

Ideological Representation of Labour in Selected Assamese Novels from the 1950s to the 1980s

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Declaration

I do hereby declare that the thesis entitled **“Ideological Representation of Labour in Selected Assamese Novels from the 1950s to the 1980s”** is the result of investigation carried out by me at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati under the supervision of Prof Liza Das. The work has not been submitted either in whole or in part to any other university / institution for a research degree.

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Certificate

This is to certify that Mr. Shivajit Dutta has prepared the thesis entitled **“Ideological Representation of Labour in Selected Assamese Novels from the 1950s to the 1980s”** for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. The work was carried out under my general supervision and in strict conformity with the rules laid down for the purpose. It is the result of his investigation and has not been submitted either in whole or in part to any other university / institution for a research degree.

(Liza Das)

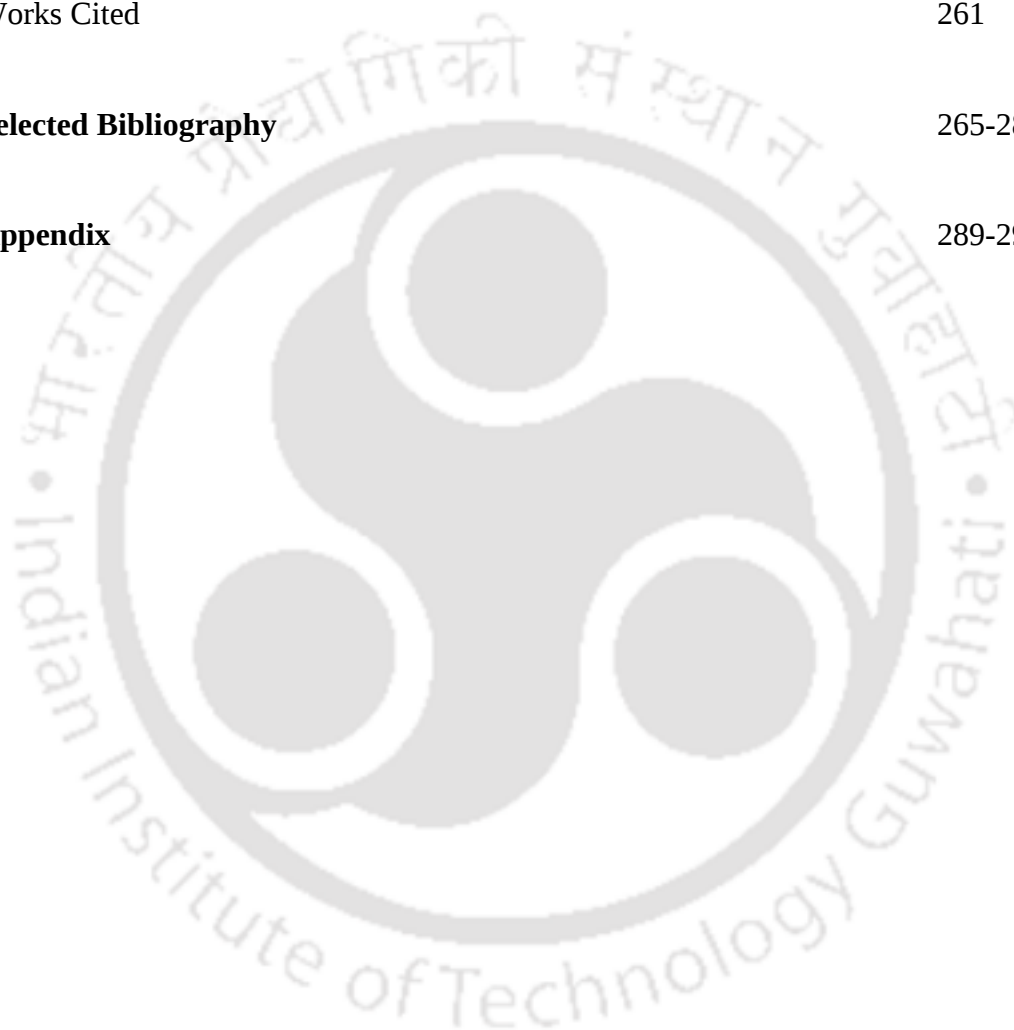
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Preface and Acknowledgements

“I lisped in numbers for the numbers came,” Alexander Pope said. Numbers or poetry came to him spontaneously. However, this research topic did not come to me that way. I have to admit that my struggle against economic hardship in childhood, adolescence, and youth was a prime motivator behind my youthful fascination for Marxism. My involvement with peoples’ troubles in rural life dragged me to get involved in different social organisations dedicated to uplifting society through cultural means. These practices needed a sharp theoretical understanding of life, society, and the world which I received from several writers, more particularly, from Prof. Hiren Gohain, Georg Lukács, and Terry Eagleton. Gohain’s writings and conversations (I am his direct student and, in a way, comrade) shaped, and are still shaping, me, my thoughts, and my life. Later I came under the magic spell of Lukascian thoughts, particularly those presented in *Studies in European Realism, Writer and Critic*, and *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. His idea of type got engraved in my critical thoughts about literature, and I wrote several reviews mainly based on these ideas. Next, Eagleton’s witty books, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, *Ideology*, *Why Marx Was Right*, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, and others helped me a lot in strengthening my reading of literature, so much so that I have been translating and publishing in *Natun Padatik*, an Assamese progressive magazine, his seminal book *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. As I enrolled myself in IIT Guwahati as a research scholar, I was thinking of studying a few Assamese novels based on the ideas of Lukács although he is seen as outdated today even in Marxian circles. Then my supervisor Prof. Liza Das, incidentally, went through one of my newspaper articles and liked it. It was on the relationship between labour and humanity. I based my article on my readings of Ernst Fisher’s *How to Read Marx* and Eric Fromm’s *Marx’s Concept of Man*. She encouraged me to apply these ideas to Assamese novels and said that it would be a quite new venture. I had, and still have, deep faith in her wisdom and realised that it was apt to work on the representation of labour in novels as the contradiction between labour and capital is growing to rage sharper and sharper in today’s world. We may not be able to contribute to the emancipation of labour

from capital, but let us at least try to expose its representational bondage in the prison house of ideology. So, Lukács was replaced with labour.

The study of novels based on the theories of labour and over-determination is quite new in Assamese criticism. The ideas of over-determination and point of entry have been used in discussions of a few novels by Julian Markels but his approach has not yet generated a robust trend. I learned from Markels but employed his method with a difference. He analyses the novels in terms of class, race, gender, etc., and holds that any of these wider categories may be the point of entry of a novel. I argue that these wider categories find expression in our everyday life through certain events or incidents that are parts of our lived experience and find fictional representation only through certain storylines or story threads. Thus, ultimately, class, race, and gender appear in fiction through such storylines or story threads. A thorough analysis of these story threads for discovering the most dominant thread, which is the point of entry, is quite a new approach. I wanted to see if or not a labour-related thread became the point of entry of a certain novel. My basic proposition came to be that if creative labour, the human essence, and its opposite, alienated labour, are not adequately represented; if a labour-related story thread is not made the point of entry, then the novel in question must have served the cause of a certain ideology. “Without ideology, there is no composition” Lukács had said. Extensive focus on the function of ideology is hard to be seen in the criticism of Assamese novels except in the writings of Hiren Gohain. So, the subject of this research, “Ideological representation of Labour in Selected Assamese Novels from the 1950s to the 1980s” and analyses of the ideology behind the choice of the point of entry of over-determined textual reality has not been taken up so far or remains unattempted either academically or extra-academically. This study undertakes this project.

However, there were several constraints before this research work and hence the finished product bears several limitations. The first such constraint is the dearth of industrial-labour-based Assamese novels. When Marx spoke of labour, it is almost definite that he spoke of industrial labour – labour in capitalism. For Marx of *The Manifesto*, the peasantry is a reactionary class. “They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay, more, they are reactionary” (*Manifesto* 20). But Lenin developed Marxism with the theory of the association of the peasantry and the

proletariat where the peasantry would be the natural ally of the revolutionary proletariat. Similarly, we may extend Marx's theory of labour to labour in any kind of class society; his insights may be applied to agrarian labour as well. It was difficult to find an Assamese novel based purely on industrial labour. One basic cause behind it is that the state economy has been agriculture-based for the last century; the development of industry, and therefore, of the industrial working class, has been lagging in this period. The dearth of industrial-labour-based Assamese novels is an effect of this socio-historical reality. Mamoni Roisom Goswami has written a few such novels but they are set outside the state. Dhubajyoti Bora's *Loha* delineates the working class in medieval times. *Pratipad* is the only novel based on the industrial labour of modern Assam. Though industry proper has been very little, the part-capitalist part-feudal setup of the tea gardens represents both agrarian and factory labour which find fictional representation in two of the selected novels, *Seuji Patar Kahini* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*. *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas* are based on purely agrarian labour.

The history of the Assamese middle class is studied systematically by Hiren Gohain, Amalendu Guha, Prafulla Mahanta, Anil Raichoudhury, and Saiilen Borkataky. However, their studies do not include the period after Independence. My task was not to build up the history of the Assamese middle class from Independence to date as my domain is literature, not history. So I had to take recourse to the complete histories of this class up to the Independence and some random scraps of write-ups and articles – but not full-fledged histories – about this class's status after the Independence. So, the vicissitudes of the Assamese middle-class ideology could not be addressed; the selected novels are discussed in terms of a generalised ideology of this class that is supposed to have remained more or less the same throughout the four decades during which the selected novels got published. Another difficulty for this research was that the number of critiques of the selected novels was very few. *Seuji Patar Kahini* attracts several leading critics, but the others are not drawing much critical attention. *Nadai* remains almost an invisible novel. Almost all the critiques are silent about the representation of labour in the novels, not to speak of the issues of creative and alienated labour. Analysis of the ideology behind the making of the novels is almost an unexplored territory, though Hiren Gohain is an exception in this regard. Application of the ideas of over-determined reality

and point of entry is exemplified for the first time by the present research work. In the absence of convenient precedence (Gohain's discussions of *Seuji Patar Kahini* are an exception), this study had to open up quite new vistas and this researcher's feelings are comparable to those of Coleridge's ancient mariner, "We were the first that ever burst//into the silent sea."

One personal constraint should be mentioned here. As I enrolled myself in the part-time category of research I had to perform all duties of the institution where I am teaching, so a continued concentration on the research work could not be afforded. I tried to make the best use of my time, particularly during the holidays and vacations, yet I felt I needed more time and more concentration. Another important point should be mentioned. I have quoted extensively from the primary texts along with several critical/creative texts written in Assamese and also in Bengali. All these quotations are used here in translation and I have translated them from Assamese and Bengali to English. While translating, I tried my best to remain faithful to the original. Yet I would like to beg forgiveness from all concerned for any unintentional distortion.

It was a long journey of a total of six years and two months and it arrived at its destined aim with the help and support of many talented, loving, and considerate people I have met in my life and particularly in this period. First and foremost I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Liza Das Madam; it has been an honour and matter of good luck to be one of her students. A rare talent and intellectual of the state, she has taught me, both consciously and unconsciously, many lessons of life extended beyond this research work. She has taught me to be more inquisitive, more thoughtful, more exploring, more industrious, more careful, more disciplined, and more courageous. Her industriousness was contagious, her profound questions about the meaning of life expressed in our conversations were thought-provoking and her interests in the varied expressions of the human essence – literature, theory, painting, music, and deep attachment to pets – simply inspire. I feel, there are very few research scholars who enjoyed so much freedom in the research work as Liza Madam had granted me. I appreciate all her contributions of time and ideas to make my research work productive, original, and stimulating. Above all, she has obliged me forever by choosing such a wonderfully relevant research topic for me.

The members of the Doctoral committee – Dr. Pahi Saikia, Dr. Agnirup Sarkar, and Prof. Sawmya Ray – provided me with precious suggestions and valuable ideas which contributed a lot to the making of this thesis. I acknowledge my heartfelt gratitude to each of them. I cannot forget the help and support extended to me by the employees of the office of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. Particularly, at the time of my seminar presentation Rubul Gogoi, Parag Kalita, Durga Sharma, and others provided me with all the necessary technical support and assistance. I am thankful to all of them. I take this opportunity to express my thankfulness to the authority and all officials of IIT Guwahati for providing me not only the opportunity to pursue this research work in the part-time category but also for catering to all the needs I felt.

I have no words to express my gratitude to the teacher of my life Prof. Hiren Gohain. I have already mentioned how vital roles his ideas, writings, and conversations played, and are still playing, in shaping my ideas and my personality. Ten years ago, I did not seriously think about doing PhD research but he repeatedly insisted that I should go for it. It is his insistence only which motivated me to enroll in PhD research. I claim that the application of the ideas of over-determination and point of entry is quite new in Assamese criticism of fiction and it was he who told me to read the book by Markels from which I learned those ideas. My thesis itself proves how much I rely on his writings to build up my arguments, particularly about the ideology of the Assamese middle class.

I owe a lot to Prerona Puthibharal, Bihampur, Nalbari, Assam, and its founder Dwijendra Narayan Sharma along with senior members Kamalnayan Mishra, Hrisikesh Borpujari, Tarali Devi, and many others for always being with me and providing me with books as and when necessary. I am proud to be one member of the Prerona Puthibharal family and will forever remember its contribution to my research work. A large collection of invaluable books, dedicated to the cause of “study, practice and change”, this library, its members, and above all, Dwijenda, always extended their support to me by sending me books that I could not find in other places. Big and sincere thanks to the Prerona Puthibharal family.

If this research work is the tip of the iceberg then the unseen part of it under water is my book reviews mostly published in the progressive journal *Natun Padatik*. The researcher in me was born as a book reviewer and critic on the pages of this magazine. I

extend my gratefulness to all members of the *Natun Padatik* family. I was told to write those reviews by Prof. Hiren Gohain, Chief Editor, and Nabajyoti Borgohain, Executive Editor. Nabada has also played quite a big role in my life, teaching me how to look at the world around me, and how to be committed to the pro-people ideology and one's own work. He is a constant well-wisher in my pursuit of knowledge and truth. My sincere thanks go to Nabada.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Doomdooma College authorities, particularly Dr. Prakashjyoti Borthakur, retired Principal, for giving me a No Objection Certificate and also for granting me different leaves from time to time. I express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Kamaleswar Kalita, Principal, of Doomdooma College, for giving me the necessary scope to complete my thesis. Doomdooma College Library, a unique and rare storehouse of books and journals, provided me with a lot in my pursuit of this research. I cannot forget the help and support of Mr. Tapan Kumar Banik, Librarian (now retired), Biren Deka, Samrat Dey, Ashok Sharma, and Putul Bhumij. I cannot forget the support and cooperation of the Heads of the Department of English, Dr. Champa Rao Mohan and Mrs. Monica Pegu, for being considerate towards me in several ways in my journey. I acknowledge my thanks to Mrs. Syeda Semim Zahan, Departmental Library-in-Charge for issuing me valuable books. I remember the inspiration, encouragement, help, and support I got from all my colleagues at Doomdooma College.

My life during these six years has been partly enjoyable, among all stress, largely because of a few friends who have become part of my life. Debajit Nath has always been a participant in my intellectual pursuits and has always been asking about my research and giving inputs also. Sanjeeb Saikia was always there to resolve all the technical troubles I faced at IIT Guwahati. Dr. Lokman Ali, my colleague also, was always there to share cups of tea and his immense knowledge of the method of citation. Dr. Abdul Jalil Choudhury, friend-cum-colleague, has been a constant motivator. I owe heartfelt thanks to all of them.

Novelist Dinanath Sarma's son Bhabaranjan Sarma was kind enough to share with me precious information about his father's literary works most of which are hard to find nowadays. I will remain ever grateful to him. Jadavjyoti Saikia, Librarian, at Manohari Devi Kanoi Girls' College, Dibrugarh, provided me with the first copy

of *Nadai* in the initial stage of my research. I sincerely express my gratitude to Mr. Saikia.

My family members were always anxious about my academic engagement. They wished me all the very best and encouraged me through their concern whenever I was in trouble and hardship. Wherever I am today, it is largely because of them. I cannot repay my debts to my brother-in-law, Late Salil Bhusan Dev Adhikary without whom I could not have pursued higher education. My eldest sister Usha Adhikary, elder sister Rita Dutta, younger sister Gitali Dutta, brothers-in-law Paresh Chandra Dekha and Jayanta Dutta, nieces Rimpi and Dikshita, nephews Boidurjya and Gyanarnav supported and encouraged me throughout. My heartfelt thanks to all of them.

My wife Runumi took all pains to make me as free as possible so that I could pursue my research unhindered. Her masterly management of our tiny but moonlit empire encouraged me to pursue my research undeterred. My daughter Subasita always inspires me to do something big and creative and takes care of her studies herself to leave me alone with my studies as far as possible. This family duo is, in a way, “the secret” behind the completion of this research.

And Toto? How can I forget you? Toto – a furry, white, male, spitz – is our family pet dog. As and when I got exhausted with my research work which was being done along with my college duties, it was Toto’s innocent and playful company that refreshed and rejuvenated my mind for the next round of work. Very many thanks to my lovely Toto.

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Chapter I

Introduction

However various the données of literature, the basic question is, and will remain: what is Man?

Georg Lukács

Introduction

The discussion of a novel may be made from quite a number of angles and with the application of quite a number of theoretical tools. But a basic question should be asked: What is the primary task of a novel? Answers to this question may also be uncountable. But perhaps none will vehemently disagree if we say that one basic task of novels is to depict man. This, in turn, will give rise to one more basic question: What is man and how can man be defined? Answers to this may also be unlimited. But the idea of man presented by Karl Marx based on the concept of creative labour is undoubtedly an important one and more to the point for this study as it ventures to discuss five labour-based Assamese novels. Marx presented this idea not as a single-sentence definition of man but from his enormous observations scattered in several texts theorists have arrived at such definitions. A few illuminating sentences from Marx's writings may be quoted, "Man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom therefrom" (*Manuscripts* 32). "Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity....his own life is an object for him....Only because of that is his activity free activity" (31). Further, "The entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labour, nothing but the emergence of nature for man, so he has this visible, irrefutable proof of his birth through himself, of his genesis" (49). Based on such observations Ernst Fischer remarks, "The species-nature of animals is an eternal repetition, that of man is transformation,

development, change” (51). As he summarises the argument of Fischer’s writings, John Bellamy Foster observes, “Marx defined human beings as creative beings, able to transform their relation to nature and to each other” (50). Thus it is creative labour which distinguishes man from other beings of nature. The condition opposed to creative labour is alienated or estranged labour. Whether or not a novel, therefore, delineates man without addressing the issues of creative and/or alienated labour is a significant question.

Although creative or alienated labour is fundamental to human existence, and its organisation that we call economy plays an equally fundamental role, human society is much more than labour or its organisation. The social world is a complex of many social processes including labour and economy. Every such process determines and gets determined by every other process and this gives rise to an over-determined social reality. In the words of Resnick and Wolff, “The existence and particular features of any one social process are constituted by all the other processes comprising a society....Each process is over-determined as well as a participant in the over-determination of every other process in the society” (24). Julian Markels endeavours to show that despite the problem of “random contingency subject only to discourse” (18) related to the idea of over-determination, it may be used “as an index to literary representation” (19). This study endeavours to argue that the over-determined processes of social reality may get adequate literary representation in fiction only through certain story threads – class may be seen in stories of exploitation and protest; gender in stories of love, sex, and marriage; race in stories of certain forms of oppression. Thus the textual world of fiction, like the social world of man, is a complex of many story threads that represent those social processes. These threads inter-determine one another and affect the over-determined textual reality. But how do we make cognition of such over-determined social or textual reality? Resnick and Wolff pose the question and answer, “To theorise society as a totality of over-determined processes and hence devoid of any determining essence(s) implies the question: How can one make sense of this totality?” They further argue, “Marxian social theory has a starting point....By entry point, we mean that particular concept a theory uses to enter into its formulation, its particular construction of the entities and relations that comprise the social totality.” “Marxian social theory’s entry point is its concept of class” (25). Markels applies this idea to fictional narratives,

“Marxism’s or Freudianism’s or Social Darwinism’s master narrative – of expropriation, or libido and superego, or survival of the fittest – can be made the organising principle of a literary narrative just as it can of a social theory” (21). To grasp the over-determined social reality or to organise or make sense of the over-determined textual reality a point of entry, “which is necessarily incomplete and thus necessarily partisan” (Markels 20) and ideologically chosen, is needed. Different theories choose different points of entry to make sense of the world in different ways. Likewise, different novels make use of different story threads as their points of entry. A particular novel has a particular point of entry (although sometimes it may not have any) which organises its material in a particular way. The choice of another point of entry from among the available story threads would change it into another novel. But the representation of labour, creative labour, alienated labour, over-determined reality, etc., through choosing or not choosing a point of entry, is ideologically conditioned. The ideology of the class the author belongs to, his/her material condition, and how he/she is situated in history, largely determine the said representation and the said choice. This ideological representation and choice are vital in determining not only the content but also the aspects of the form of a novel.

The present study endeavours to see if novels, admittedly based on labour, organise their over-determined textual reality by taking creative or alienated labour as their point of entry. In the process, it tries to unravel the ideology behind them and observe how that ideology influences their formal elements. Intending to do the same, this researcher has taken five Assamese novels for analysis. These are Rasna Baruah’s *Seuji Patar Kahini* (1959), Dinanath Sarma’s *Nadai* (1960), Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya’s *Pratipad* (1970), Syed Abdul Malik’s *Rupabarir Palas* (1980) and Umakanta Sarma’s *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* (1986). These key novels roughly represent those four decades between India’s Independence (1947) and the Assam Movement (1979-1985) which consolidated the power of the Assamese middle class as the leading social force of the state. Labour-based Assamese novels are very few and they are mostly about farm labour. Assamese novels based on industrial labour and set in Assam in modern times are hard to be found. Dhrubajyoti Bora’s *Loha* (1990) is set in the medieval period and Mamoni Roisom Goswami’s *Chenabor Sot* (1972) and *Mamore Dhora Tarowal* (1980) are set outside Assam. *Pratipad* may be said to be the only

industrial labour-based novel set in the state in the modern period. *Seuji Patar Kahini* is held to be the second Assamese novel based on the life of the tea garden labourers and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* also depicts the life of that community derogatorily termed *coolies* (the novels also use the term). *Nadai* is based on the life of a mainstream Assamese farmer and *Rupabarir Palas* on that of a farmer from the *Miya* (a word commonly used to mean the migrants from the East Bengal) community who comes from East Bengal and settles in Assam.

The advent of the Assamese middle class is a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Here the history of the origin and development of this class in the first decades needs to be traced. Several historians have studied this history but to be consistent in the unfolding of the same this researcher will depend solely on the study of Prafulla Mahanta as presented in *Adhunik Asamiya Sahitya: Samajik-Bouddhik Patabhumi* (2020). Centuries ago, some Aryan people entered this territory later called Assam. “By dint of Brahmanical religion, culture, and language these Aryan Brahmins held a hegemonic position through achieving power and authority in the tribal society” (Mahanta, *Adhunik* 99). Along with language, culture, religion, and more developed agriculture, they brought in the casteist social system of Northern India. “Since about the sixteenth century, this caste Hindu, elite, aristocratic class had been becoming coherent” (102-103). The tribal kings patronised them, favoured them, and donated land to them and other properties. They continued to receive a similar status during the Ahom rule also. But during the period of the decline of the Ahom kingdom, this class also was fast losing their religious and social influences. “But simultaneously the declining Ahom feudal administration provided this elite class the scope to earn and save huge amounts of property” (103). In this way, this class became an economically influential class. The Ahom feudal lords, certain about the solidity of their property, were indifferent to savings; but the said caste Hindu, elite class, not being that secure, had to attend to earning and saving property. With the advent of the British, they quickly perceived that the days of the Ahom kings and lords were numbered and the future of the land was in the hands of the British. “This realisation drew them near the British and the British, who believed in blue blood, drew a section of this so-called educated, powerful, elite, aristocratic class as associates of administration to facilitate the management of the new administrative system. They are

the ancestors of the new Assamese middle class” (104-105). This class, indirectly generated by the British colonial state, had to take the responsibility of organising and developing national, social, and political life. This younger participant of the British rule had to build up administrative and trade relations with Bengal, and having come to terms with the Bengali elite middle class, this newly emerging Assamese middle class also learned the lessons of nationalism. “It was Sankardeva (a Vaishnava saint) who gave the Assamese language the intimacy with the people of the territory. No doubt these people were the non-Hindu Mongoloids” (110). So, the caste-Hindu middle class had an attitude of negligence towards the language of the territory, later called Assamese. But when the Baptist missionaries started to work for the development of the local language, the new middle class also changed minds and began working for the same. Hemchandra Goswami writes, “As Phukan (Ananadaram Dhekiyal Phukon) noticed that the missionaries had taken many pains for the Assamese language, he also thought over it and realised that there was no progress of the Assamese people without the progress of the Assamese language” (qtd. in Mahanta, *Adhunik* 113). This class delinked itself from the majority of the people who were mainly tribals. “Only the language formed collectively by all (Aryans and non-Aryans) continued to preserve a thin link between the two societies” (Mahanta, *Adhunik* 113). They could not take the great majority of tribal people into confidence and so could not equally share with them education, jobs, and the project of nation-building. “In this way, the caste-Hindu-led Assamese middle-class mixed up caste and casteism with nation and nationalism. It gave itself a coherent form and thus became able to achieve a hegemonic position in the multi-lingual, multi-communal, multi-religious, tribal-dominant, multi-coloured society of Assam” (114). Later, the middle class began to absorb other tribes and communities also, but the class discussed above has been the mainstream Assamese middle class.

Prafulla Mahanta remarks, “From the fifth decade of the nineteenth century an educated middle-class slowly emerged” (*Asamiya Madhyabitta* 95). He further holds, “The modern Assamese middle-class emerges primarily from the caste Hindus. It was they who newly began social history in Assam by building up the modern Assamese language and literature. Though they did not dominate the contemporary economy, through dominating the local politics and developing the modern language and literature,

this class led the Assamese people” (*Adhunika* 84). Hiren Gohain remarks, “In truth, the Assamese novel, like the modern education system, is, from one angle, an ingredient for the formation of the Assamese middle-class individuality” (“Asomiya” 493). Gohain’s comment is parallel to the comment of Nancy Armstrong quoted by Gary Day, “Nancy Armstrong (1987) argues that the novel is also important in the construction of class identity for it offered the nascent, dispersed middle class a unified image with which they could identify; on this basis, the novel does not so much reflect the middle-class as constitute it” (109). The Assamese novel thus has been a middle-class product right from its inception. The novel and the class mutually form each other. The rise of the Assamese novel has a trajectory parallel to that of the rise of the Assamese middle-class. Geetashree Tamuly hints at this fact, “More than a hundred years ago, at the time of the beginning of the Assamese novel, an educated middle-class began to develop slowly” (193). Mahanta further says, “Their leadership in the national freedom movement unambiguously established them as the leaders” (*Adhunika* 84). Thus the freedom movement was the first big socio-cultural and political engagement of this class, the last such in the twentieth century being the student-led Assam Movement against Bangladeshi infiltrators. There were other significant middle-class-led movements like the State Language Movement of the sixties and the Language Medium Movement of the seventies. This was the period when the Assamese middle class consolidated itself as the leader of the state. Likewise, this is the period when the Assamese novel reaches its pinnacle. Here important questions arise: Could the Assamese novel of this period have remained uninformed by Assamese middle-class ideology? Did the middle-class novelists betray, or could they overcome their class ideology? And what happened in the case of the labour-oriented Assamese novels? Could the Assamese middle-class writers represent labour adequately, that is, transcending their class ideology? The question of the adequate depiction of labour in novels becomes much more crucial if Marx’s idea of labour as the human essence is taken into consideration. A novel depicts man and becoming human is a realisation of one’s essence, which is creative labour. So, how can novels in general and labour-oriented novels in particular refrain from delineating labour in general and the condition of creative or alienated labour in particular? And how can such delineations remain

independent of the ideology of the authors and their class – in our case, the Assamese middle class?

But man is not only creative labour realised; he is a social and historical being. The socio-historical processes – law, politics, and culture – are not simply economy in disguise. These processes inter-determine one another and thus affect an over-determined social reality. Such intricate reality cannot be adequately grasped without a convenient point of entry. The choice of a particular point of entry determines our perception of reality. This choice is arbitrary, incomplete, and ideological. The question is: What perception of over-determined reality and what kind of point of entry are to be found in the Assamese novels we are going to explore here? If the depiction of labour (creative labour and alienated labour) is affected by the Assamese middle-class ideology, then it is logical to think that the same ideology will have an impact on the perception of over-determined social reality and the choice of point of entry. But a novel is also a literary creation. Its content is expressed through particular literary forms. So the ideology which influences the representation of labour, the depiction of the over-determined reality, and the choice of point of entry, must also influence, shape and determine the formal aspects of a novel. Lukács remarks, “The truly social element in literature is the form” (qtd. in Eagleton, *Marxism* 19). Jameson says, “Form is itself but the working out of content in the realm of the superstructure” (329). According to Hegel, “Defectiveness of form results from defectiveness of content” (74). Hegel further remarks, “Content is nothing but the transformation of form into content, and form is nothing but the transformation of content into form” (qtd. in Eagleton, *Marxism* 21). If the content is conditioned by ideology, then form also cannot remain independent of it. By ‘determination of form by class ideology’ this researcher does not simply mean such things as the ancient age, where man was united with nature, produced epics, the feudal age romances, and the modern bourgeois age novels; this researcher also means that the selection of narrator and viewpoint, types of protagonists, types of metaphor, image, and symbol – these minute details of form – are also conditioned by history and ideology. If it is indeed so, it needs to be seen how the Assamese middle-class ideology, betrayed or transcended by the author, also conditions the formal aspects of the five novels this researcher has taken up for discussion in this study. This study has endeavoured to show that the Assamese

middle-class ideology plays a crucial role in determining the representation of creative and/or alienated labour and over-determination on the one hand and the selection of particular points of entry on the other. Further, that ideology makes clear impacts on the elements of the form of the novels will also be shown.

A Brief Introduction to the Novelists

Birinchi Kumar Baruah (1908-1964) adopted two pennames for two novels: he authors *Jeevanar Batat* (1944) as Bina Baruah and *Seuji Patar Kahini* (1958) as Rasna Baruah. These two novels are regarded as milestones in the history of the Assamese novels. He got a doctoral degree from London University in 1947 for his thesis *A Cultural History of Assam*. He taught at Kolkata University, Cotton College, and Gauhati University. He edited magazines like *Rangghar*, *Akon*, *Surobhi*, *Ramdheni*, and *Natun Asamiya*. His works include *Asamar Loka-Sanskriti* (1961), *Switzerland Bhraman* (1948), *Asamar Bhasa Aru Sanskriti* (1957), *Assamese Literature* (1941), *Arunodoir Dhalphat* (1965), *History of Assamese Literature* (1964), *Asamiya Katha-Sahitya*, *Kavya Aru Abhibyenjana* (1941), etc. He received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for his *Asamar Loka-Sanskriti*.

Dinanath Sarma (1914-1988), born in Bishwanath Chariali of the undivided Darang District of Assam was matriculated from Calcutta University. He worked in Congress Press and Tribune Press of Guwahati. As a school student, he edited a hand-written magazine, *Bhikshari*. A noted short story writer and novelist, Sarma contributed to the famous Assamese literary magazine *Abahan* which is regarded as a pioneer of Assamese periodicals, and its time is now regarded as the *Abahan Era* of Assamese literature. *Usha* (1951), *Sangram* (1954), *Nadai* (1960), *Shanti* (1961), *Navarun* (1968), *Bharali Paarar Kaahini* (1985), *Putur Poymal* (1990) are a few of his major novels. His collections of short stories include *Dulal* (1952), *Akalshariya* (1953), *Pohar* (1959), *Soroshi* (1965), *Hatipati* (1971), etc. He wrote a few biographies also. *Satyanath Borah* (1940) for which he received an award from Asam Sahitya Sabha, and *Deshpran Lakshmidhar Sarma* (1947) are examples. He translated Knut Humsun's *Growth of the Soil* (1917) into Assamese.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (1924-1997) is the first Assamese to receive the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1979 for his novel *Mrityunjoy* (1970). A renowned poet, novelist, and short-story writer, Bhattacharyya got the Sahitya Academy Award in 1961 for his novel *Iyaruigam* (1960). He was offered a PhD degree by Gauhati University for his thesis *Humour and Satire in Assamese Literature* in 1977. He worked as an assistant editor of *Banhi*, *Advance*, and *Natun Asamiya*. He edited the famous magazines *Ramdheni* and *Sadiniya Navajug*. He was the president of Sahitya Academy and a member of the University Grants Commission. He became the president of Asam Sahitya Sabha in 1983. His famous novels include *Mrityunjoy*, *Iyaruigam*, *Rajpathe Ringiyai* (1955), *Aai* (1960), *Shataghni* (1965), *Pratipad* (1970), *Kalor Humuniyah* (1982), *Ranga Megh* (1976), *Munichunir Pohar* (1979), *Phulkonwarar Pakhighora* (1988), etc.

Syed Abdul Malik (1919-2000) is a renowned Assamese novelist, poet, and short-story writer. He retired as a lecturer at Jagannath Baruah College, Jorhat. He was elected as a member of the Rajya Sabha in 1976. He was a prolific writer and published more than twenty-five short-story collections, several poetry collections, about sixty novels, three children's books, twenty radio dramas, and many essays and articles. He received the Sahitya Academy Award for his novel *Aghari Atmar Kahini* (1969). A few of his other novels are *Rathar Chakari Ghure* (1950), *Surujmukhir Swapna* (1960), *Dr. Arunabhar Asampurna Jeevani* (1975), *Ruptirthar Jatri* (1963), *Dhanya Nara Tonu Bhal* (1987), *Adharshila* (1966), *Eka Beka Britta* (1975), *Rupabarir Palas* (1980), etc. He became the president of Asam Sahitya Sabha in 1977. His short-story collections include *Hahi Aru Chokulor* (1987), *Shikhare Shikhare* (1963), etc. He received the Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1965, the Padmashree Award in 1984, and the Asam Upatyaka Sahitya Award in 1992.

Umakanta Sarma (1918-2005) is a well-known Assamese novelist, short-story writer, critic, and playwright. He received his education at Cotton College, Kolkata University, and Illinois University, USA. He taught at Saint Edmund's College, Shillong, Handique Girls' College, Guwahati, and B. Barooah College, Guwahati. His volume of poetry is *Kavyabhumi* (1949). His novels include: *Uranta Meghar Cha* (1950), *Chimchangor Duta Par* (1965), *Ranga Ranga Tej* (1968), *Ejak Manuh*

Ekhan Aranaya (1986), *Bharanda Pakkhir Jak* (1992), *Kajalir Rog* (2001) etc. His short story collections are *Ghuraniya Prithibir Beka Path* (1947) and *Uka Eti Mon* (1978). His only social drama is *Shes Pataka* (1948). He received the Asam Upatyaka Sahitya Award in 1997, the Asom Prakashan Parisad Award in 1988, and Kalaguru Bishnurabha Award in 1990 for *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, and the Bharatiya Bhasa Parisad Award in 1996 for *Bharanda Pakkhir Jak*.

Outline of the Selected Novels

***Seuji Patar Kahini*:** Nareswar runs away from home and accidentally meets Rountree Miller, manager of Nahorani Tea Estate, and his wife, Elly Seymour. His ancestors were favoured by the late Ahom kings as Ojas (rural physicians). Their glory is diminished now. Naren led several social works in the village named Ojar Gaon (village of the Ojas). After his death, the villagers fabricated stories about his wife Maloti, and Nareswar. Deveswar angrily beat his son Nareswar. So he runs away. In the garden, he makes friends with Lokhu and his sister, Sonia. He is made the “boy” (orderly) of Memsahib. Love develops between him and Sonia. To Ojar Gaon a *boiragi* (ascetic) comes and impresses all. Nareswar’s sister Aloti elopes with him. Prema, her lover, starts searching for her. At a railway station, he finds the *boiragi* and Aloti. But Aloti tells him to go back. The plot moves to the garden. Budhu tells Nareswar that Sonia is an illegitimate child of Armstrong Sahib and Mohua. Mohua’s lover Feku killed the sahib to avenge the rape of Mohua. Giving birth to Sonia Mohua died; Father Andrews brought her up. Later she came to Lokhu’s family.

Coolies gather in the courtyard of Alomoni, a middle-aged, attractive woman. They appreciate the superb taste of her homemade wine. All dance untiringly. On their way back Lokhu and Radhu make love in Nareswar’s presence. In another scene, Sonia teaches Nareswar to pick tea leaves. Powali Babu, who flirts with her, feels jealous. He tells Nareswar that once Durjan Sardar saved a coolie woman from a manager but lost two fingers being shot by the latter. Nareswar feels respect for Durjan. Mr. Miller tries several cases of the workers. Sukhdeo is whipped for working in another garden. Rotou is severely punished for stealing tea from the factory. Seeing this Sonia weeps, rages, goes

to Rotou's house, and takes care of him. Padri Jonathan sympathises with Rotou and advises him to be tolerant. One day Nareswar accompanies Sonia to a forest to find a parrot for her. She expresses her love for him but would marry none since marriage implies bondage. A few days later Nareswar starts suffering from cerebral malaria. Mrs. Miller finds Sonia with him in the hospital. She humiliates her and it displeases both Sonia and Nareswar. Sonia and Nareswar sit aloof from the collective *Karam* (a religious festival of the tea tribes) dance. He proposes marriage to her but she answers elusively. On the weekly market day, she cunningly baffles Powali Babu on the way and several others in the market. Later Sonia, Nareswar, Lokhu, and Radhu go to enjoy a circus. Sonia asks Nareswar if they could join the circus. He does not answer. She reiterates that she loves him but will not marry him. Sonia cleverly arranges Lokhu's wedding to Radhu managing both the families. That night she leaves the house forever. She meets an astonished Nareswar who vainly attempts to detain her. She says that she has both love and hatred towards the garden but at last, hatred has won over love. Saying, "I will remember your love forever" (R. Baruah, 216) she melts into the darkness. She goes to Powali Mahari's house and suggests getting married to him. Powali Mahari says that he loves her but is already married. Sonia hatefully returns all his gifts and begins an uncertain journey. Lokhu and Nareswar search for her and believe that she will come back. The story now turns to Mrs. Miller who remembers Mr. Miller's affairs with other women. In his absence, she praises Nareswar's handsomeness. She goes to the club with him but does not enjoy the company there. At night she calls him to her bedroom and kisses him. He does not surrender to her seduction. Burning in anger she orders him to get out. He leaves the garden on that silent night.

Nadai: Losing his parents early in life and being tortured by his relatives, Nadai runs away from home, comes to a distant village, and becomes Bhadiya Gayan's bonded labourer. He is not content with his status. He desires to own first a pair of bullocks and a piece of land. Dambaru Bhattacharyya calculates Nadai's wage for eight years to be approximately four hundred rupees and insists that Gayan should give him wages. Gayan asks Nadai what he wants but Nadai wants only two calves the price of which will not exceed thirty rupees. Yet Nadai is content. Now he searches for land. Gayan will never

give him any land, so he requests Bhattacharyya to lend him land for sharecropping. Bhattacharyya rejects his proposal. Then Nadai, while accompanying the villagers in fishing in a distant lake at Morisuti, discovers the possibility of clearing the forest and owning land there. He is followed by Laldhari, Janaklal, Gelai, and others, and thus Morisuti, by degrees, turns into a new village. There Nadai thrives. Bhattacharyya rebukes him for helping Kaliya's family to come out of his grip. Rongai, pauperised by Bhattacharyya's exploitation, comes to Morisuti. Laldhari, a carpenter, also comes. Benga, the potter, arranges Nadai's wedding with Kaliya's sister, Naduki. She becomes a perfect housewife. Bhattacharyya also takes land at Morisuti. Kaliya leans towards spiritualism. One day he disappears. Then comes Budhon – the extra hand for Nadai. The Marwaris purchase his products. Naduki gives birth to her first son – Mohan. Bhattacharyya settles around twenty-five Mymensinghia families as tenants on his land. They are to pay taxes to Bhattacharyya. Laldhari establishes a shop. Janaklal also becomes fairly rich. An educated couple – Premnath and Hemolota, arrive at Morisuti. They teach in the newly established school and spread Gandhian ideals. The Mymensinghians have stopped paying taxes to Bhattacharyya. Rongai, one day, spits on him and disappears. He returns as a lunatic. In the meantime, Naduki gives birth to Makon and Gopal.

A hospital, a port, a forest office, a post office, a Marwari shop, etc. are established. Laldhari and Janaklal become richer. Nadai keeps labourers as helpers. Bhadiya Gayan dies. Nadai weeps for him. Naduki begets a boy, Bharat, and a lame girl – Menoka. Rongai's daughter Maniki gets involved in several illicit relationships. Nadai warns her against such unethical manners. When Budhon dies, Nadai feels lonely. Mohan wants neither to work nor to study. Premnath admits him to a boarding school. Then Bhattacharyya dies. Naduki, contrary to Nadai's will, disagrees to marry Makon off to Bodhan, a farmer. She chooses Nandeswar, the compounder, as her son-in-law. Mohan becomes a contractor and builds a large concrete house. His brother Gopal is studying in Kolkata. Only Menoka is deeply attached to her father, Nadai. His son-in-law Nandeswar secretly deals in opium. Premnath is arrested by the police. Nadai's third son Bharat is also arrested by the police as he is a communist. Nadai has to send a lot of money to Gopal who is planning to become a barrister. Nadai is deeply hurt as Gopal has married a

girl in Kolkata and wants to sell his share of land at Morisuti. Mohan also marries a contractor's daughter. Menoka follows Gandhian ideals. Laldhari dies in a motor accident. Mohan becomes the owner of a rice mill. Nandeswar is caught by the police for his doubtful business. Bharat leaves home and the police search for him. Premnath dies and Hemolota starts teaching the women lessons of cottage industries. Menoka joins her. Hemolota tells Nadai that he cannot retain so much land. Nadai who wondered earlier, "Why do only a few people own all the land?" (D. Sarma, *Samagra* 167) now asks, "Why should he give away his land?" (258). Bharat is arrested. Naduki dies. That evening, Kaliya reappears as a hermit. When all the rituals are over, Nadai plans for a pilgrimage. Kaliya and Menoka accompany him. His sons and daughters keep sending him money and letters. In Prayag, a holy place, he takes his last breath.

Pratipad: Chandi's wife Minubai dies without treatment. Workers of Digboi Oil Company gather and discuss their problems. Chatterjee hopes to form a union. The beautiful Jebunnisa's love for Ismail is not returned because he regards her as Jilapsy sahib's "used glass" (B. Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 60). She wants to be a good girl. Dimbeswar shockingly announces that he will change religion to marry the unattractive Jahanara. Goswami comes to Digboi for organising a workers' union and attends a meeting with them. Dimbeswar's wife Madhuri comes to settle matters with him. He is unhappy with her for her rusticity and incapacity for begetting children. He needs a son. Marrying Jahanara he becomes Giasuddin. Ismail is surprised to hear the news that Pannu and Lasmi are studying. He cannot marry Pannu because of their religious difference. In the oil field Giasuddin proves to be better than the geologist Tains in calculating the depth of the level of oil in the field. He rescues Lasmi from an accident. He does not find Jahanara attractive but is happy to know that she has conceived a child. Suddenly, fifty workers are discharged. All workers stop working. As a result, the bor sahib (the sahib with the highest authority) issues orders to reengage the discharged. Pradhan's daughter Nayanmoni sings well. She stays with Mrs. Fleming who sympathises with the workers. Two pieces of news rock Digboi. First, Jawaharlal Nehru will come to Digboi, and secondly, Nayanmoni and Durga, patronised by Mrs. Fleming, register for their wedding. This makes Nayanmoni's father Pradhan angry. Ismail and Lasmi also

agree to get married. Chatterjee tells Baruah that the workers will have to manage the country after the British depart. He says to Giasuddin that he is living to establish the workers' rule. The proposal for the union is passed in a general meeting. Chatterjee opines before Pannu that men and women are equals. Mr. Fleming, Mrs. Fleming, Taoler, Jilapsy, and Tains debate about how to manage the Indian workers. Meanwhile, an oil well blast kills four workers. The company is unwilling to give compensation. The liberal bor sahib has resigned. Taoler dislikes his ways. Chatterjee falls into Panuu's love. But Jahanara insists that if she dies, Pannu must marry Giasuddin. Nehru's meeting starts. A huge crowd assembles. Nayanmoni sweetly sings "sare jahase accha..." (a popular patriotic song). Nasiruddin informs Giasuddin that Jahanara's condition is critical. She dies before he reaches the hospital. Nehru supports the union. It gets registered. Pannu, who is vocal about women's freedom, wants manliness in her would-be husband. Ismail is enraged with Lasmi for her free manners. The leper, who had always been there under a tree, has died. Nasirudin reveals that he was no leper. A refinery worker, he met with an accident and got no compensation. As a singing beggar, he remained homeless under the tree.

The union sends a demand letter to the company. Taoler says that the company is short of funds to fulfill these demands. A few workers distrust the union. Chatterjee's arguments silence them. Bodhan, engaged by the sahibs, tries to place beef in a temple. He is caught red-handed. A disturbed Nasiruddin plans to go to Mecca but his plan is frustrated as the government bans it temporarily because of the war in the Middle East. Chandi also starts going to Ramakrishna Mission. The union placed their complaints before the labour commissioner. The Court of Enquiry gives a verdict in their favour. Yet Taoler does not relent. The union decides to launch a strike. The company discharges one hundred workers. The strike gets confirmed. Taoler plans to appoint workers from outside. Memsahib wants to send Nayanmoni to Lucknow to learn music. Durga is uncomfortable with her freedom. The Congress government could not help the workers. Taoler brings two trucks of workers from outside and Ismail's group prevents them. The Assam Rifles soldiers are there. The sahibs are on horseback. Mrs. Baruah tells her husband not to go to that spot. But he rushes to the spot of conflict. Taoler and Jilapsy order the drivers to run the trucks. Chandi captures the driver's seat and starts off the

truck. Jilapsy shoots at him. Chatterjee, Baruah, and Bodhan also fall at the sahibs' bullets. Digboi becomes another pandemonium. Later, Ismail's volunteer group sets fire to the camps of the workers from outside. The company gets the scope to use the police force. Digboi is declared a protected area. The police start to arrest the workers. Giasuddin realises that the strike fails and that without an independent government, the workers cannot succeed. So, the Congress-led freedom struggle is the way. Mrs. Fleming decides to leave Digboi. She would take Nayanmoni to Lucknow and admit her to a music school. The company expels workers along with their families from Digboi. A huge crowd gathers at the railway station. All, including Giasuddin, are perplexed. Pannu reminds them what Chatterjee said about the workers' rule. Lasmi says how Chatterjee talked about unionism. Giasuddin smilingly agrees, "Stop, Lasmi. You are right, the union should be saved" (282). The weather is clear. The first moon rises. Pannu and Giasuddin agree to marry. Giasuddin thinks of farming. Ismail and Lasmi are sleeping. Suddenly, Mrs. Baruah remembers her father's letter in which he tells her that another freedom struggle may start and it will be terrible.

