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## BIRINCHI KUMAR BARUA'S *SEUJI PATAR KAHINI* AS A MIRROR: REFLECTING REAL-WORLD ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCES

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**Abstract:** Migration significantly influences or paves way for acculturation. Colonial Assam often saw deceptive or coerced migration of people from throughout India to work as labourers in the newly set up tea plantations of Assam. Naturally, this historical record of migration of people from different cultural backgrounds settling within the confined spaces of tea plantations result a complex process of acculturation. Their distinctive cultural aspects, and blend of their ancestral traditions to adaptation to the new environment (Assam) fostered to form a close-knit community within the Assamese society. There are a few novels in post-independence Assamese literature that provide crucial insights into the toilsome lives and evolving cultural landscapes of tea garden worker's community in Assam. *Seuji Patar Kahini* (1959) by Birinchi Kumar Barua shines as a pioneering literary voice illuminating the lives of people in Assam's tea plantations. This research paper will analyse the depiction of acculturation among the characters in Naharani tea estate, specifically noting how migration serves as the primary catalyst for acculturation in the novel, taking into account relevant historical facts. Also, John W. Berry's theoretical framework of acculturation will be used to analyse the novel *Seuji Patar Kahini* (1959).

**Keywords:** migration, acculturation, colonial Assam, tea plantation.

The discovery of tea in Assam is credited to Mr. Robert Bruce in 1823 and in 1839 the creation of Assam Tea Company marked a rapid expansion of tea plantations across Assam (*Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the years 1874-75 and 1875-76* 9). According to Edward Gait,

The discovery that the tea plant grows wild in the upper part of the Brahmaputra valley was made by Mr. Robert Bruce, who has already been mentioned as an agent, first of Purandar Singh, and afterwards of his rival Chandrakant. He visited Garhgaon for trading purposes in 1823 and there learnt of its existence from a Singpho chief, who promised to obtain some specimens for him. (Gait 346)

Assam's history is characterized by waves of migration. Right after the discovery of tea in Assam the establishment of tea gardens required a massive workforce. In *Empire's Garden* (2011) Jayeeta Sharma elaborates on how untamed forests were cleared for extension of tea and rice cultivation in Assam. Sharma also talks about how the British colonial administration implemented legal frameworks to import people as labourers under indentured and punitive agreements. This massive influx of people across India fundamentally reshaped Assam's fabric fostering new ideas about culture and cultural distinctions.<sup>1</sup> The migrants settling in a new land, often grappled with various social issues including identity diffusion, acculturation challenges and even marginalisation or alienation.

As the British colonial authority was driven towards economic benefit, they implemented different strategies to attract labourers from Central and Eastern parts of India. Labourers in the tea gardens of Assam originally came from present-day Odisha, Bihar, Santhal Parganas, etc. brought by the *aarkathis*<sup>2</sup>. They belonged to varied ethnic communities like Santhals, Mundas, Kurukhs, Gonds, Oraons etc. In *Plantation Labour in India* (1931) Rajani Kanta Das contributes a comprehensive overview of India's tea industry, consequently highlighting Assam's significant role in employing several laborers in its tea gardens. Historically, the tea industry has been the largest employer within the plantation sector in India. In 1895, the industry employed an average of 553,821 workers daily. This number significantly increased, peaking in 1919 with 973,358 workers. By 1928, the total number of tea garden workers across India stood at 906,787. As Assam has consistently been the primary hub for tea cultivation so the employment required was huge. In 1928, a substantial 544,193 workers (60%) were employed in Assam. Followed by Bengal as the second-largest employer, with 185,399 workers (20%). The remaining 20% of tea garden workers were dispersed across other regions, including Madras and Travancore. Hence, over 80% of tea garden workers were concentrated in the neighboring regions of Assam and Bengal (Das 17-18).

