelings of guilt, which stemmed from her being raped and the subsequent loss of social status. Similarly in the novel *Sataghnee*, a female character Bimla finds herself in a dilemma when, one day, she realises that the Chinese youth she loves is guilty of treason. Perplexed by the choice between her own interest and that of her motherland, she finally opts for a solitary existence without her husband. The mental agony of *Sataghnee*'s heroine Amala also adds to the beauty of the narrative. A pall of gloom descends on her life as a result of having loved two brothers from the same family. Having married the younger Prashant, Amala finds herself in a quandary at the unexpected appearance of her erstwhile lover Rajat. The author has expressed the soul searching struggle through Amala's father-in-law, Bandhuram Majumdar when he says: "A fervent appeal was visible in her vacant look. I sense her plight instantly. She has lost herself in a deep inner conflict." Such natural mental conflicts of the characters enhance the overall appeal of Birendra's literary style. Birendra Kumar's female characters have their own distinct identity. According to him, "A capable woman does the work of a hundred men" (*Mrityunjay* p134). *Mrityunjay*'s main women character, Dimi, and the efficient weaver, Kali *baideo*, who is a real Gandhian, Lachmi and Nayanmani of *Pratipad*, Sarengla of *Iyaruvingam*, Aaimani in *Munichunir Pohar* and other such characters have achieved greatness through their individual thinking and ideals. Basa's mother, the central character of *Ai*, is the picture of an accomplished and affectionate universal mother. Bhattacharyya had great sympathy for women, who were at that time, supposed to be the weaker sex in society. The picturisation of tortured women has taken a concrete shape in his literary style. The description

of the suicide of *Mrityunjay*'s Subhadra, the unfortunate life of *Iyaringam*'s Sarengla, a victim of inhuman torture by the Japanese army; the distress of *Pratipad*'s Jebunnissa, a victim of the white *sahib*'s lust, the tragic consequences of a woman's love in society; the authentic picture of the life of women doomed by the evil of child marriage in pre-Independent Assamese Brahmin society and parental negligence in educating the female child- all these women's issues have been projected powerfully in his novels.

The October revolution of 1917 and Marxist philosophy had some influence on Bhattacharyya as much as these had on other intellectuals and writers of the country like Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Hindi writers Bairab Prasad Gupta (*Masal*), Amrit Roy (*Beej*), Punjabi writer Narula (*Lok Dushman*) and others. Such influences on Birendra Kumar and his deep conviction in socialism find expression in all his novels in some measures, especially in *Pratipad*, *Rajpathe Ringiai*, *Ranga Megh*, *Sataghnee* and *Mrityunjay*. His unflinching faith in the basic human values, which permeates through all his creations, puts him almost at par with humanist writers like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Premchand.

According to noted critic Prabhakar Machwe, Birendra Kumar's creations do not conform to the two general patterns followed by the earlier schools of Indian writers, one writing sentimentally about social ills and the other realistically documenting poverty and deprivation. In Assamese literature, the two best novels were *Jivanar Batot* (Birinchi Kumar Barua) and *Dawar Aru Nai* (Jogesh Das) that represented these two schools. "What Birendra did", says Machwe, "was to discard the old moulds and evolve a new pattern." Birendra Kumar played a crucial role in the growth of the literature of commitment in Assamese. He himself was committed to social responsibility as a writer. This is evident in the following comments of one of the characters in his novel *Rajpathat Ringiyai*: "Writings will have to be

the sword, poetry will have to be the glow of a new society, songs will have to be the reverberating war-songs of a hundred throats." Like all universal literature, the central theme of Birendra Kumar's literary creations is to serve human liberty. Finally, one memorable contribution of Birendra Kumar to the healthy growth of Assamese literature deserves commendation. Right from the days of *Orunodai* (1846), literary magazines have been responsible for the birth of new eras in the history of Assamese literature. *Ramdhenu* (Rainbow), the widely appreciated magazine of very high standard under Birendra Kumar's able editorship, was responsible for the emergence of a new, distinct group of writers during the period from the early 1950s till the late 1960s that gave a new vigour and added colours to the rainbow of Assamese language and literature. And for that, generations to come will hold him and his *Ramdhenu* in high esteem.

(Published on the occasion of his 13th death anniversary)

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