Rupabarir Palas: It is a late and rather chilly night in winter. The poorly clad servants of the famous but atrocious landlord of Sonapara, East Bengal, Mohammad Modabbir Habib Kibriya Choudhury, are all busy at work. Babar's father Johur Miya is a tenant under the landlord. He is cruelly whipped for his failure to catch fish of the size the landlord expected. Babar's juvenile mind revolts against such atrocities while his father accepts it as his lot. Later, during a cultural function, Mojammil and one of his friends drag Mariyam, Babar's beloved, and Sofica to satisfy their carnal desire. Babar and his friend, Jafar, strike Mojammil's head and rescue the girls. Subsequently, they have to flee and begin an uncertain journey. On their way, they come upon the household of Osman Ali Sikdar Dewani who helps them with money and unites them with a band of people who are on their way to Assam. They accompany these people and assist a little girl, Muslima, and her father, Jalal. They get separated in Assam and Babar starts working as a servant of Sarif, the kind village elder of Rupabari, a village in the present district of Nagaon. Sarif advises him to learn Assamese and mix up with the local people. Babar does accordingly. Sarif, content with Babar's honesty and industry, gives him

one *bigha* (about two-thirds of an acre) of land. World War II comes. The political leaders advise the villagers to help in the war. But the school teacher Girin, whom Babar respects, tells him that this imperialist war is not for the Indians and so they should not work for it. Babar cannot understand Girin's point. He retains his honesty but makes plenty of money as a contractor who supplies certain materials to the militaries. Throughout he is helpful to others, particularly to Girin, a freedom fighter. Babar incidentally meets Muslima and her father, Jalal. They are living in poverty. Love grows between Babar and Muslima. Sarif notes that Babar has earned much more than he has. Sarif is deeply impressed and wants to marry his daughter Rani off to Babar. Babar hesitates owing to his memory of Mariyam, but cannot disobey Sarif as his support enables him to get established.

Babar travels to Kolkata where the famine is raging. Suddenly, among the beggars, he finds a few people from his native village, and surprisingly Mariyam is also among them. He comes to know that his mother is no more and his father has left home. He helps them to some extent and brings Mariyam and an old "uncle" to Assam. Ultimately, Babar marries Rani after which Sarif dies. The war ends. Election comes. Babar, with little knowledge of politics, becomes a local leader of the Muslim League. His wicked rival, Kamran campaigns for Congress. Ultimately, Babar's candidate was defeated. Rani gives birth to a girl child, Keteki. The Miya people of Rupabari, including Babar, discuss the issue of Pakistan without sufficient knowledge. Later he realises that "Even seven Pakistans cannot bring back the people who died of hunger" (S. Malik, *Rupabari* 324). One day Babar, out of anger, misbehaves with Mariyam telling her to get out. She goes out. Later, he brings her back. She reveals the secret of her life. To earn a livelihood she had to lose her chastity in a hotel. She feels that she is unfit for Babar, or she would not let him marry Rani. She suddenly goes back to Pakistan. Later, Babar also visits Pakistan to meet his relatives and friends but cannot get a warm reception from anyone except Mariyam. He comes back. The police are in search of Pakistanis hiding in Assam and Babar is arrested and beaten as he is charged with keeping Pakistani fugitives as labourers. Later he is released. A heavy flood devastates agriculture in both Assam and Pakistan. Babar's rival Kamran becomes poor and ill. Keteki is matriculated with the first division. Mariyam comes back to stay with Babar.

She looks like an old woman. Keteki is now studying B.A. She writes beautiful poems in Assamese. Some miscreants set fire to Babar's house. One is identified as Kamran's man. The storehouse remains undamaged. From here, Babar distributes rice to poor people who have no grain because of the flood. The last scene depicts Babar and Muslima going to the house of Kamran on a night. Stealthily they go, keep a sack of rice and some paddy plants in his verandah, and come back. Rain drizzles and Babar plants a few paddy plants on Kamran's field.

Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya: Almost seven hundred people were brought like animals from Odissa to Gowalond in only four compartments of a train. At Gowalond they were kept at a quite unhygienic coolie depot. Mud, excretion, urine – all got mixed up and fill the air with a foul smell. Cholera broke out and the inmates started to die. A doctor came and rebuked the sardars (headmen) for keeping men in such conditions. The sardars took some of their girls to satisfy the lust of others. Banha's eldest daughter disappeared. Magho lost his young, beautiful wife and got beaten for going out in search of her. On the ship taking them to Assam their miseries continued. More than six hundred travel on one ship. Cholera deaths continue. Tulsi's mother, that is, Banha's wife also died. The corpses are thrown into the waters of Padma. The sardars take some women to satisfy the lust of the sahibs. Finally, they arrive in Assam. Some of them including Banha's family arrived at Rupohijan Tea Estate. On one of the first nights, they find some mainstream Assamese people singing *nam* (hymn) with *tals* (cymbals). Warm exchanges take place. They are punished for going out of the garden. One day, asked by Maikibabu (an official in charge of the female workers) Cheniram, Banha's daughter Timki goes to his room. He tries to rape her but she escapes. Manager Fredrick announces leave for *Karam* and donates ten rupees. Much enthusiasm follows. In the meantime, Zamadar Babu tries to rape Bisni. She escapes. Bisni, Timki, and Kalondi danced so well that the sahibs also praised them. That night, just before dawn, Banha dies. Fredrick wants to extend the estate up to the bank of the river Chandini. The workers, afraid of spirits, are unwilling to go there. But they are forced to work there. To judge the situation, Fredrick comes to that place for one night. He wants to fish at Chandini. Dehjur the expert boatman rows the boat and Fredrick, Finley, and Bhola board it. But an accident takes place. Finley is saved

but Fredrick dies. Dehjur and Bhola are arrested for “Their failure to save the sahib” (U. Sarma *Ejak* 139). Ramu is also arrested without any reason. He was absent from the scene. Ultimately, Manager Finley helps them to get released.

The earthquake of 1897 is vividly described. The devastation beggars description. Tulsi leads the rescue. As an aftermath, disease outbreaks. But there is no doctor. Finley hires Dr. Chakrabarty but he is not enough. So he trains Tulsi, Bishnath, and Bisni as his assistants. Tulsi and Kalondi get married. Initially, they had no children. Cheniram tells them that he can ensure their begetting children through a *puja* (an act of worship). But he attempts to rape Kalondi. She manages to escape. The workers protest under Tulsi’s leadership. Finley, worried about their collective protest, promises to discharge Cheniram. Chitta and Ratan, two mainstream Assamese railway workers, come to Bhola’s shop. One day they talk about the British Government’s annexation of Assam with Bengal. Some workers cannot understand what they say. Then the issue of establishing a school comes up. Finley supports the establishment of a school in Rupohijan but Assistant Manager Mackenzie opposes it. Yet the school is established with much pomp and ceremony. After the cultural function, at dawn, Kalondi gives birth to a son – Arjun. Mackenzie extends the estate to the bank of Chandini. One day, he violates Bisni’s modesty. That evening her father Ramu dies. The coolies gather for cremating Ramu. But, Tulsi leads them to take revenge against Mackenzie. Finley smells it and counsels Mackenzie to run away. Mackenzie disagrees. He commits suicide. Chitta advises the coolies to form a union. He and Bisni decide to marry. The workers, despite the opposition from the management, form a union electing Tulsi as the president. Arjun faces many difficulties in studying in a high school outside the garden. He is disliked by his classmates, some teachers, and some coolies also. Some teachers like Risi Sir favour him. Some coolies like Dugga and Magho love him for his endeavour. He brings Rumni to Risi Sir who promises to help her in her study. On their way back they witness a huge protest rally connected to the non-cooperation movement. They join the protesters. Police beat all including them. Magho is now too weak to beat the *madol* (a drum). Kalondi falls ill. She and Bisni stop dancing. Tulsi is lame now. Chitta now talks about the freedom movement. He is arrested for his involvement with it. The coolies have organised a

grand *parab* (festival) to celebrate Arjun's successful career; Arjun decides to study medicine. In the end, Arjun and Rumni keep looking at the sunrise.

Definitions of Labour

Theorists and economists are not as interested in continuing to define labour as they are in discussing its aspects like the division of labour. Yet a few definitions may be cited for the study. A general definition may run like this: labour is the amount of physical, mental, and social effort used to produce goods and services in an economy. It is one of the four factors of production. One definition may be extracted from Locke who believed, "Labour was the major creator of economic value" (Vaughn 322). The Marxist definition of labour hints at the essential content of labour in this way, "Labour is man's purposeful activity through which he adapts natural objects and uses them as per his needs... in the process of labour, man transforms himself, develops his material and spiritual culture, his physical and mental abilities" (Savchenko 10-11).

Theorists on Labour/Division of Labour

Before going into the labour theory of Marx, this study intends to outline what the theorists from the time of Plato had said about labour or the division of labour. Plato in his *Republic* (c. 375 BC) hints at the idea that the natural inequality of men embodied in the division of labour leads to the formation of the state. "The origin of a city lies, I think, in the fact that we are not, any of us, self-sufficient; we have all sorts of needs" (Plato 51). The minimum need of a minimum state is that of a farmer, a builder, a weaver, a shoemaker, and one or two others to provide for our bodily needs. "While Plato recognises both the economic and political benefits of the division of labour, he ultimately criticises it as it hinders the individual from ordering his own soul by cultivating acquisitive motives over prudence and reason" (Silvermintz 767). Bernard de Mandeville in the second volume of *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) says that if one completely employs himself to the making of bows and arrows, a second one provides food, a third builds huts, a fourth makes dresses, and a fifth utensils, "they not only

become useful to one another but the Callings and Employments themselves will in the same Number of Years receive much greater Improvements, than if all had been promiscuously follow'd by every one of the Five" (284; emphases in original). David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), says, "When every individual person labours apart, and only for himself, his force is too small to execute any considerable work; his labour being employed in supplying all his different necessities, he never attains a perfection in any particular art." He further notes, "By the conjunction of forces, our power is augmented: by the partition of employments, our ability increases: and by mutual succour we are less exposed to fortune and accidents. 'Tis by this additional force, ability and security, that society becomes advantageous" (485). Adam Smith struck the essential note of industrialism as he maintains that division of labour affects a quantitative increase in productivity. The division of labour and specialisation "occasions, in every art, a proportionable increase of the productive powers of labour" (7). "The quantity of materials which the same number of people can work up, increases in a great proportion as labour comes to be more and more subdivided" (259). He differs from Plato as he maintains that the division of labour is both the cause and effect of the difference between a street porter and a philosopher. "The difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labour" (17). For Plato, the level of specialisation resulting from the division of labour is externally determined whereas for Smith it is the mover of economic progress. Smith not only appreciates the division of labour but criticises it as well. He maintains that it may lead to entire corruption and degeneracy of people at large if the government does not take measures to prevent it. Alexis de Tocqueville agrees with Smith saying, "There is nothing that tends more to materialise man and remove from his work even the trace of soul than the great division of labour" (642).

Immanuel Kant observes "All crafts, trades, and arts have profited from the division of labour ... Where work is thus not differentiated and divided, where everyone is a jack-of-all-trades, the crafts remain at an utterly primitive level." Henry David Thoreau, in *Walden* (1854), expressed his reservation against the division of labour as it,

he argues, weakens man's sense of connectedness with society, the world, and nature. Self-sufficiency, he believes, is enough to satisfy one's basic needs. He claimed that the average man in a civilised society is less wealthy in practice than one in a "savage" society. "Where is this division of labour to end? And what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me, but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself" (Thoreau 51). Emile Durkheim observes that the division of labour is correlative with social advancement as it is seen to be proportionate to the progress of a society. Both Smith and Durkheim share the view that the division of labour increases the productive power of labour proportionately and its effect is proportionate social progress. Durkheim, of course, believed that this law is applied not only to human societies but to all biological organisms at large and thus it is a natural law. It fosters social solidarity, hence it is moral. "If such is the function of the division of labour, it may be expected to have a moral character, because the needs of order, of harmony, of social solidarity generally are what one understands by moral needs" (R. N. Sharma and R. K. Sharma 251). More division of labour leads to *organic solidarity* represented in law by "civil laws" and less division of labour to the *mechanical* one represented by "criminal laws". The more labour is divided the more advanced a society is. John Locke studies the issue of labour very extensively. "While Locke did believe that labour was the major creator of economic value, the relative value or price of a thing was dependent upon its usefulness and scarcity and not the amount of labour it contained" (Vaughn 322). Locke maintains that one who creates property by mixing his labour with free resources owns the same property. This labour is not necessarily wage labour which is a contract where one agrees to receive a reward for one's efforts and gives up property rights in the final product. The labour of the entrepreneur who directs value-creating endeavour is the property-creating labour. Marx epitomised Locke's philosophy as "the expression of the bourgeois concept of right as against feudal privilege" (qtd. in Vaughn 323).

Karl Marx believed, "The division of labour is the economic expression of the social character of labour within the estrangement. Or, since labour is only an expression of human activity within alienation, of the manifestation of life as the alienation of life, the division of labour, too, therefore, nothing else but the estranged, alienated positing of

human activity as a real activity of the species” (*Manuscripts* 55). For Marx, an increase in specialisation may lead to a lack of enthusiasm for work. This he terms alienation: in the specialised division of labour work of the worker becomes repetitive, monotonous, and boring. Division of labour, ultimately depresses the worker spiritually and physically and relegates him to the condition of a machine. Marx thus opined that the liberation of the human essence requires the fullness of production and the division of labour is ultimately an evil. Another point made by Marx is that division of labour creates less skilled workers. “To the same degree in which the division of labour increases, is the labour simplified. The special skill of the labourer becomes worthless. He becomes transformed into a simple monotonous force of production, with neither physical nor mental elasticity” (*Wage Labour* 22). Marx sharply distinguishes the economic from the social division of labour. According to him, some forms of division of labour are caused by “technical necessity” but they are mostly caused by the “social control” mechanism of class society. While appreciating J. B. Say’s views he comments, “Division of labour is a convenient, useful means – a skillful deployment of human powers for social wealth; but it reduces the ability of each person taken individually. The last remark is a step forward on the part of Say” (*Manuscripts* 58). Marx believed that a communist society would abolish the division of labour and through engaging man in various creative works, would enable him to realise his true nature, his human essence.

The Theory of Creative and Alienated Labour

Even a cursory glance reveals that the Marxist view of labour appears to be the most serious and most comprehensive of all. Others, except Locke, are preoccupied with the idea of the division of labour, not with labour itself, and are concerned with whether the division of labour is moral or immoral, profitable or not, etc. Only Marx defines labour, division of labour, alienation of labour, etc. in terms of essential humanity. For others, labour is merely an economic category, for Marx, it is the human essence and an anthropological category. This study, therefore, intends to proceed with a discussion of Marx’s theory of alienated and creative labour as expounded in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844). Eric Fromm makes an extensive study of this subject

in his *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961). Therefore it is rewarding to have a look at what Eric Fromm has to say about this. Eric Fromm is one of those early theorists who drew our attention to Marx's humanism and Marx's idea of man. Fromm begins with the falsification of Marx's concepts and basing his arguments primarily on *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, he combats these falsifications. Marx is supposed to cherish the idea that monetary gain and material comfort are man's main psychological motives. Generally, it is assumed that Marx did not regard the importance of individuality and also man's spiritual needs. In truth, Marx aimed to liberate man from the bondage of economic determination so that he could be fully human. Fromm says, "I shall try to demonstrate that this interpretation of Marx is completely false; that his theory does not assume that the main motive of man is one of material gain; that, furthermore, the very aim of Marx is to liberate man from the pressure of economic needs, so that he can be fully human; that Marx is primarily concerned with the emancipation of man as an individual, the overcoming of alienation, the restoration of his capacity to relate himself fully to man and nature; that Marx's philosophy constitutes a spiritual existentialism in secular language" (3).

Fromm goes on to claim that Marx believed in the existence of such a thing as "the nature of man." He did not consider man "as a blank sheet of paper on which the culture writes its text." Human nature is the essence of man and it is opposed to different forms of man's historical existence. Later on, he abandoned the word "essence" and used the terms "human nature in general" as set against "human nature as modified in each historical epoch" (23). Constant drives are an integral part of general human nature. Marx follows Hegel in conceiving man. For Hegel "appearance and essence do not coincide" (Fromm 24). "In the process of existence, the essence is realised, and ... existing means a return to the essence." Man becomes self-conscious and discovers the truth by destroying the dead objectivity of the world and recognising himself against the constant, unchanging form of things and laws. "In order to know the world, man has to make the world his own" (25). "For Spinoza, Goethe, Hegel, as well as for Marx, man is alive only inasmuch as he is productive, inasmuch as he grasps the world outside of himself in the act of expressing his own specific human powers, and of grasping the world with these powers. Inasmuch as man is not productive, inasmuch as he is receptive and passive, he is

nothing, he is dead. In this productive process, man realises his own essence, he returns to his own essence” (26-27). Private property teaches us that an object is ours only when we have it or utilised it, thus alienating all the physical and intellectual senses by the sense of having. We are told to shrink from the expressions of life – eating, drinking, going to the theatre, etc. to save. Marx observes, “The less you are, the less you express your own life, the more you have, i.e., the greater is your alienated life” (*Manuscripts* 51). For Marx, labour and capital are not only economic categories, they are anthropological categories as well. Capital represents the past accumulation, and labour is, and should be, when it is free, the expression of life. “Labour, to Marx, is an activity, not a commodity” (Fromm 33). Labour is man’s self-expression, an expression of the power of his body and mind. In the labour process, man develops, expands, realises, and becomes himself. “Work is not only a means to an end – the product – but the end in itself, the meaningful expression of human energy; hence work is enjoyable” (34).

Marx criticised capitalism not merely for the injustice in the distribution of wealth, but for the perversion of labour into forced and alienated labour. Fromm observes, “The central theme of Marx is the transformation of alienated, meaningless labour into productive, free labour, not the better payment of alienated labour by a private or ‘abstract’ state capitalism” (35). For a full understanding of the active, productive man who grasps the objective world with his own powers, the idea of alienation, that is, the idea of the negation of productivity is required. “Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object” (39). Alienation is one echo of the Old Testament concept of idolatry which means the worship of something into which man has put his own creative powers and to which he now submits instead of experiencing himself in his creative art. For both Marx and Hegel, the idea of “alienation is based on the distinction between existence and essence, on the fact that man’s existence is alienated from his essence, that... he is not what he potentially is, or, ... that he is not what he ought to be and that he ought to be that which he could be” (41). For Marx, work implies an active relation between Man and Nature, a relation that creates Man and the World anew. This work for Marx is both manual and intellectual. But the development of private property and the division of labour robs

labour of its essential quality of being the expression of man's powers; it separates the object from the subject, the product from the producer. In the act of production, the worker's relationship to his own activity is experienced "as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker's own physical and mental energy, his personal life – for what is life but activity? – as an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him. Here we have self-estrangement, as previously we had the estrangement of the thing" (Marx, *Manuscripts* 31). Marx makes two points: First, "In the process of work, and especially of work under the conditions of capitalism, man is estranged from his own creative powers", and secondly, "The objects of his own work become alien beings, and eventually rule over him, become powers independent of the producers" (Fromm 42). Marx observes, "The labourer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the labourer" (*Capital Vol I* 319).

"In unalienated work man not only realises himself as an individual but also as a species being' (Fromm 42). Alienated labour deprives man of a lot of things: the object of his production, his species being and his advantage over animals. Along with the world of things, the social and political conditions created by man start ruling him. The alienated man believes that he has mastered nature but in truth becomes servile to things and circumstances, "the powerless appendage of a world which is ... the frozen expression of his own powers" (45). In a capitalist society, which is informed by alienation, needs are not human needs as they do not express man's essential powers. The only need created by the modern capitalist economy is the need for money. "The commodity man knows only one way of relating himself to the world outside, by having it and by consuming it. The more alienated he is, the more the sense of having and using constitutes his relationship to the world" (47).

The Marxian Imagination, Over-determined Reality, and Point of Entry

The term "over-determination" "has its origin in Linear Algebra, where a system of linear equations is said to be underdetermined if it has fewer equations than unknowns....By contrast, if the system has more equations than unknowns, it is said to

be over-determined” (Wolff). Freud employs the term in a psychological theory to describe a phenomenon he encountered when he sought to analyse the dreams of his patients. “Conscious experiences are seen as potentially influenced by an unlimited number of experiences a human being has had, including events that cannot be remembered” (Hau, 3388). Freud was the first to use over-determination scientifically. For him, it stands for a non-reductionist account of man’s experience and it involves the idea that everything is constituted by the totality of its causes and effects that give it instantiation. Althusser maintains that the contradiction of society is inseparable from its total structure and also from its formal conditions of existence and “it is radically *affected by them*, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates; it might be called *over-determined in its principle*” (emphases in original). He further maintains “I am not particularly taken by this term *overdetermination* (borrowed from other disciplines), but I shall use it in the absence of anything better, both as an *index* and as a *problem*” (emphases in original). Later, Resnick and Wolff employ the idea in the formation of a non-essentialist Marxian political economy. A more detailed exposition of their idea will be given in the following.

Taking his cue from Lionel Trilling’s book *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) Julian Markels proposes and theorises on “a Marxian imagination” in his book *The Marxian Imagination* (2003). If the liberal imagination “establishes its essence and existence” by a “primal act of imagination ... of a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction of human life” (Trilling xiii), then Marxism also “establishes its existence...by a primal act of imagination. This is its imagination of the enlargement of life and freedom specifically promised by the abolition of class when class is understood as an over-determined process of appropriating and distributing surplus labour without consulting those who perform the labour” (Markels 12). Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff observe, “Human beings are shaped both by the class positions they hold and those they do not hold....The same is true of all the non-class positions within society” (160). In other words, the non-class positions also contribute to the shaping of human beings. One who performs surplus labour may receive shares of the surplus labour of others. Thus a man, as Erik Olin Wright rightly puts it, may take “contradictory locations within class

relations” (19). One significant point should be mentioned here. Recent Marxists like Resnick, Wolff, Markels, etc. rejected the conventional Marxist model of the base and the superstructure. As per that model, the economy of a society is its base and it largely determines the superstructure of culture and ideology. Two passages written by Marx were the foundations of this model — one is taken from the *German Ideology* (1932) and the other from the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). To quote only one sentence from the first, “It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness” (Marx, *German* 42). Another sentence may be quoted from the second also, “The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness” (Marx, *A Contribution*). Marx’s friend Engels is the pioneer to reject the determinist view that takes economy as the social base, “According to the materialist conception of history the determining element of history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract, and absurd phrase” (Engels 205-206).

Neo-Marxist theorists mentioned above follow Engels to replace this simple model with a more complex model of the over-determined reality. For them, social reality is a set of innumerable processes where one process determines and gets determined by every other process and remains cause and effect of one another. Thus a far more intricate and complex reality arises which is termed over-determined reality and the process itself is called over-determination. In Resnick and Wolff’s words, “The existence and particular features of any one social process are constituted by all the other processes comprising a society. Each social process is the effect produced by the interaction of (i.e., is over-determined by) all the others. Each process is over-determined as well a participant in the over-determination of every other process in the society” (24). “No process in society can be understood as the effect of merely one or a subset of other social processes. No one process in society, nor any subset, can be understood as the cause of one or more other social processes. In other words, no process can be the essence of another; no subset of social processes can determine another subset.” “To

theorise society as a totality of over-determined processes and hence devoid of any determining essence(s) implies the question: How can one make sense of this totality?" If every social process is complexly over-determined by all the other processes, then any enquiry into a social aspect would require an exhaustive analysis of all the others and their mutual interaction. Such an analysis would be unending and "thorough to the point of incomprehensibility." Resnick and Wolff take up their own question "How can one make sense of this totality" by saying that, "Marxian social theory has a starting point, but the theory never ends in the sense of a "complete" social analysis....By entry point, we mean that particular concept a theory uses to enter into its formulation, its particular construction of the entities and relations that comprise the social totality" (25). They go on to say, "Marxian social theory's entry point is its concept of class... Class is understood as ... the economic process of performing and appropriating surplus labour We make no claim that our entry point, the class process, has any greater social determinacy than any other process in the social totality. Our theoretical commitment to over-determination precludes precisely such claims" (25-26). Thus, "Marxism, like all other theories, must choose for its analysis a *point of entry* (italics mine) which is necessarily incomplete and thus necessarily partisan – the concept of class as expropriation" (Markels 20). Such a point of entry enables the theory and the theorist to perceive reality in a better and more organised, more comprehensive way. But this analysis is inevitably incomplete and partisan. For Marxism the point of entry is the idea of class as a process of expropriation, for Freudianism it is the libido and super-ego, and for Social Darwinism, it is the survival of the fittest. "Marxism's or Freudianism's or Social Darwinism's master narrative – of expropriation, or libido and superego, or survival of the fittest – can be made the organising principle of a literary narrative just as it can of a social theory.... When a work is in fact governed by a 'master narrative' ... a full apprehension of that work will include its point of entry, with its particular configuration of over-determined social processes, as an autonomous epistemological project." The reader's "response to the work's holistic progression makes us aware of its point of entry – and also, in some very telling cases, of its author's rhetorical and epistemological struggle to establish or avoid the point of entry with the master narrative it entails" (21).

As the social world is a complex of so many social processes, the textual world of fiction also is a complex of so many storylines or threads representing those processes. The social processes determine one another and thus generate the over-determined social reality and in similar ways, the storylines or threads also determine one another and thus generate a representation of such over-determined textual reality. To approach, grasp, and acquire knowledge from this complex and over-determined reality of either a society or a text, one needs to take recourse to a certain point of entry, a master thread that weaves and interweaves all other threads, the master thread being guided by a master-narrative. This researcher thinks that the choice of point of entry is not innocent of ideology; rather ideology is at least one of the major factors behind such choice. It is arbitrary and so highly ideological. In the discussion of the selected novels, this researcher attempts to show that they could have chosen several threads as their points of entry, but all potential points of entry are discarded or suppressed in favour of one particular thread in each of the novels. Choice of any other thread as the point of entry would have organised the novels in different ways. Each thread is related to or determines or gets determined by a few other threads, but it is the master thread that weaves, interweaves, determines, and gets determined by, the highest number of threads and, therefore, it is the point of entry of the particular novel. If a theorist approaches the over-determined reality of society from an arbitrary point of entry, if a novelist builds up the over-determined reality of his fictional text from an arbitrary point of entry, then a critic or reader of a novel may also have an arbitrary point of entry that facilitates him to analyse the over-determined reality of the novel. Such a critic is fully aware of the arbitrariness and limitation of his point of entry but knows that his point of entry also unravels specific aspects of the reality represented by the text and thus yields a specific form of knowledge. The master narrative of this study is the Marxist idea of class as a process of expropriation and its point of entry is the Marxist idea of creative labour that fulfills, and alienated labour that does not fulfill the demands of human essence.

Here one specific point should be mentioned. Theorists like Resnick, Wolff, Markels, etc. consider class, race, gender, etc. as points of entry. But this study will consider the story threads of novels as *potential* points of entry of which only one will be seen as the real point of entry. These story threads or potential points of entry may not

seem to be as wide as the concepts of class, race, or gender but analysis will reveal that they are outcomes of those wider categories or related to one or more than one of them. This is because “the work of art...reflects...not so much the class in itself as some autonomous cultural configuration, as rather the situation of that class, or, in short, class conflict” (Jameson 381-382). Likewise, categories like gender and race also underlie the story threads seen in the surface which is the visible lived life of the characters. To put it in another way, class, race, or gender get expressed in our lived experience through certain events or incidents of daily life which get represented in fiction through certain storylines or story threads. Thus in the ultimate analysis, these story threads represent class, race, or gender in fiction. Class may be presented through stories of exploitation and struggle, race in stories of oppression, and gender in those of love, sex, marriage, and lust. Since this researcher endeavours to see the working of the ideology behind the choice of point of entry and the representation of over-determined reality, creative labour, and alienated labour, it is necessary to mention in what sense the word ideology has been taken. Terry Eagleton enumerates several short definitions of the term. Some of them are as follows: “the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life” (*Ideology* 1), “a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class,” “false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power,” “forms of thought motivated by social interests,” “systematically distorted communication,” “that which offers a position for a subject” (1), “the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world” (2), etc. But this researcher has taken the term for “forms of thought motivated by the social interests of a group or class, through which they make sense of their world.”

Resolving the Contradiction between the Essentialist Theory of Creative labour as Human Essence and the Anti-essentialist Theory of Over-determination

The theory of creative and alienated labour is part of essentialist Marxism whereas as Resnick and Wolff claim, “The Marxian conception of society as a totality of over-determined processes implies a distinctly anti-essentialist view of causality in society” (25). So, the essentialist theory of creative labour as human essence and the anti-

essentialist theory of over-determination appear to be diametrically opposite to each other. But a dialectical probe into the matter may resolve this contradiction. The present study endeavours to do the same, beginning with the idea of creative man. Man is creative not only in the sense that she, through transforming nature, creates material objects or articles but also in the sense that she creates processes as well. Politics, economics, culture, and law are as much human products as gramophones, telephones, radios, and refrigerators. It is reasonable to think that both these entities will not be found in distant galaxies, nor are they seen to have any existence in the animal kingdom. In its long course of development, man modifies, transforms, and reinvents her material set of products; in the same way, she modifies, changes, reinvents and thus complicates the other set of products – the processes. Up to some point in history, man keeps adding new processes to the old and already existing set, and throughout history, he keeps modifying all of them and all their relationships. The more man develops and the more civilisation proceeds, the more complicated and intricate the processes and their interrelationships become. Every process thus determines and gets determined by every other process and the combined effect is over-determination. Now it is not difficult to see that the so-called over-determination is also a human product; it is one reflection of man's creative genius. We cannot talk of it concerning the planets, stars, galaxies, and black holes or think of it concerning the animal kingdom. The discourse of over-determination is restricted to the narrow margins of human society precisely because it is caused by man. It is the human essence that makes possible even an anti-essentialist discourse that struggles against the idea of essence. But as Paul Smith claims, "The manner in which they (Resnick and Wolff) insist that the principle of over-determination necessarily and inevitably demands such an uncompromisingly anti-essentialist position as theirs is itself, logically, a kind of essentialism." Smith further says, "The more they posit the utterly indeterminate character of the over-determined totality, the more their famous 'starting point' of class processes as a way of grasping that totality will always appear logically arbitrary, always a tendentious choice rather than an epistemological necessity" (247). Jon Gubbay remarks, "Choosing class as the entry point smuggles back an essence into the theory" (145).

What Terry Eagleton says about the anti-essentialist fallacy of Postmodernism in his *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), well applies in the case of the Resnick-Wolff brand of anti-essentialism. Eagleton says, “Since Postmodernists are keen on sensuous particularity, it is surprising in a way they are so nervous of this belief in the specific whatness of something.... But not many philosophers would doubt that there are certain properties that make a thing what it is, or that things which are members of the same class must have something in common, even if that something is no more than a network of ‘family resemblances’” (*The Illusions* 97-98). “To believe in essentialism is not necessarily to entertain the implausible view that all of the properties of a thing are essential to it.... Nor is it to assume that there are always sharp breaks between one thing and another and that everything is locked off from everything else in its own watertight ontological space. In fact, you may hold with Hegel and others that the relationality of things is precisely of their essence.” That blurred boundaries do not necessarily obliterate essence is beautifully presented by Eagleton in this statement, “A field with uncertain boundaries can still be a field, and the indeterminacy of its frontiers does not throw everything within them into ontological turmoil” (98). Besides, “Nor does a belief in essentialism necessarily commit one to the view that there is only ever one, central property which makes a thing what it is. Essentialism is not necessarily a form of reductionism.” Also, “It is hard to see how water which was not wet still be water, but one could always argue that what is taken to be essential about human beings and their institutions is historically variable.... You could have, in other words, a kind of historically relativised essentialism” (99). Eagleton pleads for essentialism in quite a new way, “To say that women should never be oppressed anywhere just on account of their common humanity sound like a more forceful criticism of patriarchy than to say that they have no common humanity, to begin with” (100). Further, “To be some kind of cultural being is indeed essential to our humanity, but not to be any particular kind. There are no non-cultural human beings, not because culture is all there is to human beings, but because culture belongs to their nature” (102). His deadliest blow against anti-essentialism reads like this, “Postmodernism is against essentialism; but it is also against meta-narratives, universal Reason and non-pluralist cultures, and these views are arguably essential to it” (103). His final remarks on the essentiality of essentialism are an

eye-opener, “We cannot jettison essentialism because we need to know among other things which needs are essential to humanity and which are not. Needs which are essential to our survival and well-being ... can then become politically criterial: any social order which denies such needs can be challenged on the grounds that it is denying our humanity, which is usually a stronger argument against it than the case that it is flouting our contingent cultural conventions” (103-104).

A few anti-essentialist over-determinists, George DeMartino being an important exponent of this trend, mean to say that over-determination is not an ontological given, but a theoretical choice. This twist, they think, helps them to escape the trap of over-determinist essentialism. But, this stand would not help much. The theoretical choice is a human one and the discourse woven around it is a human creation. Secondly, if over-determination does not describe the world, but rather creates it after a theoretical choice, then the theory in question ceases to remain materialist. But Marxism, we remember, is known as a dialectical materialist philosophy. Thirdly, if it is a theoretical choice, the question is – why does one choose it? If it is a random, groundless choice, one need not be serious about it. But, if it has a logical and ethical ground, what is that logic and ethic, what is that ground? Resnick and Wolff maintain almost a silence as to why they are committed to over-determination and why they have chosen class as their entry point. Their disciple DeMartino’s deliberation on the issue is revealing. DeMartino first expresses his uneasiness with the flimsy ground of Resnick and Wolff’s commitment and choice in this way, “Wolff and Resnick’s treatment of the ethical dimensions of class processes – and of their commitment to the concept of class – is largely intuitive” (227). “If the normative moment in Resnick and Wolff’s attention to class and exploitation is underdeveloped, the normative moment in their commitment to over-determination is absent altogether....Yet Resnick and Wolff do little to motivate or justify their commitment to over-determination. Like class over-determination is treated as an entry point that distinguished the Marxian framework from others. But, it remains ethically unmoored. Why is this?” With a tone of regret DeMartino recalls his past reservations against his teachers, Resnick and Wolff, “I claimed that in practice they had come to treat over-determination as an objective ontological category and that they then sought to advance a form of social theory that was faithful to it. In so doing (I argued) they had

fallen into the very same essentialist epistemological error they criticised in others – that of believing that social theory must reflect the truth of the social world it sought to map” (228). We agree to this position of DeMartino. But, in no time he modifies his position to defend the Resnick-Wolff brand of over-determinist theory from the charges of essentialism. He apologetically maintains, “I now think my critique was at least partially mistaken. Resnick and Wolff do not explicitly take the view that the world is marked by an over-determinist ontology that good theory must capture.” DeMartino clarifies his new understanding of Resnick and Wolff’s theoretical position, “Like all other concepts, over-determination appears in this work not as a non-negotiable ontological given, as an objective statement about the way the world is, but instead as a terribly consequential theoretical choice that theorists can make as they try to create knowledge of the world.... Ontological, epistemological, and methodological concepts do not just describe the objects and practices in the world; they participate in shaping that world” (229).

There seems to be more than one problem in this exposition. First, DeMartino’s uneasiness is clear in his use of terms like “at least partially mistaken” and “do not explicitly take the view.” One may infer from the first that his critique was not wholly mistaken and from the second that Resnick and Wolff at least implicitly take the view that the world is marked by over-determinist ontology. Secondly, there is no semantic continuity between “over-determination appears... not ... as an objective statement about the world is” and “Ontological, epistemological ... concepts do not just describe the objects and practices in the world; they participate in shaping that world” (DeMartino 229). The first is a non-dialectical negative statement that over-determination does not describe the world and the second is dialectical maintaining that concepts both describe and shape the world. Why “do not just describe” is not applied to over-determination remains a mystery. That DeMartino is trying to defend the indefensible is clear. Over-determination, as a theory, shapes the world but describes the world before shaping it. Thirdly, how can a theory or concept “shape” the world without knowing it at least partially? How can it know that it “shapes” something without a prior idea or description of the reality of that thing before being “shaped” by the theory or concept? How can we say that our theoretical choice is “terribly consequential” if we cannot differentiate between this consequence and its previous form unshaped by the theory in question? The

shaping theory of over-determination must know “the way the world is” and then only can it be certain that it “shapes” that world anew. To “shape” it one needs to “know” it. Otherwise, whether it is “shaped” or remains “unshaped” cannot be known. Thus, over-determination is not only a theoretical choice but also involves a description of the world. DeMartino is still uncomfortable with Resnick and Wolff’s logically and ethically unmediated commitment to over-determination. “My sense is that Resnick and Wolff’s avoidance of ethics reflects concern that if they were to give the ethical moment any serious play in their epistemological or ontological accounts, any might at all, they might then put at risk their commitment to over-determination” (234). He goes on to say, “I want to suggest that irrespective of the reason, it is a mistake to repress the ethical moment in over-determination, not just for the sake of theoretical consistency, ... but also because the ethical entailments of over-determination are among its most theoretically and practically important, powerful, and exciting features” (235). DeMartino finally declares that over-determination itself is an ethical position: “The commitment to radical contingency and ignorance that over-determination entails does not separate us from ethical reasoning – it follows from it. To choose over-determination is to stake out an ethical position in defense of perpetual aperture, creativity, innovation, productive ignorance, and audaciousness and risk-taking that is combined with abiding care and humility” (239). DeMartino thus agrees that the ethical foundation of over-determination is creativity and innovation! Let us add – DeMartino would not agree to this addition – that the ethical foundation of over-determination refers back to the human essence, that is, creativity, and we should choose over-determination because it reflects and defends human nature as expounded by Karl Marx.

Now let us consider how Resnick and Wolff’s choice of “class” as the point of entry cannot bear any logic without recognition of its relation to the human essence. They say, “The class division of society into exploiters and exploited ... is unjust and has an undesirable influence upon every aspect of that broader society.” Further, “Those labourers who produce goods and services should own them and decide what to do with them.” And, “If and when this does not occur in a society, Marxian theory claims that a kind of social theft takes place: some individuals ‘steal’ the surplus labour (or its fruits) from those who have produced it” (qtd. in DeMartino 227). The question is: Why do

Resnick and Wolff think of “class injustice”? Why do they maintain that the producers should own what they produce, why do they term the process of appropriating the fruits of the labour of others a ‘social theft’? What if others, not the producers, own the products and decide what to do with them? Resnick and Wolff would not clearly answer. Their disciple DeMartino says, “To the question ‘What is your moral anchor?’ would come the reply, ‘Why do you need a moral anchor?’” (232). If there is no moral or logical anchor behind all these talks of ‘class injustice’ and ‘social theft’, one may have no motivation to agree with Resnick and Wolff’s brand of over-determination and class analysis. In their undue fear of being termed essentialists, Resnick, Wolff, and their disciples try to mystify and conceal what is as clear as daylight. The terms ‘class injustice’, ‘social theft’ etc. used by them will bear force only concerning the recognition of the human essence. Man changes nature through labour and thus realises his potential as a human being. Through the production process, the human essence is realised, and the potential man truly becomes a man. The product thus not only realises man but also expands him. The product is his expansion and extension as it contains some part of him. There is an unbreakable bond between man and the product, between the subject and the object. So, if the product, man’s realisation, and expansion, is taken away from him by others, then it is a ‘theft’, an injustice.

This researcher agrees with Paul Smith that “Marxism can no longer operate without the concept of over-determination and that it is unavoidably part of Resnick and Wolff’s legacy that they have made that the case” (247). Over-determination has opened our eyes to the fact that society is much more varied and intricate than it was thought to be. But, this researcher parts with Resnick and Wolff at a specific point of this theoretical journey, that is, this researcher is reluctant to accept the concept of unlimited contingency and endless over-determination. To put it in other words, this researcher does not adhere to their anti-essentialism or anti-hierarchy. This researcher has shown how over-determination, as both process and theory, itself is a human creation and thus testifies the human nature. Regarding the view that every process determines and gets determined by every other process and no one has an edge over another, this researcher cherishes the view of Terry Eagleton that “Everyone agrees that some historical factors are more weighty than others. This does not prevent them from being pluralists....The truth is that

nobody is a pluralist in the sense of holding that in any given situation, any factor is as vital as any other. Everyone believes in hierarchies” (*Why Marx* 109). This study also rejects the theory of economic base and cultural superstructure as too simplistic, but regards economics as a very dominant factor behind the particular form of any society. If creation or production is the human essence then the organisation of the creative process and distribution of the created objects or dissemination of the created ideas – in a word, economics – must be a very strong factor. Eagleton says, “Before we can do anything else, we need to eat and drink. We also need clothing and shelter....The basis of culture is labour. There can be no civilisation without material production” (107). He argues convincingly, “To contend that material interests have been the prime mover all the way from the cave dwellers to capitalism is a lot more plausible than believing that diet, altruism, Great Men, pole-vaulting or the conjunction of the planets have been” (111). This too singular answer may not be satisfying to all but Marx finds it satisfying. It is satisfying “because he considers that history ... has been a much more monotonous story than meets the eye.... For the most part, the threads that leash it together have been scarcity, violence, and exploitation” (111-112). Eagleton agrees that social processes other than economics also “powerfully shape the mode of production itself” (113). A determinist, Eagleton does not speak of mechanistic determinism; to him “The word ‘determine’ literally means ‘to set limits to’. Modes of production do not dictate a specific kind of politics, culture, or set of ideas....It is rather a context in which both can be illuminated” (114). Eagleton finally argues that ‘economy’ for Marx is a much broader and more varied realm than it is commonly held: “In fact, ‘the economy’ never appears in the raw.... One reason why Marx’s theory of history holds good is the fact that material goods are never just material goods....It is because this realm of human existence folds so many other dimensions into itself that it plays such a key role in human history” (122-123).

Thus this researcher contends that social reality is an over-determined one comprising many, but not an infinite number of, inter-determined and inter-determining processes created by finite human beings. To make a comprehensive idea about this very intricate reality one can take a point of entry as one chooses. But as it has been seen, creation itself is the distinguishing and essential nature of man, and the organisation and

distribution of such created things people call economics are very central to essential humanity and therefore to human society as well. Economics, thus, may not dictate, but set limits to the other processes of society; it is the prime mover of society. There is the over-determination of all the threads, but the thread of economy is the most conspicuous, most dominant. So, our ideal point of entry is man's creative/alienated labour, class, and economics.

Review of Literature: Neglect of Labour as a Vantage Point of Criticism

Even in discussions of novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Mother* (1906), *Hard Times* (1854), etc. which are noticeably based on labour issues, the application of labour theory in general and that of the theory of alienated/estranged labour and creative labour in particular, is hard to find. For example, in his discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath* Zavari Marzieh Asefi Najaf Abadi, Professor, Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan (Esfahan), talks about Steinbeck's social philosophy in this way, "The social philosophy presented by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* is complex and somewhat contradictory.... This social philosophy maintains that human survival is dependent upon the banding together of humans to find strength in group unity and action. The elaboration of this theory in the novel is seen in the education of the oppressed and disadvantaged with the organisation of unions and strikes as vehicles of group protest and change. Theoretically, Steinbeck's philosophy appears to be based upon the socialist theories of Lenin and Marx, although it shows the clear influence of several distinctly American philosophies." According to him, Steinbeck's social philosophy is a composite of the ideas of Marx, Lenin, Emerson, Jefferson, Henry James, etc; he also analyses its structure but does not deal with the issues of labour and its organisation from the standpoint of any distinct labour theory.

Thus few critics discuss novels placing labour and its theories at the centre of discussion. A serious study concerning labour in novels is made by Sarah Brouillette in her *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014). Here she explains how *creative economy* is understood as ideas and practices which present the artist's figure as a model for transforming the mechanised and routine labour of the older times into newer forms

that look creative, autonomous, and refreshing, while in reality, this labour is less secure and more easily exploitable. According to her, creative economy ideology is rooted in Richard Florida's book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). Florida opines that this creative labour provides more happiness and pleasure which, in turn, increases the worker's productivity and efficiency and yields greater profits for a firm. Britain's Labour Party also held that owing to such experiences of creative labour the workers would feel that cultural equalities are more important than economic equality and the collective and organised trade union activities result in the loss of freedom. Brouillette is correct to see that this high talk of the creative economy serves the neo-liberal ideology that wants to debilitate collective labour and trade unionism while legitimising economic inequality and hiding the contradiction between capital and labour. While discussing how creative economy and its false presentation of the worker as an artist serve the interests of neoliberal capitalism, Brouillette analyses a few novels and poems to examine how literary artists reconcile with their positions as creative workers and how their art reflects, produces, and critiques the ideology of creative-economy. She argues that Arbind Adiga in *The White Tiger* (2008) and Monica Ali in *In the Kitchen* (2009), along with their protagonists, display mixed and contradictory feelings toward their part in a creative economy that is built on the exploitation of cheap labour. Similar problems are dealt with in Gautam Malkani's novel *Londonstani* (2006) and Daljit Nagra's book of poetry *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (2007). Brouillette also rejects the idea of art's autonomy against capital arguing that the desire to be autonomous from capital is often used to support rather than oppose the expansion of capital. If autonomy from the market was once a significant feature of literature, now this autonomy is its most marketable feature. So the basic question is not whether art can regain its autonomy, rather it is whether the artist can make the problem of autonomy the object of her representation. All this is agreeable. But, Brouillette makes one more point to which we cannot agree. While refuting this ideology of creative economy which is, in reality, exploitative and thus not "creative" at all in the Marxist sense discussed above, she goes on to say that "creativity" is not a natural condition of human existence, and it is only a historically contingent concept which emerges as the product of, rather than a resistance to, capitalism. This researcher, like her, believes that the "creativity" of creative economy ideology is

exploitative and in the service of capitalism, which is a euphemism for alienated labour, but, unlike her, this researcher contends that real “creativity” advocated by Marx is the true human essence as it distinguishes man from other beings although man’s historical existences in different class-societies contradict this essence.