This highlights how several waves of historical migration that took place within the region altered the demography of Assam. Despite their diverse origins, languages and belief systems, coming from their varied backgrounds across India they remain united in their shared struggles. They were brought to Assam as laborers who belonged to diverse communities is not a simple one-way assimilation in their new land, but a dynamic interplay of cultures. On one hand were the cultures of their own lands, their own ethnicities and on the other, the culture of the places they were transported to. Thus, these people went through the process of cultural shift as they adopted a new culture meanwhile retaining their old. This shift is intergenerational in nature and is evident through attributes such as language, mannerisms and rituals, among others. Such cultural attributes can arbitrate whether the culture of a community persists or undergoes deviation, alteration or assimilation. This is indicative of the process of acculturation. As evidenced through the experiences of the people of this community. In *Chah Bagisar Asamiya Sampradaya* (1983) Sushil Kurmi talks about the tea garden worker's society and how the people of Assam's tea gardens have fully embraced Assamese culture. He also claims that a strong mutually cherished bond exists between tea garden workers and Assamese society. His work indicates a positive intergroup relationship or a hallmark of effective integration. However, authors like Kamal Kumar Tanti often challenge such stance as assimilationist. In the article, "We are just Adivasis, No Community in the World is Named After a Commodity" (2019) Tanti emphasizes on the Adivasi identity as representative of a community rather than a nomenclature like tea community that derives from the socio-economic exploitation of a group of people who migrated (not always voluntarily) to this region. As a consequence, the lived experiences of the people of the community are both layered and complex in their representation. In post-independence Assam one of the earliest novels to have attempted such portrayal in a sensitive and evocative manner is Birinchi Kumar Barua's *Seuji Patar Kahini* (1959). Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-1964) who wrote under the pseudonym Rasna Barua is considered a pioneering figure in the sphere of Assamese literature. One of the major aspects of the lived experiences of the people of the community is migration. This is effectively portrayed in *Seuji Patar Kahini* (1959) set in Naharani tea estate during the colonial Assam. This novel serves as a testament to the acculturation of the characters portrayed as tea garden workers. This narrative also contrasts sharply with situations where acculturation often leads to marginalization or separation through the characters Sonia and Nareshwar. It illustrates how distinct the Assamese society and tea garden worker's society during the colonial era never fully assimilated but instead found a way to integration. *Seuji Patar Kahini* that deals with the people living in Naharani tea estate of Assam, originally brought from Ranchi: "Sonia's mother, Mahua came to Naharani garden from Ranchi with her maternal aunt and uncle as indentured labourers" (Barua 79).<sup>3</sup>

The narrative revolves around Nareshwar and Sonia and through them the author tries to depict the communal lives within the tea estate and also provides insight about the Assamese society during the colonial era. The novel opens with a British couple, Mr. and Mrs. Miller who are on the way to Naharani tea estate as Mr. Miller is appointed as a new manager of the tea estate. The couple meets Nareshwar, who comes from a nearby village to Naharani tea estate in search of work. He helps them fix their car; Mrs Miller is impressed by Nareshwar and convinces Mr. Miller to take him along so that he can serve in their bungalow as a 'boy'. Their journey leads them to Naharani tea estate where Nareshwar meets Sonia, the protagonist of the novel. Meanwhile almost all the characters portrayed in the novel experience the ordeal of migration and find themselves in the process of acculturation as they navigate between different cultural landscapes.

According to Redfield R. et al, acculturation refers to

those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups under this definition acculturation is to be distinguished from...assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation. (Redfield R. et al 149-152)

In simple terms, acculturation is a multifaceted process of cultural change that occurs when individuals or a group of people from different cultural backgrounds assimilate cultural elements from the other where the original cultures of both groups can also be influenced or changed. Acculturation is a complex and ongoing process within the people living in the tea gardens of Assam. John W. Berry defines acculturation as a mutual process of cultural and psychological adaptation that results when different cultural groups interact. Acculturation therefore is not a one-dimensional affair; in fact, both the dominant and minority cultures experience changes. Berry presents a paradigm of four acculturation approaches and the four approaches forwarded by Berry involves:

Assimilation: Assimilation is adopting the dominant the prevailing culture and mostly letting go of one's native culture.

Separation: Separation in this context implies keeping intact with one's original culture and limiting interaction with the existing culture.

Integration: Integration is retaining one's own culture meanwhile embracing elements of the existing culture which eventually give rise to bi-cultural identity.

Marginalization: Its neither connecting with the prevailing culture nor retaining one's own original.

Hence, Berry's concept of acculturation emphasizes as a continuous and evolving process where individuals might shift between these strategies over time.

Sonia, the protagonist of the novel inherently grapples with dual identity. She happens to be an illegitimate child of Mahua, a tea garden worker and Armstrong Sahib, a former tea garden manager. Sonia's illegitimacy and abandonment by her parents right after her birth presents a cross-cultural assimilation and resilience. She possesses a mixed heritage of colonizer and colonized which shapes her personality as rebellious and dissimilar from the other individuals of the tea garden can be perceived as a survival mechanism. Her survival in the environment of the tea garden with her relatives speak volumes about her innate strength and adaptability. The personality of Sonia paints a sketch of how the remarkable capacity of human spirit to survive perhaps even thrive in the face of profound adversity shapes individual lives:

Sonia is a girl difficult to understand, her personality is strange. Her eyes, face and body colour are not like her mother, instead it is like her father's so she is as great as Army Sahib; who dominates men (Barua 87).<sup>4</sup>

Again, we read,

Why can't I? Am I not a girl from here? I only remember the songs of coolie children from Ranchi, forgetting rest of their language and becoming Assamese. Don't you know? (Barua 132)<sup>5</sup>

Sonia explicitly states that she has "forgotten the rest of their language" from Ranchi which signifies loss of her original linguistic heritage and simultaneously as a powerful symbol of incomplete assimilation or a lingering connection to her roots. "Becoming Assamese" denotes cultural assimilation as she has adopted Assamese language as language of her own displacing her original language. Sonia has embraced new identity, yet the echoes of her past continue to shape herself. According to Berry's model of acculturation, Sonia's separation from her own culture and integrating to the new environment perfectly illustrates acculturation.