The initial assumption of Carolyn Lesjak’s celebrated book *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel* (2006) is the simple truth that the vast majority of men labour hard for an earning but not for their enjoyment or satisfaction. This is indeed a symptom of alienated labour. She enquires into the question of why pleasure is separated from work and what impact this separation had on the Victorian novel. Lesjak profoundly analyses the relationships between work and pleasure which played a central role in the Victorian literary imagination. Formulator of a new genealogy “labour novel”, Lesjak rejects and criticises the popular assumption that work ceases to be portrayed with the fall of the industrial novel from its prominence. According to her the problematic of labour continues to be there throughout the 19th century and informs texts like Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), Eliot’s *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861) and works of William Morris and Oscar Wilde. She shows how the so-called realist novels sought to separate pleasure from labour and how the former, but not the latter, was emphasised as the proper realm for literary representation. She makes it a point that representations of actual work and workplaces are absent from Victorian realist novels. In *Mary Barton*, domestic space is prioritised over the factories and consumption over production. *Felix Holt* valorises culture and thus denies the working-class people the capacity for self-determination. In the opinion of Lesjak, any proper portrayal of the working classes would have required an engagement with the problems of labour and thereby it would have promoted social revolution. It results in the reluctance to address the real problems of employment and thus labour is kept unexpectedly marginal in Victorian industrial novels. She further reveals how the utopian writers, Morris and Wilde, did not accept the opposition between work and pleasure and how they hypothesised non-alienating and humanely fulfilling modes of work. Such works are modeled on art and artisanship and they are not opposed to pleasure. Thus, Morris and Wilde in their utopian worlds, imagine new social structures and values that provide corrective measures to the difficult problems of real societies. Though Lesjak

pioneers dealing with the alienation of work under modern capitalism, along with the consequent textual marginalisation of work, and its opposition to pleasure, her analysis is limited to only one aspect of alienated labour, i.e., separation of pleasure from work. She keeps herself aloof from analysing the distinctive alienations of different kinds of labour, and from revealing other facets of alienated labour. This gap this researcher proposes to fill in through analyses of a few key Assamese Novels.

Another serious engagement with the question of labour can be seen in Liam Connell's *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel* (2017). Connell here explores the condition of precarious labour as it is depicted in recent Indian, North American, and British novels. The book analyses how novelists like Douglas Coupland, David Foster Wallace, Joshua Ferris, Arvind Adiga, Chetan Bhagat, and Monica Ali portray characters to lay bare the contemporary experience of insecurity and precarious existence. Connell presents an account of the period of flexible labour and notes how work changes its character in our era and how our understanding of it has changed since the late 1970s when neoliberal economics began to replace Keynesianism as the reigning political-economic philosophy. In this period the insecurity of work gradually increases but as a prolonged effect of the Keynesian social capitalism of the earlier period, workers continue to take work for something that will bring security and prosperity to them. The book, on the other hand, argues that there is a mismatch in the contemporary labour market between the promise of work as a path to success and the realities of employment that is becoming increasingly contingent and risky. Along with the ever-growing insecurity, a sense of loss for the socialised forms of security characterise the contemporary period. Its implications are very serious for the workers who often feel vulnerable or precarious. The meaning of precarious labour is limited not only to the threat of unemployment, or to the conditions of work that cannot guarantee a secure and good life; it also signifies the life condition of the workers whose relationship to the society, whose very being, is contingent or at risk. Connell's book thus looks at the way these problems are represented in contemporary fiction. It also suggests how contemporary novels are engaged with flexibility as the basic character of work in the contemporary period and how this generates various forms of precariousness. The book thus touches upon another significant feature of alienated labour, i.e. uncertainty which

stands in the way of the worker's happiness, belongingness, and fulfillment of life, making him only a vulnerable tool in the process of production. But, Connell explores this idea without Marx's concept of alienated labour in mind. Further, his analysis cannot be taken for a complete unfolding of the nature of creative and alienated labour in contemporary times.

Review of Literature: Absence of the Theory of Alienated Labour, Creative Labour, Over-determined Reality and Point of Entry in the Criticism of Assamese Novels

Here this researcher attempts to examine if theories of labour in general and that of alienated/creative labour, in particular, inform the critiques of the selected Assamese novels and whether the ideas of over-determined reality and point of entry are employed by these critiques. Besides, this study will probe if the critiques are concerned with the analysis of ideology replete in the novels.

Seuji Patar Kahini

This is one of those few Assamese novels that have caught the attention of so many critics. But, many critics repeat what others said earlier, i.e., added nothing new to the critical reception of the novel. Madhusmrita Baruah Changkakoty, for example, in her essay "Birinchi Kumar Baruah Uponyas" (2012) provides a brief account of the story and agrees that "Nareswar and Sonia are the most dominant characters" (65) while stating that Sonia's appeal is far greater than that of Nareswar. The question of oppression imposed on people, exploitation of labour, etc. do not find any mention in her critique, let alone the problem of creative and alienated labour. Maheswar Neog remarked, "The author delineates the characters by placing a boy of an Assamese village against the background of a tea garden that feels like another state and is filled with the vitality of the *Adibasis* (tea tribes); he does it without allowing his sociological vision to sleep" (331). For Satyendranath Sarma the plot of the novel is not well-built. He observes, "Unlike *Jeevanar Batat*, its story or plot has not achieved a well-built form" (178-179). And, "The incidental sub-plots and the episodic sub-plots are not interdependent"

(179). Further, “The prelude to the main story is unnecessarily lingering (180). Thus the questions of labour in general, and that of alienated labour, in particular, were left in the air in these critiques. Since 1967, Hiren Gohain has written several essays on this novel, and he is the critic who established this novel as a major and highly accomplished one in the realm of Assamese fiction. His ideas will be discussed later. Two critics who made full-length discussions of the novel after Gohain’s pioneering work are Krishna Kumar Mishra and Gobinda Prasad Sarma. Mishra in his essay “Uponyas Bishlesan: *Seuji Patar Kahini*” (1991) combats Gohain’s statement “Sonia is the real hero of the novel” (“Nispanda” 699) by saying that Nareswar’s presence in the beginning and at the end of the novel is significant, the action moves through him. Gobinda Prasad Sarma, in *Asomiya Uponyasor Itihas* (2014) also claims that the central question of the novel is why Nareswar could not stay in the tea garden. Nareswar is indeed the linking thread of the three societies described in the novel: traditional Assamese rural society, the society of the coolies, and that of the British people in Assam. The novel indeed continues for some time even after the disappearance of Sonia. Still, we mean to say that Nareswar is the pivotal hero of the structure but Sonia is undoubtedly the “hero” of the theme. Nareswar is related to service labour while Sonia is to productive labour. Thus exploitation and oppression as consequences of alienated labour and revolt against it become more conspicuous through Sonia. The novel aims to reveal the dehumanising effects first of the rural, patriarchal society and then of colonial exploitation. Nareswar has to flee from both, but he is not an actively conscious rebel. He does not see any problem in the organisation of labour in the tea garden. If Sonia had married him he would have remained there comfortably. It was only Sonia who could sense the inhumanity and cruelty lurking behind the seemingly green way of life of the coolies.

Mishra, like many others, agrees that Sonia’s character is a riddle. But, strangely, he goes on to find an easy solution to that riddle. Mishra notes that Sonia both loves and hates the tea garden; she loves Nareswar but would not marry him for fear of being trapped in the customary patriarchal society; she detests her own body born of a sahib’s sexual exploitation of her coolie mother, but enjoys tempting men with her bodily beauty; she is self-willed, rough, revengeful, angry, fearless on the one hand and sympathetic, loving, free, protesting on the other. Because of this seemingly contradictory nature of

Sonia, Mishra regards her as perverted by birth. He thinks that the problem of her character arises from her obsession with her illegitimate and questionable birth. That Sonia singly tries for emancipation from exploitation is also noted by Mishra, but his emphasis is on Sonia's obsession with her birth. Gobinda Prasad Sarma also says that the mixed blood in her body does not allow her to live comfortably in any of the societies – of the sahibs and of the coolies. Hiren Gohain alone emphatically relates the problem of Sonia's character to imperialist exploitation. Her birth and body themselves are shreds of evidence of the cruel exploitation of the imperialist rulers. She is angry with her dear fellow beings because they accept this imperialist exploitation as dictates of destiny. Gohain unravels the mystery behind her departure from the garden saying that she has no way out from the chain of circumstances and she has to accept this poisonous servility (towards both imperialism and traditional patriarchy) as long as she is in the society. So searching for her freedom along with Nareswar's good she departs. Gohain convincingly states that Armstrong's oppression of Sonia's mother, Mohua, is not simply an individual sin, this is symptomatic of a particular social system. In this connection, we may mention another revealing statement of Gohain, "The story signals a riddle. How can man escape from the prison of humanity?" ("Birinchī" 375). Gohain quotes Rabindranath as a reply, "Hetha noy, hetha noy, anya kotha, anya konkhane (not here, not here, in some other place, in somewhere else)" (qtd. in "Birinchī" 375). Gohain thus almost articulates the root of the problem of both Sonia and the novel – the oppression of semi-feudal patriarchy and imperialist capitalism. But, he could have gone one step further, i.e. he could have explicitly mentioned that at the root of semi-feudal or capitalist set-up lies alienated labour. Thus Sonia's, and also the novel's, problem lies with alienated labour – not visibly all the time, but as an undercurrent every moment. French Marxist Pierre Macherey says, "The novel maintains a silence that determines its structure. The form itself throws an oblique light on the absence/silence, which must be spelt out by the critic" (qtd. in Gohain, "Birinchī" 372). This novel also maintains a silence about the overwhelming role of alienated labour and our endeavour is to make this silence speak. This study ventures to show that the riddle of Sonia's character or that of the novel is the visible flower of the invisible root of alienated labour which largely determines its plot, character, narration, structure, etc.

This researcher cannot agree with Krishna Kumar Mishra's comment that the ideal coolie girl is Radhu, not Sonia. Radhu is an unconscious victim of alienated labour and the consequent exploitation, but the protesting and revolting Sonia is the expression of the highest potential of the coolie people. Her sympathy for and identity with the coolies bring her near them but her superior consciousness and their passivity distance her from them. For Mishra she is perverse and it is her perverse nature that makes her disrespectful towards her familiar society. Is it so? She is angry with the familiar society because of its passivity and acceptance of oppression as destiny. Gohain rightly observes, "Sonia's craziness is merely the reflection of her moral force, a kind of spiritual courage" ("Nispanda" 701). Mishra says, "At the end of *Seuji Patar Kahini*, a tragic tune of fruitless search reverberates" (71). Search for what? He says, "It is a search for true humanity" (87). But, what does true humanity consist of? Mishra does not answer clearly. Gobinda Prasad Sarma seems to indicate an answer, "Silently he (Nareswar) wanted a society where people are simple, where morality has not degenerated, where the value of humanity remains intact" (*Asamiya Upanyasar* 193). This is a vague answer. Gohain's answer is clearer: "Through the exposure of cruel oppression and exploitation unleashed by imperialism in the Indian society and the hypocrisy and oppressive character of the traditional society, the novelist expresses an intense longing and urge for a healthy and complete life" ("Birinchii" 370). Thus a healthy and complete life must be free from hypocrisy, cruelty, oppression, and exploitation. This researcher wants to add that freedom from these evils is possible only when there is no alienated labour, only in the condition of free, creative labour, simply because the basis of all hypocrisy, cruelty, oppression, and exploitation is alienated labour. The basic hypocrisy of class society is to rob the worker of his product and give him wages which is a false justification for this robbery. Sonia significantly comments, "They are robbers, not Sahibs" (R. Baruah, 120). The novel says, "Nareswar is bewitched by the merry eyes and faces of the men and women of the working class" (154). Gobinda Prasad Sarma observes, "Still Nareswar did not seek shelter in this society. Why? Enquiry into this or answer to this question is the subject of *Seuji Patar Kahini*" (*Asamiya Upanyasar* 199). Gohain also remarks, "But, ultimately, the hero Nareswar could not stay in the tea garden" ("Nispanda" 699). This study proposes to show that Nareswar's departure from his village and Sonia's departure

from her garden are more important than Nareswar's departure from the garden. The first departure indicates a search for a healthy life away from the traditional, patriarchal society and the second indicates such a search away from the garden troubled by alienated labour. But, Nareswar's departure from the garden is not as significant as the other two departures. In the first two cases departure is a choice for those who departed, while in the last case, it is a compulsion. Nareswar's beloved goes away, he is dismissed from his service by Mrs. Miller, and he cannot join the coolie line as a tea garden labourer. Thus his departure was inevitable. Gobinda Prasad Sarma comments, "Here the white managers have not given proper wages and proper human status to the labourers" (*Asamiya Upanyasar* 200). But, the problem does not lie with wages or status; it lies with snatching away the product of the labourers, alienating them from their product, thereby alienating them from themselves, thus dehumanising them. Marx criticised capitalism not merely for its unequal distribution of wealth but for perverting labour into forced, alienated, futile labour which cannot be remedied by better payment; better payment of alienated labour is not the issue – the issue is converting alienated labour into free, creative labour. Sarma quotes Sonia at full length but has not been able to penetrate its real core: "There is no blood but poison in my body. You know, I love with full heart every tea plant in this garden and consider every young boy and girl in the garden as my own. Still, I have malice towards the garden. I wish I uprooted every tea plant, shattered the factory, set fire to sahib's bungalow, murdered Miller Sahib, and sent back the young boys and girls to their villages. The garden, as it were, impoverishes the body and soul of my brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers day by day, drags them to sin and greed day by day" (R. Baruah, 214). Here, Sonia hints at not only physical exploitation but spiritual exploitation as well. Thus, Sonia hints, though unconsciously, at the robbery of the human essence through the mechanism of alienated labour – and that is a spiritual loss for the labourers.

Hiren Gohain's path-breaking criticism neither fully explores the implications of alienated labour propounded by Marx nor mentions it explicitly. Though, therefore, his idea of systemic colonial, imperialist exploitation leads him to unravel the true meaning of the novel to a large extent, some of his observations cannot be accepted. For example, he tends to celebrate the "naturalness" of coolie life pointing out its "uncorrupted human

essence”: “The glimpse of primitive life expressed in the collective dance of the tea garden labourers even today along with the rhythm of *madol* in the darkness of night, beckons towards an uncorrupted human essence which is complete, gratified, hence healthy and beautiful” (“Birinchī” 374). Further, “Thus the naturalness of a contradiction-free, captivating and vigorous life can be discovered among the male and female characters from the coolies of the tea garden” (Gohain, “Nispanda” 701). Also “Sexuality (open and unrestricted) here is a sign of healthy, gratified, natural human life” (Gohain, “Agkatha” .11). Gohain does not make it explicit that true human essence is creative labour of which the workers are deprived. It is not that the labourers lead a natural, essential life that is only disturbed by exploitation and oppression; rather it is exploitation and oppression (effects or aspects of alienated labour) which make their life unnatural and lacking in essence. The labourers’ revelry, unrestricted sexual life, drinking, dancing, cultural activities, etc, far from being signs of healthy, essential life, are signs of life deformed by alienated labour. Marx says, “The worker’s work is not part of his nature, so he does not fulfill himself in work but denies himself; he feels at home when there is no work and at work he feels homeless.... The man/worker feels freely active only in his animal functions like eating, drinking, procreating, etc.; but in his human functions he is reduced to an animal” (*Manuscripts* 30). Theodor Adorno also significantly observes, “Pleasure when equally isolated from the ‘serious’ content of life, becomes silly, meaningless and sheer ‘entertainment’ and ultimately it is a mere means of reproducing one’s working capacity” (*The Stars* 97-98). Terry Eagleton poignantly observes, “In such conditions, ‘culture’ and fantasy are not an alternative to hard facts and hard labour, but simply the other face of them.... Culture is reduced to the question of what to do with people when they are not at work” (*The English* 158). Thus the seemingly “lively” aspects of the workers’ lives are simply the expression of dehumanising alienated labour. Intuitively Sonia feels it, so she does not whole-heartedly participate in that life. Both Nareswar and Sonia refrain from the workers’ open and unrestricted life and ultimately both depart from that life. The riddle felt by critics (excepting Gohain) in the novel and Sonia’s character is nothing but the invisible but real role of alienated labour, this makes the novel a tragedy and Sonia unhappy and unstable. The author unwittingly conceals this root but shows us the unhappy flower, so the critics find the flower a riddle as no visible

cause can adequately explain it. As part of this concealment of the role of alienated labour, the author refrains from depicting workers at workplaces – amid the tea plants and in the factory. Very few scenes are set amidst the tea plants and only one scene is set inside the factory – that is also at night when Sonia sees the love-making of two workers inside the factory. No critic so far makes the general absence of working scenes a point. The idea of alienated labour is applicable in human relationships like love also. Aloti and Prema create each other as lovers through their labour and struggle. Ultimately, the hypocrite *boiragi* elopes with Aloti leaving Prema behind. Thus for Prema “love’s labour’s lost”! Sonia and Nareswar too create each other as lovers. Sonia intuitively knows that in a society informed by alienated labour, the creator is deprived of what he/she creates. Aligning with the overall condition, she deprives herself of Nareswar and Nareswar of her.

Nadai

It is very difficult to find critical reviews of this fine novel based on peasant labour. In the introduction to *Dinanath Sarmar Uponyas Samagra* (2014) Sonaram Hazarika makes a few remarks on the novelist’s general characteristics like strong sense, sympathy for the weak, portrayal of the socio-individual problems created by modern civilisation, progressive and unbiased outlook, well-knit plot, etc. In the novel *Nadai* he finds Naduki, Nadai’s wife, a great female character with her sacrifices as per the norm of the ideal Indian woman, and Hemolota a dynamic female character with revolutionary grandeur and modern sensibilities. He appreciates the novelist for depicting village life vividly. In this introduction, he did not mention the role of either labour or creative/alienated labour in the formulation of plot and character. Satyendra Nath Sarma in his path-breaking book *Asomiya Uponyasor Bhumika* (1992) draws parallels between Nadai and Pierre of *Growth of the Soil* (1917) and Wang Lang of *Good Earth* (1931). He remarks “Nadai’s story is the story of creation, of dynamism, of transformation from silence to speech, of going from nullity to completeness” (165). Sarma goes on to say that by dint of strong optimism and enthusiasm for work, poor, and deprived, Nadai becomes capable of filling the banks of Morisuti with golden crops. His natural, primitive

simplicity and dynamism are shared by his wife Naduki, but she cannot retain that character fully till the end. Economic uplift and class upgrade changed her, so she refused to marry her daughter Menoka to the farmer's son Bodhan and allowed her son to run after luxury and comfort by selling land. But Nadai remains unchanged as he, unlike Naduki, is profoundly close to the soil and nature. The introduction of the elements of modernist life in Morisuti causes a generation gap between Nadai and his educated sons who turn their back on land. After Naduki's death, Nadai suffers from a sense of resignation, goes on a pilgrimage, and dies in Prayag. Despite the mild conflict towards the end caused by the generation gap and the introduction of modern ways, Nadai's life has the aroma of completeness. His death in Prayag, a famed holy place for the Hindus, signifies a well-consummated life punctuated sometimes by bits of sorrow. Sarma also calls the novel a comedy without melancholy or pessimism. But, Sarma's criticism falls short of the explanation for the question as to why Nadai's story is a comedy, what gives his life the aroma of completeness. This gap we want to fill in through an analysis of the role of free, creative labour as propounded by Marx as opposed to alienated labour which cripples essential humanity. At the beginning of the novel, Nadai performs some alienated labour. Yet it is not as crude as it is in a capitalist setup. In that phase, the fruits of Nadai's labour are consumed mainly by his protector and landlord, Bhadiya Gayan. Later, with the meager help of Bhadiya Gayan, Nadai makes progress and becomes independent and a rich farmer. In this second phase, all his products are only his, his products expand him, enlarge him, and give identity to him.

Pratipad

Pratipad is the only novel set in Assam and based on industrial labour. Mamoni Roisom Goswami wrote two novels on factory labour – *Chenabor Sot* and *Mamore Dhora Torowal* – but they are set outside Assam. This dearth of industrial or factory novels in Assamese literature speaks volumes of the large-scale absence of industries in Assam and also that of the proletarian movement in Assam. Labour-oriented novels in Assamese literature, therefore, largely imply peasantry-based novels as the working-class movement here implies primarily the movement of the peasants. Noted critic Gobinda

Prasad Sarma points out that its untraditional narrative technique is parallel to that of Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) which Bhattacharyya translated into Assamese. "This style is the style of the American novelist Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*" (Birendrakumar 23). According to him, the plot of the novel develops not simply through first person or third person point-of-view, but through dialogues and expressions of thoughts and consciousness of the characters. Sarma combats the idea of another noted critic Bhaben Baruah who finds the novel "modernist", "internationalist" and "liberal" – a view which, according to Sarma, is misleading and a contradiction of terms because progressive internationalism of the novel cannot go with modernism and liberalism. Then Sarma talks about the historicity of the plot noting how the labourers of Digboi Oil Company launched a famous strike in 1938-1939 demanding leave at the time of festivals, higher wages, other facilities, and continuation of job and how the strike was crushed by the British management supported by the British government, and how it resulted in the expulsion of thousands of labourers from Digboi.

Sarma notes that one of the central characters, Giasuddin alias Dimbeswar says in the end that in the presence of an independent national government the legitimate strike could not have been crushed, so he thinks of India's freedom from the British. This, according to Sarma, is a deviation from the Marxist, socialist ideal and adherence to nationalism. In this regard, this researcher agrees with Sarma and takes up this topic for detailed discussion in the fourth chapter. Sarma divides the political and human dimensions of the novel saying that "Though *Pratipad* is a political novel, its human side is also rich" (Birendrakumar 43). He identifies love, marriage, etc. as expressions of that human aspect. We reject this political-human binary and accept that humanity consists of free, creative labour of which the workers of Digboi are deprived. Upendra Nath Sarma, another noted critic, is right when he says that "Courageous defense against the oppressors is also an external expression of man" ("Sahitya Kriti" 36) since the fight against oppression is a fight against alienated labour, fight for regaining the human essence, i.e. free, creative labour. Of course, like these two critics, the workers of Digboi, their communist leaders like Chatterjee, Goswami, etc. also, did not nurture the ideas of creative and alienated labour. They were fighting for better wages, better conditions of living, etc. Marx criticised capitalism not merely for its unequal distribution of wealth but

for perverting labour into forced, alienated, futile labour which cannot be remedied by better payment; better payment of alienated labour is not the issue – the issue is converting alienated labour into free, creative labour. In conclusion to his discussion of the novel, G.P. Sarma remarks that “The ultimate identity of man is not different from that of the animals; biological drives and biological characteristics guide man” (*Birendrakumar* 53). Alienated labour, snatching away the human essence, projects man in this light, and makes him the plaything of biology. Sarma says so concerning Giyasuddin’s relationship with women. But, Giyasuddin fails to establish any proper relationship of love with his first wife Madhuri, second wife Jahanara, and would-be wife Pannu. He forsook Madhuri as she cannot give birth to a male child; he marries Jahanara in the hope of getting a male child. Thus he regards humans as machines or objects only. Thus though otherwise progressive, Giyasuddin is also largely dehumanised by the ambience of alienated labour which makes a binary division between the subject and the object.

Malaya Khaund in her detailed discussion talks about the political ambience, social atmosphere, presentation of women characters, the life of the workers, characters of the British, etc. Mainly she echoes the ideas of the earlier critics but adds a few new points. She mentions how the British lady Mrs. Fleming termed Mr. Towler’s way of dealing with the workers as “the way of robbers.” “The ruling system of this way of robbers did not allow the workers’ union to grow” (Khaund 116). Khaund does not go into the depth of Mrs. Fleming’s unconscious hint at the idea of alienated labour. The British managers in particular and capitalists in general “rob” the product of labour and thus dehumanise the workers. Further, she points out that the strike failed because of the workers’ ignorance and lack of education and the impact of the Second World War. However, she fails to see that a socialist/communist revolution cannot succeed in isolation from similar activities in other parts of the country. Despite the arrival of a handful of activists from outside Digboi the strike in Digboi was largely isolated. The state machinery supporting the capitalists is far more powerful compared to the tiny number of workers in Digboi. So the worker’s defeat was inevitable. Defeat in a battle within the vast and long war does not matter much, what matters is the expansion of workers’ unions and their class consciousness. The strike is somewhat successful in that.

Therefore, the author titles it as *Pratipad* (the first night when the moon appears in the sky after complete darkness). Later the action follows a different trajectory; class struggle gives way to the freedom struggle – an ideological move that this study will elaborate on in the fourth chapter. Khaund sees the symbolic purport of Minubai's death from tuberculosis and the terrible screams of Ramchandra, a leprotic patient. She says that Minubai's death is a symbol of the misery of the workers and Ramchandra's sufferings are that of the pangs of the workers. We see both these two examples as symbols of the dehumanising impact of alienated labour. Pinky Saikia, in her essay "Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyar Uponyas" (2012), adds nothing new to the ideas formulated by the earlier critics. But at the end of her discussion, she makes a strange claim that "It is only a fiction, the social mind is not reflected here, and it is not history" (134). It is fiction, no history – true. But, the incidents described in the fiction are very close to the truth of historical incidents that have taken place in Digboi at that time, as Gobinda Prasad Sarma has meticulously shown. Further, a composite, metropolitan society like that portrayed in the novel cannot have one definite "social mind", but the novel successfully depicts the various social forces, and various classes along with their class interests, allowing us to peep into the "social minds" of different groups of people. Overall, the critics in general are aware of the oppression and exploitation of the workers by the management. But, they do not see these as consequences or symptoms of alienated labour. To them, better wages, better status, and better livelihood would put an end to the worker's plight. But the human essence of the workers in particular and human beings, in general, can be restored only through the replacement of alienated labour with free, creative labour; only through radical changes in the mode of production. We propose to go into the depth of the nature of alienated labour lying implied in the novel and show how its plot, character, symbolism, form, and even mode of narration are largely determined by the novel's representation of this dehumanising alienated labour.

Rupabarir Palas

This novel represents the labour of another labouring community – the Muslims who migrated from East Bengal. Like *Nadai*, this novel has attracted the attention of only

a few critics. Upendra Nath Sarma and Gobinda Prasad Sarma are two of them. Both share the view with Malik, the author, that the cruelty of landlordism in East Bengal was the cause behind the migration of these people to Assam. Sarma finds a few more reasons in the novel like poverty, communal-political riots, etc. But both critics, like the novelist, have not mentioned the role of the colonial policy of the British behind this migration. That such movement of labour served the cause of augmenting imperialist capital is indicated in neither the novel nor its criticism. Upendra Nath Sarma notes that the story of the migrated group is told through the story of the struggle and rise of a typical individual named Babar. Babar witnesses the landlord's tyranny, oppression, and exploitation. Fighting against it, he has to flee to Assam and become part of the migrated group. His rehabilitation, labour, and progress have been narrated. Apart from being a farmer, he became a contractor during the Second World War. He marries the daughter of the *gaonburha* (village elder) who sheltered him. His sympathy for the plights of Mariyam, Muslima, the revolutionary teacher Girin, and even the villainous Kamran establishes him as an ideal character to some extent. He accepts the Assamese language and culture, and merges into it by degrees, and so does his daughter, Keteki. Upendra Nath Sarma notices its "epical range" ("Patoni") and Gobinda Prasad Sarma notes the unbiased objectivity of its narration. Sarma further notes that as there was a gap in the vacillating political ideology of Malik and his act, there is a gap between the ideology and act of Babar also. "The reader may or may not accept such contradiction of political ideology and act as natural, but that was the reality in case of several migrated and local Muslims like Malik" (*Asamiya Upanyasar* 361). Babar does not share the ideology of the Muslim League, yet incidentally becomes a supporter of it. Sarma adds that Malik, in the beginning phase of the Assam Movement, seemed to say that deportation of these migrants as not possible; rather they should be accepted in the greater interest of the welfare of the Assamese society. Both of these critics do not make it explicit that Babar migrated from a feudal economy characterised by alienated labour to an economy the general characteristic of which is free, creative labour. We tend to fill in this gap and show how creative labour fulfills Babar's life giving it an aura of completeness. This play of creative labour not only makes Babar truly happy and successful but also generates a comic (in the sense of a happy ending) form for the novel. Another critic Abdul Malik

discusses in detail the religious beliefs, role, and status of women, sociocultural elements, festivals, etc. in the society depicted in the novel. This survey-like discussion does not serve our purpose.

Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya

Several critics including Upendra Nath Sarma, Shashi Sharma, Shoilen Bharali, Gobinda Prasad Sarma, Bibhajyoti Dutta, Mayuri Saikiya, have expressed their views about this novel. All of them outline how the exploited, deprived, landless poor coolies from the middle part of India were enticed by the agents of the British Raj to come to Assam, how the uprooted people made an inhumanly tortuous and painful journey that beggars description and in the course of which they lost women and babies because of diseases, especially cholera, how their girls and women were exploited by the superiors and sahibs, how the dead bodies of their fellow travelers were thrown into the water, how they received only cruelty and oppression even in the place of their hope, how they gradually mixed up with other people and gradually merged into the Assamese society and formed labourer's union and fought for a better life. According to Nalinidhar Bhattacharyya, "*Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is his best work" (*Srestha Sahitya* 171). For Upendra Nath Sarma and Mayuri Saikiya, the novel is comparable to novels like *Seuji Patar Kahini*, *Dawor Aru Nai* (1955), and *Kalor Humuniyah*. "This novel, written on the life of the tea garden labourers, reminds us of the famous Assamese novels like Jogesh Das' *Dawar Aru Nai*, Rasna Baruah's *Seuji Patar Kahini*, Birendrakumar Bhattacharyya's *Kalor Humuniyah*, etc." (Saikiya 28). Upendra Nath Sarma sees parallels between this novel and *The Grapes of Wrath*, both depicting the exodus of multitudes of poor people. "If one reads the unforgettable first chapters of this novel, one cannot help remembering the novel *Grapes of Wrath* by Steinbeck. The labourers migrate from one end of the country to another in two comparable situations" (*Nirbachita* 92). For us, this sort of comparison is superficial as the purpose and achievements of each of these novels are unique. For example, the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* fights hard against all odds on their journey of hope while the coolies of the present novel appear as puppets in the hands of their superiors on their way; they learned to fight only later. *Seuji*

Patar Kahini does not show any development of consciousness of the coolies while the plot of the present novel centers on that development. Further, as Gobinda Prasad Sarma claims, “There is no second novel till date which takes the tea tribes as the single subject” (“Umakanta Sarma” 29). Shoilien Bharali’s view is different, “This is the second Assamese novel written on the complete life of the tea garden labourers” (34). He indicates *Seuji Patar Kahini* as the first such novel, but this researcher regards Sarma’s view as more appropriate.

Both Upendra Nath Sarma and Mayuri Saikiya point out that Banha’s family is the centre of the action. This researcher agrees but likes to add that Banha-Tulsi-Arjun – these three members of three generations of the family represent three stages of consciousness of the coolies represented by the three parts of the novel. Significantly, the first part ends with Banha’s death who accepted oppression without protest; the second part is mostly occupied by his son Tulsi, the leader of the coolies, who is a protester with no formal education. This part ends with the birth of Arjun who in the third part represents further development of the coolie consciousness receiving education and adding education to their struggle. This researcher agrees with Shashi Sharma as he says that “Umakanta Sarma’s sincerity and honesty in the portrayal of the totality of coolie life cannot be found in others” (“Pragatishil Bhabdhara” 49) and he performs a national duty by portraying how the forefathers of these people were brought by the British, how they were compelled to live an obnoxious life and how they became an unavoidable part of Assam through unification, mixing, harmonisation and combination. Shashi Sharma, therefore, calls the novelist progressive. This researcher disagrees with Sharma in this regard. This is so because, as in *Pratipad*, in this novel also, class struggle is weakened and diverted in many ways which will be thoroughly analysed in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Bibhajyoti Dutta makes a valid point when she says that the novel depicts oppressive rule and exploitation on the one hand and a glimpse of a better life on the other. “The novelist presents very tactfully the rule and exploitation on the one hand and the glimpses of betterment on the other” (292). Further, she justifies the title of the novel by saying that *aranya* (forest) provides all necessities for living and enriches man through its largeness, man has to struggle in *aranya* to live with ferocious animals and fear of death at all moments. None of these critics sees the play of alienated labour even though

everyone sees its symptoms. This researcher will endeavour to show how the ideological representation of alienated labour and the struggle against it largely determines the plot, character, narrative technique, form, formation of subjectivity, and formation of identity.

From the above discussion, it is seen that critics have not discussed the novels from the vantage point of creative/alienated labour. Further application of the ideas of over-determined reality and point of entry are not to be found in the discussion of Assamese novels in general and these novels in particular. Application of these ideas will yield new readings of these novels providing us with new insights into the form, plot, character, narration, and even symbolism of these novels. It will help us to explain how alienated labour makes *Pratipad* and *Seuji Patar Kahini* tragic, how the struggle against alienated labour makes it possible to overcome tragedy by hopefulness in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, and how free, creative labour, though purely at individual levels, makes *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas* comparatively “comic” (having relatively happier endings) in form. This study will show how in *Pratipad* set in a purely capitalist system, there is no comic relief in the plot and how relief can be found in the part-feudal-agrarian part-capitalist setup of *Seuji Patar Kahini*. This researcher will try to see the intricate mechanism of various, inter-determining story threads giving rise to the over-determined textual realities along with the ideological choice of points of entry. Further, it is seen that except for Hiren Gohain in his discussion of *Seuji Patar Kahini* and, to some extent, Gobinda Prasad Sarma in his discussion of *Rupabarir Palas*, the critics, in general, are oblivious to the role of ideology in the novels. Gohain shows how the limits of the middle-class ideology of the author do not allow him to imagine a revolutionary character in the novel and Sarma shows how Malik’s vacillating political ideology makes Babar also self-contradictory in his political ideology and act. This researcher will see how ideology plays a significant role in both revealing and concealing the roles of creative and alienated labour. Eagleton observes, “Fiction may be a potent source of ideology since one function of ideology is to present a specific situation as though it were a universal truth” (*The English* 13).

Rationale and Objective of the Study

A novel that does not depict man and his affairs does not exist. And man does not exist without material production that requires primarily labour. Thus labour is basic to human culture and existence. Therefore one needs to examine whether or not fictional representation addresses the issue of labour. Yet it has been seen that despite the enormous volume of criticism of fiction, criticism centered on the issue of labour does not form a large part of the totality. Almost all of this is quite silent about the role of the representation of alienated and created labour in fiction, that is, the critics in general, including the Marxists, even those who take the issue of labour seriously, do not base their analyses of novels on the issue of creative and alienated labour. It is surprising in the context of the fact that Marx famously defines man in terms of creative labour; in other words, creative labour, for him, is the human essence and alienated labour cripples it. Although creative labour is the human essence that distinguishes man from other beings, man is not simply *homo economicus*. Apart from material objects man, in the long course of its development, creates several other processes – law, politics, religion, etc. – which also contribute in various degrees to the ‘creation’ of man. All these processes inter-determine one another and thus give rise to an intricate socio-historical reality and this process is termed as over-determination. One can make sense of this almost inconceivably intricate reality only by choosing a point of entry. This choice is not ideologically neutral. A novel, the primary task of which is to depict man and society, depicts, knowingly or unknowingly, the over-determined human existence with or without a consciously or unconsciously chosen point of entry. A few critics like Julian Markels approach the novels of Dickens and others from the standpoint of analysing the over-determined reality and point of entry. However this approach is not one of the dominant ones in the entire world, and in the criticism of the Assamese novels, it is largely absent. The representation, adequate or inadequate, or suppression, of labour, creative labour, alienated labour, over-determination, and the choice of point of entry or the lack of it, are ideologically bound.

To analyse the ideological representation of creative and alienated labour and over-determination and also the ideological choice of point of entry along with the impact

of all this upon the formal elements is quite a new approach in the discussion of the Assamese novels. Thus this study promises to be pioneering in the history of criticism of Assamese novels in general and the selected novels in particular. To make an in-depth study and close analyses of the novels with meticulous attention to the minute details, this study has been limited to five key Assamese novels published in those four decades – 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s – that established and consolidated the power of the Assamese middle-class as the mover and leader of the Assamese society. These four decades are bracketed by two significant socio-political events – the Freedom Movement and the Assam Movement – in which the Assamese middle class engaged profoundly and thereby gained social power and recognition. In between these two, this class not only involved itself in but also led movements like the State Language Movement of the sixties and the Language Medium Movement of the seventies. But, these cannot be compared to the Freedom Movement and the Assam movement in size, scale, scope, and impact. The Freedom Movement is its first big engagement in the twentieth century and the Assam Movement is the last. The ideology of a class becomes relatively more conspicuous in the period of its rise and consolidation. This study has, therefore, chosen this period to see the impact of the Assamese middle-class ideology on the issues mentioned above.

This study proposes to examine how the selected novels represent labour in general and alienated and creative labour in particular. Further, it wants to explore how the selected novels represent over-determined reality and what points of entry are chosen to do that. It will particularly explore what role the Assamese middle-class ideology plays in delineating creative labour, alienated labour, and over-determined reality and in choosing points of entry. It will also consider what role, if any, is played by the Marxian imagination in the making of the novels.

Research Methodology

Close readings of the primary sources, that is, the five novels selected for the present work will be made. These readings will involve paying special attention to the major tropes involved in the theoretical scaffolding of this research study. As has been

mentioned earlier, these specific tropes are related to labour (creative and alienated), over-determination, and point of entry. It is needless to mention that considerations relating to ideology, class, nationalism, polity, etc. will also form part of the discussion in the close reading of the texts. Wherever pertinent, the relevant theoretical discussion conducted in Chapter I will be employed in the central chapters of this work to make this research theoretically rich.



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Chapter II

Creative and Alienated Labour in the Novels

From age to age to meet

Man's myriad need,

For ever,

They row, hold the rudder.

In the fields they sow,

Ripe paddy they mow

Royal parasols crumb,

The war trumpet goes dumb

They toil far and wide

At the river and sea side

To work up life's supreme hymn

They toil aside hundreds of empires' ruin.

Rabindranath Tagore

Introduction

This study starts with Georg Lukács' claim made in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1963) that "However various the données of literature, the basic question is, and will remain: What is Man?" (19). It follows from this that the fundamental function of a novel also is to inquire into this question: What is man? The

definition of man may be given from various standpoints. But this study finds Marx's idea of man as propounded in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* more illuminating as it is based on creative labour and this study also proposes to examine the representation of labour in a few Assamese novels. According to Marx, creative labour is the distinguishing characteristic of man or it is the human essence. When labour is not creative and free, it is, as termed by Marx, alienated or estranged labour that dehumanises man or distances man from his essence. This idea is reiterated by several other theoreticians. John Bellamy Foster observes, "Marx defines human beings as creative beings, able to transform their relation to nature and to each other. Labour – understood in its broadest sense as the realm of human creativity and productive activity – is what distinguishes the human species from all other species....It is this view of humanity as *homo faber* (the maker) which underlies Marx's entire analysis of historical development" (50). Ernst Fischer says, "Because Marx saw the "species-nature of man" in creative activity, in man's conscious transformation of the outside world and consequently in his all-round self-realisation, the loss of the creative quality of labour meant to him man's alienation from his species-nature and therefore from himself" (64-65). Ultimately it may be said that a novel in general and a labour-oriented novel in particular, ideally, cannot but represent creative and/or alienated labour if to represent man in the sense mentioned above. This chapter is going to unravel how labour in its alienated and creative forms is represented in the novels selected for this study. For this purpose, primarily Marx's ideas of alienated and creative labour as propounded in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* will be quoted, and how the textual materials of the novels are and/or are not aligned with these ideas will be examined.

Representation of Alienated Labour in the Novels

Marx said that "the devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things" (*Manuscripts* 28). In *Seuji Patar Kahini*, examples of the devaluation of men are quite a lot. Budhu tells Nareswar that Armstrong Sahib "did not pass an order without kicking the coolies with boots, or whipping their bodies" (Baruah 83). In the club, Mrs. Piper, while boasting of Mr. Piper's deftness, says

that according to Mr. Piper, “Red eyes on the babus, whipping of the labourers and alert vigilance of sahibs, yield the best quality tea” (237). *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* also describes how about seven hundred coolies as cheap labour for tea gardens in Assam were brought from Odissa to Gowalond like animals only in four compartments of a train and from Gowalond to Dhuburi on only one ship where there is room only for two hundred. A doctor said to the sardars, “What have you kept here? Are they men or other things? Even cows and buffalos should not be kept like this. Here the room is not sufficient for even one hundred men, and you have kept many more hundreds! You should be hanged” (U. Sarma 20). In *Nadai*, the role of free, creative labour is more dominant than that of alienated labour. Further, this alienated labour is not as crude as that in a capitalist setup. Yet when Nadai requests Dambaru Bhattacharyya for land for sharecropping and refuses to stay with him, Bhattacharyya bursts into anger and behaves as if Nadai is not human, “Curs like you cannot make progress. Understand? Get out, get out from my house” (D. Sarma 180). “Bhattacharyya is a very strict man. Even if the land lies fallow, his share of crops and tax must be given...He not only takes back the land from the sharecropper, but he also gets his capital and interest by holding meetings or by lawsuits.” Further, “Three years ago, Dambaru Bhattacharyya taught his villager Rongai bitter lessons for such reasons.... He could clear the liabilities only by selling his bullocks. On the other hand, the land also went away.... From that day onward, there is no end of his misery” (192). Thus Bhattacharyya values Rongai the man much less than money.

Rupabarir Palas, in the early chapters, presents a vivid portrayal of the condition of alienated labour caused by the cruel system of landlordism. Johur is whipped for his failure to collect fish of the length of the landlord’s imagination and he is called a “traitor” (Malik 6). The fishes are the outcomes of Johur’s labour on that chilling wintry night, yet the landlord not only owns and consumes them but also treats Johur in such a way as if fishes are more important to him than Johur, the human. Such devaluation of men is demonstrated in many ways in *Pratipad*. Nasiruddin says, “He told me to call Jebunnisa. I did not move. He took the *raidang* (rattan) and caned my back. Then he chased me away by setting dogs behind me” (Bhattacharyya 169-170). The leper was no leper, but a worker turned disabled in an accident and he did not get proper treatment. His

painful cries become a symbol of the workers' devalued life at large. The protesting workers were killed like mice and the magistrate gave false reports about the killing, "The magistrate could not determine who was responsible for the crime of killing people" (267). The workers also know fully well that "the sahibs will discharge the workers from work even at the cost of killing people" (244). This devaluation leads to oppression and exploitation. Nasiruddin's wife Meher Bibi committed suicide to get rid of the oppression of Philips. And Jebunnisa says, "The sahibs behave with me as they behaved with my mother and if I beget daughter, they will do the same with her also. The world will detest her also" (21). Chatterjee meets with an accident and as Ismail says, "Not a single dispensary here. Even a first aid box is not to be found here" (126). Several people died in a blast while working for the company but the company is reluctant to give compensation to the families of the dead. The novel asks, "What is the value of life here?" (141).

"The object which labour produces – labour's product – confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the worker....Whatever the product of his labour, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him" (Marx, *Manuscripts* 29). The tea garden is the product of the labour of the coolies, but it assumes greater importance than them. In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, "The coolies in the garden are imprisoned in the garden.... It's a crime on their part to go out of the garden at night" (U. Sarma 54). They are whipped for that. "Right in the morning their back skin is rent" (71). Assistant manager Mackenzie thinks, "If they read, who will work for the garden, and what will the educated boys and girls do?" (222). Not only coolies, but also other stakeholders are nothing compared to the importance of the garden. Manager Finley thinks, "It's easy to get Cheniram (Maikibabu) out. His departure will not make any loss to the garden" (195). Further, "Let Mackenzie die, he (Finley) will not bother. But his death will bring death to the garden too. This he will not tolerate" (258-259). Dugga asks, "If Rupohijan estate is annexed with another, will you be able to object?" Bishnath replies, "No, we are coolies who work. How can we have objections?" (201). Thus their product is not theirs or alien to them, exists outside them,

independent of them. In *Seuji Patar Kahini* also Sukhdeo is whipped for going out of the garden and working as a *faltu* (unregistered worker) in another garden, Ouguri Tea Estate. Rotou is severely beaten by Mr. Miller for stealing some tea from the factory. Thus, the tea produced by the workers is not theirs. The garden and tea transcend their producers. Thus, the worker is enslaved by the object as it enables him to exist. That the product stands alien to the producer and transcends him, is dramatised in the present time of *Seuji Patar Kahini* only in this single scene of chapter thirteen.

In *Pratipad* the company survives and prospers through the labour of the workers, but they are counted as nothing before the profit-making interest of the company. Their wages are cut in trivial matters. For example, “One thousand oil-well workers have been dismissed” (Bhattacharyya 25). “The oil-well workers may be dismissed at any moment” (17). Again, “The sahib issues discharge notice to fifty people” (92). Chandi says, “A new machine has come. Fewer people are required now. Earlier many people were needed to run the engine. One in place of five is enough now” (92). Further, “They build a cemetery with money. Why will the company have the common love for men that men bear for men?” (92). The most potent and important worker Giasuddin’s house is also not spared from being raided. The workers’ justified demands are softly dismissed by Taoler, “The Company cannot accept these claims, and these claims are made only as a means to create trouble in the industry. The company will not care” (199). “The company issues notice of dismissing a hundred workers from the refinery, oil-well, and office.... Even a very favourite employee of the company, Giasuddin Sahib, also is not spared” (207). “If the workers do not join work, the sahibs will appoint other people. But, they will not accept the demands of the workers” (224). The company officials killed even their secret agent Bodhan. His daughter Lasmi cries, “You have worked so much for the sahibs. Now, you have died at their bullets –” (234). Thus Marx is correct as he observes, “As, in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalistic production, he is governed by the products of his own hand” (*Capital* 436). Eagleton also arrives at the same conclusion, “Alienation is the condition in which men and women fail to recognise the objective world as their own subjective creation” (*The English* 18).

“Labour indeed produces for the rich wonderful things – but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty –

but for the worker deformity.... It produces intelligence – but for the worker stupidity, cretinism” (Marx, *Manuscripts* 30). “They all are dirty. When clothes are few and work to be done in the forest day and night, bodies are tired because of hard labour, one must be dirty. It’s a habit also” (U. Sarma 148). When post-earthquake diseases were all-pervasive, there was only one doctor, Dr. Chakrabarty, without any assistants, whom Tulsi, Bishnath, and Bisni had to help. They had to improvise so many things as the room was scanty in the hospital and other facilities were insufficient. People took recourse to Bhola’s *sudhasamudra* (a home-made medicine), bacyline, and black tablets, i.e. opium. “Child death in the garden is not big news....But, death of five babies just in a week made people anxious” (216). And it resulted in the killing of Dayalu’s aunt whom some believed to be a witch. Some coolies like Dayalu and Bhakru are skeptical about the establishment of the school. So they secretly disturbed the preparation for its inauguration. When others were talking about the annexation of Assam with Bangladesh, Magho got bored and said, “If you do not have other things to talk about, talk about Timki or children. How many do you have now?” (207). He also thinks that the British alone is fit to be rulers. In *Seuji Patar Kahini* the workers are victims of superstition. They believe that “the trees are possessed by evil spirits. Only after performing *pūja* (an act of worship) and sacrificing hens and goats, they could strike at trees with axes” (Baruah 36). They lack education. Sonia says, “Fooh, why should coolie boys go to school?” (61). Durjon Sardar observes, “The labourers would have committed suicide right at their birth had they been incapable of enjoying life’s laughter and pleasure even amid hundreds of needs” (113). There is no light in the coolie line – “Why those, whose life is unbearable because of wants, will waste money for kerosene oil for moving from darkness to light?” (136). The mothers lack nourishment, so the babies also are deprived of it – “Milk will form in the breast only if mothers find food to eat! ... The money husband and wife earn together is not enough for two meals per day” (203).

In *Nadai*, Gayan steals Nadai’s surplus labour; Dambaru Bhattacharyya calculates his wages for at least eight years to be nearly four hundred rupees whereas the cost of the calves Gayan gives to him costs around twenty or thirty rupees. Dambaru also wanted to keep him as a bonded labourer but Nadai declined that offer. “Many were jealous of Gayan’s luck... Gayan has found such a fit man at no cost” (D. Sarma 173). It is in the

interest of Nadai's surplus labour that Bhattacharyya wants to keep him, "Will you stay with me?" (180). The exploitative system of sharecropping itself is a rural form of the condition of alienated labour: Rongai's family and Kaliya's family are sharecroppers in the land of Dambaru Bhattacharyya. The system makes Gayan and Bhattacharyya affluent but Rangai pauper and mad. It threatens the existence of Kaliya's family which is saved by Nadai. Nadai also deprives his workers like Budhon of their products as he was deprived by Gayan earlier in the story. Kaliya's mother and sister, Naduki, also realise that "Dambaru Deu deceives them engaging them at work at half price...But they remained silent under the pressure of their condition" (190). In *Rupabarir Palas*, a very cold night of winter is chosen to vivify the sufferings of people under the exploitative system of landlordism; the winter backdrop makes conspicuous and foregrounds the reality of their poverty and oppression. Even in such a late hour of the cold wintry night, they are almost without clothes! "All their feet are bare, none has shoes in his feet, and shoes are not there even in the feet of the sardars of each department" (Malik 1). "Nothing except the *lungis* (waistcloth) were there on the bodies of a few of them" (1). But, opposed to this miserable condition of the tenants and workers, is the luxury and comfort of the landlord's family, "In the upper story of the building of the landlord, the sweet warmth of soft, expensive blankets were pressing down all even at that time" (2).

In *Pratipad* the leaflet issued by the workers speaks volumes of their miserable condition: "Some houses have been built and they are divided into A, B, C, and D, etc. groups. But in most of them, light, water, washing facility, and other necessary facilities are lacking. In comparison to the houses of the covenanted staff and the sahibs, these houses may be called cowsheds. In the sahibs' bungalows, there are many electric fans, lights, water tapes, curtains, carpets, dining sets, drawing sets, telephones, motors, *khanchamas* (butlers), and *baburchis* (cooks) ... Latrines are public. No ceilings in the houses. Entrance of air and light is difficult" (Bhattacharyya 71). The union's demand letter to Taoler reiterates the same problems, "Minimum wages, to fix the scale of salary, leave with salary on the days of the festival, rate of salary increase, skill bonus, fixing service period, gratuity, medical leave, medical care facilities, schools, residential houses, compensation for accidents, promises for canteen and security..." (181). "The company profits enormously. The facilities from the profit are enjoyed by the directors,

managers, senior assistants, etc. ... The workers' jobs are not guaranteed, not to speak of getting salary allowances, etc." (128). Death, decay, disease, and malnutrition are regular features of the workers' lives. Chandi's calves are thin and dried up (1). His wife is on a sickbed for a year without proper treatment (4). The doctor failed to come in time to treat her as he was busy with the pregnant wife of the Chota Sahib. His younger children Shekhar and Sona die of cholera without treatment. Nasiruddin, after completing the story of the leper, says, "Just this is the life of the workers. Pain, pain and pain" (177). The workers perceive this condition of alienated labour, "Happiness is for the sahibs only, for us only misery" (15). The condition of alienated labour leaves many of them backward and ignorant. Chandi is an upholder of casteism and untouchability. Jebunnisa complains, "Uncle Chandi did not allow me to take Sona in my lap. So much contempt! He disgraced me in public!" (20). Chandi is superstitious as well; "Father said that Goddess Kali is dissatisfied. If *puja* is offered, he will get well" (45).

"The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it....it (labour) is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another....Therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating... and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal" (Marx, *Manuscripts* 30). The labourers in *Seuji Patar Kahini* also feel emancipated when they are away from work. "The sun, even before they wake up, brings the comfort of emancipation of leave days, the leisure of the workless day increases enthusiasm" (Baruah 174). Lokhu contrasts pleasure with labour and metaphorically talks about the burning of work, "Let them laugh – they will laugh only for the night. In the morning they will come to pluck the young leaves to burn in the fire of the factory" (106). Theodor Adorno comments on this divide between work and pleasure, "Work completely severed from the element of playfulness becomes drab and monotonous, a tendency which is consummated by the complete qualification of industrial work" (*The Stars* 97). The two novels based on plantation labour – *Seuji Patar Kahini* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan*

Aranya – draw their liveliness from scenes depicted outside workplaces: from scenes of dancing, love-making, quarreling, drinking, etc. The proportion of such scenes in *Seuji Patar Kahini* is so large that they tend to cover up the fact of the sufferings of the coolies. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* takes particular care not to depict any scene inside the factory. *Seuji Patar Kahini*, of course, depicts one scene inside the factory when Sonia is looking for Powali Babu. Even this scene also does not depict labourers at work. In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* the few working scenes in the garden are also replete with torture as the beating of Dugga by Memsahib for uprooting a rotten plant (U. Sarma 65), lengthening of working time (“As per sahib’s order, work is extended by one hour today”; 243) and other sorts of exploitation. In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* the coolies were forced to work at the extended division of the estate, i.e. at Chandinighat, against their will. “Coolies...are always beaten. One should be blamed if one praises them even when they do good works” (72).

In *Nadai*, deceived by his near relatives and deprived of his father’s meager means of livelihood, Nadai runs away to a distant village and there performs alienated labour for Bhadiya Gayan. He perceives the condition of alienated labour, “True, he grows potatoes, it is his product, but he has no right over it.... He starts not to feel any pleasure from working, farming.... These are not his. The land is Gayan’s, the farming is Gayan’s – he has no right over them” (D. Sarma 174). Johur in *Rupabarir Palas* feels in similar ways, “Johur has a big unhappiness: he does not have a piece of land of his own. All is landlord’s land...the landlord if he likes, can snatch away the crops of his land” (Malik 10-11). Babar, the hero, cannot be equated with a landlord. Yet he also appropriates the labour of others; less cruelly, he also exploits the surplus labour of others including Mariyam and Muslima. The labour of Mariyam and Muslima is latent in Babar’s property yet not they, but Babar and Rani are the owners. An angry Babar, therefore, can order Mariyam to get out, “Babar, as in snubbing, shouts with a rude voice, ‘Shut up! What does it matter to you if we have quarrels (between Rani and him)? Get out–’” (290). Later the repentant Babar brings Mariyam back but the incident unmistakably shows his unquestionable authority in the household which Mariyam and Muslima cannot claim. Thus Mariyam, Muslima, and others do not fulfill themselves through their work; they do not work for themselves but for people like Babar. Muslima

reveals the lack of fulfillment in her life in these words, “My life was of no use for anyone...But I loved you” (407). In *Pratipad* also the workers at large do not enjoy their work. They, therefore, complain about their working conditions. Chandi expresses his displeasure in this way, “Here there are machines, electric lights, shops and all, but no love, no religion” (Bhattacharyya 16). “No weekly leave, no certainty of shifts, no quarters. When there is any accident, there is no compensation” (17). They want to enjoy life outside of work, so they ask for leave but the company does not grant those leaves. “No leave is granted even in times of *pujas*, functions, and festivals” (12). Though Baruah once says, “Happiness of the village life is not here – true. But here is the happiness of running the engines,” (15) such “happiness” is not realised in the action of the novel. A scene in the twelfth chapter is revealing. Lasmi meets with an accident and Giasuddin rescues her. After that Aimya wants to take a rest under the pretext that “the engine has become hot” (77). But, Giasuddin does not allow Aimya to take a rest. Aimya criticises his workaholic nature, “When he is here, you do not find time to rest. Work, work, work. Mark it, he will stay here tonight. He has a newly married woman at home. But he is more interested in drilling than in his wife. This man is a monster” (77-78). His companion Ramu also did not want to continue work. He says, “Let the engine keep running. Let’s talk a little. Let’s go a little away from here” (78). Giasuddin’s love for work is exceptional. He can assert his individuality at work, prove himself exceptionally skillful, and outclass the British geologists in calculating the level of oil. “Hey Aimya, see at what little depth oil is found. Sahib said – 6000 feet! Inform the sahib at once” (81). But the general unhappiness of the workers is revealed right in the beginning sentence of the novel when Chandi says, “I cannot bear it any longer” (1). So Nasiruddin wanted peace in pilgrimage and Chandi in the Ramakrishna Mission temple.

Significantly, the thirty-nine-chapter long novel includes only two chapters that depict the actual workplace and each of these two also contains an accident – the twelfth chapter depicts Lasmi’s and the nineteenth Chatterjee’s accidents. Thus the worker-based novel is reluctant to depict scenes at workplaces and when it depicts it depicts accidents! Reports that come from the workplace are generally unpleasant and terrible. The blast that took four lives, dismissals of the workers, pay cuts, etc. are the reports that disturb the Home. The ominous shadow of Work darkens the Home also and, therefore, Home

scenes also carry unpleasant, disturbing notes. Death, disease, adultery, frustration at love, divorce, various forms of family troubles, etc. are abundantly portrayed in the novel. The lovers talk but do not make love and their talks lead to dissatisfaction and frustration. Jebunnisa could not get Ismail's love and Ismail Pannu's. Ismail loves and marries Lasmi and wants to leave her. Chatterjee could not get Pannu's love and Madhuri and Jahanara Giasuddin's. The most unemotional man, Giasuddin, loves/marries three women but there is not a single love scene where he is present. The most successful lovers seem to be Nayanmoni and Durga but when Durga wants to clasp Nayanmoni's hand for the first and last time in the novel, Nayanmoni stops him by saying, "Not now. I will allow you to clasp me only when you will be able to prove yourself a man" (95). Aimya significantly criticises such unfulfilling love, "This is no real love. These are attempts at building nests as the birds build nests" (80). Ismail articulates what this researcher is trying to say, "Love is the main thing. That is very much wanting in this city" (73). It is very much wanted in the novel also.

"The external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another" (Marx, *Manuscripts* 30). "If the product of labour is alien to me, if it confronts me as an alien power, to whom, then, does it belong? To a being other than myself" (32). "If the product of labour does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, then this can only be because it belongs to some other man than the worker" (33). In the thirteenth chapter of *Seuji Patar Kahini*, Mr. Miller, the manager, tries lots of cases against the coolies and complaints by some of them. It happens because not only their products but themselves also do not belong to them but to the owners and managers of the tea estate. Domari needs the manager's letter to bring the girl from Ouguri Tea Estate whom he married. "Sir, Domari has married a girl of the Ouguri Tea Estate. You are requested to bring him the girl writing a letter to the manager of that estate" (Baruah 121). Mr. Miller passes an order about the marriage between Kalicharan and Jonaki's daughter with Etowa. Several cases are "amicably settled" (125) and the settler is only Mr. Miller. The workers create the garden and produce tea. But their creations and productions do not belong to them. So Sukhdeo cannot work where he wishes to and Rotou cannot take a little tea from the factory without permission.

Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya also registers the fact that the development of the coolie life depends on the will and policy of the management. It is Finley the manager who thinks, "There is a danger if a doctor cannot be brought from the town at least for a week. Finley himself prepares to go" (U. Sarma 164). Further, Finley's goodwill is pivotal to the process of the establishment of the school, "There is no end to Finley's enthusiasm for nicely establishing the school." "If the factory needs to be fit for working, then the schoolhouse also needs to be fit for teaching. So he built the schoolhouse as beautifully as it is possible" (223). But Finley is an exception; most of the managers are against the education of the tea garden labourers. "The managers do not attend to this. In truth, very few managers support the issue of the establishment of schools. Others think the establishment of schools in the garden will invite troubles one after another....The implication of admitting boys and girls to schools is to distance them from work.... Besides, the opening of schools means the appointment of teachers from outside the garden. Then gradually there will be an influx of people from outside" (221). The labourers are engaged in work in the Chandinighat Division against their will. "They object to going there despite getting all accommodation of food and lodging. It is because they believe that there are spirits and goblins in that place" (122). They argue against the sardar who insists on their continuous stay at Chandinighat, "We will not stay here any longer. No matter if the sahib kills us by beating. Here we can neither sleep nor eat for fear" (129). "Why will we stay amidst the spirits?" (130), another complains. But they have to go and work there as the management wants to extend the tea estate up to Chandinighat.

Chandi in *Pratipad* observes that landlordism is better than the exploitation of the company, "We were happier in Pupdi (name of a place in Bihar) than we are here. There was the land of the landlord of Allahabad....One can talk with them (tenants of the landlord), but here one cannot even talk with the sahibs" (Bhattacharyya 15). But Ismail remembers, "When the *jotdars* (landed peasants) take away the grains from the yard, the heart turns black" (2). That the workers are doing the work of others is confirmed by the fact that they are fired from work time and again, a process that culminates in the permanent expulsion of all of them from the oil city. "One thousand oil-well workers have been fired" (25). "The sahib has issued discharge notices to fifty people" (92). "The

company has issued a notice of dismissing one hundred workers from the refinery, oil well, and the office....Even a very favourite employee of the company, Giasuddin Sahib, also is not left out” (207). It is reconfirmed by the fact that the company brings a new set of workers to replace the existing set. “The sahibs are determined to run the refinery and the well. If the workers do not join work, the sahibs will appoint other people. But, they will not accept the demands of the workers” (224). The sahibs are callous about the compensation to be given to the families of the four workers who died in an oil well blast. “Tains is not there. He has gone for a picnic. Files are not prepared at the office. Taoler has paid no attention to it” (142). “Taoler is resolute to protect the interests of the company. He knows that the purpose of this strike is not only to get from the company what is demanded but to establish the rule of the workers” (278-279).

Nadai has to become a servant in the household of Bhadiya Gayan; he belongs to Bhadiya Gayan – a condition that he perceives and dislikes. “To be a servant in the house of others? His mind shrinks, probably it revolts” (D. Sarma 167). Gayan asks him, “Will you be a servant? What am I to give you? Will you stay at my house?” (172). When Nadai becomes a rich farmer he also keeps a servant as he was kept by Gayan. “Nadai does not need a servant....But he needs a helping hand to do Kaliya’s part of the work” (207). This “helping hand” is no other than a servant. Change of terminology cannot change the fact. The novel later says, “Budhon is his first servant. Not only a servant, but Budhon is also much more” (236). Later the number of Nadai’s servants increases. “Nowadays she (Naduki) does not need to go for planting the saplings or harvesting the paddy. Nadai has extra hands for these works” (226). Nadai keeps two *Kachari* (a tribe) servants also, “These two are *Kachari* people. How and from where they turn up at Nadai’s place! Nadai has given them a pair of bullocks and the tools for farming and engaged them in tilling that land. Nadai has profited a lot from the mustard grown in that piece of land” (235-236). “No, he has men for doing works. Not one or two, he has many” (236).

In *Rupabarir Palas* Johur catches big fishes like *rohu*, *bahu* (kinds of fish), etc. for the landlord and wishes, “If one of those fishes could be kept at home for lunch! Okay, let me not want it. We will somehow take the handful of rice fishing a few *kawoi* or *goroi* (kinds of fish) somewhere in some pond” (Malik 9). Johur is

unhappy: he has no piece of land of his own. All is the land of the landlord. “The landlord, if he wants, can snatch away the grains grown in his land” (11). Babar in Assam works as a servant of Sarif. “From the next day onward, Babar turns into a labourer amidst the labourers of the village elder’s home” (73). Sarif has several servants and maidservants, “Now and then he (Babar) thinks how could Sarif the village elder become the owner of so much of landed property, so much of money and crops, so many servants and maids!” (84). “Though he has enough money now, he is still a servant in the household of Sarif the village elder” (129). Mariyam stays at Babar’s house, does domestic labour, and keeps a hen that lays eggs, and thinks of keeping goats and a cow. But she does not belong to that house and the house does not belong to her. So Babar thinks, “After I marry the village elder’s daughter, where will Mariyam go, where will she stay? How will she live?” (201). Babar, when he turns into “a new young rich man of the village” keeps others to work for him. “Rani need not do the household work. Uncle is there, Mariyam is there and Babar has kept the two boys who work on his farm in the corner of his campus building houses for them. Babar need not do anything, it is enough if he eyes at the work and passes orders” (239). That rich farmers like Babar are dependent on the alienated labour of many others is recorded by the novel in this way, “This time the number of people who earlier worked at the time of plantation and harvesting is decreased. Because though they have been in Assam for a long time, they do not have land and house of their own” (349).

“Free, conscious activity is man’s species character” (Marx, *Manuscripts* 31). “It (animals) produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom” (32). In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* Bisni said to Timki, “How beautiful dresses are found in the market! But how will you buy? Where will you get money? For a few days you pluck more leaves. Only then a little money will be accumulated. I did the same” (U. Sarma 75). Thus, work itself is not a need but only a means to satisfy other needs. Ernst Fischer pertinently remarks, “A sense that is cramped by crude practical necessity is bound to be a sadly limited one. To a starving man, it matters little whether food is presented in a form fit for human consumption or not” (47). In *Seuji Patar Kahini* Alomoni produces wine not for earning money, not for satisfying any immediate

physical need, but for the sheer interest of the work. But others work in the garden to fulfill their physical needs. “As soon as the money of their salary falls into their hands, most of them go to the shops of the Marwaris grown centering on the garden” (R. Baruah 173). “As soon as the money of the week falls into their hands, a few of them rush to the wine shops” (147). In *Pratipad*, Giyasuddin alone enjoys his work as he can assert his individuality in work, “We got oil. The first drop of oil made the pant wet. Ah, how happy I am!” (Bhattacharyya 83). But others do not work for the sheer pleasure of the work. The leaflet and the demand letter sent to the company prove that the satisfaction of the immediate physical needs is the prime concern of the workers. “Minimum salary, fixation of the scale of salary, leave with salary on the days of festivals, rate of salary hike, expertise allowance, fixation of service period, gratuity, medical leave, provision for treatment, school, residential houses, accident compensation, provision of canteen and security, etc” (181). Physical, practical, and calculated needs are the motive forces of the main protagonists of *Rupabarir Palas* too. Rani thinks, “Boys are more needed than girls in a farmer's family” (Malik 268). Babar finds no more significance in human life than this: “What else to be done by people like us? To do farming in the agricultural fields and to produce children by wedding a woman is enough” (310).

“In a society of alienation the relationship of a man with other men is not that of a human being to his fellow human beings but that of a servant to his master, of an exploited man to his exploiter, of a subordinate to his commander, a petitioner to a man of privilege, and so forth, to include all the many ranks and degrees of social status allotted to everyone” (Fischer 65). This feature of the society informed by the condition of alienated labour is simply conspicuous. The hierarchy of rank and status is foregrounded all the time in all the societies depicted in *Seuji Patar Kahini*. In a digressive chapter, it offers a glimpse of the society of the Ahom times where a prince has to obey the king, the medical practitioner has to obey the prince and the maids have to obey all. In Nareswar’s village, everyone listens to the *boiragi*, the father can humiliate his son. In the Nahoroni tea estate, the babus and sardars have to obey the managers, the workers have to obey the babus and sardars. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* also portrays a similar hierarchy: manager, assistant manager, *kerani* babu (the clerk), jamadar babu, kamjari babu, maiki babu (different officials), sardars, and workers. In *Pratipad* there are

Bor Sahib Higgins and Fleming, followed by Taoler Sahib, Jilapsy Sahib, Tains Sahib the geologist, etc. Among the employees also there are a director, manager, senior assistant, foremen, etc. In *Nadai*, Dambaru Bhattacharyya is the most powerful man followed by Bhadiya Gayan and the ordinary peasants. Nadai is a servant to Gayan and Bhattacharyya also wants him to keep him as a servant. When Nadai becomes an independent farmer he also keeps others as servants. In the first few chapters of *Rupabarir Palas*, the landlord-tenant relationship is dramatised. Later, when the action moves to Assam, a similar hierarchy with less cruel appropriation is observed. Babar is a servant to the benevolent landlord or dewan (steward or Islamic religious instructor) Sarif. Later, Babar also keeps servants.

Marx argued that the division of labour creates less-skilled workers; less training is needed for each specific job. “Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman.... It is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack that is required of him” (*Manifesto* 18). He further said, “To the same degree in which the division of labour increases, is the labour simplified. The special skill of the labourer becomes worthless. He becomes transformed into a simple monotonous force of production, with neither physical nor mental elasticity” (*Wage Labour* 22). At Rupohijan and also at Nahoroni the women, girls, and boys uproot weeds, pluck leaves, and clear the undergrowth, while the adult males work with spades, fell trees, make fencing, etc. Skill or individuality is scarcely needed to do such ordinary jobs. In *Pratipad*, only a few like Giasuddin, Baruah, etc. are skilled workers. Even Chatterjee and Ismail are not that much skilled. Chatterjee lost his sense when hydrogen sulfide entered his nostrils. “The inexperienced Chatterjee could not put on the mask” (Bhattacharyya 125). Ismail’s confusion is clear, “Shall I make gas masks? I am only a foreman” (126). “Ismail was scared. If the gas pipes catch fire, it will be impossible to save the refinery” (127). Later, Baruah controls the dangerous situation.

The condition of alienated labour outlined above leads to dehumanisation which, in turn, implies death-in-life existence. This death-in-life existence is symbolised by a series of deaths, diseases, degenerations, divorces, etc. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* reinforces this theme of death-in-life through a series of physical deaths and scenes of destruction.

“Inside the coolie depot nearby Gowalond station, altogether fifty lives are lost within a few days” (U. Sarma 22). The deaths of Banha, Fredrick, Kurhi, Ramu, Gojanan, the newly-married woman exploited by Fredrick, several babies, patients, livestock, etc, and the suicide of Mackenzie overshadow the whole novel and make it gloomy. The graphic description of the destruction of the 1897 earthquake enhances the gloom. In *Seuji Patar Kahini* also the vipers of death, decay, and melancholy lurk behind the colourful flowers of love, fun, mirth, and amusement. Deaths of the palace maid Sahita, Jogen’s widow and social worker Naren; the murder of Armstrong; separations between Mohuwa and Feku, Prema and Aloti, and Sonia and Nareswar; departure of Nareswar from his village, Sonia’s departure from the garden and Nareswar’s final departure from the garden – all these cumulatively build up the gloom that continually disturbs the sunny surface of the story. But, unlike *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, *Seuji Patar Kahini* describes deaths, murders, rapes, etc. more as incidents of the past. Despite being a study in creative labour and despite its seeming sense of completion, the novel *Nadai* is also full of deaths – Nadai’s mother, his father, his loving aunt, his father-in-law, mother-in-law, mother of Janaklal’s son-in-law, Nadai’s fourth child, Gelai’s father, Bhadiya Gayan, his first calves and other livestock, Budhon, Dambaru Deu, wife of Benga the blacksmith, Laldhari, Premnath, Naduki, and finally Nadai himself – all die. The death of Laldhari, farmer-cum-artisan-turned-into-businessman, in an accident is an exception, but all other dead are representatives of the older way of life. *Pratipad* opens with the incident of Minubai’s pathetic death. This is followed by the deaths of her children Shekhar and Sona, the leper, Ramu, Ainya, two other workers, Jahanara, Chandi, Baruah, Bodhan, Chatterjee, Jebunnisa, and Mr. Taoler. tuberculosis, cholera, leprosy, liver disease, malnutrition, etc. pervades the action of the novel. The separation of Madhuri and Dimbeswar, the temporary distance between Nayanmoni and her father Pradhan, Beerbhadra’s attempt to rape Lasmi, Jilapsy’s continual exploitation of Jebunnisa, etc. increase the gloom of the novel. *Rupabarir Palas* tells a tale of creative labour at the expense of hiding the tales of alienated labour of many. To align with the atmosphere of the hero’s creative labour, the novel does not much deal with death. Sarif’s death signals a normal completion of a happy life, the death of Babar’s child does not make much impact on the plot and the death of Girin symbolises the death of “impractical” idealism.

This last one together with Mariyam's broken health is an unfailing indication that all is not well that ends well.

Another form of dehumanisation can be noticed in the man-woman relationship where women are mostly seen as the object of lust and machines for producing children. "They (Bhakru and Dayalu) collect wives one after another" (U. Sarma 242). What is more, Bhakru even forgets his new wife Bijli's name! (251). Only the enlightened few like Tulsi, Chitta, and Arjun exemplify humane and sustained love affairs. Manager Fredrick, Assistant Manager Mackenzie, maiki babu Cheniram, kamjari babu Nitai Paul – all view coolie women as cheap objects of lust and exploit them. Cheniram's attempt to rape Kalondi and Mackenzie's to exploit Bisni are elaborately narrated and dramatised in the present time of the story. In *Seuji Patar Kahini* also Armstrong raped Mohuwa, Powali Babu wanted to flirt with Sonia and Mongra accepted his wife from her lover Rup Singh on condition of money. Of course, the rape of Mohuwa is distanced from the present time of the story. In *Nadai*, Naduki's modesty is sought to be violated by Gelai. Here, Maniki presents herself as an object of lust before the louts. In *Rupabarir Palas*, the landlord's son, Mojamml, together with his friend, attempts to rape Mariyam and Sofica. Later in the novel, Jabbar plans to marry Maina by force and at the time of the war deals in the supply of girls to the soldiers. *Pratipad* is full of such oppression of women. The British sahibs, Philips and Jilapsy, force Meher Bibi and Jebunnisa respectively to satisfy their carnal desires. Even the hero, Giasuddin, considers women child-producing machines and leaves his first wife only because she is childless.

At Rupohijan as well as at Nahoroni, both feudal and capitalist exploitations are present. The gardens signify feudal, and the factory capitalist, mode of production. The bound slavery of the coolies is feudal and their wage slavery is capitalist. In the gardens, ordinary tools like spades are used, and, in the factory, machines. Tea produced in the factory, as well as the garden, is the objectification of the labour of the coolies. Tea, their product, is removed from them whereas the garden, though greater than them, still exists close by them. Thus, their alienation is somewhat less than it is in a purely capitalist set-up. Radhu's attachment to the garden in *Seuji Patar Kahini* is telling, "Why should we leave the garden? ... Mothers bring up their babies; we take care of the tea plants till they grow old.... The tea plants keep us green" (Baruah 108). The exploitation portrayed

in *Pratipad* is capitalist whereas the exploitation of the sharecropping system in *Nadai* and the landlordist exploitation in *Rupabarir Palas* are semi-feudal. Agriculture is quite absent in *Pratipad* while industry is not to be found in *Rupabarir Palas*. *Nadai* mentions mills but they are not dramatised in action.

In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* the processes of degeneration and regeneration as effects of and reactions to alienation can be noticed side by side. Bhola's shop breaks down (U. Sarma 195); Magho's fingers grow too stiff to blow *madol* (a drum) (356); Tulsi grows weak and lame and Kalondi falls ill (346-347); the married life of Dugga and Bishnath is not faring well (351); Chunu and his friends appear as heartless goons who accumulate money from doubtful sources. On the other hand, school is established (233-237); a workers' union is established (290); Arjun studies at a high school outside the garden and dreams of becoming a doctor (359). In *Seuji Patar Kahini* Sonia's "mysterious" farewell to the garden is a symbol of the degeneration affected by alienated labour. Nareswar's follow-up with his final departure makes that degeneration more conspicuous, further augmented by Mrs. Miller's degenerated behaviour towards Nareswar. But, unlike *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, *Seuji Patar Kahini* does not describe degeneration as a process; it presents it as a given fact. Further, there is no trace of regeneration in it. Sonia's and Nareswar's departure from the garden closes the novel with a tragic, pessimistic, negative note. Both departures happen to take place in the darkness of night while *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* closes in the morning with Arjun and Rumni, the representatives of the latest and most enlightened generation. *Pratipad* portrays varied sorts of struggles – moral, gender, class, freedom – and each of them is a way to achieve enlightenment. Though the class struggle is diluted, defeated, and diverted in several ways, the novel stands for the process of regeneration. This theme is indicated by the title itself. *Rupabarir Palas* does not depict such consistent struggle against the system; to enact peaceful co-existence with the system it falsifies history and depicts the system as good for the diligent like Babar, the hero. Forgetful of the life struggle of many, the novel insists on the honest, industrious, and compassionate hero's successful career and magnanimity; forgetful of the tragedies of Mariyam and Muslima, it prefers to close with a happy ending scene. The criticism Eagleton makes of Dickens' *Hard Times* may be made of this novel also, "It focuses on the lone individual

... whose deference, confusion and passivity are made to seem more commendable than a struggle for better wages” (*The English* 159). *Nadai* may be seen as a more subtle novel in this sense. In appearance, Nadai dies after living a complete life. But the novel represents a systemic change: the old exploitative agrarian system is sure to be replaced by a modern system of trade and commerce; the old rural, semi-feudal classes will give way to the newly emerging middle class. Nadai’s love for the land is inherited by none of his sons or daughters or friends. He is the last land-loving farmer. One may remember him as “the verray parfit gentyl knight” (Chaucer) but one is certain that his class, like that of the knights, is a matter of the past. He may be an exception but his class was cruel and exploitative whereas the new middle class is also callous and opportunist. One can sympathise with neither of these classes. Carried away with Nadai’s bildungsroman, the reader may overlook this grim and subtle tragedy but the tragedy is there. A ray of hope may be expected in the characters of Premnath, Hemolota, Menoka, and Bharat. Despite their sympathy for Nadai, they are distanced from both the classes already mentioned.

The central theme of Marx is the transformation of alienated, meaningless labour into productive, free labour, not the better payment of alienated labour by a private or “abstract” state capitalism. “For man, what is at stake is not ‘ingestion’ pure and simple; rather it is a matter of self-expression and self-creation, and not only in the economic domain but in all domains” (Castoriadis). The novels do not clearly state the significance of this human essence, this free, creative labour. Even the most enlightened worker Chitta in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* has a very limited view of the worker’s plight: “You need medicines for your children, rice to eat, a house where rain does not fall inside. Will you be whipped by the sahib for saying these? Will not you let the sahib learn that workers are also humans?” (U. Sarma 275). Only the Mathematics Teacher Mr. Bezbaruah (Risi Sir) of the same novel once hinted at this human essence: “He who lives by working is a worker. And only he is worthy to have the status of human” (335). Only Chatterjee in *Prartipad* dreams of the rule of the workers and he alone cherishes an idea that is close to Marx’s idea of free, creative labour as the human essence, yet he also does not clearly articulate the human need for creative labour. Of course, his lifestyle indicates that he is not going to succumb to the condition of alienated labour; he lives, loves, and works to achieve something more than the satisfaction of immediate physical needs, while others

are struggling for those only. His diary reads like this, “I live for others. Therefore I do not want to possess anything. Not even the woman I happen to love....Sufferings there must be, for the individual; for in his sacrifice lies the greatest glory of being a man” (Bhattacharyya 275-276). But the novel does not take him as the hero and he dies much before the end. The other three novels do not have such a character. Herbert Marcuse’s penetrative comment may be quoted here, “Marx’s analysis of labour under capitalism is thus quite deep-seated, going further than the structure of economic relationships to the actual human content. Relations such as those between capital and labour, capital and commodity, labour and commodity, and those between commodities are understood as human relations, relations in man’s social existence” (Section 4, “Marx”).

Thus it is seen that the selected novels have more or less represented alienated labour but a closer look reveals that they do the same in varying degrees and various ways. Subordination of the subject of alienated labour by prioritising other issues or themes is common to all the selected novels, yet the play between revelation and concealment is unique to each of the novels. The two novels set in the tea gardens – *Seuji Patar Kahini* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* represent alienated labour not in the same way; the former has a tendency to conceal it more and the latter is more revealing in comparison. One way of concealing alienated labour and its effects in the forms of oppression, exploitation, etc. is to distance it from the “here and now” of the novel. It has already been mentioned how Armstrong and Piper oppress and maltreat working-class people. But Armstrong is distanced from the Rupohijan Tea Estate or the “present” of the novel by time and Mr. Piper by space. But in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, unlike in *Seuji Patar Kahini*, the drama of the devaluation of humans is unfolded in front of our very eyes. Not that *Seuji Patar Kahini* does not depict the present oppressions, but compared to the other novel, it distances such incidents more. Another way to dilute the subject of alienated labour is to focus on scenes of revelry. Both novels draw their liveliness from scenes depicted outside workplaces: from scenes of dancing, love-making, quarreling, drinking, etc. The proportion of such scenes in *Seuji Patar Kahini* is so large that they tend to cover up the fact of the sufferings of the coolies. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* takes particular care not to depict any scene inside the factory. *Seuji Patar Kahini*, of course, depicts one scene inside the factory when Sonia is looking for Powali Babu. Even

this scene also does not depict labourers at work; it depicts the love between Sita and Tingmin. Still, another way to conceal the impact of alienated labour is to represent the incidents of death, murder, and suicide as matters of the past. Alienation leads to dehumanisation which implies death-in-life which, in turn, is symbolised by incidents of death, murder, suicide, disease, and destruction. Both novels have ample examples of these. But, unlike *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, *Seuji Patar Kahini* describes deaths, murders, rapes, etc. more as incidents of the past.

There is no trace of labour union in *Seuji Patar Kahini*. But, *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* narrates the formation, function, and struggle of the workers' union in Rupohijan Tea Estate under the leadership of Tulsi. It mentions such unions in other estates as well. Amalendu Guha's *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (1977) tells us that workers' Unions in the tea estates of Assam had not been formed until 1939-40. A 1958 novel *Seuji Patar Kahini* which does not refer to any historical date could have preferred to delineate the formation of such unions. But for *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, particular in its historical references, the depiction of workers' union is simply a dilution of its historicity, as its plot cannot go beyond the second decade of the twentieth century. We remember, Tulsi and others came to Rupohijan Tea Estate in 1886 and as Tulsi tells Kalondi in the sixth chapter of the second book, they got married twelve years after their arrival, i.e., around 1898. They remain childless for three years of their marriage. In the fourth or fifth year, they get their only child Arjun. So, approximate calculation tells us that Arjun was born around 1903. When he was eleven, Tulsi and others formed their *sangha* (union), i.e., the *sangha* was formed around 1914. Further, Chitta was arrested for his involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement which dates around 1921. All available historical pieces of information regarding the plantation workers' union including those furnished in *Planter Raj to Swaraj* do not tally with these dates. An ideological will to depict the coolies' struggle and development inspired this novel to compromise with historical facts and ideological withdrawal from depicting the same impelled the other to shun the opportunity.

Similar comparisons can be made between *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas*. Though both these novels work to suppress the stories of alienated labour – a key point this study means to explore in detail in the fourth chapter – exploitation of labour is more

realistically portrayed in the former than the latter. *Rupabarir Palas*, except for the first part that portrays landlordism as demonic, does not question the existing system. It even contradicts history in presenting the dewani system (social system headed by a dewan) as considerably benevolent. This falsification is apparent as Fazal Ali Ahmed remarks, “For ages a cruel administrative system, that is, dewani system or *Matabbar* (well-to-do chief) system, which is another name of feudalism, has been operating in these *char-chapori* (islands and banks formed by rivers) areas” (26). *Nadai* also exhibits how despite the exploitative system one can survive and thrive through one’s industry and labour. In both novels and also in *Seuji Patar Kahini* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, the working-class heroes or protagonists migrate from one place to another. In *Seuji Patar Kahini*, Nareswar migrates from Ojar Gaon to Nahoroni Tea Estate; in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, the coolies are transferred from distant Odissa to Rupohijan Tea Estate, Assam; in *Nadai*, Nadai migrates from a village of Gowlpara, Assam to an unnamed village; in *Rupabarir Palas* Babar and other Miyas migrate from Sonapara, East Bengal to Rupabari, Assam. In *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas*, the migrated heroes settle in the new places and thrive through creative labour. This is an allegory of the displacement of labour under the class societies in general and capitalism in particular. The already settled people of ‘the new places’ show different degrees of sympathy for the migrated heroes: Babar receives more sympathy and support from Sarif the village elder than Nadai from Bhadiya Gayan. Thus the representational focus on alienated labour is more loosened in *Rupabarir Palas* than in *Nadai*.

Nadai and Babar find the new places and new peoples better than their native places and peoples. Both start as servants first and through their honesty and industry both make economic progress and end as landowners themselves. Such stories of individual success leave very little space for those of alienated labour. Nadai, as a farm labourer, feels the loss of his labour’s product but Babar does not feel the same. Initially, Nadai is not given wages and later he is deceived by Bhadiya Gayan as he is given only a pair of calves worth rupees twenty or thirty whereas he should have been given at least four hundred rupees as calculated by Dambaru Bhattacharyya. Babar is offered both land and daughter by Sarif. Thus exploitation of Nadai is bitterer than Babar’s. The exploitative system is crueller in Nadai’s story than in Babar’s. The sharecropping system

threatens the very existence of Kaliya's family and turns Rongai mad. But the dewani system depicted in *Rupabarir Palas*, despite the presence of unmarried Mariyam and Muslima, does not have such visibly disturbing consequences. To own means of production is not easy for Nadai, but means of production come to Babar very smoothly. Gayan would not give Nadai any land, though he extended other supports to him. But Babar gets permanent ownership of land and other occasional help from Sarif. This higher optimism of *Rupabarir Palas* lowers the representation of the socio-historical truth of the condition of alienated labour and exploitation. Nadai, the almost illiterate, poses more basic questions about the system than Babar, the literate. Babar protests against the oppression of the landlord but does not question the system itself and he is perfectly content with the dewani system of the new place. Though involved in a little bit of trade, Nadai is a farmer to his marrow. He sells only his produce and thrives through farming. But, Babar, the farmer, thrives mainly through contract and supply to the militaries. Thus, as a farmer, Nadai is more typical than Babar.

Kaliya's resignation from life puts a question mark on the sense of "complete life" in Nadai's world and indicates that the system is not without serious limitations and problems. That Babar's world also has serious limitations is signaled by the pathetic life situations of Mariyam and Muslima. Nadai and Babar enjoy the fruits of individual creative labour, both are upgraded from the status of farm labourer or servant but none works to change the system and later both keep others as farm labourers or servants. The selection of such plots and such protagonists serves to undermine the stories of alienated labour although they occasionally pop up through pathetic episodes of characters like Rongai, Kaliya, Mariyam, Muslima, Jalal, etc. What creative labour can do is depicted by both novels, yet both shrink from depicting a condition of creative labour or struggle for such a condition. Creative labour remains largely the hero's individual affair in each. Yet there is a difference. In *Nadai*, Nadai's creative labour transforms not only his own life but Morisuti as well and schools and hospitals are established there. These things appear at Morisuti only after Nadai's arrival. But in *Rupabarir Palas* Babar's creative labour builds up only his personal life and despite his help to others there is no transformation of *Rupabari* owing to his labour. Schools/Madrasas were established there before his arrival. For example, Sarif long ago played a pivotal role in transforming the school into

an M.E. Madrasa. Thus Babar's creative labour in this sense is more individualistic than Nadai's. Death consciousness is almost absent in *Rupabarir Palas*, but it is very conspicuous in *Nadai*. An exploitative system dehumanises people and prevents the realisation of the human essence; thus it generates a death-in-life situation for the dehumanised, the fictional representation of which can be done through depicting deaths, diseases, and destructions as has already been said. The story of Nadai is full of deaths and Nadai himself dies in the end whereas Babar continues to live. This fact indicates that *Nadai*, despite its representational evasions, is more realistic than *Rupabarir Palas*.

The fictional representation of the alienated labour of the tea garden labourers in Assamese novels finds its close parallel in the historical representation of the tea garden labourers of Bangladesh. Fact and fiction across geographical boundaries point towards the same conditions. Sadika Nousheen comments, "The first group of tea workers migrated from different famine-stricken parts of India to Bangladesh. The indentured migration was fueled by labourers' desire to escape domestic socio-economic oppression and aspiration for a better future. Indentured migration was similar to trading slaves as their freedom was determined by the authorities.... Their options are constrained, their life choices are compromised, and their social standing is undermined. All these factors contribute to the systemic exploitation and marginalisation of tea workers.... Tea plantation workers have been deprived, poverty-stricken, and living isolatedly from the British era. Over the years their situation has not improved in this country." Another Bangladeshi writer Mohan Rabidas remembers the Mulluk Cholo Movement of 1921. He narrates how incapable of tolerating the oppressions imposed by the British tea planters, the tea garden labourers launched a movement of returning home on 21st May 1921 and how thousands of the labourers were shot dead by the soldiers engaged by the British owners. He writes, "No labourer could resign from his job at will. If they ran away, they would be arrested and taken back. They were treated with inhuman punishments that were not regarded as crimes. Whipping and kicking these innocent people with boots were everyday occurrences."

Two Leaves and A Bud (1937), an Indo-Anglian novel by Mulk Raj Anand, set in Assam, explores the condition of alienated labour in the tea garden of Assam in a more convincing way. The inhuman treatment of the labourers is exposed by Narain when he

says to Gangu, “But at home, it was like a prison and here it is slightly worse.” That the product acquires more importance than the producer, that the garden is seen as more precious than the workers who build it up, becomes clear in the conversation between Narain and Gangu. “You cannot escape from here now, anyhow. You can never go back” (Anand 85). “This prison has no bars, but it is nevertheless an unbreakable jail.” “The other day the chowkidar beat Balkrishnan, the boy who fled from the Santal village because he thought he could escape to his mother in Oudh” (86). That the coolies were treated in very inhuman ways may be seen in the incident when Gangu came to Croft-Cooke for begging for the help of twenty rupees to bury the corpse of his wife, Sajani. “You, bloody fool, get out! Get out! You have been spreading infection all over the place!” “Gangu walked away from the office deeply chagrined and humiliated” (107). Barbara, a sympathetic character, reads a book on plantation labour and it runs like this, “The present system of plantation labour is a curse and a crime. It is a monstrous crime against humanity” (116). Barbara goes on to read, “75% of the coolies on the Assam plantations suffer from caratomalaisia ... Wages of coolies on the Indian plantations have not changed for the last seventy years” (117). While *Pratipad* is confused about the cause of the workers’ plight – is it caused by the capitalist system or the personal cruelty of individual sahibs? – an issue to be discussed in detail in the fourth chapter – Anand’s novel is crystal clear about it. John De La Havre says to Barbara, “It is no use hating anyone. It is the system. You must hate the system. You and I have been brought up to be what we are by the sweat of these coolies” (125). De La Havre later says, “You want a *coolie raj* (rule of the plantation workers), you people. Why do you let them beat you? Why can’t you beat back, all of you together?” (187). While the selected novels are reluctant to depict working scenes at the workplaces, *Two Leaves and A Bud* has several such scenes where the mechanism of producing surplus through extortion, the hierarchy of sahibs, babus, and sardars who collectively perform the extortion can be observed. “The wild swing of their axes, the sharp sweep of their scythes and the clean cut of their knives filled Reggie with a belligerent passion for destruction” (43), and the plot proves later that Reggie Sahib is an embassy of destruction. “Mind the plucking there, it is getting coarse,” Neogi shouted to stop the giggling of the women workers. “Keep the tops of your bushes level,” Reggie Sahib said (46). Neogi shouted again” I shall give a taste of

my stick to anyone I see lazing about, and I shall get the sahib to impose the fine of half the pay” (176). Even the Marxian imagination finds a better exposition here than the selected novels. Barbara thinks that one need not read Marx to understand the situation. “The black coolies clear the forests, plant the fields, toil and garner the harvest, while the money-grubbing, slave-driving, soulless managers and directors draw their salaries and dividends and build up monopolies. Therein lies the necessity of revolution in this country” (115). Deadly exploitation resulting from the condition of alienated labour is symbolically best suggested by the wreathing of the python around Leila’s body when she was working in the forest with her scythe. Thus this novel set in Assam and written in English by an Indian writer gives a better exposition to the theme of alienated labour than similar Assamese novels like *Seuji Patar Kahini* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*.