“Do the people of garden have houses? None can tell who came from where; the garden has given them houses - they will stay till the days they work here - then where will they go?” (Barua 132) <sup>6</sup> Sonia shares a powerful commentary on the historical and ongoing experiences of the individuals in Naharani tea estate to Nareshwar. The tea garden worker’s community are very diverse as they belonged to various regions of India with distinct languages, customs and social structures. Sonia’s words “they will stay till the days they work here- where will they go?”<sup>6</sup> offers an insight of bringing them to Assam under coercive indentured labour systems. “None can tell who came from where” highlights how their original identities were obscured and a new composite identity emerged out of this shared experience of exploitation and marginalization. The new identity is a product of their collective acculturation to the plantation system in Naharani tea estate of Assam. Paradoxically, Sonia’s expression about the “houses” provided by the gardens are not symbols of integration or belonging, but rather of functional adaptation by the tea garden worker’s community portrayed in the novel. They adapted to the living conditions and learned new ways of life necessary for survival within the plantation economy. Consequently, this can be perceived as a form of acculturation driven by necessity not by choice or desire for mutual cultural exchange. The “where will they go?” question encapsulates the outcome of marginalization within the acculturation framework. According to John W Berry’s strategies of acculturation, integration is holding onto one’s own culture meanwhile also embracing elements of the dominant culture which eventually results to a bi cultural identity. But in the novel the influence seen was unidirectional where Sonia along with her community feel they neither fully belong to their original culture nor to the prevailing culture. The phrase “where will they go?” highlights not only about physical displacement but also reveals direct consequence of acculturation that did not lead to full integration.

However, the portrayal of Nareshwar in the novel elevates a poignant narrative of a highly personal but ultimately unsuccessful attempt at cultural adaptation and the inherent challenges of seeking an alternative identity within the established social structures of tea garden. His relocation to the tea plantation society was driven by a yearning for an idealized life but the realities of the life on tea garden particularly prevent him from achieving meaningful acculturation. Nareshwar’s attempt to navigate between his origin culture (Assamese village society) and perceived culture of tea plantation society however does not leads to successful integration or even assimilation. Towards the end of the novel, Sonia’s departure from the tea plantation society contradicts Nareshwar’s acculturation process. Nareshwar’s disillusionment of his attempted cultural shift and his disappearance from the estate reveals his growing sense of alienation. He was neither able to fully return to his village roots nor find a sustainable identity within the tea garden community. His personal quest for acculturation collides with the deeply intertwined socio-economic realities of the tea plantation society. The novel does not explicitly demonstrate if Nareshwar was fully accepted by the tea garden worker’s community in Naharani tea estate. He seems to be more of an internal yet observational one who tries to draw distinct imagery of rural village existence and the life of tea garden workers in the estate. The author portrays him as one whose initial grief and anger from the village were replaced by a more profound sense of loss or confusion in the tea garden.

There is an incident where Nareshwar and Budhu shares a conversation about “sin and virtue” where Nareshwar states that “Is sin and virtue inherent in gardens only? Where there are people there will be sin and virtue. Where can you find a society without sin and virtue?” (Barua 79)<sup>7</sup> The author also mentions that Nareshwar’s cultural perspective of sin and virtue was likely inherited from his father as he belonged to an Ojah family: “Finally, the last child of the Ojah family fled from his father’s house at night with some of his clothes. Where Nareshwar went no one knew” (Barua 24).<sup>8</sup> He is seen to retain his own culture while navigating his life in Naharani tea estate. This highlights how Nareshwar internalizes and reproduce the norms and beliefs of his primary cultural group.

The novel *Seuji Patar Kahini* reveals various facets of cultural interaction showing how characters experience acculturation, assimilation, separation and even integration. The fact that the novel is a depiction of real-life experiences faced by the people living in the tea plantations of Assam explores the complex dynamics of cultural exchange, from partial adoption to complete absorption. Sonia, as a character had to grapple with acculturation which stands as a key revelation of how her mother’s migration from Ranchi to Assam had profoundly impacted her present life. Similarly, the other characters portrayed in the novel significantly go through acculturation and this can be seen through their evolving behaviours, beliefs and interactions as they navigate life in a different society. Meanwhile, Nareshwar is depicted as an unassimilated observer in Naharani tea estate, someone who meticulously watched the lives of the people within the tea estate. Coming from an Assamese village society he retained his individual beliefs, yet skilfully engaged with the people living in the tea estate by discovering how their perspectives resonated with his own. He actively drew parallels and contrasting pictures between in his life before coming to the tea plantation and life after coming to the estate.

#### Notes

1. Sharma, Jayeeta. *Empire’s Garden*. Duke University Press, 2011. (pp 5)
2. *aarkathis* are professional recruiters who recruit labour to work in the tea plantations.
3. Translated by both the authors.
4. Translated by both the authors.
5. Translated by both the authors.
6. Translated by both the authors.
7. Translated by both the authors.
8. Translated by both the authors.

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