Representation of Creative labour in the Novels

Now the representation of creative labour in the novels may be surveyed. Raymond Williams observes, “At the very center of Marxism is an extraordinary emphasis on human creativity and self-creation....The notion of self-creation, extended to civil society and language by pre-Marxist thinkers, was radically extended by Marxism to the basic work processes and thence to a deeply (creatively) altered physical world and self-created humanity” (206). *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas*, far more than the other three novels, try to depict and study the phenomenon termed creative labour. In the first novel, right from the beginning, the hero’s extraordinary abilities for hard work are repeatedly emphasised. He is seen especially by Bhadiya Gayan and Dambaru Bhattacharyya as a source of plenty of surplus labour. Gayan enriches himself through the exploitation of Nadai’s surplus labour as he keeps him as an unpaid bonded labourer. Bhattacharyya also wants to keep him as a bonded labourer but with a promise of reasonable payment. But, better wages do not solve the issue of alienated versus creative labour. The development of the plot ensures the fact the productive forces of the hero remain fettered by the condition of alienated labour. The hero himself is uncomfortable with this condition of alienated labour. He almost spells it out. So, right from the beginning sentence of the novel, Nadai is hankering after the means of agricultural production apart from his

physical labour. First, he succeeds in owning a pair of calves and then he clears and owns land at Morisuti. His free, creative labour magically transforms not only his individual life but also Morisuti and its people. Now he owns anything he produces and he produces according to his own free will; he consumes the surplus and distributes parts of it as per the dictates of his conscience. His labour unleashes many forces at Morisuti most of which he and his labour cannot control. He and his labour are “like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” (Marx, *Manifesto* 17). Yet, Nadai’s creative labour does not stand for any condition of creative labour. His extraordinary exertion, help, and support from well-wishers and the particular turn of events enable Nadai to become a beneficiary of creative labour. But he contributes to the continuation of the system of alienated labour by keeping bonded labourers like Budhon whose surplus labour Nadai certainly appropriates. Thus creative labour, though it seems to fulfill Nadai’s individual life and not only creates but transforms Morisuti, remains mainly an individual affair of the hero and does not get delineated as systemic.

This point should be elaborated on a little more. Nadai’s creative labour functions to conceal to a large extent the negative impact of the all-pervasive condition of alienated labour. As the brightness of the sun hides the stars during daytime, the evanescence of Nadai’s labouring faculty puts into shade many a story of oppression: the reader gets only glimpses of those stories of misery affected by the exploitative system. Rongai is such an insect caught in the net of the sharecropping system where Dambaru Bhattacharyya is the spider. Rongai failed to pay the debt and was dragged to court by Bhattacharyya where, as a result of the latter’s skillful management of the legal system, the former loses his property and turns into a pauper. Later the pauper turns into an insane fellow. His family is in deep trouble. Nadai helps them sporadically but it is not enough. It is not easy to maintain honesty, culture, etc. amidst such a disturbing situation. As an indirect consequence of such a turn of events, Rongai’s daughter Maniki appears adventurous in terms of relationships with men. The exploitative system of sharecropping not only ruins Rongai but also threatens Kaliya’s family’s existence. They also find it difficult to pay the land taxes imposed on them by Dambaru Bhattacharyya. The threat of losing their household and becoming homeless looms large but this time Nadai comes forward and

rescues them. But his rescue is an exceptional case; it does not alter the system. Nadai himself is the appropriator of the alienated labour of others like Budhon. But, the novel is almost silent about those characters; a very tiny space is given to the character of Budhon. The later Morisuti gives rise to a class who are engaged in trade, contract, service, small-scale industry, etc. This class – the newly emerging middle class – is by nature the class of appropriators. The novel, engrossed in the depiction of Nadai's creative labour, does not depict or prefers not to depict the appropriation of alienated labour of those who work in Laldhari's mill, Janaklal's dairy farm, and Mohan's contractual works.

Rupabarir Palas also distinguishes creative labour from alienated labour in landlordism very explicitly. “Whatever Sarif, the village elder, does, he does it for himself and enjoys the fruits himself. Here, one does not depend on the mercy of any landlord” (Malik 84). Thus Sarif's condition is opposed to that of Babar's father Johur who is whipped by the landlord for not being able to catch fish of the size the landlord expected. That Sarif thrives because he is no victim of the condition of alienated labour does not mean that he puts an end to such exploitative conditions. He appropriates the surplus labour of his workers and servants although appropriation on his part is less cruel and less visible. That he allows each of his servants to own one *bigha* (about two-thirds of an acre) of land does not imply any right for them. Their ownership of land is caused simply by the broad-hearted Sarif's choice. In a later chapter, this researcher will show that this benevolent face of the dewani system represented by Sarif is an ideological creation unsupported by actual history. Sarif makes the hero Babar a beneficiary of creative labour. He gives him a piece of land, occasionally allows him to use his bullocks and buffalos, and permits him to do business and contract. As Babar owns what he earns and later, what he produces, his labour is creative. The rich Babar keeps helping the needy and distressed as Sarif did previously. He helps Mariyam, Muslima, Girin Borah, and Mrs. Borah, even his enemy Kamran and many others. But, unlike Sarif, Babar does not give land to his servants and workers, not even to Mariyam and Muslima. He rather appropriates the surplus labour of all of them. The labours of Mariyam, Muslima, and many others are latent in Babar's property, yet he alone is the owner of that. Therefore he can order Mariyam to get out of his house. Thus Babar, the beneficiary of creative labour,

does not generate a condition of creative labour and remains mainly an appropriator of the surplus labour of others. Thus, as it is in *Nadai*, in *Rupabarir Palas* also, creative labour is not systemic, it is an affair of the individual hero, or at best an affair of one or two protagonists. This exceptionally individual creative labour, despite being not systemic, not only upgrades the class status of Sarif and Babar but also builds for them comparatively a well-accomplished life. Sarif dies peacefully amidst affluence, good prospects for his children, and many sympathisers. His and Babar's children further improve their class status. Sarif's son Mubarak, a B.A. in Economics, becomes a high school teacher apart from inheriting his father's property, and Babar's daughter Keteki, who appears in B.A. final examination, becomes a poet and writer in Assamese. In this novel, as in *Nadai*, the preference for delineating the creative labour of the main protagonists – Sarif and Babar – works to eclipse the stories of alienated labour. Sarif donates land to all his servants but only Babar is seen as thriving. Whether other servants also thrive with the help of that important means of production, land, is not known. But it is not land alone that builds the strong economic foundation for Babar. His involvement in the contract is the trump card of the game. The novel's silence about the other land-owner servants and its reverberating cries about Babar's progress through military contract speak volumes of the fact that the condition of creative labour is not systemic. Labour is this much creative only for Babar and, to a large extent, for Sarif. The novel prefers to depict the story of a beneficiary of creative labour, a successful individual from the Miya community who can extend help to mainstream people like Girin. Babar and Jafar fled from Sonapara. But the novel is almost silent about the fate of Jafar in Assam.

The main focus of *Seuji Patar Kahini*, *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, and *Pratipad* is not creative labour; these novels primarily reflect or refract the condition of alienated labour. In the later two novels, organised struggle against the condition of alienated labour may be seen as a fight, in varying degrees, for the condition of free, creative labour. But, *Seuji Patar Kahini* provides at least one example of free and creative labour even amidst the tortuous life generated by alienated labour and that is Alomoni's homemade wine, popularly called *prasad* (food offered to a deity). "Alomoni prepares *hariya* (a kind of wine) that can caress the body and please the mind" (Baruah 94). "Alomoni kept many a pot of *Madhu* (honey, but here wine) made by her skilled

hands in order; people fill up the bowls at will and drink rapaciously. Even young boys and girls are also not prohibited; because *madhu* is not wine, it is the *prasad* of Lord Shiva, it's the ambrosia of a worn out life" (96). "Today *parsad* (*prasad*) is very delicious, no one can prepare *parsad* as Alomoni can. Drink, your whole body will be caressed" (167). This wine prepared by Alomoni bears the flavour of her individuality, it is not prepared for the market, and it is not a commodity. It is prepared at Alomoni's will, not at the dictates of others. We may recall the words of John Molyneux, "Of course under capitalism the *majority* of labour and the characteristic *form* of labour is alienated wage labour but this does not make all labour under capitalism alienated (emphases in original)." Alomoni's *prasad*-making labour here is not alienated. It is an art and "Art finally returns the world to the common people who had created it through their labour, and who could now contemplate their faces in it for the first time" (Eagleton, *The English* 19).

Thus it has been observed that the selected novels have represented alienated and creative labour in varying degrees. These novels are more or less labour-oriented. Yet labour is not the prime focus in any one of them. A close analysis reveals that *Seuji Patar Kahini* is focusing on issues other than labour; the issue of labour is tangentially touched. There are altogether twenty-three chapters in the novel, but only in seven of them, the reader sees the representation of the people who are in productive labour. And even in these scenes, labour is not the only issue. Budhu appears several times in several chapters. But he is in service labour like Nareswar. Those who are in productive labour find less representation in the novel. Alomoni's creative labour of preparing wine does not indicate any system of creative labour. The novel focuses more on the love affair between Nareswar and Sonia, Sonia's mysteriousness, the vibrant life of the tea garden labourers, etc. It betrays an unwillingness to depict the labouring class at their work. Working scenes are very few in the novel and there is not a single working scene inside the factory. The only scene in the factory depicts love and sex, not work! Tingmin and Sita are madly making love at midnight inside the factory. Sonia goes there to meet Powali Mahari. The exploitative condition of alienated labour can best be judged in the workplace. However, the novel does not prefer to depict scenes at the workplace. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* does the same. Though the factory is mentioned scores of times,

not a single scene is depicted inside it. The scenes of working in the garden are also numbered. They are only two in such a long novel with altogether twenty-eight chapters. The novel's narration in the first four chapters is superb in its delineation of the dehumanising effects of the condition of alienated labour. But, that sting and density of narration lose its force in the subsequent chapters while the coolies' are seen in Rupohijan Tea Estate. The reader has to labour hard to find traces of hard labour in the later chapters. Other issues like the coolies' assimilation with the mainstream Assamese, the improvement of their condition of life, etc. made the representation of labour dim and indirect. The workers' union is formed but its activities remain undelineated. Thus the fight against the condition of alienated labour remains blurred. Even when the novel shows its superb artistry in the depiction of the dehumanisation of the coolies in the first four chapters, it, in truth, does not depict the actual condition of alienated labour simply because the coolies were not working in those chapters, they were only potential workers being brought from Odissa to Assam. Their oppression in those chapters, therefore, does not directly point to the oppression or exploitation affected by the condition of alienated labour. Alienated labour is indeed more conspicuous in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* but even in this novel, it is not the central focal point.

Nadai fled from home not because of economic exploitation of the system of alienated labour but because of the cruelty, selfishness, and deception of his relatives. Then Bhadiya Gayan exploits his labour and he perceives it, He does not organise any struggle against the system of exploitation but struggles to build up an alternative territory at Morisuti where the condition of creative labour, at least for him, may be generated. Thus the problem of alienated labour gets solved relatively easily. But, Nadai's creative labour does not put an end to alienated labour as he exploits the labour of others. He pioneered the establishment of Morisuti where a middle class emerges who also dotes on the alienated labour of others in their trade, mills, etc. Nadai's story of creative labour hides to a large extent many stories of alienated labour. In its attempt to make a bildungsroman of Nadai's character, the novel bypasses the stories of Rongai, Budhon, etc. But that all is not well in Nadai's universe is indicated by Rongai's madness, Kaliya's resignation, and Maniki's incestuous relationship. In *Pratipad* also, most of the chapters are devoted to the subjects of Giasuddin's love and marriage; love,

marriage, and education of Nayanmoni, Pannu, Lasmi, Jahanara, Jebunnisa, etc.; the conspiracy of the management to divide the workers based on religion, etc. Depiction of the condition of alienated labour is very limited and mostly indirect. In the first chapter, Minubai dies from a lack of proper and timely treatment. This, along with the cries of the so-called leper, is indicative of the condition of alienated labour. But, the representation of that condition gets diluted because of several reasons. First, it has already been mentioned that most of the space is given to subjects other than alienated labour. Secondly, the impacts of alienated labour are enlisted only in the leaflets and demand letters to the company but it is not dramatised through the actions. Most of the characters seem to yearn for freedom, love, etc.; they do not seem to be oppressed by the condition of alienated labour. Jebunnisa is sexually exploited by Jilapsy and the major problem she is facing is how to get the love of Ismail. Thirdly, scenes at the workplace are very few. The twelfth, nineteenth, and twenty-first chapters partially depict “work” but all of them contain one accident each; none of them is entirely devoted to the depiction of labour. Fourthly, the strike of the workers begins very late – from the thirty-second chapter. All these factors contribute to the dilution of the representation of alienated labour in the novel.

The first chapter of *Rupabarir Palas* is a densely artistic portraiture of the condition of alienated labour under landlordism in East Bengal. The second, third, and fourth chapters continue to depict the same condition with lesser density and penetration. It is a textual necessity to depict this cruel, tortuous, oppressive, and exploitative condition so that the hero Babar may be pushed away from East Bengal to Assam. From the time he arrives in Assam, that is, from the eighth chapter, the novel begins not to focus on the potential condition of alienated labour. Sarif and Babar are presented as very industrious as if their industry and integrity alone make their labour creative whereas they are appropriators of the labour of their workers and servants. To do this, the novel has to suppress the stories of alienated labour of Jafar, Jalal, Mariyam, Muslima, the servants of Sarif, the servants of Babar, the servants of Kamran, and all other migrants from East Bengal. To do this, the novel deviates from actual history and shows the exploitative dewani system as benevolent. More of this point will be discussed in the next two chapters. Though this artificially and ideologically created condition of creative labour

forms part of the main storyline of the novel, this is surrounded by several other storylines which collectively make the issue of labour much less foregrounded than it could have been. Such other storylines include 1) the migration of Miyas to Assam, their settlement here and their gradual assimilation into the Assamese society, 2) the struggle of the Miya people to settle in Assam and to assimilate into the Assamese society and the conflict therefrom, 3) Babar's love affairs with Mariyam, Muslima, and Rani and the problems they entail, 4) involvement of the Miyas into the question of the creation of Pakistan, 5) impact of the Second World War, 6) landlordism in East Bengal and the class struggle it entails, 7) famine in Bengal and the human tragedy, etc. These issues occupy such a huge portion of the total action that the issue of labour remains eclipsed to a large extent.

The point that these labour-oriented novels are conspicuously reluctant to dramatise the action in scenes of working needs to be a little more elaborate. The mechanism of alienated labour, particularly the production, distribution, and circulation of surplus, can best be seen at the working sites. Erik K. Olsen appreciates Resnick and Wolff's "emphasis on the productive site as the unit of analysis and, in particular, their carefully articulated Marxian theory of that most basic capitalist institution, enterprise" (74). He further says, "My central argument is that in *Capital* Marx develops his theory of capitalism primarily through a close analysis of the capitalist enterprise." "Here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class interests" (75). "Marx notes that an unavoidable 'antagonism of interests' between labourers and their capitalist employers in the labour process necessitates hiring managers and supervisors who do not carry out the actual processes of production but rather oversee it to extract labour from the labour power purchased by the entrepreneur." "Marx thus explores not only the *source* of surplus value but also its *use* by analysing how the surplus created in production provides the resources to support nonproduction activities inside the firm" (76: emphases in original). One may extend Olsen's idea of the capitalist enterprise to the enterprise or working site of any class society. Whether labour is creative or alienated, and to what degree it is so, may best be checked only at the working sites. But, as it has already been noted, the selected novels generally exclude such scenes. A comparison

with the beginning scene of *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1936) will illustrate Olsen's point in a non-capitalist setup. But before going to that comparison it should be probed why the so-called labour-oriented novels do not prefer to depict scenes at the workplace. The answer lies in the middle-class assumption that work is tedious and leisure is pleasing, hence if the novel means to be 'interesting' it should depict scenes of leisure more than those of labour. Adorno sniffs at this prejudice, "Time and time again, when questioned or interviewed, one is asked about one's hobbies....Making music, listening to music, and reading with all my attention, these activities are part and parcel of my life; to call them hobbies would make a mockery of them....There is no hard and fast opposition between my work itself and what I do apart from it" (*Culture* 188-189). That the novelists prefer to depict the leisurely scenes has an additional factor behind it: the bourgeois intention to rejuvenate the workers for the next round of alienated labour. Adorno's exposure is worth mentioning, "Free time must not resemble work in any way whatsoever, in order, presumably, that one can work all the more effectively afterward" (190).

Now the comparison with the first scene of Manik Bandopadhyay's novel may be made. A detailed description of the fishing boat and the fishing activities are given. The hard, surplus labour of Kuber and Ganesh is vividly portrayed. "Fastening a piece of cloth around the waist with one hand, sinking gradually into the water, feeling the cold water and the cold wind, continuing to look at the restless waters of the river with their sleepless reddened eyes, Kuber and Ganesh catch fish throughout the night." "This boat is Dhananjoy's; the fishing net also is his." Half of the fish caught is his and the other half is Kuber's and Ganesh's. "He works less as he is the owner of the boat and the net" (Bandopadhyay 3). That day Kuber was not well. At late night he asked Dhananjoy, "Let me take a little rest, Ajan uncle" (4). But he was not allowed. In the morning, Shitolbabu, a middle-class man, wanted Kuber to steal a few fish for him. Kuber stealthily took three fish from the boat and gave them to Shitolbabu. But Shitolbabu did not pay him the money, "You will be paid tomorrow, Kuber." Then Dhananjoy deceived Kuber about the total count of the fish. That night Kuber caught an unusually large number of fish. He expected more than four hundred. But Dhananjoy said, "Huh! Thousand, not four hundred! Only two hundred and fifty-seven" (6). Thus the mechanism of the appropriation of surplus labour of the boatman is crystal clear. Since the actual labourer

has no means of “production” – the boat and the net – but only his physical labour, so he is given the benefit of only one-fourth of the total “production.” Even that one-fourth is also reduced through open deception; the labourer knows the trick but is compelled to maintain silence. But as one looks at the selected novels one’s experience will be quite the opposite. The drama of labour, alienated labour, or creative labour is not acted out but reported only. How scenes inside the factory are avoided by *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* and *Seuji Patar Kahini* has already been noted. How, *Pratipad*, despite enormous scope, shuns the opportunity to set scenes at the workplace, has also been mentioned. Scenes of working in the field cannot be seen in *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas* also – work is reported but not dramatised as it is in *Padma Nadir Majhi*.

Ways of Representing Labour

A crucial point needs to be made. Labour is abstract and it finds its exposition and existence through the labourers who are concrete entities. Priority given to labour, therefore, gets expressed through priority given to the labourers. In fiction, one way of giving this priority is to draw the hero and the heroine from the ranks of the labourers. Does it happen in the selected novels? In *Seuji Patar Kahini* the hero, Nareswar is not from the tea garden labourers’ community. Further, he is in service, but not in productive labour. The heroine Sonia also is not exactly a member of the tea garden labourers’ community; she is born of Armstrong, a British sahib, and Mohuwa, a woman from the tea garden labourers’ community. In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* the main protagonists are taken from the tea garden labourers’ community but its ultimate hero, Arjun, pursues higher education and thinks of becoming a doctor, not a worker. He is not actively engaged with the workers’ union. In *Pratipad*, the working class leader, Giyasuddin loses hope in the workers’ strike and thinks of joining the farmers’ class and the freedom movement. In *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas* the heroes, Nadai and Babar, are originally from the agrarian labourers’ class but they gradually rise to the class of the rich farmers or landlords thus losing largely their working class identity. A true working-class hero or heroine that remains so throughout is nowhere to be found. If a few of them are from the

working class they change either class or ideology or both before the conclusion of the novel. Nadai, Babar, Giasuddin, Arjun – all are such heroes.

Another way of prioritising labour in a novel is to foreground the issue of labour making it the dominant thread among all the story threads of the plot. This point will be given a better and more detailed exposition in the third chapter. Here it suffices to say that despite the conspicuous potential of alienated labour in the plots the selected novels have not taken labour or alienated labour as their dominant threads or points of entry. Nareswar-Sonia love affair, Prema-Aloti-Boiragi love episode, the myth and history of the Oja family, etc. along with the episodes of fun, mirth, and merry-making put the theme of labour into shade in *Seuji Patar Kahini*. Storylines related to subjects such as the rural versus urban conflict, pastoral versus modern conflict, the rise of a bonded labourer to a rich farmer or landlord, Gandhian practices, etc. divert the issue of labour in class society in *Nadai*. To delineate the trajectory of the hard-working hero's rise from utter poverty to affluence, the novel suppresses the potential class conflict generated by the sharecropping system. The similar trajectory of the hero's rise, success, and class upgradation yields similar results in *Rupabarir Palas*. The success stories of Nadai and Babar fail to explore adequately the issues of alienated labour of characters like Rongai, who is pauperised and turned mad by the system, Jalal, who dies in utter poverty, Mariyam and Muslima, who have to live an unmarried and parasitical life of tragic incompleteness and gloom. *Pratipad* works with the workers but it considerably marginalises the issue of alienated labour through several means the most significant of which is to relegate the class struggle to only one of many struggles like gender struggle, moral struggle, freedom struggle, and struggle for enlightenment. Another such means is to prove the inefficacy of the class struggle compelling it to give way to the freedom struggle. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* also follows a trajectory considerably similar to *Pratipad*. It emphatically starts with the issue of oppression and labour but later engages more in the issues of assimilation and enlightenment through education. A workers' union is formed, but not a single activity of their union is narrated. After its formation, the novel seems to forget it till the end.

Of course, it must be admitted that social reality is a total of many interlinked processes and textual reality which is the representation of social reality cannot but depict

as many processes as possible through a variety of storylines. The narrator of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* hints at this, "I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be thrown on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe" (Eliot 113). "The web of human lots" indicates the "woven and interwoven", that is, interlinked social processes, and in the case of a novel – the interlinked storylines. Though labour should be the main concern of particularly a labour-oriented novel, it, ideally, cannot help depicting other issues to represent the complex web of human lots. Then how can a labour-oriented novel do representational justice to the issue of labour without marginalising the other issues of the "web of human lots"? This brings us to the ideas of over-determination and point of entry. The representation of the former and the choice of the latter will be discussed in the third chapter. There we will examine whether or not a storyline related to labour is made the point of entry for the over-determined textual reality.

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Chapter III

Over-determined Reality and Point of Entry in the Novels

Resnick and Wolff's linked concepts of over-determination and point of entry become all but indispensable to explain the representation of class in the novel.

Julian Markels

Introduction

In this chapter, a thorough inquiry into the story threads of the selected novels is made to see whether the points of entry of the over-determined textual realities of the novels are focused on labour (alienated and/or creative) or anything else. Here a reiteration of the ideas of over-determination and point of entry will be helpful. The introductory chapter has already outlined how Freud took the term “over-determination” from algebra to apply it in psychoanalysis, how Althusser applied it in the analysis of society, and how Marxists like Resnick and Wolff further widened the idea adding to it the new concept of point of entry. They see the social reality as a set of innumerable inter-determining processes the mutual determination of which leads to a far more intricate and complex reality termed over-determined reality. To make sense of this totality one needs a point of entry which is “that particular concept a theory uses to enter into its formulation, its particular construction of the entities and relations that comprise the social totality” (Resnick and Wolff 25). Such a point of entry, always incomplete and partisan, enables one to perceive reality in a better and more organised, more comprehensive way. Like the social world, the textual world of fiction also is a complex of many storylines or threads representing social processes. In a fictional text also the storylines or threads determine one another and thus generate an over-determined textual reality. To approach, grasp, and acquire knowledge from, this complex and over-determined social or textual reality, one needs a certain point of entry, a master thread that weaves and interweaves all or most other threads. This choice of point of entry is

ideological. In the discussion of the selected novels, it will be seen that each novel has discarded or suppressed several story threads in favour of a particular one which is its point of entry. It is the master thread that weaves, interweaves, determines, and gets determined by, the highest number of other threads. The choice of any other thread as the master thread would have made a novel a different one. While for Resnick, Wolff, and Markels, points of entry are wider categories like class, race, gender, etc., for this study they are certain story threads of the novels as, in the last analysis, they are resultants of the wider categories. This is so because the wider categories are expressed through certain visible events and incidents of man's lived life and those events and incidents are represented in fiction through certain story threads.

Seuji Patar Kahini

The over-determined reality represented by *Seuji Patar Kahini* has several threads such as 1) The life of the tea garden people of Assam before the Independence, 2) the class struggle of the tea garden people against the condition of alienated labour, 3) the love affair between Nareswar and Sonia, 4) Prema-Aloti-Boiragi love-triangle, 5) the myth and history of the Oja family, 6) social reform activities of people like Naren and challenges ahead and 7) search for happiness, peace, and humanity away from all conditions of oppression, injustice, cruelty, and inhumanity. They need to be examined one by one.

Is the novel primarily about the life of the tea garden people of Assam before the Independence? The largest share of the action takes place in Nahoroni Tea Estate. Most of the characters are tea garden labourers. A few scenes depict them in their labour and leisure. We find how they are managed and oppressed by British management, how they live a very poor and challenged life, and how they amuse themselves and try to overcome the pains of life through love, dance, song, shopping, jokes, and other forms of entertainment. Yet, the novel cannot be said to be a novel on the life of the tea garden labourers for several reasons. The novel begins with Mr. Miller, manager of Nahoroni Tea Estate, and his wife, and ends with Nareswar's departure from the garden, all of them being characters outside the tea garden communities. The story begins with Nareswar's

entry into the garden and ends with his departure from it. Thus not the life of those people but how the mainstream Assamese look at that life is the focal point of the novel. The novel, therefore, chooses Nareswar, representative of the mainstream Assamese, as the hero. The hero is not recruited from the tea garden labourers. The heroine, Sonia, is also not a labourer of unmixed blood; she is born to a British sahib and a coolie woman. Sonia is presented as much different from the common coolie woman. In the *Karam* organised at Alomoni's courtyard, she and Nareswar keep aloof from the dancing community. Her mind is also so away from the general mind of the community that while Radhu claims the garden to be her own, Sonia, finally, bids farewell to it. Radhu says, "Why should we leave the garden? ... Mothers bring up their babies; we take care of the tea plants till they grow old....The tea plants keep us green" (Baruah 108). Contrarily Sonia says, "I have malice towards the garden...Sometimes I love the garden very much, sometimes I hate it. I struggled against both love and hatred for many days. Finally hatred has won" (214). There is practically no scene where either Nareswar or Sonia or both are not present. A novel on the life of the coolies would not bear such characteristics. Gobinda Prasad Sarma pertinently remarks, "The main theme of this very high-class novel is not the life and society of the tea garden" ("Asomiya Uponyasot" 29). Besides, the thread of the life of the tea garden people of Assam before the Independence does not determine or is unrelated to what happened in the Ojar Gaon or what happened to the Prema-Aloti-Boiragi love triangle. Thus it cannot be taken as the basic thread or point of entry of the novel.

Another important thread for being the point of entry is the class struggle of the tea garden people against the condition of alienated labour. Doubtless, the labourers are very cruelly treated by the sahibs. Armstrong "did not pass an order without kicking the coolies with boots, or whipping their bodies" (Baruah 83). According to Mr. Piper, "Red eyes on babus, whipping the labourers and alert vigilance of sahibs yield best quality tea" (237). Sukhdeo went out of his garden to work as a *faltu* (unregistered worker) in Ouguri Tea Estate for which he was whipped. Rotou steals some tea from the factory and Mr. Miller severely beats him for that. The implication is that the tea produced by the workers is not theirs. Thus the workers are working and living in a condition of alienated labour and class exploitation. This condition keeps them uneducated. Sonia says, "Pooh, why

should coolie boys go to school?" (61). This condition compels them to live in darkness: There is no light in the coolie line – "Why those, whose life is unbearable because of wants, will waste money for kerosene oil for moving from darkness to light?" (136). It keeps their mothers and babies undernourished – "Milk will form in the breast only if mothers find food to eat!" "The money husband and wife earn together is not enough for two meals per day" (203). Durjon Sardar compassionately observes, "The labourers would have committed suicide right at their birth had they been incapable of enjoying life's laughter and pleasure even amid hundreds of wants" (113). Naturally, they feel free when they do not work. "The sun, even before they wake up, brings the comfort of emancipation of leave days, the leisure of the workless day increases enthusiasm" (174). Lokhu contrasts pleasure with labour in this way, "Let them laugh – they will laugh only for the night. In the morning they will come to pluck the young leaves to burn in the fire of the factory" (106). Here the burning of the leaves is a metaphor for the pain of labour. Sonia's "mysterious" farewell to the garden is a symbol of the degeneration caused by the condition of alienated labour. Nareswar's final departure makes that degeneration even more evident. Sonia's birth and body themselves are shreds of evidence of the cruel exploitation of the imperialist rulers. She is angry with her dear fellow beings because they accept this imperialist exploitation as dictates of destiny. She has no way out from the chain of circumstances and she has to accept this poisonous servility (towards both imperialism and traditional patriarchy) as long as she is in the society. So seeking her freedom along with Nareswar's good she departs. Gohain convincingly states that Armstrong's oppression of Sonia's mother, Mohua, is not simply an individual sin, this is symptomatic of a particular social system. "This oppression of Armstrong sahib is not only a personal sin...such injustice becomes possible just because of a particular social system" ("Agkatha" .10). This system is the system of capitalist exploitation, the system of alienated labour. The basic hypocrisy of class society is to rob the worker of his product and give him wages which is a false justification for this robbery. Sonia significantly comments, "They are robbers, not sahibs" (Baruah 128).

Thus the situation of class exploitation depicted by the novel has full potential for a class struggle. Yet, there is no proper, general class consciousness among the workers, let alone an organised form of class struggle. Almost all of them are unconscious victims

of alienated labour and the consequent exploitation. We have already seen how Radhu, representative of the common tea garden labourers, reveals her uncritical love for the garden. Only Sonia's perception is exceptional: "There is no blood but poison in my body. You know, I love with full heart every tea plant in this garden and consider every young boy and girl in the garden as my own. Still, I have malice towards the garden. I wish I would uproot every tea plant, shatter the factory, set fire to sahib's bungalow, murder Miller Sahib, and send back the young boys and girls to their villages. The garden, as it were, impoverishes the body and soul of my brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers day by day, drags them to sin and greed day by day" (214). Despite this awareness of dehumanising exploitation Sonia does not, and also cannot, try to organise her people against it. Her protest is purely individual and is not heard by the exploiters. There is no collective protest or struggle and no trace of labour union in the novel. According to Amalendu Guha's *Planter Raj to Swaraj* workers' unions in the tea estates of Assam had not been founded until 1939-40. A few strikes began to outbreak first and then a few unions were formed and registered from 1938-1939. "Short-lived strikes in tea gardens...took place in 1938-39" (Guha 195). "The Sylhet-Cachar Cha Mazdoor Sangathak Committee was formed in 1938....Renamed the Syhet-Cachar Cha-Bagan Mazdoor Union, it was registered...on 27 April 1939" (197). This implies that such unions had begun around 1940. A 1951 novel that does not refer to any historical date could have portrayed the formation of such unions. But the novel does not portray any such labour union. Thus the potential class struggle remains unrealised in the novel despite the portrayal of glaring class exploitation. Yet the thread of class exploitation is an important one as it is knitted with a few other threads like the life of the tea garden people of Assam before the Independence, the love affair between Nareswar and Sonia, and the search for happiness, peace, and humanity away from all conditions of oppression, injustice, cruelty, and inhumanity. But, it is unrelated to threads like the Prema-Aloti-Boiragi love triangle and social reform activities of people like Naren and the challenges ahead. So it cannot be taken as the point of entry.

The love affair between Nareswar and Sonia is a very important thread in the story without which the novel cannot be imagined. Falsely accused of adultery and punished by his strict father, Nareswar runs away from home and accidentally meets the manager of

the Nahoroni tea estate, Mr. Miller, and his wife. He comes to Nahoroni and is appointed as Mrs. Miller's boy. There he makes friends with Lokhu and his jolly 'sister' Sonia who is born of Philips sahib's exploitation of her mother, Mohua. Sonia and Nareswar fall in love but Sonia declines to marry Nareswar for mysterious reasons. She indicates several reasons any one of which is difficult to accept unquestionably. One reason she indicates is that she does not want to enter the confinement of patriarchal marriages. Another is that she carries poison in her body and life history from which she wants to keep Nareswar free. One more hint is that Nareswar lacks the expected degree of maleness and determination. Still another reason may be that Sonia wants to go away from that life and search for happiness in another world and Nareswar does not dare to accompany her on that uncertain journey. Whatever it is, the love affair does not consummate in their union. But, it is a major thread, a central focus of the novel. Like a bright star amidst the dark clouds, it is scintillating there, emitting light of true human relationship. It is pitted against the stories of lust that involve the oppression of powerless women by powerful men, it is opposed to the exploitation of coolie women by the sahibs, it is unlike the revengeful lust of Mrs. Miller, it is free from the cheapness of Lokhu-Radhu affair or the mad love of Sita-Tingmin affair, or the thinness of Alomoni-Sukhdeo affair. Like the morning dewdrop, it is pure; like the lonely Venus in the Western sky, it is burning bright. *Seuji Patar Kahini* is remembered for this Sonia-Nareswar love affair. The climax of the novel is Sonia's departure from the garden which separates her from her lover Nareswar forever. The novel ends with Nareswar's final departure from the garden – probably a journey in search of his beloved, Sonia. The last sentence faintly indicates this, "Amidst that solitary silence only the moon remained awake – to give Nareswar signal of Sonia's path" (Baruah 247). The novel ends with a tragic note and the source of this tragedy is the separation between Nareswar and Sonia. Yet it is not the basic thread or point of entry of the novel because it does not determine, and gets determined by many other important threads. The life of the tea garden people of Assam before the Independence, the class struggle of the tea garden people against the condition of alienated labour, the Prema-Aloti-Boiragi love triangle, social reform activities of people like Naren and challenges ahead, and the myths of the Oja family during the royal times, etc. exist almost independently of Nareswar-Sonia love-affair. True, the life and class

exploitation of the tea garden labourers are mostly seen through Nareswar's eyes, and the failure of their affair is related to Sonia's perception of that exploitation. But, that life and class exploitation does not require a particular love episode for its existence and portrayal.

Prema-Aloti-Boiragi's love triangle is narrated in the ninth chapter and it is a digression from the main story. Nareswar's sister Aloti is in love with Prema. After Nareswar departs from his village, a *boiragi* comes to Ojar Gaon. His preaching hypnotises the villagers in general and Prema and Deveswar, Nareswar's father, in particular. Aloti is vexed with Boiragi right from the beginning. Then he falls ill and on being requested by Prema, Deveswar takes him to his own house and takes care of him. Aloti unwillingly begins to look after the patient. One morning, to the great surprise of the villagers, Boiragi and Aloti disappear. Prema wept bitterly and despite his father's warning, begins a search for Aloti believing that Boiragi charms her with black magic. In his search he meets a conductor who refutes the genuineness of Prema's love and teaches him that women do not want to be worshipped, they want to be loved and the maleness of the lover. Later, Prema finds Aloti with Boiragi but she appears indifferent to him and tells him to go back and marry some other girl from the village. This conductor tells Prema his love story which is a digression within a digression. He fell in love with the daughter of a washer man, Deoson. Her name was Lasimiya. He bought wine for Deoson and different articles for Lasimiya. Deoson and his wife accepted him as their son-in-law. He committed the crime of theft only to buy Lasimiya a pair of golden earrings. Thus he developed intimacy with the family and a deep love for Lasimiya. But one day he discovered the son of a tea planter drinking wine with Deoson and Lasimiya standing beside them. Deoson violently warned him against coming to their house. The tea planter's son insulted him. Outraged, the conductor threw a piece of coal at him, wounded his forehead, and went away. That night Lasimiya committed suicide. This digressive thread, containing another digressive thread within it, has only a thematic relationship with the others. A man runs after happiness and peace which always eludes him. Happiness and peace are nowhere to be found as everywhere the more powerful deprive, exploit, and oppress the less powerful. But this thread has little structural relation

with the other threads of the story. The novel can proceed well without this. So there is no point in considering it to be the point of entry.

The myth and history of the Oja family narrated in the second chapter look like a digression but it is the prelude to the main story of Nareswar. The part-mythical part-historical story of Nareswar's family goes back to the generation of his grandfather's grandfather, Hareswar. During the reign of the Ahom King, Gourinath Singha, Hareswar brought to life the snake-bitten son of a maid of the royal household. The pleased king favoured him, his family, and his village. His son Jogyeswar also continued to enjoy the privilege during the time of Kamaleswar Singha. His son Maheswar performed a tragic and terrible abortion of a royal maid, Sohita, against her will as he was forced to do that by a prince who exploited her. This experience led Maheswar to think of leaving the Oja profession forever but later he became entangled with a case of abortion of a widow of his village who conceived through adultery. This was a final death blow to the status of the Oja family. Maheswar this time left his profession forever and compelled his son Deveswar to take a vow not to continue this profession. Gradually their glory and pomp diminished and at the time of Deveswar, they turned into an ordinary family. Deveswar's son Nareswar ran away from the village completely vexed with his father's cruel treatment and the villagers' false complaint of adultery against him and the widow, Maloti. Nareswar's story could have been told without any reference to the myth or history of the first three generations mentioned in the novel. Structurally, this prologue is not solidly connected to the rest. Its only connection is thematic. As Nareswar's experience is full of episodes of sorrow, injustice, cruelty, pain, and oppression, this prologue also involves these negatives, only more glaringly, even though while Nareswar lived in a half-feudal, half-colonial age his forefathers lived in a purely semi-feudal age. Structurally it is unrelated to the other major threads. So, it has practically no potential for being the point of entry.

One more short thread is about the social reform activities of people like Naren and the challenges ahead. Naren is the grandchild of the widow whose abortion was done by Maheswar. He received an education, married an educated girl, Maloti, and went to the town to do business. Two years later, Naren and Maloti returned to the village but the village women spread scandalous stories against Maloti as she was educated and

childless. Naren gave leadership to several social works like the renovation of the school building, cleaning of the village tank, and an attempt to establish a minor school. Many of the villagers spread false libels against Naren also. "My mind gets much pained at these false accusations. I came from the town with a pledge for many developments of the village. But I have lost all enthusiasm for doing any work" (17-18). This conflict between Naren and one portion of the villagers signifies the conflict between modern bourgeois values and the values of the old, feudal, patriarchal society. One side-effect of this conflict is the continuation of the villagers' accusations against Naren's wife's conduct even after his death. The villagers hatch up false stories about the Maloti-Nareswar relationship which leads to Nareswar's departure from the village that sets the main action of the novel in motion. Thus social reform activities of people like Naren and the challenges ahead is a thread that is structurally related to the hero's uncertain journey that drags him to Nahoroni, the setting of the largest part of the action. But, it is away from several other important threads like the life of the tea garden people of Assam before the Independence, the class struggle of the tea garden people against the condition of alienated labour, the love affair between Nareswar and Sonia, Prema-Aloti-Boiragi love-triangle, the myth and history of the Oja family, etc. So it cannot be the main thread or point of entry of the novel.

Through the threads discussed above, the novel wants to explore the possibility of a healthy, happy, well-consummated, humanely complete life free from all forms of oppression, exploitation, cruelty, inhumanity, and above all, conditions of alienated labour. For this, it examines several alternative societies or conditions. The part-myth, part-history of the Oja family set in the royal times speaks volumes of the inhuman practices that are consequences of an exploitative structure of the society. The royal household depends on the labour of the maids and servants like Sohita but they are made soft targets of the lust of the powerful people. The people in power force and compel skilled subjects like the Ojas to perform cruel deeds like abortion against their will and conscience. Thus this is a society that is not conducive to the ideal of humanity. The recent past of the Ojar Gaon is not depicted with all its constitutive details, particularly, the system of economy, and the system of material production are not delineated. But from the random scraps of the social structure hinted at by the story we may guess that it

is a rural society of pre-Independence India. Schools, teachers, local boards, minor schools, deputy inspectors, etc. are indicative of that. Despite limited data, a few observations may be certainly made. There is a clash between two sets of values: the traditional, patriarchal structure of feelings and that of the modern, progressive bourgeois class. The latter is represented by Naren, Maloti, and unconsciously by Nareswar, and the former by many of the villagers of Ojar Gaon including Deveswar. Naren's social work signifies a collective effort towards modern enlightenment and his wife Maloti is also an exponent of that enlightenment. Naren's despair and death indicate the defeat of the progressive, emancipating elements, and Maloti's character assassination by the villagers and Nareswar's humiliation by his father seal that defeat. So Nareswar finally could not stay in that village. His departure is symbolic of man's search for a healthy and complete life free from hypocrisy, cruelty, oppression, and exploitation for which the novel expresses an intense longing. Nareswar enters the garden and in this alternative society, "the glimpse of primitive life expressed in the collective dance of the tea garden labourers even today along with the rhythm of *madol* in the darkness of night beckons towards an uncorrupted human essence which is complete, gratified, hence healthy and beautiful" (Gohain, "Birinchī" 374). "Thus naturalness of a contradiction-less, captivating and vigorous life can be discovered among the male and female characters from the coolies of the tea garden" (Gohain, "Nispanda" 701). So, at the beginning of his stay in the garden, "Nareswar is bewitched by the free and healthy attitude towards life which he sees in the society of the workers of the tea garden" (G. Sarma, *Asamiya Upanyasar* 197). 'But, "Nareswar, the representative of the agrarian Assamese rural civilisation, becomes traceless as he could not take a position among the flows and currents of today's civilisation" (G. Sarma, "Ardhashatabdir" 25). Hiren Gohain also observes, "Ultimately, the hero Nareswar could not stay in the tea garden" ("Nispanda" 699). Why? Does it imply that this life also has its problems – does the blooming flower keep a poisonous serpent hidden under it?

The answer partly lies in Sonia's ambivalent reaction to garden life. She articulates her love for every tea plant and every youth of her garden, but says, "Still, I have malice towards the garden" because it "impoverishes the body and soul" of the garden people dragging them "to sin and greed day by day" (Baruah 214). Truly, her birth

and body themselves are shreds of evidence of the cruel exploitation of the imperialist rulers. She is angry with her dear fellow beings because they accept this imperialist exploitation as dictates of destiny. Gohain unravels the mystery behind her departure from the garden saying that she has no way out from the chain of circumstances and she has to accept this poisonous servility (towards both imperialism and traditional patriarchy) as long as she is in the society. Thus it is not that the labourers lead a natural, essential life that is disturbed by exploitation and oppression; rather it is exploitation and oppression (elements of alienated labour) which make their life unnatural and lacking in the human essence. The labourers' revelry, unrestricted sexual life, drinking, dancing, etc., far from being signs of healthy, essential life, are signs of life deformed by alienated labour. Marx says, "The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it...it (labour) is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another....Therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating... and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal" (*Manuscripts* 30). Thus the seemingly "lively" aspects of the worker's life are simply the expression of dehumanising alienated labour. Intuitively Sonia feels it, so she does not whole-heartedly participate in that life. Both Nareswar and Sonia refrain from the workers' open and unrestricted life and ultimately both depart from that life seeking freedom from the said evils of that life. But, freedom from these evils is possible only when there is no alienated labour – only in the condition of free, creative labour; simply because the basis of all hypocrisy, cruelty, oppression, and exploitation is alienated labour. The basic hypocrisy of class society is to rob the worker of his product and give him wages which is a false justification for this robbery. Sonia significantly comments, "They are robbers, not sahibs" (Baruah 128). But there is no effectual effort to overcome such evils. The idea of alienated labour is applicable in human relationships like love also. Aloti and Prema create each other as lovers through their labour and struggle. Ultimately, the hypocritical hermit elopes with Aloti leaving Prema behind. Thus for

Prema “love’s labour’s lost”! Sonia and Nareswar also create each other as lovers. In a society informed by alienated labour, the creator is deprived of what she creates. That Sonia deprives herself of Nareswar and Nareswar of her is aligned with the deprivation caused by the condition of alienated labour. So, ultimately, “The story signals a riddle. How can man escape from the prison of humanity?” (Gohain, “Birinchī” 375). Gohain quotes Rabindranath as a reply, “Hetha noy, hetha noy, anya kotha, anya konkhane” (qtd. in “Birinchī” 375). Thus the search for happiness, peace, and humanity away from all conditions of oppression, injustice, cruelty, and inhumanity is the overarching thread that informs and encapsulates all other threads. Of course, that search is shown as a failed search and this failure makes the novel a tragedy.

Nadai

The story of *Nadai* could be written, and the over-determined reality represented by the novel could be organised, with almost any point of entry from among the following: 1) the making of a farmer, 2) survival of the fittest, 3) exploitation of the sharecropper, 4) class-conflict between the farmers and the landlords, 5) conflict between rural/pastoral simplicity and modernisation, 6) impact of the freedom movement on an interior village of Assam, 7) creative labour’s production of forces that it cannot control and so on. All these factors or facets or threads influence one another, determine one another, and thus collectively frame the over-determined reality represented by the novel. But the novel preferred to organise the over-determined reality from a particular point of entry, that is, creative labour’s production of forces that it cannot control. This is the thread that stitches all other threads, all other aspects mentioned above into an over-determined totality. The potential or alternative points of entry are examined below one by one.

Is the novel a story of the making of an independent farmer? Incidentally, the homeless *Nadai* comes to a faraway village and becomes Bhadiya Gayan’s servant or farm labourer, or a kind of bonded labourer. Gayan appropriates his labour and thrives. He is given food and shelter but no wages. The illiterate *Nadai* instinctively perceives the condition of alienated labour, “True, he grows potatoes, it is his product, but he has no

right over it.... He starts not to feel any pleasure from working, farming.... These are not his. The land is Gayan's, the farming is Gayan's – he has no right over them” (D. Sarma 174). In his pursuit of becoming an independent farmer, he harps on the necessity of means of agricultural production – first a pair of bullocks and then land, as either his own or in the system of sharecropping. The very first sentence of the novel is “He wants a pair of bullocks.” In the course of his pursuit of class-upgradation from a farm or bonded labourer to an independent farmer, the almost illiterate Nadai raises a few poignant questions about the nature of ownership of means of production, and thus into the system itself: “Why only a few people own all the land?” (167) and “Why land is scarce in such a wide world? If there is no land for people, where shall they farm? What shall they eat? How shall they live?” He resolves, “There must have been some blunder, otherwise this cannot happen” (180). Dambaru Bhattacharyya, jealous of Bhadiya Gayan's luck of having such an industrious labourer like Nadai, paves the way for him to get wages from Gayan for his eight-year-long service. But he is well satisfied with the pair of young calves Gayan allows him to own in return for his long service. Ownership of this first means of production is Nadai's first step towards class promotion and also towards building up for him a condition of creative labour. Next, he goes to Dambaru Bhatta with a desire to get land for sharecropping. Rejected and disheartened, Nadai, later, along with other villagers, starts to clear the forest at Morisuti, ten to fifteen miles away from the village. Gradually, he and a few others shifted to Morisuti, and their labour in general and Nadai's exertion in particular, transformed Morisuti into a heaven for creative labour. Nadai's economic condition develops and develops. Nadai and Morisuti both develop parallelly. Nadai marries his fan Kaliya's sister Naduki; frees Kaliya's family from the cruel exploitation of Dambaru Bhatta exacted based on the sharecropping system; fathers three sons and two daughters; educates them; contributes to the socio-economic development of Morisuti like the establishment of school and hospital; keeps farming assistants including servants/farm labourers and becomes a rich land-owning farmer. Morisuti, a deserted forest area, becomes first an abode for three or four families and then turns into a great village sheltering many. Gradually, schools, hospitals, a ferry port, a mill, a market, etc. are established and the modernisation and urbanisation of Morisuti continue. Through Premnath and Hemolota, Morisuti gets in touch with the Gandhian

freedom movement, and through Nadai's youngest son, Bharat, it feels the wind of the communist movement. Along with these, Maniki's incestuous relationship with many lovers, her elopement with Hafiz, Nadai's son-in-law Nandeswar's drunkenness and black marketeering, Laldhari's and Janaklal's black marketeering, his first son Mohan's detestation for farming and his contract during the war, his second son Gopal's desire for selling land, his third son Bharat's communism and subsequent imprisonment, great number of deaths including Naduki's – all these are threads of the story which the potential point of entry, the making of an independent farmer cannot weave, control or determine.

Then is it a story of survival of the fittest, that is, is survival of the fittest the organising principle or point of entry? At first glance, it looks so. True, Nadai's single-mindedness and industry help him to survive and escape the utterly bitter exploitation of the sharecropping system – a system that turns Rongai mad and threatens Kaliya's family's existence. He grabs the meager opportunity that the old village offers and makes the best of what Morisuti does. But this thesis of survival of the fittest will not explain or organise the other materials outlined above. The story is much more than Nadai's survival amid all odds. Another thread is the exploitation of the sharecropper which is there, but this also cannot organise all facets of the plot, so it cannot be the point of entry. The novel indicates that this exploitative system is very much there: Rongai's family and Kaliya's family are sharecroppers in the land of Dambaru Bhattacharyya. Rongai is pauperised by the system and it is Nadai who protects Kaliya's family from extinction. But the novel does not dramatise this system on a wider scale and the hero Nadai is shown as successful in escaping the stranglehold of the system or as one who thrives despite the system. This system is absent at Morisuti and the old village which harbours the system gradually wanes. Dambaru Bhattacharyya, a typical representative of the system, is challenged by the Mymensinghians who make it amply clear that they are not going to pay him taxes, and also by Rongai who spits on his face. The deaths of Gayan and Bhattacharyya and the decline of the old village ring the death knell of the system. They are rung out and the emerging middle class represented by Mohan, Nandeswar, Laldhari, Janaklal, etc. is rung in. Further, this facet of the story cannot organise several other facets like the introduction of the Gandhian freedom

struggle, communism of Bharat, corruption and moral degeneration rampant at Morisuti, modernisation along with its fair and foul aspects, etc.

If exploitation of the sharecropper is not the point of entry for the reasons mentioned above, then for similar reasons conflict between the farmers and landlords also cannot be the organising principle. Various facets mentioned above cannot result from this. Besides, though there are a few incidents in the way of conflict they cannot be termed as class antagonism. There are clashes of interests no doubt. True, pauperised Rongai spits on Dambaru's face; true that the Mymensinghians refuse to pay taxes to Dambaru; but such incidents are very few in the novel and so do not amount to a continued and defining class conflict worth consideration. More importantly, the hero, the archetypal farmer, Nadai has no direct conflict with either Gayan or Dambaru. Exploited by one and insulted by the other, he respects both of them and feels aggrieved at the time of their deaths. It was Gayan's help, though meager, which significantly contributed to the making of Nadai a farmer. Nadai is more comfortable with Gayan and Dambaru than with the members of the newly emerging middle class. To him, their exploitation is natural while the enterprises of the new class are unbearably unnatural! Further, Nadai, initially an unwaged, bonded, farm labourer, rises to the level of an independent farmer who also keeps others as bonded, farm labourers. His questions are also different now. He, who earlier asked, "Why do only a few people own all the land?" (167) now asks quite the opposite question. "The reverse question comes to his mind 'Why should he give away his land?'" (258). Thus, his story is more about class promotion than of class-conflict.

Then is the conflict between pastoral, rural simplicity, and modernisation plus urbanisation the point of entry? There this conflict glaringly exists but it cannot be the organising principle for everything. For example, this rural-urban dichotomy does not include the Gandhian practices of Premnath and Hemolota, the communist practices of Bharat, Kaliya's indifference to material life and his becoming a saint away from the cozy, domestic life, and even the making of Nadai as an independent farmer. Moreover, "the rural" is not always free from vices, and "the modern" or "the urban" also is not always vicious. If the urbanised Morisuti produces an amorous adventurer like Maniki, then the unnamed old village also has her counterpart in Ghotai who tried to harass

Naduki sexually. If the representatives of this new, urbanised world such as Laldhari, Janaklal, and Nandeswar are black marketeers, then the representatives of the old, rural world like Bhadiya Gayan and Dambaru Bhattacharyya are cruel appropriators of the labour of people like Nadai. A simple binary opposition between pastoral Morisuti and modernised Morisuti also cannot be drawn. The pastoral Morisuti was also not completely free from the traits of the modernised Morisuti and there are continuations between the old village and this pastoral Morisuti. To take the second first, Nadai, a victim of the bonded-labourer system and landlordism, himself turns into a kind of landlord and thrives appropriating the labour of a few bonded labourers. The landlord of the old village, Dambaru Bhattachayya, also occupies land at Morisuti and leases it out to the Mymensinghias in exchange for taxes. Morisuti does not end appropriation but simply revises it. As Gayan did not give any land to Nadai, Nadai also did not think of giving land to Budhan, his labourer, however sympathetic he is towards Budhan. Nadai is skeptical of machines, mills, and large businesses, but he becomes rich selling his produce in the market, the market being one characteristic of modernity, assisting Nadai's surplus product to turn into a commodity. In truth, the old village, the earlier Morisuti, and the later Morisuti are not simply opposed to one another, but they are three significant stages in the continuum of social development. The modernised Morisuti is not all evil; it establishes schools, hospitals, and a middle class which defeats the old classes. Significantly, the novel announces the death of not only Bhadiya Gayan, Dambaru Bhattacharyya but also Naduki and Nadai. The old village wanes and is defeated by Morisuti and the earlier Morisuti also gives way to the later Morisuti. To the great dissatisfaction of Nadai, not a single son of him continues farming, and all of them turn into businessmen, contractors, lawyers, or revolutionaries. Janaklal, the farmer and herdsman, adjusts himself to the tune of the new Morisuti and so becomes a trader, mill owner, and black marketer.

The impact of the freedom movement on a remote village of Assam has the least chance of being the point of entry. The smell of the freedom movement is absent in the first part of the story set in the old village and this smell is carried to Morisuti by a fugitive couple, Premnath and Hemolota. They failed to organise people in the line of the movement but succeeded in introducing certain Gandhian reforms at Morisuti such as the

making of home-spun cloth, assisting fellow human beings in their distress, etc. They play a significant part in modernising Morisuti through their leadership in establishing schools and hospitals there. But they and their activities are given much little space, hence though a bright thread in the story, the impact of the freedom movement ushered in by them cannot be the organising principle for all threads and incidents of the story.

But, creative labour's production of forces that it cannot control is the thread that can organise all the other threads discussed above and which interweaves all elements of the novel giving the novel its particular shape. This thread, therefore, is the point of entry. Nadai's capacity for extraordinary labour and his physical strength is highlighted right from the beginning. Losing both parents early in his life and being deceived and tortured by his relatives, Nadai runs away from his home and after a tortuous journey comes to a distant village where incidentally he meets Bhadiya Gayan and becomes his servant or bonded labourer. He is not content with his status as he is aware of the fact that he and his labour can do something more. Instinctively he perceives and refutes the condition of alienated labour and desires to overcome it through ownership of means of production—first a pair of bullocks and then a piece of land. As in the capitalist mode of production, the capitalist steals the labour time of the worker, so in the half-feudal mode of production Nadai belongs to, Bhadiya Gayan steals his labour time. This fact is shown to Nadai by Gayan's rival Dambaru Bhattacharyya who calculates Nadai's wage for eight years to be approximately four hundred rupees while the cost of the two calves Gayan offers to Nadai is not more than twenty or thirty rupees. Still, Nadai is content as these calves are his first private property, something of his own, and something that he owns as a means of production apart from his physical labour. Next, he searches for land, the most important means of production, to exert his labour. Gayan will never give him any land, so he approaches and requests Bhattacharyya to lend him a piece of land for sharecropping. Bhattacharyya downright rejected his proposal. Then Nadai, while accompanying the villagers in fishing in a *beel* (lake) ten or fifteen miles away from the village, suddenly discovers the possibility of clearing the forest and owning land there. People, most of them being exploited by the sharecropping system, always feel the need for such land, but afraid of the forest there and unwilling to take much pain to clear it, they hesitate to come to an affirmative resolution. But Nadai declares that he is going to

grab the opportunity. Kaliya declares that he will accompany Nadai. Thus, it is the leadership of Nadai that is pivotal to transforming that area into a habitat for human beings. His incomparable labour earns him this leadership. He is followed by Laldhari, Janaklal, Gelai, and others, and thus Morisuti, by degrees, turns into a new village. Nadai's creative labour not only builds his private property, his house, home, relations, family, and money, or frees Kaliya's family from the bondage imposed by Bhattacharyya, but also creates Morisuti. True, the creation of Morisuti is the outcome of the labour of many, but it is Nadai's labour that starts and sets the whole process. Nadai's labour is basic to building up his own life and to the creation of Morisuti as a new and better habitat. His labour is instrumental in unleashing various forces at Morisuti many of them being beyond his and his labour's control. Premnath and Hemolota come to Nadai's creation Morisuti and spread Gandhian principles and practices like home-spun cloth, love for others, education to all, etc. They lead the process of establishing hospitals and schools. In those schools, Nadai's children read along with others. Premnath advises Nadai to buy land and build a house in town where his children can receive higher education. This modern education is one factor behind Nadai's children's distance from and reluctance to agriculture. Without Nadai's labour there would have been no Morisuti, but as inhabitants increase at Morisuti, elements of modern, urban life appear, develop, and consolidate there some of which make Nadai deeply uncomfortable. He does not dislike the settlement of the Nepalis, the Mymensinghians, etc., but he is certainly averse to mills, machines, large businesses, etc. He is shocked by Maniki's incestuous relationships, his son-in-law Nandeswar's drunkenness and involvement in black market, etc. He is aggrieved by his children's detachment from the land. He is disturbed by Hemolota's information that he too cannot keep land as he wishes. Finally, Nadai's labour cannot control his class promotion and his approach to the question of owning means of production. It is a structural irony in the novel that Nadai, who asked earlier, "Why only a few people own all the land?" (167) ultimately asks quite the opposite question, "Why should he give away his land?" (258).

While thus establishing that creative labour's production of forces that it cannot control is the point of entry or the organising principle that encompasses and interweaves all elements or threads of the story, we cannot forget that Nadai's creative labour does not

create a condition of creative labour at Morisuti. Half-feudal setup of the old village, though compelled many to perish, yet left a bit of scope for even its slaves to thrive through the exertion of labour. Nadai is not a rule but an exception and his exceptional exertion, together with support from the well-wishers, enables him to expand and own the products of his creative labour. But this beneficiary of creative labour deprives his workers like Budhon of their products as earlier he was deprived by Bhadiya Gayan. Thus, Nadai's creative labour does not end the condition of alienated labour. There is no systemic difference between the old village and the earlier Morisuti. Morisuti simply shows the enormous possibility of the development of productive forces lying in the lap of creative labour. To show this, the novel does not portray any class struggle for systemic change but shows how individual industry and exertion can bear fruit even inside and despite an exploitative system or a condition of alienated labour. Nadai's labour can neither change the system nor control the forces at work at Morisuti, but it certainly develops Nadai's life condition and also the situation around him. "You cannot change the world; you can change only yourself if you intend and effort accordingly" – the novel means. No mistake, this is the bourgeois middle-class pragmatic wisdom which is reiterated in book after book.

Thus, though Nadai's creative labour seems to fulfill and complete his individual life, it does not alter the systemic condition of alienated labour and so it cannot influence the changes in the historical forces. Many of his close friends, relatives, and acquaintances – Laldhari, Janaklal, his sons, his son-in-law, etc. turn into middle-class most of them being averse to land while Nadai is deeply attached to it. Even Naduki is repelled by the farming occupation – she wants to educate her children but not engage them in farming; she prefers Nandeswar, the compounder, to Bodhan, the farmer, as her son-in-law. In this, she declares her opposition to Nadai. Nadai fails to control any of them, all moves away from land and farming. He would not give his land to Laldhari for establishing the mill, but cannot detain Laldhari from doing the same. Laldhari does what he wants and establishes the mill. The new Morisuti has both good and evil aspects; Nadai has support for some of them and reservations against others. But the novel affirms that the process of modernisation will go on despite Nadai and his will. At Nadai's death in Prayag in the final chapter the reader is assured that no one in the novel is going to

continue his spirit and his deep attachment to the land. The new Morisuti is going to be dominated by the newly emerging middle class. If the earlier Morisuti overcomes the sharecropping system of the old village retaining the element of the bonded labourer, the new Morisuti threatens the existence of the big farmers owning plenty of land. The Sealing Act and the communists' struggle for the redistribution of land are mentioned before Nadai by Hemolota and Nadai gets deeply concerned with this information. If the deaths of Bhadiya Gayan and Dambaru Bhatta are symbolic of the death of the old system of appropriation, then the deaths of Nadai, Naduki, and even Budhon, the bonded labourer, signals the death of the modified form of appropriation represented by Nadai, the first inhabitant of Morisuti. The scene is set for the newly emerging middle class – the future is in their hands. This middle class is sure to defeat all earlier classes – landlords, peasants, farmers, bonded agricultural labourers – handed down from the previous age. Their defeat is symbolically represented by their deaths. In truth, the novel is full of deaths – Nadai's mother, his father, his loving aunt, his father-in-law, mother-in-law, mother of Janaklal's son-in-law, Nadai's fourth child, Gelai's father, Bhadiya Gayan, his first calves and other livestock, Budhon, Dambaru Bhattacharyya, wife of Benga the blacksmith, Laldhari, Premnath, Naduki, and finally Nadai himself – all die. The death of Laldhari, farmer-cum-artisan-turned-into-businessman, in an accident is an exception, but all other dead are representatives of the older way of life. Nadai fails to retain even his enthusiastic fan Kaliya with whom he comes to Morisuti first and builds Morisuti. Kaliya resigns from "practical" life, escapes from Morisuti, and turns an ascetic. If the system of the old village turns Rongai mad, then the system of farming at Morisuti also produces an ascetic. True, there may be several factors behind the shocking change of Kaliya's mind – the teachings of the Bhakti movement internalised by the rural society of Assam, the hangover of the earlier experience of bitter exploitation of the sharecropping system, his inferiority to Nadai as a worker, etc. But, this researcher thinks, one cause is more significant than all these, and that is, the continuation of the condition of alienated labour. Though he is very close to Nadai, and Nadai also loves him, and though both of them work together, and despite the less quantity of his work Nadai gives him an equal share, and frees his family from Dambaru Bhatta's exploitation, Kaliya feels that it is all Nadai's. He is not the producer but a beneficiary, things do not belong to him and his role

in the production process is conspicuously very little. Having failed to draw pleasure from work and work's product, Kaliya resigns from it and turns towards the spiritual.

Pratipad

The story of *Pratipad* could be written, and the over-determined reality represented by the novel could be organised, with any story thread from among the following: 1) the failure of a strike organised by the oil well and refinery workers of Digboi, 2) the class-struggle of the oil-well and refinery workers of Digboi against the condition of alienated labour built by the Digboi Oil Company, 3) the struggle, particularly of women, against various forms of patriarchal repression, 4) the impact of the freedom movement of India on the oil-well and refinery workers of Digboi, 5) love and marriage, 6) the struggle of men and women living at Digboi for a happy life free from oppression, repression, and exploitation. How these facets or threads influence one another, determine one another, and thus collectively frame the over-determined reality represented by the novel, is going to be examined below. It will be seen that the novel prefers to organise the over-determined reality from a particular point of entry, that is, the struggle of men and women living at Digboi for a happy life free from oppression, repression, and exploitation. This is the thread that stitches all other threads, all other aspects, mentioned above into an over-determined totality. All the threads enumerated above need to be examined one by one.

Pratipad is usually seen as a strike novel. Gobinda Prasad Sarma says, "The subject of the novel is the famous strike (1938-39) of the workers of Digboi Oil Company" (Birendrakumar 29) Upendranath Sarma informs, "The Workers' movement in the oil city of Digboi in 1940 shook him (the author) a lot. He took the initiative in collecting money for the support of the distressed workers" ("Sahitya-Kriti" 36). Shri Ram Goswami also views the novel in the same way, "The story of the novel is expanded against the backdrop of a remarkable workers' strike that had taken place at the oil-city Digboi of Assam in the pre-Independence period" (121). Jogesh Das has the same opinion, "The actions of the novel *Pratipad* have been organised around the huge strike of the workers in the industrial city of Digboi in the pre-Independence period" (50). True,

the workers' class struggle against the condition of alienated labour culminates in a strike that completely failed. Yet, can it be called a strike novel, or is the failure of a strike organised by the oil well and refinery workers of Digboi the point of entry or basic thread of the novel? The 289-page long novel has 39 chapters and the possibility of the strike is mentioned by Baruah on page number 202 which is in the thirty-first chapter! "If they do not fulfill the demands within twenty-one days, then we will go for a strike" (Bhattacharyya 202). Thus the strike is the effect – but not the cause – of the action of the preceding thirty chapters. Rosa Luxemburg observes, "The mass strike is the first natural, impulsive form of every great revolutionary struggle of the proletariat." But, the struggle is not carried forward from this first impulse. Further, other threads like the struggle against patriarchal practices, the freedom movement activities; the love and marriage of the main protagonists, etc. neither determine nor get determined by the strike. So, the failure of a strike organised by the oil well and refinery workers of Digboi is not the point of entry of the novel.

Then is the class struggle of the oil well and refinery workers of Digboi against the condition of alienated labour built by the Digboi Oil Company the basic thread of the novel? At first glance, it looks quite so. Hiren Gohain comments on the author's ideology and the people's struggle reflected in the novel in this way, "People's hopes and desires, dreams and struggles were combined with his (the author's) personal ideological sincerity" ("Biren" 14). According to Shri Ram Goswami, "The theme of the novel is the worker's movement and its political awareness" (121). The novel begins with Chandi's exclamation, "I cannot bear it any longer" (Bhattacharyya 1). The exclamation is suggestive of the burden of alienated labour upon the workers. Through leaflets distributed among people and letters sent to the company, the workers outline their miseries and enlist several demands the fulfillment of which might improve their condition and make life bearable for them. Once their protest bears fruit and they can reengage fifty workers who were previously discharged. But they regularly face pay cuts, discharge, unhygienic living conditions, underpayment, and other forms of exploitation. To achieve their goals, much to the management's chagrin, they form and register a union that places several demands before the company the rejection of which leads to the strike, which, in turn, causes confrontation between the company and the workers, violence,

firing, killing of four workers, and ultimately, the expulsion of all workers along with their families from the oil-city. The novel seems to be all about this. But, it is not all about this. A little later, this researcher is going to discuss the struggle against patriarchal practices one consequence of which is a few new women – Pannu, Lasmi, and Nayanmoni. This gender struggle, the impact of India's freedom movement at Digboi, and the love, and marriage of the protagonists – such threads are almost independent of the thread in question. So, despite being a very strong contender for being the point of entry, this thread, that is, the class struggle of the oil well and refinery workers of Digboi against the condition of alienated labour built by the Digboi Oil Company is not the point of entry of the novel.

One more thread is the impact of the freedom movement of India on the oil well and refinery workers of Digboi. Though, finally, Giasuddin thinks that the class struggle must be associated with India's freedom struggle to achieve its ends, and though the novel ends with Mrs. Baruah's freedom-fighter father's information that a stronger phase of the freedom movement is going to start, this is not a major thread of the novel. It does not occupy much space. Congress is first mentioned on page no 25 and Nehru's tour of Assam is mentioned on page no 40. Nehru's meeting at Digboi is referred to in the twenty-fourth and the twenty-fifth chapters and Gandhi is mentioned two/three times in the twentieth chapter. The Congress-led coalition Government of Assam is mentioned a few times. That Mrs. Baruah's father is a Congress volunteer is informed on page number 226. Nehru is in favour of the union and the Congress Government is also sympathetic to the workers' cause. Yet the Government could do nothing for the workers leaving them discouraged and frustrated. Thus the freedom struggle encourages the class struggle only to dilute and divert it in the end. Further, it has little impact on the gender struggle of the New Women, the moral struggle of Jebunnisa, the religious diversions of Chandi and Nasiruddin, and other incidents and events. So it is far from being the point of entry of the novel.

One more important thread is the struggle, particularly of women, against various forms of patriarchal repression. The society depicted in the novel juxtaposes what Raymond Williams, in *Marxism and Literature*, termed as residual, dominant, and emerging structures of feelings. "We have certainly still to speak of the 'dominant' and

the 'effective', and in these senses of the hegemonic. But we find that we have to speak ... of the 'residual' and the 'emergent' (Williams 121-122). And, "The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" (122). Further, "By 'emergent' I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture ... and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it" (123). Chatterjee's dream of a classless society exemplifies emergent; the assertion of individual freedom by Mrs. Fleming, Pannu, Lasmi, Nayanmoni does dominant and patriarchal values and practices upheld by Chandi, Bodhan, Durga, etc. do residual structures of feelings. Patriarchy is continually challenged and almost comprehensively defeated by the struggle for individual, particularly women's, freedom. Several New Women dominate much of the action. Mrs. Fleming teaches Nayanmoni English, encourages her to go to Lucknow Bhatkhande School to learn music, and patronises her love and marriage with Durga. She freely moves, comes close to the natives, sympathises with them, writes about the ethnic groups, and paints. Mr. Fleming, otherwise a more liberal manager of the company, does not like Mrs. Fleming's free movements, yet cannot and does not control her. Jebunnisa learns English from a governess. Pannu and Lasmi receive education from Jahanara. Nayanmoni learns English from Mrs. Fleming. But Ismail is surprised at the news of reading by women: "Women have read! Oh, no, Pannu and Lasmi have read!" (Bhattacharyya 58). The said women make independent decisions about their love and marriage. Pannu decides not to listen to her family members and not to marry. "She will not listen to anyone of the family and she will not marry" (94). Nayanmoni leaves her relationship with her family for love. The patriarchal Durga's confrontation with the new woman Pannu is significant:

Durga: Did you ask father?

Pannu: Why should I ask? Did you ask?

Durga: My case is different. You are a girl.

Pannu: That is your error. Do girls have no freedom? (96).

Nasiruddin perceives, “The movements and manners of the girls have changed” (100). Chatterjee accepts that, “men and women are equal” (124). But the patriarchal front speaks through Ramu’s mouth, “Is there any value of their mind? How can they live without getting married?” (78). When Lasmi asserts her freedom, “I move like men. The men dislike it” (168), Giasuddin supports her, “She moves without fear. That’s not her fault, that’s the fault of the society, that is, the fault of men” (169). But the same Giasuddin, liberal, progressive, crusader of individual freedom is not free from patriarchal sentiments. He reveals his secret, “Of course, one sorrow stays with me. I wished for a son” (164). And he callously separated from Madhuri and married Jahanara for that only – a male child! Pannu vehemently asserts her freedom, “I will not allow anyone the right to think about my marriage, Master Babu. This is my right” (181). Nayanmoni’s assertion before Durga is similar, “Are men everything for women?” (222). “I am not going to be a Memsahib, but a human.” But patriarchal Durga feels wounded. “Nayanmoni has already sent an application to the school – without consulting him. He does not like this audacity. He is husband, after all” (223). And, “Can there be any greater wish for women without children?” (222). Further, it is interesting to note that Pannu, the new woman, cherishes a patriarchal idea of ‘maleness’ which she sees in Giasuddin but not in Chatterjee and Ismail. “Jahanara asked – what is maleness? She smiled and said – Giasuddin Sahib. He left his religion to marry you....Chatterjee needs to pass the test of maleness” (165). But after Chatterjee’s death, “Pannu’s interest in him is increasing... probably because of showing maleness as per his words” (264). Thus the struggle, particularly of women, against various forms of patriarchal repression is a very important thread of the story. But this struggle neither accelerates nor decelerates the speed of the class struggle or the strike. The class struggle or the union or the strike moves forward completely independent of this gender struggle. It is there without helping or hampering the other threads like the impact of the freedom movement of India. It is, therefore, not the main thread or point of entry of the novel.

The subject of love and marriage occupies much space in the action and impels the residual and dominant structures of feelings to confront each other. Giasuddin, otherwise liberal and progressive, appears to bear patriarchal sentiments in such matters. For love and marriage, he forsakes his religion and embraces Islam. He famously says,

“Religion for me is a coat” (42). Or, “Religion is a coat. Love is the body” (104). Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami observes, “The author has portrayed the character of Dimbeswar/Giyasuddin who can change ‘religion as a coat’ in *Pratipad*...with befitting sympathy” (320). He changes religion, an unexpectedly big step, to marry Jahanara though, as her uncle Ahmad says, “Whoever comes to see her says that she is dark, ugly and small-sized” (Bhattacharyya 29). Giyasuddin, previously Dimbeswar, separates himself from his first wife, Madhuri, because, as he says, “I will not keep her any longer. She could not beget a boy. I will marry Jahanara” (33). Jahanara also later realises that it is not love but a wish for a male child that impelled Giyasuddin to marry her. “For this, he married for this” (87). “The man has courage, but no depth in his love” (121). “Women are only bed-mates for him. She cannot remember a time, apart from sleeping together in bed, when he talks with her” (121-122). There is only one hug in the novel and that is done by Giyasuddin. But as he hugs the sleeping Jahanara, he finds her unattractive, compares this experience with the passionate hug of a British couple he saw many days ago, and leaves Jahanara with a sigh, wondering, “Why some women are so attractive and lively and why some others are so tasteless and lifeless?” (86). At the time of separation from Madhuri, “There was no trace of sadness in Dimbeswar’s face. It seems he is already prepared for this separation.” For him Madhuri’s fault is “Madhuri is sterile. She is completely rustic” (43). Madhuri weeps but “that weeping could not imprint anything at the heart of Dimbeswar” (44). “Helpless Madhuri decides to go back to Teok that very night” (45). After Jahanara’s death, at her request, Pannu comes forward to marry Giyasuddin. The enlightened and independent Pannu will not allow any other person to decide her marriage, but she cannot understand her mind. But Jahanara could penetrate the secret lurking in Pannu’s subconscious mind, ‘Do you think I have not got it? You love Giyasuddin Sahib very much’ (152). She loves Giyasuddin for his ‘maleness’ which, according to her, Ismail certainly lacks as he, unlike Giyasuddin, cannot forsake his religion to marry her and to prove which Chatterjee must pass a certain test. “I could also make Ismail my own as Lasmi did. But I told him to become a Hindu. He did not” (121). But, she also lacks the strength that she expects to find in Ismail: “I do not have the capacity. I am not that courageous. I respect religion. I have fear in mind” (60). After Chatterjee’s death, “Pannu’s interest in him is increasing... probably because

of showing maleness as per his words.” Significantly she has ‘interest’, but no considerable ‘grief’; “her face becomes melancholic” (264) but she does not feel any tragic emotion. This lack of passion for love is shared by Ismail also. He is as indecisive as Pannu. Nasiruddin reports about his mind, “Jebunnisa has a slur on her character. So Ismail does not want to accept her. The same is true with Lasmi. Once or twice he saw her in the car of that contractor. His mind breaks easily. And he has not been able to accept Pannu’s condition. He does not want to be a Hindu” (101-102). Later he marries Lasmi but is discontent with her free manners and wants to leave her. His patriarchy is evident when referring to Jebunnisa, he says, “It is unpleasant to drink water from a used glass.” Pannu immediately silences him in this way, “Is there no used glass among men?” (60).

Nayanmoni leaves her family for her love for Durga, but the only ‘love scene’ between them is devoid of love-making – rather it reads like a scene in a Shavian problem play. Durga once wants to clasp her hand but she prevents him saying, “Not now” (95). Later, assisted by Giasuddin and Mrs. Fleming, they registered in the court as a couple. The playful Lasmi does not bother much about her would-be lover and husband. She is conscious of her right as a woman and fully avails that right, though it disturbs Ismail. In the scene where Ismail proposes to her and she accepts him, she is smilingly saying “Ismail has no heart. Ismail’s love has no depth. Ismail does not know whom he needs.” Again, “Fie fie, leave these. Marry whom you want to. Resolve your mind. Do not run after three women” (112). Then, “Pannu also has fear. Or why has she given condition? ...But Jebunnisa has courage. But you hate her as a prostitute. You have feared to accept me also, have you not?” (113). Two minutes later, she accepts Ismail as her lover and husband. How passionless and arithmetic-like it is! Aimya is correct when he says, “This is no real love. These are attempts at building nests as the birds build nests” (80). And Durga also correctly observes, “Love does not easily take place here” (94). No wonder, there are dozens of lovers in the novel but only three kisses are recorded: one by Jahanara on Giasuddin when the latter was sleeping and two by Baruah at the time of his tragic parting from his wife. The impassioned love is exemplified by Jebunnisa in her passion for Ismail which remains unrequited. None of these love stories can determine the course of the class struggle, though some of them are expressions of

the gender struggle. Mrs. Baruah, lovingly and passionately, tries to stop Baruah from going to the place of the clash between the workers and the company officials but fails. Despite the personal love-and-marriage crisis Giasuddin well attends the discussion of the workers' plight. Nayanmoni's love for the patriarchal Durga does not dissuade her from being a New Woman and the discomfited Durga also does not stop her. Her father, Pradhan, comes in the way of her love but finally recoils and blesses her. But her and Pannu's New Womanliness frees them to make independent decisions regarding love and marriage. Contrarily, Giasuddin's love, and marriage are motivated by his patriarchal sentiments and desires. Thus the characters' involvement in the class struggle neither determines nor gets determined by their love and marriage. However, their involvement in the gender struggle partly determines and is partly determined by their love and marriage. Further, the thread of love and marriage is quite distanced from the thread of the impact of the freedom movement and also that of the strike. So this thread is not the principal thread or the point of entry.

Then what is that thread that stitches the most, if not all, threads, incidents, and events in the novel? It is the struggle of men and women living at Digboi for a happy life free from oppression, repression, and exploitation. The thread of class struggle leaves out so many details linked to the thread of gender struggle and vice-versa. The gender struggle has something to do with the subject of love and marriage, but the same cannot be said of the class struggle. Love and marriage here are almost entirely innocent of class. But every incident of the novel is a form of struggle – be it class-, gender-, moral-, or India's freedom struggle. Everyone strives to remain happy by overcoming hurdles set by different forms of oppression, repression, and exploitation. Jahanara, who detests her oppressed life and who wants to come out of the clutch of Jilapsy, wants to overcome that condition by learning English, nursing, and yearning to have Ismail, the patriarchal, as her lover. She does not think of joining the strike or the union and does not assert herself as equal to men. Her rejected but steadfast love for Ismail is her way of fighting back against the bitterness of a degenerated life. Jahanara, who strives to get pure love from Giasuddin and gets frustrated, keeps herself away, like Jebunnisa, from the union and the strike. Considerably educated, she teaches Lasmi and Pannu but does not share their anti-patriarchy sentiments. Rather, she, as a traditional wife devoted to her uncaring

husband, urges Pannu to become his wife after her death! Significantly, the women who do not fight on the class or gender lines – Jahanara, Minubai, Jebunnisa, and Mrs. Baruah – either die or lose their love. The more you struggle, the more you live and love – the novel implies! So Lasmi, Pannu, and Nayanmoni can retain their love and continue to live at the end of the novel. The workers enthusiastically welcome and receive Jawaharlal Nehru at Digboi as Indian National Congress and Nehru are sympathetic to their cause. They are discouraged by the fact that the dependent Congress Government could not assist them in their fight against the company's exploitation. After the failure of the strike, the main protagonist Giasuddin thinks that the strike would have been successful under an independent government, so the success of the class struggle must follow the success of the struggle for India's Independence. The novel ends with a reference to a letter written by Baruah's father-in-law, who is a freedom fighter, and who, in the letter, writes about an imminent, vigorous movement against British rule in India. Even Chandi's religious practices at the Ramakrishna Mission and Nasiruddin's plan to go for the pilgrimage are forms of struggle to achieve happiness and peace against the all-pervading condition of alienated labour that leads to dehumanisation. As Marx says, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" ("Religion" 229). Thus the struggle of men and women living at Digboi for a happy life free from oppression, repression, and exploitation encompasses almost all the threads and incidents in the novel and hence it is the point of entry.

Rupabarir Palas

Similarly, the over-determined reality represented by *Rupabarir Palas* also has several threads: 1) the migration of Miyas to Assam, their settlement here and their gradual assimilation into the Assamese society, 2) the struggle of the Miya people to settle in Assam and to assimilate into the Assamese society and the conflict there from, 3) famine in Bengal and the human tragedy, 4) love-quadrilateral and the problems thereof, 5) involvement of the Miyas into the question of the creation of Pakistan, 6) impact of the Second World War on a backward region of Assam mainly inhabited by the Miyas, 7)

landlordism in East Bengal and the class struggle it entails, 8) the survival and class-promotion of the fittest Miya through creative labour, etc. The close examination of each of these is what follows:

The leading critics agree that the novel is about the migration of Miyas (a term commonly used to mean the migrants from East Bengal) to Assam, their settlement there, and their gradual assimilation into the Assamese society. It looks like that. Babar's father Johur Miya is a tenant under the famous but atrocious landlord Mohammad Modabbir Habib Kibriya Choudhury. Johur is cruelly whipped for his failure to catch fish of the size the landlord expected. Such atrocities leave Babar's juvenile mind deeply wounded and revolting while his father accepts it as his natural lot. Later, during a cultural function organised by the landlord's son Mojammil Choudhury, Mojammil and one of his friends drag Mariyam and Sofica for the satisfaction of their carnal desire. Babar and his friend, Jafar, strike at Mojammil's head and rescue the girls. Subsequently, Babar and Jafar have to flee and begin an uncertain journey. On their way, they come upon the household of Osman Ali Sikdar Dewani who sympathetically takes care of them, helps them with money, and unites them with a band of people who are on their way to Assam. Babar and Jafar also accompany these people among whom a little girl, Muslima, and her father, are assisted by them. Babar arrives in the unfamiliar Assam and starts to work as a servant in the household of Sarif, the kind village elder of Rupabari, a village in the present district of Nagaon. Sarif advises Babar to learn Assamese and mix up with the local people, an advice Babar punctually obeys. Sarif, content with Babar's honesty and industry, gives away one *bigha* of land to Babar. The Second World War comes. Babar, an honest young man, retains his honesty but makes plenty of money as a contractor who supplies certain materials to the militaries. Throughout he is helpful to others, particularly to teacher Girin, a freedom fighter. Sarif wants to marry off his daughter Rani to the now-rich Babar, who hesitates owing to his memory of Mariyam but cannot decline the offer as Sarif's love and support enables him to become what he is now. Incidentally, he meets Muslima and her father who are in a deep economic crisis. A love-like affair grows between them. Babar makes a tour of Kolkata where the famine was in full swing. Suddenly, among the bony beggars, he finds a few people from his native village, and surprisingly Mariyam is also among them. Babar helps them to some extent and brings

Mariyam and an old man whom he calls “uncle” to Assam. Ultimately, Babar marries Rani after which Sarif dies. Incidentally, Babar gets involved in politics and, with almost no knowledge of politics, becomes a local leader of the Muslim League which is defeated by Congress in the election. Mariyam and Muslima love Babar, and cherish the impossible wish to get him as their own but do not want to disturb his settled family life. Babar too loves them but fear of sin and his sense of responsibility for Rani prevent him from making love with them. Babar’s family gets expanded with the birth of a son and a girl, named Keteki. Keteki gets an education, learns Assamese, becomes an Assamese writer, and feels oneness with her people. The novel ends with a scene where Babar and Muslima, in the late hour of a dark night, go to the house of Kamran, a villainous rival of Babar, who once set fire to Babar’s house, and who turns very sick and poor now. Stealthily Babar and Muslima go to his house and keep a sack of rice and some paddy plants in the verandah. On their way back, rain drizzles, and Babar plants a few paddy plants on Kamran’s field and the rain turns it muddy now. Does this storyline suggest that the migration of Miyas to Assam, their settlement here, and their gradual assimilation into the Assamese society is the point of entry or the organising principle? No, it does not. First, Babar’s migration does not symbolise the migration of Miyas to Assam as migration began long ago. Babar came to Assam around 1936 but Sarif, Imran, etc. came to Assam much before. The novel reports that Sarif came forty years ago. Babar is simply an addition to the already settled community. The majority of the Miyas migrated to Assam as per the British colonial policy of collecting revenues from land by settling farming people in uninhabited and uncultivated land. The cause of Babar’s migration is different. Atrocities of the landlords are a cause, but not the only one. Babar is industrious no doubt. But success comes to him very smoothly, all odds are somehow evened. But this is not the common story of all the Miyas. Common Miyas undergo a very tortuous life struggle. Muslima’s family is an example in the novel and thousands of such families are there in actual history. So, Babar is not a true representative of the Miyas whose struggle in life is both hard and harsh. He is an exception but not the rule. Secondly, the migration of Miyas to Assam, their settlement here, and their gradual assimilation into the Assamese society cannot encompass storylines like the impact of the famine, the impact of the world war, Babar’s relations with the three women, etc.

Similar is the case with another potential point of entry, that is, the struggle of the Miya people to settle in Assam and to assimilate into the Assamese society and the ensuing conflict. True, the line system is mentioned a few times, and true, Nilakanta Chakrabarty will not sell land to the Mymensinghians. This is random information occupying little space in the novel and making no impact at all in the development of the plot. Further, the Miyas like Sarif, Imran, Mubarak, etc. settled at Rupabari and assimilated into the local society much before Babar did. Primarily his story is one of smooth coexistence, and not of conflict. He is on good terms with Girin and his family, he buys land from a Lalung man, he is assisted and befriended by Kumud Kachari, his contractor friends are Bhumidhar Sharma and Harihar Sharma, he gains support from Bhadiya Koch and Kameswar, other friends of him include Bhubon and Moti. Thus, there is not much of a struggle and conflict left for Babar. Moreover, the little trace of conflict mentioned above cannot organise several story materials vital to the story like the Bengal famine, the Second World War, the Babar-Kamran rivalry, etc.

Another thread that we need to examine is the famine in Bengal and the human tragedy. For giving the plot of the story of Babar its particular shape the “famine in Bengal” is essential. This famine devastates his village in East Bengal either killing or making rootless almost all his villagers and family members. That Babar has none in that village now ensures Babar’s continued and permanent stay in Assam. Further, the famine compels Mariyam to lose her virginity in exchange for money as she finds no alternative to satisfy her hunger for herself and her companions. Because of this deep tragedy, Mariyam considers her body derogate and herself inappropriate for Babar. Or, she would not let Babar marry Rani. Thus the famine drives Mariyam away from Babar and smoothen his marriage with Rani which further augments his establishment in the society as the son-in-law of the village elder and brother-in-law of teacher Mubarak. But this also cannot be the point of entry or the organising principle as it is much distanced from other threads like Babar’s class-upgradation with the help and support of Sarif, the impact of the Second World War, and grasp of the opportunity unleashed by the war, assimilation of Babar and other Miyas into the Assamese society, etc.

What about the love quadrilateral and the problems thereof? Is it the organising principle for all threads of the plot? That there was an unexpressed love affair between

Babar and Mariyam is very conspicuous. Their companions teased them about this. Mariyam's uncle, her guardian, also pondered their possible marriage. Babar rescued her from Mojammil and fled from Bengal to Assam. Later, he met her in Kolkata among beggars. They conversed in a hotel room like lovers. Babar took her to Assam and kept her with him. The novel offers ample evidence that both love each other but their love cannot be fulfilled. Babar cannot violate his promise to marry Rani and Mariyam does not want to unite herself with her lover Babar as she considers her body to be polluted and derogate. After narrating to Babar how she lost her virginity in a hotel during the famine she says, "If I remained a good girl, I would not leave you to marry Rani" (Malik 299). On his second tour to Pakistan one night Babar slept with Mariyam and made love, though, he probably, refrained from sex. Whenever they are left to each other they talk like failed lovers and both feel a pang of sorrow. On his way to Assam Babar met Muslima and her father and helped little Muslima to carry her luggage. After many years, when he is an established farmer and contractor, he again meets her and her father and they are in deep economic distress. Their attraction towards each other is obvious and later, after her father's death, when Bojlu wants to marry her off to Golam Rosul, a middle-aged man who has already married twice, she declines, begs Babar's support and guardianship and ultimately comes to live with Babar. Many a time she makes clear statements of her love towards Babar. Once Babar makes love with her but, again, refrains from sex. Both of them feel the pangs of incomplete love. Muslima suggests that she is in deep love with Babar, "Contractors know money only, and they do not know the heart" (228). Babar feels conscience-stricken at the thoughts of Mariyam and Muslima. He wonders, "After I marry the village elder's daughter, where will Mariyam go, where will she stay? How will she live?" (201). But this potential conflict is resolved simply. Babar says, "Allah will do as he wants to" (202). Babar understands Mariyam's sorrow, anger, and revenge against herself. He does not want to grieve her with talks of his marriage with Rani. That Babar wants to evade the central question is as clear as broad daylight. It is alright that talks will grieve, but will not the grief generated by the actual marriage which will take Babar away forever be bitterer than the talk? The potential conflict of love melts into the icy water of easy, callous acceptance of "the practical situation". Mariyam would not marry Babar even if he wanted to: Babar says to himself

“(I) cannot pay back Mariyam’s love. I have married Rani. Despite the absence of any obstacle, I cannot marry Mariyam. If I want to marry her, she will not agree to marry me – I know” (334). Further, Muslima also will not create any disturbance in the way of Babar’s happiness. But Muslima declares, “My life was of no use for anyone...But I loved you” (407). “Babar remains speechless. He felt a causeless pain in his heart. He feels he is guilty before this girl.” Babar says, “I had to marry Rani. There was no way to disobey the village elder. Love of the poor is meaningless” (407). It is an irony that it is poor Muslima whose love is meaningless! It is for Babar that these tragic women characters suffer celibacy, but they are content with their closeness to Babar. They, through struggle and sacrifice, create Babar as a lover, but their “love’s labour’s lost”. Babar, their product is not theirs, but someone else’s. Their lot is the lot of a worker in the capitalist mode of production. Here we may quote Christopher Caudwell who draws an interesting relation between love and economy, “Sexual love is a modified economic relation” (91). Babar has a sense of guilt for Mariyam, but his internal conflict fades away with a low degree of uneasiness and a high degree of adjustment and acceptance of the situation. This love story occupies much of the space of the plot. It is interwoven with several other threads like the famine, Babar’s contract during the war, landlordism in East Bengal, etc. But it cannot determine or interweave threads like the involvement of the Miyas in the question of the creation of Pakistan, the Muslim League politics of Babar, the Miya-Assamese conflict, etc. Therefore, like the others discussed above this too cannot serve as the point of entry of the novel.

Then is the thread the involvement of Miyas in the question of the creation of Pakistan point of entry? The Miyas of Rupabari discuss the issue of Pakistan without sufficient knowledge about the issue but their opinions are divided and they tend to support what the dewans and *matabbars* (wealthy headmen) say about it. Babar does not understand the idea of Pakistan. He says to Girin Borah, “Sir, I don’t understand those things, nor do I want them. I am a farmer; I want land for farming. Where there is land for farming is my country, my Pakistan, my Hindustan” (Malik 241). Muslim League, not all Muslims, wanted Pakistan and the inclusion of Assam into it. Babar says, “I am neither Congress nor Muslim League. I am a farmer; I will live through farming” (249). Yet, incidentally, he becomes a member and local leader of the League and campaigns in

its favour in the election. His wife Rani thinks that Pakistan would solve the problem of their non-acceptance by the locals. Babar would support Pakistan if it ended landlordism and allowed him to till the soil. In the election, the League candidate lost and the Congress candidate won for whom Babar's rival Kamran campaigned. Babar gets disappointed when Assam is not included in Pakistan but disapproves of the riots for Pakistan. Later he realises that "Even seven Pakistans cannot bring back the people who died of hunger" (324) and no real change is ushered in by the birth of Pakistan. He says to himself, "What if only Muslims live? What if only Hindus live? Say that there will not be any poor in Pakistan" (321). "Earlier our people thought that the Hindus kept the Muslims poor.... Now they have understood that only the rich people keep others poor" (323). Babar and Mariyam make visits to Pakistan and come back. They decide to live in Assam. The police administration is in search of Pakistanis hiding in Assam and Babar is once arrested and beaten as he is charged with keeping Pakistani fugitives as labourers. A sizable part of the novel presents the problem of Pakistan but till the twenty-seventh chapter, which is half of the novel, Pakistan remains unmentioned. Further, this thread can not necessarily weave other threads like the oppressive landlordism in Bengal from where Babar flees, his assimilation into the Assamese society, the famine in Bengal, the impact of the war that turns Babar rich, etc. It, therefore, cannot be considered as the point of entry.

One more potential point of entry is the impact of the Second World War on a backward region of Assam mainly inhabited by the Miyas. Most of the characters do not have sufficient information about the war. A few enlightened characters like teacher Mubarak, freedom-fighter Girin Borah, etc. have ideas about the war. Representatives of the Government teach the rural folk to "grow more food" and help the army of the Allies. Girin Borah tells Babar not to occupy land without proper official permissions and suggests that the Indians need not help the British in this war. Babar cannot understand what Borah says but eventually becomes a contractor who supplies materials to the military. This makes Babar a very rich man which is one important cause why Sarif, the village elder, wants to marry Rani off to him. The war debases many— Jabbar, who supplies wine and women to the militaries, is an example. The war, however evil, uplifts Babar's fortune. It was an opportunity for Babar to make money which helped him to

become a big landowner, to earn importance in society, to marry Sarif's daughter and Mubarak's sister Rani, and to help people in distress. Indirectly, it distances Babar from Mariyam and Muslima. Oliver Goldsmith famously writes, "Wealth accumulates and men decay" (line 52). Babar's accumulation of wealth also deprives him of true, human love. But this thread influences Babar-Mariyam and Babar-Muslima love stories only indirectly, and slightly determines Babar's journey to famine-trodden Kolkata just by making him capable of spending money. But, Miya's settlement in Assam, Miya-Assamese conflicts, landlordism in East Bengal, etc. are far away from this thread and therefore this cannot be considered the point of entry.

Landlordism in East Bengal and the class struggle it entails had the potential to become the point of entry or the organising thread for all other threads. In Chapter Five, the novel presents a general picture of how and why the Miyas migrated to Assam. British colonial policy for collecting more revenues and oppression of landlordism is presented as the basic causes behind this migration although the action of the novel dramatises only the second cause. The hero, Babar, also runs away from Sonapara, East Bengal, as a consequence of this oppressive landlordism. Babar's conflict with Habib Kibriya Choudhury and his son Mojjamil Choudhury cannot be considered a class struggle. True, he is angry at the physical torture imposed on his father and he wounds Mojjamil to rescue Mariyam from his grasp. Yet, his fight is limited to the individual level; he does not organise others to continue the struggle against the appropriation of landlordism. Further, his protest is not against the half-feudal system of appropriation but against its too-conspicuous forms of torture. The hero, Babar, is not an exponent of class struggle for another reason: he flees the battlefield and comes to a place where his opponents are absent. With his flight, the novel changes its direction – as the story moves from East Bengal to Assam, cruel landlordism is replaced by the "benevolent" dewani/ryotwari system, the condition of alienated labour gives way to the condition of creative labour and at least Babar is its beneficiary. Whatever happens in Assam is only indirectly related to the cruelty of landlordism in East Bengal as it sends Babar away from his native place. That there is an unfillable gap in the Babar-Mariyam love affair, that Babar met Muslima on his way to Assam and later in Assam also, that Babar met Sarif and thrived because of this meeting, that he became very rich becoming a war

contractor, that he had to marry Rani – a marriage which left Mariyam’s and Muslima’s desires unfulfilled – all these threads are future consequences of that departure of Babar which was caused by the cruelty of landlordism. Yet landlordism does not directly cause or influence all these simply because the subsequent events could easily have taken any other course. Further, the Bengal famine threatened the very existence of Babar’s villagers including Mariyam, and compelled Mariyam to lose her virginity for which she gave up the dream of marrying Babar; the war opened up vistas of opportunity for Babar to achieve affluence that not only enables but also “compels” him to marry Rani; the gradual assimilation of Babar and other Miyas into the local, Assamese society – all these threads cannot be controlled or organised or determined by the thread described as landlordism in East Bengal and the class struggle it entails. So, it cannot be the point of entry.

Then what is the organising principle or the point of entry or the main thread that weaves and interweaves all other threads and thus presents the over-determined reality the novel represents? It is no other than the survival and class promotion of the fittest Miya through creative labour. The first part of the novel presents a graphic picture of the cruel system of appropriation that landlordism upholds. The chilly wintry night is appropriately chosen to vivify the sufferings of people under landlordism; the reality of their poverty becomes conspicuous in this cold late night of winter as they are almost bereft of cloth; this lack of garments could not have such an impact in summer. Babar’s father Johur’s back is whipped for his failure to collect fish of the length of the landlord’s imagination and he is called a “traitor” (Malik 6). Babar, the adolescent boy, does not protest before the landlord but he is angry about what happened and not in a mood to humbly accept such torture and insult. Later, when Mojammil and his friend try to violate the modesty of Mariyam and Sofica, Babar and his friend Jafar, wound them with sticks and run away. Babar and Jafar, out of fear of severe punishment, run away to Assam. Thus, it is seen that Babar, unlike his humble father who accepts torture as ordained by Allah, has enough anger against the oppressive system. This anger, the element of protest, and also the prudence for fleeing are the keys to Babar’s survival and future class-upgradation. Or, he, like others, would have perished first in landlordism and then in the famine. Yet Babar’s survival is not guaranteed by his act of fleeing. He becomes

what he becomes only because the socio-economic condition of Rupabari greatly differs from that of Sonapara. The dewani or the ryotwari system of Rupabari is better and more humane than the landlordism of Sonapara. Of course, in this regard, the novel deviates from the historical facts. The dewani or ryotwari system was not as benevolent as it is shown in the novel. Fazal Ali Ahmed, in his book *Char-Chapribasi Prokritote Asomiya* (2015), says, “For ages a cruel administrative system, that is, dewani system or matabbar system, which is another name of feudalism, has been operating in these *char-chapori* areas” (26). The novel is almost silent about the cruelty and oppression of the dewani system. Only one dewan, Imran, is mentioned as cruel, quarrelsome, selfish, unpopular, and oppressive and he is presented to us only in two pages of this four-hundred-page-long novel. But the other two dewans – Dewan Osmani and Dewan Sarif – appear as compassionate human beings. It is Dewan Osmani’s help that enables the fugitive Babar and Jafar to come to Assam and it is Sarif’s compassion for Babar that he could build his life. Sarif does not oppress Babar as a servant but donates one *bigha* of land to him. Not only that, Sarif gives away land to other servants as well. Despite the dewani system that continues the general condition of alienated labour, the exceptional dewan Sarif’s compassion and magnanimity create a specifically narrow circle of the condition of creative labour particularly for Babar. Sarif allows Babar to have means of production, to own the product of his labour, and to shift from his serfdom or bonded labourer’s status to that of a war contractor and supplier. Not only that, he marries his daughter off to Babar, his former servant. Thus, Sarif is an exceptional dewan, Babar is an exceptional Miya, and the Babar-Rani marriage is an exceptional one. It appears that in the novel exception is the rule.

Babar not only survives but also thrives with the support of Dewan Sarif. But this support is mainly caused by Babar’s honesty, humility, and industry. The angry adolescent of Sonapara, East Bengal, turns into a humble, peaceful youth of Rupabari, Assam. Both these contradictory attitudes enable him to adjust and respond to the specific conditions of both places. An attitude of anger and rejection was required to escape the stranglehold of oppressive landlordism and an attitude of humble acceptance is necessary for coping with the “benevolent” dewani system. Historically, the dewani system is not that benevolent and its condition of labour is also not that of creative labour, but the

novel exaggerates its benevolence simply to establish its thesis of survival of the fittest Miya through individual industry and creative labour. True, it is not as cruel as landlordism in East Bengal, but at the same time, it does not uphold a system of creative labour as well. Sarif and Babar are exceptional examples of creative labour, but they do not suggest a system of creative labour. The broad-hearted Sarif donates one piece of land to each of his seventeen servants or farm labourers, but Babar, his beneficiary, does not take his cue from Sarif in this regard and does not give away his land among his labourers. He even appropriates the labour of Mariyam and Muslima and gives nothing in return. Thus, for Mariyam, for Muslima and her father Jalal who is the cook in Ibrahim's hotel, and for the labourers engaged by Babar, Kamran, etc. labour is always alienated; their product is not theirs. Only Sarif and Babar reap what they sow. Their creative labour, therefore, does not indicate any system or condition of creative labour. Though not systemic, this exceptionally individual creative labour not only upgrades the class status of Sarif and Babar but also builds for them a well-accomplished life. Their children further better their class status. Sarif's son Mubarak, a B.A. in Economics, becomes a high school teacher apart from inheriting his father's property, and Babar's daughter Keteki, who appears in B.A. final examination, becomes a poet and writer in Assamese. The novel marks the distinction between Sarif's creative labour and the alienated labour in landlordism – "Whatever Sarif, the village elder, does, he does it for himself and enjoys the fruits himself. Here, one does not depend on the mercy of any landlord." Added to this lack of the condition of landlordism is Sarif's industriousness – "How much Sarif, the village-elder, toils – ah! He is one but his work is equal to that of ten men" (Malik 84). The novel identifies individual industry as the key to economic success. For example, the villagers of Pabhomari, a *Koivarta* (a fishing caste) village, are very poor. Babar thinks, "How can their economic condition be good? To make it good, they must toil." Even Babar himself is Sarif's favourite simply because he is industrious. He reflects upon the poverty of people in the Lalung village, "Their men are very lazy. The women do everything from planting and gleaning to weaving and cutting. How can their economic condition be good?" (115). Thus individual worth, not the system, is primary to one's economic progress. And no mistake, this is the ideological stance of the middle-class bourgeois. But it is equally clear that Sarif enriches his life in the absence of any

cruel appropriation imposed by any condition of alienated labour. That does not mean that he puts an end to the condition of alienated labour and creates a condition or system of creative labour. He indeed gives away a part of his land among his labourers but this distribution of means of production does not establish any right for the labourers; they are simply beneficiaries of the “broad-hearted” Sarif who appropriates their surplus labour, owns the products of their labour and thereby thrives. Their ownership of the means of production depends entirely on Sarif’s choice.

But this exceptional dewan generates sufficient scope or opportunity of creative labour for Babar, the industrious, which he befittingly grabs. He not only gives Babar a piece of land, or occasionally puts his bullocks and buffalos in Babar’s service, but also allows him to contract and supply for the militaries which is impossible under landlordism or the system of bonded labour. Babar’s products are entirely his and so is his income. Thus, for Babar, his labour is creative. Babar turned rich and followed in the footsteps of Sarif in helping people in distress. The novel presents plenty of incidents where Babar extends financial help and other support to others. He helps his villagers including Mariyam in Kolkata, brings Mariyam and an old man to Assam, brings Muslima to his house, gives money to Girin Borah’s wife several times, donates food to many during the season of poor harvest, and finally gives Kamran, his enemy, a sack and plants of rice. But unlike Sarif, Babar does not give any piece of land to any of his labourers, even to Mariyam and Muslima. Babar appropriates the surplus labour of not only the unnamed labourers but also of Mariyam and Muslima. “Apart from his men engaged for farming, uncle and Mariyam also labour heart and soul in his farming” (252). But, “Rani does not go to the agricultural field. It’s not necessary also; she has no particular knowledge about the farming works” (254). During Rani’s first pregnancy, “Mariyam takes care of Rani day and night” (259). When Babar gets deeply involved in the election campaigning, “He forgets his household, forgets his farming, he even finds no time to take note of the pregnant Rani. Mariyam takes on herself all these responsibilities” (264). “When Babar is not around, Mariyam was Rani’s keeper, friend, guard, guardian” (301). Rani says to Babar about Muslima, “Do not send her away even after her marriage – if it takes place. She is very good at work” (363). And when Babar’s old house was burnt to ashes by miscreants engaged by Kamran, he needs to build a new

house: “Rani, with her boy, stays for a few days in the house of her brother. Babar, together with Mariyam and Muslima, prepares for building the new house” (413). But it is all Babar’s and to some extent, Rani’s; Mariyam, and Muslima are simply their beneficiaries. Even the novel, in its form, succumbs to patriarchal ideology in softly dismissing their agony and closing the novel with a comic note of a happy ending and making the patriarchal master appear great. The labour of Mariyam and Muslima remains concealed and latent in Babar’s property but they are not the owners. Babar, therefore, can become angry with Mariyam and order her to get out, “Babar, as in snubbing, shouts with a rude voice, ‘Shut up! What does it matter to you if we have quarrels (between Rani and him)? Get out – ’” (290). Later he repents and brings Mariyam back but the incident unmistakably shows his unquestionable authority in the household which Mariyam and Muslima cannot claim. Thus, though Babar’s labour is creative to a large extent, he is the appropriator of the alienated labour of others.

Babar’s survival and thriving are rooted in his ability for adaptation. We have seen how he properly adjusted his emotions to the opposite circumstances of Sonapara and Rupabari – angry in one, humble in the other. It has also been noticed how he properly utilises the scope of creative labour generated by Sarif’s magnanimity, and how he grabs the opportunity of the world war to earn money through military contract despite the counter-suggestion of Girin Borah whom he respects much. Girin Borah, the idealist freedom fighter, who does not swerve from his ideology of opposing the British and maintaining distance from the war, gets ruined. The irony is that Babar who does not understand such an ideology and contrary to Borah’s advice makes money through war-contract and helps Borah’s family both before and after his death. “The war spoils not only Jabbar but also many boys and girls of towns and villages” (137). But Babar is successful in both making money and retaining honesty. In the question of love and marriage Babar’s adaptability is exemplary. He loves Mariyam and Muslima, makes love with them, would not marry them, and would marry Rani whom he did not love before marriage as “there was no way to disobey the village elder.” He says to Muslima, “Love of the poor is meaningless” (407). This ironically suggests that the love of a poor girl like Muslima is meaningless. Babar improves his status through marriage with Rani but feels, and shows that he feels the sufferings of Mariyam and Muslima and thus continues to get

their unrequited but unconditional love. Muslima says to herself, “He neither brought me closer nor sent me away”! (390) and this ambivalence of Babar helps him to manage the complicacy of the situation. Before his marriage with Rani, he could have changed his mind and married Mariyam, but he said to himself, “Allah will do as he wants to” (202). Thus, Babar’s sympathy, support, love, restraint, and dutifulness satisfy in varying degrees all three women who love him; he, thanks to his personality and money power, manages to avoid any unwelcome conflict among his beloveds and successfully retains all of them. Babar’s money plays a pivotal role in making this ‘next to impossible’ possible and easy. Lukács quotes Marx to indicate such a role of the middle-class bourgeois money, “What I cannot do as a man, what is beyond my innate capacities, I accomplish through money” (*Writer* 70). Mariyam’s love for Babar is absolute. She considers her body to be polluted and so she regards herself unfit for being Babar’s wife. She says, “If I remained a good girl, I would not leave you to marry Rani” (Malik 299). Yet, she would not marry Babar even if he wanted to and would not come in the way of Babar’s happiness. “Mariyam never tries to be equal to Rani or to snatch away Rani’s share of love from Babar” (253). But when she sleeps with Babar in her house in her village in East Pakistan, she lovingly hugs him and says, “You have Rani. She always sleeps beside you. I have none. I can also get someone to sleep beside me, but I will not. I have not done that so far. I have not allowed anyone except you to be close to my body. My mind does not allow it” (328-329). Thus, Mariyam’s love is beyond any selfish, “practical” calculation. So is Muslima’s. Muslima could have married Golam Rosul. She says, “He is a good man. I would not have declined to marry him if he had gone himself. He was taken by Bojlu.... Bojlu wanted to sell me and he wanted to buy me” (226). Muslima thus refrains from being a commodity and continues to love Babar unconditionally. When Babar says, “If I arrange your marriage?” she whispers, “But, I have loved none but you.” Babar’s explanation, “I had to marry Rani. There was no way to disobey the village-elder” (407) falls flat before such high ideals of love of Mariyam and Muslima. Because of such an ideal, they like Girin Borah, could not adapt to the situation and could not achieve material success, but Babar, the compromising lover, is perfect in his adaptation to the circumstances and so he thrives and they go down. Thus Babar, unlike most other Miya men and women, adapts to a variety of circumstances for

which he undertakes a series of acceptances and rejections that may cause him emotional troubles but always contribute to the building of his life as a successful Miya in Assam. He leaves his family and village, maintains ambivalent relationships with Mariyam and Muslima whom he loves but would not marry, respects Girin Borah yet disobeys his advice and supplies for the militaries, obeys Sarif and marries Rani without love but remains her dutiful husband, learns Assamese, mixes up with Assamese people and so on.

Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya

Judged from the angle of over-determined reality and point of entry *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is an exceptional novel. Its over-determination is not that much rich as the other four novels. It is almost a single-thread story though one may find a few other minor threads. Therefore, its point of entry is clear right from the outset. What is more, the point of entry, in its initial stage of development, is the only story thread in the first book of the three-book novel. It is the tea garden labourers' life under the condition of alienated labour and the gradual development of their fight against that condition. Gobinda Prasad Sarma's statement supports this claim, "We see that the sole or main subject matter of *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is the community of the workers of the tea gardens" ("Asomiya Uponyasot" 29). One may discover a few more threads but they are either limited episodes unqualified for being termed as story threads or simply extensions and, therefore, parts, of the main thread. Those episodes or threads may be enumerated in this way: 1) the tea garden labourers' life under the condition of alienated labour and the gradual development of their fight against that condition, 2) contacts between the tea garden labourers and the mainstream Assamese people, 3) formation of workers' union and the coolies' fight for the improvement of life-condition under it, 4) enlightenment of tea garden labourers through education symbolised by Arjun's and Rumni's schooling and 5) impact of the freedom movement, 6) accident in the river Chandini, death of Manager Fredrick and its aftermath and 7) the earthquake of 1897 and its impact on Rupohijan Tea Estate.

The tea garden labourers' life under the condition of alienated labour and the gradual development of their fight against that condition is the master thread of the novel,

and therefore, its point of entry. Persuaded by the agents of the British tea planters, the labourers, much oppressed by their landlords, migrated from Odissa to Assam and became tea garden labourers or coolies. The novel describes the untold miseries of such a group of almost seven hundred labourers who were brought from Odissa to Gowalond in only four compartments and from Gowalond to Dhuburi on only one ship. At Gowalond they were kept for a few days at a coolie depot in very unhygienic and pathetic condition. On the train, there was practically no space for passing stool and urine. “Foul smell of clothes immersed in stool and urine, the smell of sweat emitted in unbearable heat, the smell of saliva and expectoration, smell of *bidis* (mini-cigar wrapped in tendu leaf) ... amid that rotten stench he ate *sattu* (a kind of flour) and drank water too” (U. Sarma 5-6). In the coolie depot, almost one thousand of them were given only rice and salt to eat; a roof without walls to stay in and sleep. In that unhygienic condition, cholera broke out and some of them died without proper treatment. The sardars (leaders-cum-agents) took some of their girls to satisfy the lust of other people. Magho lost his young, beautiful wife. “Like Magho others also search for the lost girls. Till then three girls could not be found out by any means. Including Magho’s wife, they were four” (14). On the ship also their miseries did not whittle down. At the beginning of this second journey, they were six hundred and eighty-two. “Under five sardars they were in total seven hundred and fifty-four but on the ship, they are six hundred and eighty-two and the condition of three scores of them are critical” (23). Many of them, including Tulsi’s mother, died of cholera and their corpses were thrown into the waters of the river Padma. In this way, they conclude their journey to Assam and some of them including the remaining part of Banha’s family arrived at Rupohijan Tea Estate in present-day Nagaon District. At Rupohijan they get disillusioned, and their dream of a better life gets shattered. They find themselves at the receiving end of cruelty, oppression, and strict administration. As per the rule, they cannot go out of the garden. “Their life is limited to taking care of tea plants during daytime and sleeping in the huts of the coolie line at night” (Saikiya 31). Despite this oppressive rule, they make sporadic contact with the mainstream Assamese people, particularly through Chitta and Ratan. Gradually, a hospital, a temple, a school, etc. get established in the garden, and at Chitta’s advice and much to the chagrin of the management of the garden, they form a workers’ union also. Later, Tulsi’s son Arjun gets

the opportunity to read in a high school outside the garden. The mainstream students and a few teachers do not receive Arjun easily. Yet he passes matric in the first division and wishes to study medicine in the future. This story thread is undoubtedly the main thread and most other threads are simply part of it. Contacts between the tea garden labourers and the mainstream Assamese people, the formation of the workers' union and the coolies' fight for the improvement of life-condition under it, enlightenment of tea garden labourers through education symbolised by Arjun's and Rumni's schooling and love and marriage of tea garden labourers, etc are essential parts of the tea garden labourers' life under the condition of alienated labour and the gradual development of their fight against that condition. In what follows it will be seen that episodes like the accident in the river Chandini, the death of Manager Fredrick and its aftermath, the earthquake of 1897 and its impact on Rupohijan Tea Estate, etc. are also loosely knit with the life and struggle of the tea garden labourers.

The second story thread to be examined is the contact between the tea garden labourers and the mainstream Assamese people. Gobinda Prasad Sarma remarks, "The novel beautifully portrays the gradual process of becoming Assamese after their stay in Assam for generations" ("Ardhashatabdir" 29). In the fifth chapter of Book I, this contact takes place for the first time. One particular night of their first days at Rupohijan, Banha, Gajanan, etc. heard strange sounds at a distance that were quite similar to the roars of a thousand tigers. Later, they discover that some mainstream Assamese people are singing *nam* with *tals* at a *namghar* (Vaishnavite place of worship). They receive the coolies, give them *Prasad*, and exchange words about their respective ways of life and cultures. But, this accidental contact does not go without punishment. "There is punishment for going out of the garden at night.... So their backs were skinned right in the morning" (U. Sarma 70-71). This happens because "The coolies of the garden are captives in the garden.... It is a crime on their part to go out of the garden at night" (54). Thus the first rays of racial contact and brotherhood are overshadowed by the dark cloud of the condition of alienated labour – presenting the product (the garden) as bigger than the producers. In the seventh chapter Bisni and Timki go to the market and Chitta, a mainstream Assamese, meets Bisni. Chitta is fond of Bisni. But when Bisni asks, "Will you be able to marry a coolie girl?" Chitta replies, "I will not. I cannot marry even you.

You are a girl whom one wishes to see continually. Yet I cannot marry you” (83). This indicates how the tea garden labourers are not received as equals by the mainstream. In Book II Chapter VII Chitta and Ratan, two mainstream railway workers, come to the *adda* (meeting place) of Bhola’s shop where they talk with the coolies about the annexation of Assam with Bengal. Ratan identifies the differences between the coolies and the mainstream Assamese, “There are differences between them and us. But, where will they go? If we are in trouble, they will also be in trouble. If there is any trouble for our state it will touch them also.” A little later Bhola responds significantly to Chitta, “Who asks where your father or your father’s father came from? ... It is futile to say repeatedly that this is your state” (198). Tulsi is angry with the mainstream Assamese as a whole as one member of this community, Cheniram, the maiki babu (official in charge of the female workers), attempted to rape his wife, Kalondi. “I will not talk with these Assami (Assamese) people. I get angry whenever their names are mentioned” (199). Annexation of Assam with Bengal is a non-issue for them. Magho says, “Talk about other things. I am getting bored with these” (206). Bhola, Bishnath, etc. are a bit interested in the talk but find it difficult to understand. Ratan significantly hints at the assimilation of the two communities, “‘We’ means that we are taking you in the count. If we are in misery, you will also be in misery” (205). Bishnath says, “You have said that if you are in misery, we will also be in misery. But, if we are in misery, will you be in misery? ... We had a lot of misery, and still it continues. When we had misery, did it touch you too? When our people died in hundreds, did some of you weep?” Chitta replies, “True, we have not shared your happiness and misery among us.... Your world is different.... We cannot do anything in your misery, but we can know it. You too cannot do anything if the country faces hazards, but can know it. This is so because one day we will come closer to each other” (206). Chitta, later, marries the coolie girl, Bisni, and towards the end, it is hinted that Ratan may marry Dugga, another coolie girl. These two mainstream Assamese teach the coolies to form and run workers’ unions and later, to join the freedom movement. Thus, the contact and assimilation of the two communities are gradually, slowly, developing.

This process of assimilation is not always progressive or without adverse effects. Mainstream members like Nakul, Gobin, Naren, etc. come to the garden and mix up with

tea garden labourers like Chunu, Lakhiram, etc. and the result of this contact is gambling, doubtful business, violation of women's modesty, etc. Moreover, the contact between the communities is not always smooth. Arjun's study in a high school outside the garden is not easy. That will be explored in a later section. This thread of contact is an important thread of the plot but it is not explored to a satisfactory extent. The characters of the mainstream people remain underdeveloped; even Chitta and Ratan are not allowed sufficient space. Chitta appears only in four chapters, maiki babu Cheniram in two, Ratan in one, Dr. Chakrabarty in one, Arjun's high school teachers in one, Teacher Bhabadhar and the second doctor in one. This "thread" of coolie-mainstream contact is, as has already been hinted at, in reality, part, and parcel of the main thread, that is, the tea garden labourers' life under the condition of alienated labour and the gradual development of their fight against that condition. Though considerably underdeveloped, it is closely connected with other threads like the formation of the workers' union and the coolies' fight for the improvement of life-condition under it, the enlightenment of tea garden labourers through education symbolised by Arjun's and Rumni's schooling, and love and marriage of tea garden labourers. Of course, this thread has nothing to do with episodes like the accident in the river Chandini, the death of Manager Fredrick and its aftermath, the earthquake of 1897 and its impact on Rupohijan Tea Estate, etc. The tea garden labourers learn how to fight against the condition of alienated labour by organising themselves under the banner of workers' unions from the mainstream Assamese, Chitta, and Ratan. The thread of contact is made stronger by the thread of enlightenment of tea garden labourers through education symbolised by Arjun's and Rumni's schooling. Teachers are from the mainstream Assamese community and Arjun's high schoolmates are all mainstream Assamese. Even the thread of love and marriage is intertwined with the thread of contact as Chitta marries Bisni and Dugga also indicates towards the end that she may marry Ratan who remains unmarried most probably for having been unable to marry Dugga. The idea of the Freedom Movement is brought to the garden by Chitta, and Arjun and Rumni also get the experience of the movement suddenly finding themselves in the rally of the mainstream.

The formation of the Workers' Union and the coolies' fights for the improvement of life-condition under it is one more thread to consider. In Book II Chapter III, Chitta

explains the necessity of the union in this way, “Presently we have two hundred people in our union.... Now it is seen that the railway officers listen to the words of this union of two hundred people....When your force is increased, you can say your words with force, energy, and courage....You need medicines for your children, rice to eat, and a house where rain does not fall inside. Will you be whipped by the sahib for saying these? Will you not let the sahib learn that workers are also humans? ...You do not have a union in these one hundred years. Have you not been oppressed in these one hundred years? Not beaten? Not sent to jail?” (274-275). Immediately after Chitta concludes his words “The siren of the factory gives out a prolonged whistle” (275). The factory, a symbol of the condition of alienated labour, is pitted against the workers’ spirit of class struggle represented in the words of Chitta. The siren is a form of disapproval of the class struggle. In Book II Chapter IV, the labourers gather to discuss the formation of the union. Jamadar babu and kamjari babu try to dissuade them. Jamadar babu says, “Why should you form a Workers’ union? What have you not got? ...Did you have not any problems earlier? Didn’t the sahib listen to you then?” Tulsi replies, “If kneeling before the sahib, we begged for something, he would give it if he intended to, and would not if he did not intend. But we are no beggars, Jamadar Babu” (284). Jamadar babu further says, “You know that there is no rule for establishing workers’ union in the garden” (285). After the babus’ (clerks or lower functionaries) departure, there is a debate among the workers about the formation of the union. Bhakru is skeptical about the union, “Unions were sought to be established in other gardens too. ... They could not establish. They were only beaten and sent to jail” (287). Bisni opposes Bhakru, “The union was dismissed. But, two meetings of that union were held last year. Beatings continue, the works of the union also continue.” Basdeo mildly opposes the idea of the union but Magho supports it. Tulsi says, “If we do not form the union in fear of punishment if we are happy to live among rotten things, then, alright, let’s go home or let’s go to our works. Let’s remain coolies forever!” (288). Ajun the boy shouts, “I am no coolie. I read in school. I am no longer a coolie, I am a student.” Bisni reiterates, “I am also not a coolie....We do not beg, we live by working. We have established our union today only to teach them that....We may be beaten more. But one day these beatings and humiliation will end. Today our union has been formed” (289). Kalondi and Magho support her. The

workers' union is confirmed. The police come, beat them, and arrest six workers including Bisni and Tulsi. The story of the union is finished here – within two chapters! The village ritual called *grampuja* observed on the day of the full moon is described in detail with meticulous care but what the union of Rupohijan does is never indicated. One piece of information about the union is found in the fifth chapter. Sundor Ram, the businessman, says to Nakul, "All know, you also know that the workers' union of Rupohijan Tea Estate is now a strong union. But do not talk anything about the union here" (296). The novel also stops talking about the union, particularly its functions. Later the reader is informed that Tulsi is retained as the President of the union. Then the reader is told about an incident at Jorpakri Tea Estate where two workers were killed by the police's bullets while a meeting for establishing a union was going on. Finally, Tulsi mentions the workers' union of Jorpakri before the manager of Rupohijan Tea Estate. Thus this is also a thread the scope of which is not fully explored and which may not be seen as a thread quite different and distanced from the main thread as it is an unavoidable part of the coolies' life and struggle under the condition of alienated labour. In the discussion of the thread of contact between the coolies and the mainstream we have seen how this and that thread are closely related to and determine each other.

A very important thread is the enlightenment of Tea Garden Labourers through education symbolised by Arjun's and Rumni's schooling. This thread has been given much more space than all other threads except the main one. The coolies' struggle for cultural enlightenment is presented as more significant than their political struggle, the struggle for economic progress, and assimilation with the mainstream. The talk of the school is introduced very late – only in the ninth chapter of the second book, that is, after two-thirds of the novel. Six of the last eleven chapters – the ninth of the second book and the fourth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and tenth of the third book – dramatise this issue. The ninth chapter of the second book and the sixth chapter of the third book are wholly devoted to depicting the theme of education. The number of chapters depicting this subject and the space allowed for it signals how the novel concentrates on it in the last one-third of the action where the third generation of this community is foregrounded. Manager Finley is in favour of the establishment of a school in the garden but Assistant Manager Mackenjee's opinion is quite the opposite. Managers, except a few, are against

schools in the garden because they think that “The workers’ children will not read; the will for studying is not there in their blood.” Secondly, schooling means their withdrawal from work, and thirdly, “Establishment of school implies appointment of teachers from outside” (221), which, in turn, implies the flow of outsiders to the garden. Finley is an exceptional manager who thinks, “Either you blow the doors open when there is time, or they will break the doors and come out.” But, “Mackenzie finds it difficult to articulate the terms ‘English workers’ and ‘coolies of the garden’ together” (222). The labourers are quite excited about the school. Bhola says to Ramu, “Now there is a school for even you and me....We have got what sahibs and babus get. What happens then? We have become their equals” (223). Ramu is skeptical about the school. He thinks that it is a trick of the sahibs to save money. “The boys and girls work and earn money. If the company can stop them working, the company will benefit, it will save money” (226). Tulsi says that school is established “not because of the kindness of the sahibs but because of the demands of the workers” (227). They organise a function to celebrate the establishment of the school; their ardour is limitless because “something new is going to be established and that new thing is for them only” (223). Dayalu and Bhakru do not like the proceedings. Dayalu expresses his embarrassment, “School? You will see. Today they will say – boys and girls, you have to read. A few days later, they will say – old men and women, you are to read. Then they will say – leave wine” (232). So, they demolish the preparation for the function at night. But, Tulsi, along with others, rearranged the whole thing. The school was established with a colourful function that the sahibs also applauded. “About sixty boys and girls are going to be admitted” (234). Chapter IV of Book III introduces Arjun at his school. But, a quarrel, instead of learning, becomes the source of action in the first part of this chapter. Chunu, a goon, misbehaves with both Gulabi and Arjun. Chunu grabs Gulabi’s hand, forces her to stand up, and says to her, “You are sitting close by a boy, what if you sit by me? Oh, no, I forgot. He is not a boy, he is only a girl. He has a boy’s name, but in truth, he is a girl” (279-280). A short exchange of dialogues followed. Arjun slaps Chunu and Chunu, the older and bigger boy, beats Arjun badly. Arjun bleeds and faints. When he regains consciousness he finds only Rumni with him and she takes care of him. Both come out of the school and meet a crowd of labourers discussing the formation of the union. When an angry Tulsi says to the skeptics “Let us remain coolies

forever” (288), Arjun suddenly exclaims in protest, “I am no coolie. I read in school. I am no longer a coolie, I am a student” (289). This indicates that education will uplift them from their coolie status. Chapter VI of Book III is completely devoted to the narration of Arjun’s High School Education. How it is difficult for Arjun first to get admission to a school outside the garden and next to adjust to the teachers and fellow students from the mainstream community, how he overcomes the hurdles and develops himself into a bright student, how he represents the hope of the tea garden community – all these are delineated in details. In truth, Arjun’s pursuit of an educational career is almost an allegory of the endeavour of the tea garden labourers to get established in Assam.

It was difficult for Arjun to study in a high school in the mainstream area which falls outside the garden. “It was not easy for Arjun to get admission into a high school. If the Headmaster were not kind, his study in a high school would probably be impossible” (305). “The first year of his school life was tormenting for Arjun.... He was insulted as a ‘coolie’ at any time.... Often he was enclosed by all, threatened with slaps and punches, and given a few kicks. His pant was very short and it was, as if, the utmost crime!” (306-307). A few teachers dislike him. Of course, a few others are compassionate for him. The teacher of Assamese never likes him. “He is, in a sense, untouchable at home As he, a coolie of the garden, wants to become a babu, even a sahib, instead of becoming a coolie. From one angle he insults the tea garden labourers. He is untouchable in school because he wants to be equal to the babus, he wants to become babus, despite being a coolie” (307). But there are other people in the coolie line who loved Arjun for his endeavour. Such a one is Dugga. She says, “You are the first boy from among us who has gone to a bigger school. You must continue to go by any means” (309). She talks about the benefit of Arjun’s learning meant for the workers as a whole. Magho also says similar words, “We hope that you pass the examination by any means. Read a lot and be a well-informed man. What do you call it – educated! Yes, become educated despite being the son of a coolie of the garden. Not only for you” (329). There are other teachers in the school also who love him and sympathise with him. The mathematics teacher, popularly called Risi Sir, tells him in private, “I know that the number of boys who dislike you will continue to increase. Today they neglect you because you are the son of a worker. It’s not complete malice. A little malice has begun, it will develop further. Not for any fault on

your part, but for your qualities” (311). Risi Sir keeps mentoring him. Arjun makes his progress up to class nine. He stands second in every class. Many of the students, guardians, and teachers dislike him. They think, “How can a coolie boy become second? There must be some mystery” (313). On a particular Saturday they are to play games. The Headmaster insists that Arjun should also play. Some of the students along with some village boys were hatching up a conspiracy against Arjun. They keep broken bricks piled up in two places. When the game reaches its climax moments they start throwing those broken bricks at Arjun. His leg gets injured and the English Teacher’s son Naranath’s forehead gets badly wounded. All the other boys go away. Arjun alone takes care of the unconscious Naranath. The injured Arjun carries the injured Naranath to his home. The English teacher first suspects that it is Arjun who quarrels with Naranath and injures him. Later the truth becomes known and the whole family of Naranath appreciates Arjun, takes care of him, and gives him food to eat. There he comes to know that girls can read privately and appear in matric examinations privately. In the seventh chapter, he shares this knowledge with Rumni. Rumni is interested in appearing for the matric examination, “Private? Is it true? If I could pass the examination by any means! Say and think. How can I appear in the examination?” (325). Arjun gives her the necessary bits of advice regarding the preparation and suggests that Risi Sir will surely help her. Arjun and Rumni thus represent another newer phase of the development of the mindset of the so-called coolies. Kalondi gives expression to this, “You are different. You, Rumni, Gulabi. Your minds are different, not like ours. We are coolies and we regard ourselves as coolies. You are our children, you are also coolies. But your minds are not those of coolies....You secretly think that there are no coolies anymore; you are also humans like other people” (327). And this difference is brought in by education and exposure.

In the eighth chapter, Arjun brings Rumni to Risi Sir who promises to help her in her study. During the conversation Risi Sir makes a few significant remarks about man, society, freedom, etc. “One who lives by working is a worker and he is in the true sense – man.” Responding to a question from Risi Sir Arjun says, “We do not have another language, Sir. We speak Assamese, that is, our sort of Assamese” (335). Rumni asks him if she can touch his feet to which Risi Sir says, “Who has taught you these? What crime have you committed that you cannot touch a man? ...But you need not touch my feet”

(336). Here the teacher upholds modern, democratic values. Encouraging them to continue their studies and promising to help them academically and financially, he says, “It is difficult to remove the chains of the feet but to remove the chains of the mind is far more difficult.... This is not only my responsibility; it is the responsibility of the society where I live” (337). On their way back home they witness a huge rally of innumerable protesters. “The people are serious-looking, their steps are resolute, and their slogans are forceful” (338). Without being aware Arjun and Rumni also find themselves inside the people. Police come and beat the protesters. Arjun and Rumni also get the beating. Thus they get connected to the non-cooperation movement. In the tenth and the last chapter of the third book, the tea garden labourers are going to organise a *parab* on the occasion of the fact that Arjun is going to study medicine. “Arjun will go to study medicine. The son of a labourer will turn into a doctor. So, how can’t a *parab* be organised?” (359). Teacher Bhabadhar’s responsibility is to teach the students how to recite. “So far there has been no provision for recitation before or after singing and dancing....But what contributions the school has made to the life of the tea garden labourers?” (360). The *parab* is organised with much pomp and ceremony. Bijli danced the *deodhani* (a dance by a possessed). “Gradually the *deodhani* is disappearing among the tea garden women” (359). Bijli exhibits, as if for the last time, a glimpse of her community’s cultural distinctiveness – a community that is going to merge with the larger Assamese society. In the last scene, Arjun and Rumni, the educated duo, stand looking at the sunrise. “Arjun grabs one hand of Rumni. Both keep standing thus looking towards the East. Through the clouds, radiating a thousand beams, enlightening the whole world with light, comes out the morning sun. The dewdrops fall from the tea leaves, they keep falling” (371). With this promise of a new beginning and a better future for the tea garden labourers through education, the novel comes to an end. Even though it is a very important thread of the plot, it has no trace in the first book, and in the second book also it is introduced very late, that is, only in the last chapter. Other important threads like the workers’ struggle through union, their assimilation with the mainstream, etc. are not interconnected with this one. Arjun and Rumni are not seen in any union activities. Their participation in the non-cooperation movement is accidental, sudden, and unintentional. Of course, their pursuit of education brings them closer to the mainstream. Moreover, this thread is also

not very independent as it may easily be seen as an integral part of the main thread, that is, the life and struggle of the workers.

The impact of the freedom movement is a very short thread. But this thread is instrumental in making a serious ideological shift in the novel. A kind of discontent against the British Rule finds expression on page number 200 as Chitta says, “The state of Assam is no more. Now Assam has been annexed with Bengal....Now, what will the people here do? Will they be pleased to see the new railway track or become sad because of the loss of their state?” But the actual freedom movement is mentioned as late as page number 337 when Arjun and Rumni, back from the hut of Risi Sir, find a procession on the road. “Arjun heard the name of Mahatma Gandhi. He is a great leader of India – he knows this much only. Asking questions to a few people walking close by, he comes to know that this is a movement against the British.” Gradually they get involved in the procession which halts in an open field. Someone with a white cap on his head starts to address the people. Police come, arrest the leader, beat the protesters, and disperse the gathering. Arjun and Rumni also receive a beating. Next, Chitta mentions the freedom movement on page number 351 concerning an incident that took place at Jorpakri Tea Estate. He says, “Police thought that it was not a meeting of the workers’ union, but a meeting of *swaraj* (self-rule or freedom).” A clash ensued between the police and the workers. One worker died. The working class leader, and member of the workers’ union, Chitta, who inspires Tulsi and others to form a union, now says significantly, “Now, not only workers but other people also will get killed. I believe the workers and non-workers have become the same because it is now a problem for the whole country” (352). A little later Bisni says, “Why should we remain subjugated? ...We will tell the British that we want to become independent as they want to....So you go, we will rule our country” (353). Chitta reiterates, “I do not know in what way we can get *swaraj*. But I know this much that there must be a movement throughout the country” (354). Further, “Have you not heard of Mahatma Gandhi? He is the helmsman of this pan-India movement. It is enough if we understand that our country is our mother. That country is now under the rule of others. This is a huge disgrace for all people of this country. We will not tolerate this insult. We will sacrifice our lives if needed....We the railway workers, we the workers of the garden will not lag” (355). The freedom movement is mentioned for the

last time on page number 360. “Chitta has been arrested by the police. He addressed a few meetings. He tried to explain to the people the subjects of *swaraj*, Non-Cooperation Movement, loss and sacrifice.” Thus this thread is mentioned not only very late in the novel but also in very few chapters – only in three chapters. Though it is not the point of entry yet it is significant in two ways: First, it is a thread that cannot be termed as a part of the main thread. It is not an extension of the workers’ life and struggle. Secondly, it helps to make a serious ideological shift compelling the class struggle led by the working class to give way to the nationalist struggle led by the middle class. We will throw more light on this in the next chapter.

The accident in the river Chandini, the death of Manager Fredrick, and its aftermath narrated in the second chapter of Book II cannot stand as a thread, it is only an episode. Manager Fredrick wants to extend the Southern boundary of Rupohijan Tea Estate up to the bank of the river Chandini. The workers are not willing to go to that place. “They believe that there are ghosts, fiends, and evil spirits” (122). But the manager forces them to stay and work there. One night a herd of elephants comes and demolishes lots of huts. One old woman is killed. To dispel the fear among the workers and to judge the actual situation manager Fredrick comes to that place for staying there for one day and one night. “He will stay at Chandinighat for the night and go fishing the next morning. For that night the assistant manager will stay at Rupohijan and the next morning he will also come and join the manager in fishing” (131). Dehjur, the expert boatman, rows the boat where Fredrick, Finley, and Bhola board the boat. Fredrick and Finley catch some fish. But in the upper part of Chandini, an accident takes place. Fredrick leans over the side of the boat to get hold of a hook that has fallen in the water and suddenly the boat turns upside down. Bhola and Dehjur try their best to save the sahibs. Finley is saved, but “Fredrick did not breathe anymore” (137). This episode is important as it further shows the oppression exacted on the workers by the managerial class of the tea estates. Dehjur and Bhola are arrested by the police. “Their crime is their failure to save the sahib” (139). Ramu is also arrested without any valid reason. He was absent from the scene. Yet “the babus spread the news that Ramu and Bhola were talking with each other at the time of pushing off the boat. What secret talk may be there at that time? ... Ramu

must have taught some tricks to Bhola” (139). Ultimately, the workers go to Finley and request him to release the arrested. Finley, a better human being, does accordingly.

The earthquake of 1897 and its impact on Rupohijan Tea Estate is vividly, graphically, and deftly portrayed keeping Rupohijan as the backdrop. In this connection, Hiren Gohain writes to the author, “Your pen has achieved excellent intensity in the narration of some incidents like the earthquake or the whirlpool of the streams of the river Chandini” (qtd. in U. Sarma 375). The silent advance of the earthquake is beautifully portrayed with a few significant strokes. “Have you seen? How the birds are flying in flocks?” (U. Sarma 150). “Your cow has run away tearing the tether.” Some goats are bleating.” “Other cows are also running. The calves, along with the cows, are also running. They run not in the direction of their homes, they run in every direction.” “Suddenly a thousand crickets start whistling. Hearing their whistles a few birds fly away from the trees” (151). Dehjur says, “Have you seen Monsur? There is no wave, there is no current. Keep seeing and you will feel that the whole river turns this side and then turns that side” (152). This is the prelude to the earthquake. Then it comes, “Suddenly a sound starts. It seems that a booming sound is drawing nearer floating from a faraway place.... It is not like the thundering sound of the clouds....Slowly the booming sound turns more solemn, and slowly it starts to thunder. And the earth starts to shake. Shaking gives way to terrible jerks. Earthquake! A terrible, destructive earthquake! ...The whole earth suddenly starts crying bitterly. It seems that the whole earth will get torn into pieces. The mountains will fall, and the rivers will rise to the sky....The stars of the sky become one with the light worms of the earth....The earth has been torn into pieces. Through its slits the small hillocks go in, the trees of the forests go in, rivers go in” (154). When finally it stops “the familiar world of the past is no more, everywhere there are scenes of destruction” (155). The workers like Bhola, Gajanan, etc. come out to help the distressed people. Tulsi appears as a leading rescuer. He darts over the scenes of destruction and extends help and supports to whomever he finds in difficulty. “In Rupohijan Tea Estate alone seven small children, three women, and two men died. Plenty of houses got destroyed” (160). Strangely, “The factory bore no particular damage....No damage was seen in the machines too” (161). In a broken house Tulsi sees a photo hanging from a wall. “The photo is unrecognisable. Yet he understood that it was some

English sahib's photo. The photo has not fallen" (156). These two pieces of information indicate the solidity of the colonial power. This episode serves at least two purposes: First, it establishes Tulsi as a leader who genuinely sympathises with his people in particular and human beings in general. Secondly, the earthquake and its aftermath show how unprepared and unprotected life the workers are living. After the earthquake, several diseases outbreak at Rupohijan. But there is practically no hospital, no doctor. "There is a hospital building in the garden, some medicines are kept there. But there is neither a doctor nor a compounder" (164). Manager Finley hires Doctor Chakrabarty from the town. Dr. Chakrabarty realises that he alone cannot manage all the health issues. He trains Tulsi, Bishnath, and Bisni to conduct basic treatment and nursing. Thus the togetherness of the coolies is once more revealed in this episode. Bisni's statement confirms this, "Our people are dying. What will happen if I alone stay happy?" (171).

From the detailed discussion of the story threads of the selected novels made above some general conclusions may be drawn. Each of these so-called labour-oriented novels, it is seen, has not grabbed the opportunity to take a labour-oriented thread as its point of entry although such threads are there. Despite the presence of such potential points of entry, *Seuji Patar Kahini* takes the failure of the search for happiness as its actual point of entry. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* marginalises the thread related to the workers' union and takes such a point of entry which is more bent towards the labourers' development on cultural and educational lines than on the line of their politico-economic struggles. *Pratipad*'s point of entry includes all kinds of struggles and thus dilutes and ultimately diminishes the workers' class struggle. Points of entry of *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas* are indeed related to the issue of creative labour, but interestingly, this creative labour is not systemic; it is strictly limited to the individual heroes and it effectively marginalises the representation of the mechanism and effects of the condition of alienated labour. Why do these so-called labour-oriented novels refrain from organising themselves around story threads that may give full exposition to the nature, function, and effects of the condition of alienated labour? The next chapter will address this question and try to answer it.

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Chapter IV

Impact of Ideology on the Representation of Labour, Choice of the Point of Entry and Aspects of Form

And without ideology there is no composition.

Georg Lukács

Introduction

Right in the beginning we want to mention in what sense we have taken the word “ideology”. Terry Eagleton points out several probable meanings of the word. A few of them are: “the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life” (*Ideology* 1), “a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class,” “false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power,” “forms of thought motivated by social interests,” “systematically distorted communication,” “that which offers a position for a subject” (1), “the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world” (2), etc. This researcher has taken the term for forms of thought motivated by the social interests of a particular social group or class, through which they make sense of their world. This study endeavours to show how the Assamese middle-class ideology largely determines the representation of alienated and/or creative labour, the representation of the over-determined social reality, and the choice of the point of entry in each selected novel. This approach underscores the belief that literary art does not represent any timeless criteria, values, etc. but is conditioned by the particular history of the particular society that produces it. A quote from Jameson here may be rewarding, “The logic of content is in the long run...social and historical....Yet to omit this enlargement, this movement from the intrinsic to the extrinsic, is itself an ideological act, to the degree to which it encourages belief in some ahistorical essence of art and cultural activity in general” (331-332).

In the introductory chapter, it was argued that the Assamese novel is the product of the Assamese middle class or the literary expression of its worldview. Eagleton’s

general remark on the birth of the form of the novel may be quoted here in support of that claim, “If it is a form particularly associated with the middle class, it is partly because the ideology of that class centers on a dream of total freedom from restraint” (*The English* 2). In the realm of literature sometimes it happens that the author transcends his class ideology to see the truth of society. But in the case of the selected novels it does not happen. The mainstream Assamese middle-class authors have not transcended the ideology of their class. Debabrata Sarma shows how this class was fathered by British imperialism and how bereft of economic freedom; it took linguistic nationalism as its ideal. The language was termed “mother” by it: “chira chenehi mor bhasa janani” (my language mother is ever dear to me; it is the welcome song of Asom Sahitya Sabha). It had the dream of building a nation through cultural means. “This middle class that was born from the womb of the old feudal society and fathered by imperialism, formed itself as per the colonial model; but its soul remained feudal” (Sarma, *Asamiya Jatigathan* 34). It never tried to uproot foreign imperialism and native feudalism. “Migration, geographical unity/expansion, annexation with Pakistan/Bengal or grouping, conservation of the national existence, Assamese linguistic nationalism – these ideas were accepted and circulated as the central political ideology of the Assamese middle class” (117). Sarma shows that the progressive section of the middle class wanted to include the migrants to build the Assamese nation. Hiren Gohain points out that “The history of the Assamese middle-class is, so to speak, the recognised history of modern Assam. In this recognised and standard history, the peasants’ revolts of the nineteenth century are a storm outside the periphery. The pangs of the scheduled castes and communities are hidden disruptions made by rats or insects somewhere in the walls, pillars or roof-tops” (“Madhyabittar Jeevanbed” 1). “The job-holders and the *mouzadars* (a fiscal officer in charge of an area called *mouza*) were the representatives of the Assamese middle-class and they stood against the *raij mels* (people’s meetings) and helped to crush them (Gohain, “Asamar Madhyabitta” 559). “Right since the time of the freedom movement the capitalist, middle, and landlord classes have been leading the people’s movements giving priority to their respective class interests and neglecting the hopes and expectations of the common people” (Gohain, *Progotir* 107). “The main source of the political power of the urban Assamese

middle class was their links with the rural agrarian people” (Gohain, *Parampara* 110). But “The Assamese middle class came away from the people from whom it drew its power” (Gohain, *Parampara* 112). “The sources of income of the Assamese middle class were mainly service and land given out for sharecropping” (108). So, on the one hand, it competed against the Bengali middle class on the question of jobs, and the other, “didn’t want to oppose the dominance of the landlord class in the rural agrarian sector and the continuity of the process of half-feudal exploitation... (and) could not give the farmers the right to land, since they were the owners of land meant for sharecropping” (110). This class position and ideology of the Assamese middle class of the first half of the twentieth century did not considerably alter in the subsequent decades and the novels discussed below bear its imprints. Gohain’s comments will be reiterated as and when necessary in the discussion of ideology of the selected novels to make the arguments more distinct.

The Assamese middle-class ideology betrays itself in varying degrees and various ways in the formulation of the main protagonists of fiction, particularly the labour-oriented novels we are analysing. First, the hero is a male, mainstream, Assamese middle-class individual. The Assamese middle-class striving to achieve leadership in socio-cultural and politico-economic spheres of the state strives also to fulfill the slot for the hero in fiction. Secondly, if he is not from the mainstream, he should, at least, earnestly try to assimilate into the Assamese language and culture. In other words, such a hero must serve the class interest of the Assamese middle class, that is, to strengthen Assamese nationalism through cultural means. Thirdly, the hero should not be a crusader against the existing social system; he may at best adjust himself to it. This indicates the middle-class fear of a ruthless or radical change of the social system that helps its parasitical life to thrive. Thus escape or withdrawal, but not confrontation is the basic character of the hero. The fictional form of this fact is that most of the heroes of these novels are fugitives: Nareswar, Sonia, Nadai, Tulsi, and Babar – all are fugitives, and all are displaced. Fourthly, if by chance, the hero is a fighter, a protester, he must change his course, soften himself, and adjust himself to the system upheld by the mainstream Assamese middle-class at least before the end of the novel. All is well that ends well! We see this in the characters of Nadai, Babar, and Giasuddin. Fifthly, if the hero is a worker, he should not be seen working at his workplace, where his economic exploitation may be

clearly visible. His exploitation should be reported, but not dramatised. He should rather be seen in activities like love-making, merry-making, protesting, helping or assisting others, etc. Each novel of the selected five will demonstrate these general observations. What follows is a systematic unraveling of the middle-class ideology in general and the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology in particular that inform each of the novels.

Seuji Patar Kahini

It is generally assumed that this novel is centered on the life of the tea garden labourers. Gobinda Prasad Sarma, for example, says, “Birinchī Kumar Baruah’s *Seuji Patar Kahini* is the second novel written on the tea gardens... The life, culture, etc. of the tea garden labourers are presented here frequently” (*Asamiya Upanyasar* 195). Further, “Birinchī Kumar Baruah’s novel also depicts this society and this class of people...” (193). Shashi Sharma remarks, “*Seuji Patar Kahini* written under the pen name of Rasna Baruah is primarily centered on the tea garden labourers” (“Asomiya” 44). The title of the novel also invites the reader to experience the interior of the life of the tea garden labourers. Yet the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology does not allow this class of people to be represented through the characters of the hero and the heroine. They are not recruited from this community. The hero is a mainstream Assamese middle-class youth and the heroine is a fair-skinned young girl born to a British Sahib and a coolie woman. Why does a novel, supposedly based on the life of the tea garden labourers, not take the leading protagonists from these labourers? It is very difficult to find a scene in the novel where either Nareswar or Sonia or both are absent. A chapter without them, and with the labourers alone, cannot be found. The reader knows Nareswar’s story from the time of his grandfather’s grandfather; the novel narrates the story of five generations of Nareswar’s family starting with Hareswar, flowing through Jogyeswar, Maheswar, Deveswar, and coming down to Nareswar. Such treatment is not given to any tea garden character in the novel. The mainstream has a history, the marginalised have none. The plot starts with Nareswar’s departure from his village and entry into the garden and ends with his departure from the garden. Thus the novel depicts not the life of the tea garden

labourers but their life as seen by Nareswar; not their life as such, but how the mainstream Assamese middle-class looks at it. Its main focus is on Nareswar and Sonia, not on the general life of the coolies. It is interesting to note that this labour-oriented novel is reluctant to give reasonable space to the life of the labouring people. Nareswar first meets Sonia, Lokhu, and a few boys and girls from the labouring class only in chapter three. After that seven chapters elapse and only in chapter eleven the tea garden labourers are seen gathering in Alomoni's courtyard for dance and merry-making. In the twelfth chapter for the first and last time, we see the labourers labouring in their workplace plucking the tea leaves. In the thirteenth, they again gather but not for working but for being tried by Mr. Miller. In the sixteenth chapter, again there is a gathering for *Karam* dance. In the seventeenth, the labourers go to the marketplace. In the nineteenth Sonia fixes Lokhu and Radhu's marriage and leaves the garden. In the twentieth, the labourers talk about Sonia's disappearance, and Lokhu and Nareswar search for her. All of these chapters mentioned are not purely centred on the coolie life. Some of them touch the coolie life only tangentially. Yet if we count all of them, they are only seven out of the total twenty-two chapters of the novel.

How is the character of the hero formulated? He does not confront a difficult situation and cannot protest against injustice. He sees the injustice, feels it, and gets angry with it. Yet he does not protest against it or oppose it. He prefers to escape, to run away. "As Nareswar, at the threshold of youth, saw the uncalled-for disgrace of Maloti, who gave him motherly love, disgrace, pique, and resentment burnt pattering like the all-devouring fire of the cremation ground. Nareswar thought of many ways to get freedom forever from the torture of his pitiless father. At last, the last child of the Oja family, with a few clothes he wore, fled at night from his parental house" (R. Baruah 26). Nareswar remains confused and inactive even at the climax moment of Sonia's departure. "When he was perplexed as to what to do and what not to do, Sonia, all of a sudden, vanished in the dense darkness of the night" (216). He articulates not a single word against the exploitation and oppression of the labourers. His final escape from the garden, as his first escape from his village, is symbolic of his escape from the real troubles of life. His escapes distance him personally from the cruelties of the village and the cruelties of the garden. But these individual escapes leave the village and the garden as they previously

were. Sonia's departure from the garden has the same implication. Nareswar and Sonia may have deep compassion for the oppressed, they may go away from the condition of oppression, but they do not mean to fight against or organise a fight against, that oppressive condition. Nareswar's and Sonia's search for individual peace, a search that leaves their fellow people behind, allegorically symbolises the mainstream Assamese middle-class's class interest that made it indifferent to the interests of the other classes and tribes of Assam. That *Seuji Patar Kahini*, instead of becoming the story of the tea garden people, becomes the story of Nareswar and Sonia, is the fictional parallel of the fact that modern Assamese history stands for the history of the Assamese middle class that marginalises the history of the other classes, races, and tribes. A few of Hiren Gohain's comments may be reiterated briefly. He writes, "The history of the Assamese middle-class is, so to speak, the recognised history of modern Assam. In this recognised and standard history, the peasants' revolts of the nineteenth century are a storm outside the periphery" ("Madhyabittar Jeevanbed" 1). What is more, this middle class sometimes went against the interests of the other classes. "They stood against the *raij mels* and helped to crush them" (Gohain, "Asamar Madhyabitta" 559). They have "been leading the people's movements giving priority to their respective class interests and neglecting the hopes and expectations of the common people" (Gohain, *Progotir* 107).

One more point about Nareswar. His departure from the garden reconfirms the fact that he is a creation of the imagination of the mainstream Assamese middle class. When Mrs. Miller gets him out of the service of a 'boy', Nareswar finds no other alternative than to leave the garden. But, is there no other alternative for him? Could he not join the labourers? Could he not think of staying in the coolie line – particularly since he believes that Sonia one day will come back to the garden? "Waiting with profound belief for Sonia's return Nareswar engaged himself in Memsahib's work as he did earlier" (R. Baruah 225). Why then he, leaving the garden, spoils his only chance of getting Sonia back? There is no signal in the novel that he departs in search of Sonia. "The signal of Sonia's path" (247) mentioned in the last sentence of the novel does not mean to say that Nareswar is out in search of Sonia, "Sonia's path" rather represents the path of departure, the path of no return, the path of search of happiness in yet another world. Why does Nareswar forsake the garden, his friend Lokhu, the probability of

Sonia's return – everything? Nareswar forsakes all only to retain one thing – the class character of the mainstream Assamese middle class. To date in Assam, the mainstream people do not do physical labour in the gardens; this labour is left for only one community of Assam, that is, the tea garden labourers, briefly, coolies. Further, as Hiren Gohain says, “The sources of income of the Assamese middle-class were mainly service and land given out for sharecropping” (*Parampara* 108). Nareswar cannot earn as a coolie earns. He cannot become a coolie. He cannot marry a coolie girl. Radhu says, “He is a youth from the village; for what sin will he marry a coolie girl?” (R. Baruah 167). Thus Nareswar may sympathise with the coolies, he may be friends with the coolies, but he cannot be a coolie; there must be a significant distance between him and them. A protagonist of the author's first novel *Jeevanar Batat* (1946), Dharani, finds himself at a similar economic crossroads. Geetashree Tamuly writes, “The eternal farmer-soul inside Dharani lost all its traces as he came in touch with the urban people of upper Assam that had the tea gardens. Now, if Dharani wanted to start some urban occupation, he would have to deal in grocery or explore the city asking for government jobs” (195). The middle-class preoccupation with government jobs is further exemplified in the hope of Ahini, a character from *Jeevanar Batat*. Tamuly further writes, “In the novel *Jeevanar Batat*, Mohan's widow Ahini also had a hope – that of engaging her only son Dharani in the service of a *mandal* (administrative officer of a revenue division)” (197).

This study intends to look closely at the character of “the mysterious” Sonia. She is presented as an ambivalent character. She both loves and hates the garden. “Sometimes I love the garden very much, sometimes I hate it” (R. Baruah 214). She loves Nareswar yet would not marry him. “You know – I love you right since the day I met you.” “Can one marry simply because one loves?” “I will not marry” (201). Sonia will not marry but ensures the marriage between Lokhu and Radhu. She promises to Lokhu, “I will speak to grandfather and fix everything today. When you come back, you will hear that the date of the wedding feast has been fixed” (205). She looks like the jolliest and most vibrant girl, yet she is unstable and melancholic. “Why does she have no stability of mind? Why cannot she enjoy unmixed pleasure in anything?” (206). She considers the labourers as her own. “I consider every young boy and girl of the garden my own” (214). Yet she does not love a youth from the rank of the labourers; she loves or flirts with Nareswar, Powali

Babu, etc. who are not tea garden labourers. “Sonia is a bird of the sahibs, how can one keep her in the cage of our line?” (103). Lokhu says, “Sonia is a white hair among our black hairs” (108). To this Radhu responds, “Therefore she is not interested in coolie youths” (108). True that Sonia, unlike Nareswar, perceives the cruelty of the condition of alienated labour in the garden which largely determines her hatred of the garden. She is instinctively averse to the patriarchal oppression of women and the imperialist exploitation of the labourers. “If I marry, I will have to exert myself like a coolie woman. The husband will keep sleeping very comfortably. The wife must wake up early in the morning, cook food, sweep the floor and courtyard, and manage the livestock.... Instead of being captive in one’s cage like a cocoon in marriage, I will make cobwebs with the glue of love and will have fun entrapping in it worms and insects like you” (146-147). This is her criticism of patriarchy. She spells out her contempt for capitalist exploitation in this way, “I wish I uprooted every tea plant, shattered the factory, set fire to the sahib’s bungalow, murdered Miller Sahib, sent back the young boys and girls to their villages. The garden, as it were, impoverishes the body and soul of my brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers day by day, drags them to sin and greed day by day” (214).

Hiren Gohain writes, “But she has no respite from the chains of the situation. She will have to accept poisonous slavery until she remains in society...For her freedom and the good of Nareswar, it is better to disappear from that society” (“Nispanda” 701). The critics, including Gohain, identify Sonia as a rebel against patriarchy and class society. They also see that the rebellion is quite personal. Gohain even hints at the role of the ideology behind the lack of truly revolutionary characters. “No consciously revolutionary worker is seen in Baruah’s novel. His imagination could portray such a lively character easily. But, his imagination accepted the limits of his class consciousness” (“Birinch” 375). One may say that the time depicted by the novel is not ripe with the possibility of a hero or a heroine who can lead a revolutionary struggle against the condition of alienated labour. But Henri Arvon argues quite the opposite, “The true hero, according to Marx and Engels ... is ahead of his time; he accelerates history rather than endeavouring to halt its onward march” (11-12). This study likes to go further toward unraveling the impact of mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology in the formulation of the characters, particularly that of Sonia. First of all, it should be noted that the miserable life condition

of the labourers is articulated not only by Sonia but also by other characters like Durjon Sardar and Lokhu. Durjon for example observes, “The labourers would have committed suicide right at their birth had they been incapable of enjoying life’s laughter and pleasure even amid hundreds of needs” (R. Baruah 113). Lokhu, with symbolic suggestions, contrasts pleasure with labour when he says, “Let them laugh – they will laugh only for the night. In the morning they will come to pluck the young leaves to burn in the fire of the factory” (106). The only difference between Sonia and others is that she is in a mood not to accept that condition and she explicitly articulates her displeasure quite several times. But, here there is a point – a significant one. Sonia’s protest is only verbal. This researcher does not mean to say that it is only lip service. Her protest is genuine, but it does not bear any practical value as it is not translated into action and even the verbal protest is not made before the perpetrators. When Sukhdeb and Rotou were whipped Sonia protests whisperingly and only Nareswar hears it. True, Sonia cannot protest differently given the situation depicted in the novel. A character cannot be judged away from the overall situation of the plot. Not only Sonia’s character but the novel as a whole is an ideological creation. More light will be thrown on this later.

The middle class obsession with individualism is revealed not only in the creation of individual characters but also in limiting protest or dissatisfaction to the individual level. Disruption of the social structure could not be imagined by the Assamese middle class of the pre- and post-independence times. This was because the Assamese middle class was never economically independent, exploring, and adventurous; it built up itself drawing nourishment from the British imperialist rule in pre-Independence India and government jobs and land rent out for sharecropping in post-Independence India. The demolition of the old society, its radical transformation, and the formation of a new society based on equal distribution of the means of production, and particularly land reform, was beyond its imagination. In Assamese fiction, which is primarily a middle-class literary product, therefore, truly revolutionary characters desirous of complete social change are hard to find. So Sonia’s protest is kept limited to the purely individual level so that it can remain non-functional. The novel does everything to keep Sonia within those limits. But, this ideological formulation harms the characterisation of Sonia, her full potential remains unrealised. The novel’s ideological prison does not allow her to do

what she can do. What she can do? She could have told her people what she told Nareswar. All her vehemence, anger, and complaints find expression in front of Nareswar – a very unfit listener. But, her vehement complaints remain silent when she meets the labourers like Rotou. She is not seen talking to her people about the injustice, cruelty, and oppression perpetrated on them by the system.

Therefore, it is compelling for the novel to make her appear “mysterious”, and “ambivalent” which, in reality, is an ideological evasion. Sonia is so dissatisfied with the life of the garden that she can forsake whomever or whatever she dearly loves – Nareswar, Lokhu, her dear goat, the garden – but she cannot express her feelings to her people! Not that there is no scope to question Sonia’s genuineness of feelings. What is more important for her – love for her people, love for Nareswar, love for Lokhu, or love for something hidden? She says, “I have fought against love and hatred both for long; finally hatred has won” (214). A character more motivated by hatred than love has never been an ideal. Ideology thus diminishes Sonia’s character. But her hatred also signals a love that remains hidden and it is her self-love. Though the narrator says that “Sonia has detested herself” (200) and Sonia also says, “I have no blood in my body, only poison” (214), a close analysis of her actions will reveal that she has a sense of superiority which she cannot part with. She rejoices in overpowering others, particularly men. In her first meeting with Nareswar she wounds his self-respect, “Fie, sahib could not find a better man to engage as his boy...His body smells like a rustic’s” (29). In their second meeting also, she makes fun of him and deceives him repeatedly. “Right since their introduction this girl has been trying to insult him and make him dirty” (60). In the market also she enjoys overpowering several people. But she maintains a distance from the labourers. In the sixteenth chapter, when all are dancing, Sonia keeps talking with Nareswar – both do not take part in the dance. In matters of love and flirting Sonia chooses men outside the tea garden community. Sonia thus may be a sympathiser of the labourers but she does not feel oneness with them, she is acutely conscious of her difference, her superiority. “I have sahib’s blood in my body – and that would drag me to unknown remote places. You have rustic blood in your body – will you have the power to cross the boundaries of the village?” (153). The immediate motive of her departure from the garden is her wish to join a circus – a circus that may allow her to exhibit her talent, the garden offering no

scope for culturing individuality. One interesting fact about her is that even before her final departure, even after her tragic meeting with her lover Nareswar for the final time, Sonia meets Powali Babu only to check if his love for her has some genuine element in it! “She somewhat believed that, though not equal to Nareswar’s love, Powali Mahari also loved her. In this belief she found pleasure and felt pride also as a woman” (221). It is already seen that Sonia cannot even flirt with a coolie youth; her sense of superiority is satisfied by flirting with Powali Mahari. She will not love Powali Mahari because his love is not genuine. Nareswar is the best candidate in her circumstances for being her lover. Yet she will not marry Nareswar too. The novel takes the risk of being a tragedy in order not to get Nareswar married off to Sonia. Let the break come from Sonia, let her appear as mysterious. But the marriage between the mainstream and the coolies must be avoided.

She has several reasons for not getting married to Nareswar. But one reason is that Nareswar is not ‘manly’ in her eyes. To check Nareswar’s courage she asks, “If Miller takes me to his bungalow, will you be able to murder him?” (149). This individualistic superiority complex, despite occasional expressions of an inferiority complex regarding her birth, is the hallmark of her character. Such a soul wants to be loved but cannot love others in the true sense of the term. “Sonia, like all women, does not want to love anyone, but wants to be loved” (216). This generalisation is misleading, but it is true about Sonia’s character. This confirms once more Sonia’s self-love and superiority complex. This is the bourgeois middle-class individualism that is represented by Sonia. Sonia ultimately leaves her people, her garden, and her lover as Nareswar leaves his family, his village, and his mother-like aunt. They are in search of happiness, unpolluted humanity, etc., and in this search, they leave behind their people among whom, and through drawing life experiences from whom, they have built up their personalities. It is not only a journey towards some ideally happy world but also a journey away from the people. Their distance from the people around them has been cumulatively built up by the novel right from the beginning as has been shown earlier. This is a kind of allegory of the history of the Assamese middle class in the twentieth century. Hiren Gohain needs to be quoted here, “The main source of the political power of the urban Assamese middle-class was their links with the rural agrarian people” (*Parampara* 110). But, this middle class

remained indifferent to the class interests and class struggles of these people, they turned their back to the question of land reform and “on the question of the ownership of land (that is, on the fundamental question of livelihood) their opinions seriously differed” (*Parampara* 110-111). “The Assamese middle class came away from the people from whom it drew its power” (*Parampara* 112). This aloofness of the mainstream Assamese middle-class from the people around is noted by Dilip Bora in this way, “The Assamese nationalism centred on the Assamese language and literature could not achieve the expected success in embracing properly the various ethnic groups living around it” (121). Bora, while critiquing Kailash Sharma’s novel *Bidrohi Nagar Hatot* (1958), notes, “Despite staying among the Naga rebels in the novel, Kandarpa (the main protagonist) has not tried to understand their problems. He fails to go beyond the periphery of the general outlook of the middle-class” (126-127). About Kailash Sharma’s third novel *Dalimir Sapon* (1972), Bora explicitly mentions the author’s middle-class ideology, “His viewpoint is the common viewpoint of the Assamese middle-class” (127). Sonia, we remember, expresses her anger against oppression only before Nareswar. Rotou’s instance proves that there is a potential for revolt even among the labourers. Rotou, after being whipped by Miller, says, “Rascal, enemy, sometimes I will blow him with my spade...” When Paduri (a priest) advises him not to say bad words, Rotou angrily says, “Is it a sin to say bad words? It is good that the bloody wounds me whipping – and it is sin if I say bad words!” (R. Baruah 134). Yet Sonia does not think of leading her people or at least sharing the discontent with her people. Why the novelist leaves out the depiction of a truly active and courageous revolutionary leader character is sought to be explained by Gohain, “Probably Birinchi Baruah did not portray the protagonist of his second world (novel) as strong, though portrayed as honest, because he could not see any trace of heroic endeavour and enthusiastic enterprise in modern Assamese society” (“Nispanda” 699).

Another reason for the absence of revolt and truly rebellious character in the novel may be that there was no trace of a strike or workers’ union in the tea gardens of Assam in the historical time which is represented by the novel. The novel does not mention any exact date. Yet one may logically calculate the approximate time in which the imaginary action of the novel is sought to be shown as having taken place.

Nareswar's grandfather Maheswar had links with the royal house in the period of the Ahom King Chandrakanta Singha. Chandrakanta Singha reigned in Assam during 1811-1818 and 1819-1821. Around this time Maheswar was a married man and father to a son – Deveswar. What was Deveswar's age at this time cannot be known. But it is almost certain that he was unmarried at that time. When his son Nareswar left him, Nareswar was "At the threshold of youthhood" (R. Baruah 26), that is, he should not be more than twenty. So, from Chandrakanta Singha's reign to Nareswar's departure, there may be a lapse of at least three to four decades. Budhu says, "Sonia's mother Mohua came ... from Rachhi to Nahoroni Tea Estate as a bonded labourer" (84). Budhu had been with Gurney Sahib since the beginning of this tea estate and he also came from Rachhi as a bonded labourer. Mohua's lover Feku and Budhu were friends. Homen Borgohain writes, "In 1859 the foreign tea companies gave up the policy of employing local people and took the policy of importing landless labourers from the famine-trodden Bihar, Odissa and Andhra Pradesh" (*Asomor Chah* 31). So it may be logically conjectured that Sonia, Lokhu, Radhu, etc. are the second generation of tea garden labourers in Nahoroni and their time is around 1875-80. But, when one comes to know that secondary education for girls in Assam might be a late nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century phenomenon but the novel says that "Maloti is a girl who reads in a rural secondary school" (R. Baruah 15), one has to decide that the novel does not suggest a historically accurate or precise period. If we think that Deveswar was around ten in Chandrakanta Singha's time and he got married as late as his age of thirty-five then Nareswar's birth may be guessed to have taken place around 1845 and the year of his departure from the village may be calculated roughly as 1860-1865 if Nareswar is at the threshold of youth as the novel reports. But, it cannot be as per the historical facts. If Mohua, Budhu, etc. were, let us say, the first tea garden settlers in Assam arriving around 1860 (they could not come earlier as the policy for importing such people was framed in 1859), Sonia, Nareswar Lokhu, Radhu – the second generation – must be in their youth around 1875-1880. Even this date is not supported by the history of secondary education in Assam.

One may still suppose that the novel imagines the time of its action in the late nineteenth century. Was there no revolt, no struggle against the exploitation of labourers in the nineteenth century? Homen Borgohain writes, "Such a revolt, or strike in today's

language, started in the very preparatory stage of the tea industry in Assam. An Assamese tea labourer named Madhu Koch, a leader of such revolt was punished with eight-year-long rigorous imprisonment” (*Asomor Chah* 30). This happened before the arrival of the so-called tea garden labourers. What after that? Amalendu Guha writes, “The workers fought back at the individual garden level, as is evident from the available official statistics on disputes for the years 1884-93. The forms of struggle varied from absconding and occasional litigation to strikes and violent mass attacks on the planters. For example, in 1884, the manager of Bowalia Tea Estate in Cachar was gheraoed in his house for defiantly canning a boy in the presence of assembled coolies.” Guha quotes an 1889 report of Mr. Cotton, “There is a growing tendency in the Coolie class to resent a blow by striking a blow in return and this soon leads to serious results, as the Coolies act in combination among themselves, and armed with formidable weapons – the implements of their industry” (37). Guha shows that official data regarding the plantation workers’ organised strikes may be obtained from as early as 1930 (153) and that of plantation labour unions from 1939-40 (196).

So, it cannot be said that the novel does not depict a strong, revolutionary character who can lead the people against the condition of alienated labour because history does not support such an imaginary depiction. The actual history provides some solid facts of rebellion upon which the literary imagination could have worked if it had chosen to work. The text of the novel itself contains such instances of rebellious, strong characters. Budhu tells Nareswar how his friend Feku murdered Armstrong sahib for sexually harassing his beloved Mohua. “I have murdered Army Sahib” (R. Baruah 88). Feku is past, but in the present of the action also there is Durjon Sardar who terrified one sahib for attempting to torture a coolie woman. “Loading the gun the sahib came out. When the sahib pointed his double-barrelled gun towards him, Durjon flung off the gun with his stick. Two fingers of his right hand, of course, flew away at the shot. Because of fear, the sahib shook hands with him” (117). Yet a character like Feku or Durjon is not chosen as the hero. Both the hero and the heroine choose not confrontation but withdrawal as the philosophy of life. They even do not think of reforming their societies. Such a reformer, Naren, is portrayed by the novel itself. “I came from the city with a vow to develop the village a lot” (17-18). Despite all odds and counter-forces, “Naren again

got enthusiastically busy with the works of the welfare of the village” (19). But, he died of cerebral malaria very early. His character is given a space of only seven pages. It is interesting to note that the novels created by the mainstream Assamese middle class often exhibit a kind of reluctance to make a progressive character with higher awareness its hero or heroine. In *Pratipad* the most progressive Chatterjee and Lasmi are not made the hero and the heroine; Chatterjee is shown as dead well before the end. In *Nadai*, the reformer Premnath dies yearly and the communist Bharat is in prison, both get only a little space in the novel. In *Rupabarir Palas*, teacher Girin is the most advanced morally and intellectually, but he dies midway and even when he was alive he did not influence the plot. In *Surujmukhir Swapna* (1960), Syed Abdul Malik portrays the socially active Chitta as an unstable and comic figure. Development of these characters to the levels of the hero and the heroine would certainly disturb the middle-class complacent universe. So the reader has got Nareswar and Sonia.

Erik K. Olsen draws our attention to the role of the workplace in general and enterprise in particular in generating surplus and thereby realising the class process and the condition of alienated labour. “Marx’s investigation of capitalist production in volume one is an investigation of the production of surplus value in industrial capitalist enterprises” (“Class-Analytic” 75). “Marx thus introduces a class distinction based on the positions of different groups concerning the surplus value produced in the enterprise. Some produce it, and others receive it, either directly (entrepreneur) or indirectly through their wages (managers, supervisors)” (76). So the workplace is very important for examining the class exploitation and condition of alienated labour. But, in Assamese novels in general and *Seuji Patar Kahini* in particular, the working scenes at workplaces are hard to find. In this novel, only one chapter is devoted to the depiction of labourers at their work, that is, while plucking leaves in the garden. Other chapters involving these labourers depict them in love-making, merry-making, dancing, going to the market, etc., that is, away from productive work. Only one scene inside the factory is depicted in chapter nineteen. But this is not a working scene. Sonia goes to the factory in search of Powali Babu and discovers Tingmin and his wife mad in love-making. One last point about the seeming revelry, fun, mirth, and dance of the plantation workers at large in this novel needs to be made. It seemingly contrasts labour with leisure and one may think that

these leisurely activities are a way out of the condition of alienated labour. But it is not so, it only intensifies that condition. Eagleton argues, “Laying on leisure allows men and women to recuperate from work so that they can return to it refreshed. Laying on organised fantasies, whether at circuses or television soap operas, provides those whose working lives are less than glamorous with substitute fulfillments, as well as providing a safety valve for energies which might otherwise prove socially disruptive” (*The English* 159).

Nadai

It has already been mentioned that the mainstream Assamese middle-class not only did not sympathise with but also kept its distance from the peasants’ uprisings in Assam during the British times. After the independence, this class seized the political power in the state and turned back to the class interests of the peasants; it did not take land reform seriously, rather it tried to keep land in its hand so that it could thrive through sharecropping. It is no surprise, therefore, that the issue of land gets easily solved for the hero of most peasant-based Assamese novels. In Syed Abdul Malik’s *Surujmukhir Swapna*, Guloch owns land in proportion to his desire. In *Rupabarir Palas*, Babar is given land by Sarif and then, by degrees, Babar grabs more and more land. In the present novel, Nadai is originally a landless farmer but, clearing the forest at Morisuti later turns out to be a landlord. One gets land if one is hard-working and industrious. Landlessness is not a problem! Nadai’s poignant questions and comments point towards the injustice of the system: “Why only a few people own all the land?” (D. Sarma 167) and “Why land is scarce in such a wide world? If there is no land for people, where shall they farm? What shall they eat? How shall they live?” “There must have been some blunder, otherwise this cannot happen” (180). But the action develops in such a manner that the reader is tempted to think that for Nadai-like industrious peasant there cannot be any scarcity of the means of production. If one has “the cause and will and strength” one will have “the means” (Shakespeare 99) to do what one wants to do. This brings us to the thesis of the survival of the fittest so dear to the middle-class ideology. In the unnamed village of Bhadiya Gayan and Dambaru Bhatta, the bitterly exploitative system of sharecropping prevails.

This system turns Rongai mad and threatens the existence of Kaliya's family. But it cannot crush Nadai. His single-minded hard work enables him not only to survive the system but also to prosper by grabbing the meager opportunities the village leaves for him and later the tremendous scope Morisuti offers him. This Nadai achieves not fighting consciously against the system of the village but adapting himself to it and partly cooperating with its stakeholders. Gayan, the appropriator of Nadai's surplus labour, not only gives him a pair of calves, his first means of production apart from physical labour, but also extends support to the making of Nadai as an independent farmer. "You will need at least one year to clear the forest. You may stay in my house for this year.... Or how will you live in that jungle? And, yes, that pair of calves are very young. If you till the new soil with them, they will die. I will give you a pair of buffalos for some days" (D. Sarma 183). If one has willpower and is hard-working, one will win amid all odds – the novel represents this middle-class wisdom through the life story of its hero.

But the sun of socio-historical truth comes out tearing off the foggy envelope of ideological repression. Though it wanted to tell an inspiring story of the individual worth of an industrious farmer winning over the troubles caused by the system, the novel finishes with a story of the waxing and waning of the social systems and the rise and fall of the social classes. For the old village and its system of sharecropping, "the moon is down" and for the new Morisuti and its rising middle class, the sun is up in the sky. Not only the representatives of the old system – Gayan, Dambaru, etc. – die but also those who came out of the stranglehold of that system and built up Morisuti retaining some elements of the old village – Nadai, Naduki, etc. – die. The members of the newly emerging middle class – Janaklal, Nandeswar, Mohan, Gopal, etc. – continue to live. So, though Nadai is portrayed with love, respect, and sympathy, and the moral lapses of the newly emerging middle class are depicted meticulously, the novel's message is very clear and emphatic – Nadai and his class along with the sharecroppers must go and victory for the middle-class is certain; the agrarian Morisuti must give way to the Morisuti of trade and commerce. Yet the success story of Nadai is an ideological necessity to conceal – as far as it can be concealed – the story of appropriation of surplus labour in the context of the condition of alienated labour. The stories of failure are sometimes more useful in uncovering the truth than those of success. The story of Rongai turning into a pauper and

his gradual breakdown into insanity is briefly outlined but not narrated in detail. The choice of Rongai as a major protagonist and his story as a major thread would have made the cruelty of the mechanism of alienated labour much more conspicuous.

As the relegating of Rongai to the position of a minor character prevents the detailed portrayal of the exploitation and class conflict involved in the system of sharecropping, the limiting of Premnath to the narrow scope allowed to a minor character restricts the theme of social reform and Gandhian movement. It has already been seen in the discussion of the role of ideology in *Seuji Patar Kahini* that labour-oriented Assamese novels in general show a tendency not to choose the hero from those who have a higher awareness of social realities and who can take part in the drama of the main contradictions of the time concerned. The novels rather tend to take up average characters as their heroes. Lukács expresses his reservations against such protagonists while talking about the “type”. “What characterizes the type is the convergence and intersection of all the dominant aspects of the dynamic unity through which genuine literature reflects life in a vital and contradictory unity – all the most important social, moral, and spiritual contradictions of a time. The representation of the average, on the other hand, inevitably results in diluting and deadening these contradictions” (Writer 78). Making a hero or a heroine from this kind of people may make a novel a novel of conflict and confrontation between two social forces for which the pro-establishment ideology of the Assamese middle class is not prepared. So Naren has to die in *Seuji Patar Kahini*, Chatterjee in *Pratipad*, Girin in *Rupabarir Palas*, and Premnath in *Nadai*. The Crusaders must die. Rongai’s life story, though very briefly outlined in the novel, had the potential to be a full-fledged story of class antagonism. The family story of Kaliya, a tenant of the sharecropping system, was another such story with similar potential. “The Mymesinghias told him (Dambaru Bhatta) that they would not pay him land taxes” (D. Sarma 218). This last clash had a similar but higher potential for a class conflict. But the bildungsroman of meek, humble, hard-working Nadai suppresses all. Though Nadai is presented as a farmer, he shares a lot with the character of the middle class. A believer in individual worth and hard work, Nadai is an explorer. It is through him that Morisuti is both discovered and “colonised”. He produces not for himself and his family alone, he produces for the market, produces commodities. “Nadai harvested paddy grains, mustard

seeds, and potato before the Magh Bihu. He calculates in his mind to sell them. A few Marwaris have visited him” (207). “Yes, he will be able to sell a lot of things. There will be a surplus of paddy grains, mustard seeds, and potato even after being kept for seed and consumption” (208). “Nadai has no other business than selling his products.” “Nadai earns a lot from molasses. He has bought a machine for pressing sugarcane” (224). Thus Nadai is a middle-class tradesman who deals in agricultural products and who draws power from the market and modern technology. The middle-class ideology, despite emphasising Nadai’s unfailing bond to the land, and despite dramatising his departure and solid emergence of the commercial, industrial middle-class, sees Nadai also as a middle-class bourgeois in its embryonic form. The middle class, so to speak, creates all after its own image.

In the previous chapter, we have seen how story threads like the exploitation of the sharecropper, class conflict between the farmers and the landlords, the conflict between rural/pastoral simplicity and modernisation, etc. are marginalised and creative labour’s production of forces that it cannot control is taken as the point of entry. We have also seen that this creative labour is purely an individual affair of the hero; it does not represent any general condition of creative labour. Thus, on the one hand, the potential stories of exploitation, appropriation, and alienated labour that could have flared up class conflicts are left unrealised, and on the other, a story of creative labour is presented which is limited to a single individual. Even this beneficiary of creative labour, Nadai, is an appropriator of the alienated labour of others like Budhon. Hiren Gohain says, “The sources of income of the Assamese middle-class were mainly service and land given out for sharecropping” (*Parampara* 108). So, a decisive class fight against land-holding and sharecropping seems to be beyond the literary imagination of the middle class. So the hero of the Assamese middle-class imagination needs to rise to the status of a landlord, land must come to him in a comparatively easy way, particularly as the result of his individual worth. This wish-fulfillment of the Assamese middle class can be seen in *Rupabarir Palas* also. We take note of the fact that here Nadai is a member of the mainstream Assamese society and in the other novel’ Babar, originally a Miya, is trying to culturally assimilate into the Assamese society. In *Nadai* as in *Seuji Patar Kahini* scenes at workplaces are hard to be found. Quoting Erik K. Olsen this researcher

noted the role of the workplace in executing the class process and the condition of alienated labour. However, the narrative produced by the middle class considers the working scenes unfit for fiction. It is ready to depict the life of the workers but not the work at its ground level which is an unavoidable and a big constituent of that life.

Pratipad

It is interesting to note that despite faithfully reflecting several key ideas of *the Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) about the progress of the working class, *Pratipad* ultimately refrains from being a novel of class or strike. Before proceeding with the analysis of the function of ideology behind the novel, it is good to examine the reflection of the *Manifesto* in it. The author, a Marxist in one phase of his life, must have read, and become influenced by the *Manifesto*, and, therefore, the novel bears its imprints. The *Manifesto* says, “These laborers ... are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market” (Marx 18). In *Pratipad* also the workers are subject to such vicissitudes, their job is not secured, and their employment is precarious. “The oil-well workers heard that new drilling machines would be brought from England and then there wouldn’t be work for men” (Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 15). “The oil well workers may be fired at any moment” (17). “One thousand oil-well workers have been dismissed” (25). Chandi says, “New machine has come. Fewer people are required now. Earlier many people were needed to run the engine. One in place of five is enough now” (92). “The lower strata of the middle class – the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants – all these sink gradually into the proletariat” (Marx 18). Ismail and Chandi came from a farming background. Their conversation is its evidence. Chandi says, “Farming is more pleasing, understand?” Ismail replies, “When the landlord takes away the grains from the yard, the heart turns black” (Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 2). Giasuddin’s father was an employee of a tea garden. Workers like Giasuddin and Chatterjee who are educated and of middle-class origin “supply the proletariat with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress”

(Marx 19). The *Manifesto* says that in the beginning phase of their struggle the workers “direct their attacks not against the bourgeois condition of production, but against the instruments of production themselves; they destroy imported wares that compete with their labor, they smash to pieces machinery, they set factories ablaze” (Marx 18). Ismail expresses such violent desires, “Fire must be set to the refinery, and bungalows must be burnt to ashes” (Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 251). And he, along with others, actually set fire to the camp of the newly recruited workers. There is a competition between the resident group and the newly recruited group of workers, so Ismail burns the huts of the latter. The *Manifesto* exactly notes such phenomenon, “At this stage, the laborers ... (are) broken up by their mutual competition.” Further, “The organization of the proletarians into a class ... is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves” (Marx 19). In *Pratipad* also there are competitions and conflicts even among the resident workers. When Ismail is promoted to the rank of foreman, he betrays his selfish pleasure, ego, and divisive temperament. One thousand workers are dismissed from work but Ismail is not pained, rather he contentedly says to Nasiruddin, “Neither a Muslim nor an Assamese is fired” (Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 25). Workers like Ahmad, Beerbhadra, Bodhan, etc. do not support the union, and the latter two work as agents of the company. Bodhan says, “One year has passed. What has the union done? ... Dismiss the union” (201). Further, “This union should be dismissed. We will withdraw our membership. We will form a different union” (202). Both work as Taoler’s agents to divide the workers on communal lines. One gives money and instigates Ismail to perform *korbani* (sacrifice of animal) where the Hindus live and the other tries to keep beef in a temple. “But with the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number, it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more” (Marx 19). The British sahibs are afraid of the possibility of a workers’ union. Giyasuddin perceives, “That (British) power is shaking in the fear of the power of the people” (Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 87). Baruah says, “Bodhan, you have no idea about the power of the people. Bullets can’t penetrate it, swords can’t cut, fire can’t burn, and storm can’t frighten it” (203). “Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lie not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers” (Marx 19). When fifty workers are dismissed, all the

workers collectively protest. Consequently, the bor sahib ordered Taoler to “appoint those fifty workers in other works” (Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 104). “The fifty discharged workers got work again” (109). This incident is an example of the workers’ temporary victory. But, at the end of the novel, the grand strike, organised by their union, completely fails, and all of them are expelled from the oil city. But, this defeat is also no final defeat. When leaders like Giasuddin, Pradhan, and Mala Singh see no way out of that impasse and keep sitting bewildered, Lasmi bursts in with the wisdom of the *Communist Manifesto*, “Chatterjee said just that. None could understand. The union is still there. It’s not dead. Save the union” (282). Giasuddin quickly responds, “Stop, Lasmi. You’re right. The union must be saved” (282).

However, ideology, particularly the Assamese middle-class ideology, plays a significant role in determining so many aspects of the form and the content of the novel. It deceives the casual reader pretending as a novel of class, union, and strike, while a closer look reveals a more complicated pattern where class, union, and strike is only a major thread amidst so many other major and minor threads. It is a thread that betrays its limit and gives way to a “better” thread. It is a thread that loses its way inside the dense forest of vagueness and uncertainties. Not that the novel develops the theme of class enthusiastically and fails to carry its burden further, rather it continues to dilute the theme of class right from the beginning in various ways. The novel begins with Chandi’s exclamation: “I cannot bear it anymore....Bones cannot be soiled and blood watered only for eight annas” (1). Thus the worker is presented as a helpless victim of, not a crusader against, the condition of alienated labour. So, Chandi says “cannot”, but not “will not”. Further, the middle-class view that an increase in wages may increase the quantity of work is indirectly expressed when Chandi, the worker, says that he cannot work so much for only eight annas, one implication of which is that the increase in wages from eight annas may energise him to soil bones and water blood. Doubtless, it is the workers’ experience seen through the middle-class eyes. In choosing the hero, choosing the heroine, giving the title, chalking out its beginning and the end, choosing the point of entry, and designing the over-determination, the novel betrays its middle-class ideology; it signals to the left while turning right. It has been seen how the novel was prevented from being a strike novel or a novel primarily of class struggle, and how these threads are

set side by side with other significant threads without making most of them inter-determining and thus weakening the process of over-determination. For example, the class struggle and the gender struggle are intertwined but they determine each other only slightly. That is to say, class struggle is relegated from the position of the master thread, the master thread being a more generalised thing that encompasses various forms of struggle mutually almost independent of one another.

It is to be noted that the novel depicts a society that is informed by what Raymond Williams, in *Marxism and Literature*, calls residual, dominant, and emergent structures of feeling, and the hero, Giasuddin, incarnates all of them. His unionism, pro-people character, support for Chatterjee's dream of a classless society, appreciation of class consciousness in Nasiruddin, etc. indicate his emergent structure of feelings. His appraisal of individual liberty, support for women's freedom, courage to overcome the limits set by religion, etc. speaks volumes of his dominant bourgeois structure of feeling. But, his patriarchal desire for a male child, his callous approach to his relationship with his first wife, his negligence of the emotions of his second wife, Jahanara, etc. are shreds of evidence of his residual structure of feeling. Thus, as far as the structure of feeling is considered, he is far behind Chatterjee who cherishes, more than any other character in the novel, the emergent structure of feeling – the dream of a classless society, the dream of *bonuwa raj* (rule of the workers). Men and women, for Chatterjee, are equals. Yet, as Pannu does not regard Chatterjee as her lover, the novel does not choose Chatterjee as its hero. As Pannu is bewitched by the "maleness" of Giasuddin – a quality that Chatterjee, according to her, may not have, the novel also celebrates the "heroism" or "leadership" of Giasuddin far more than that of Chatterjee. But a middle-class ideology, informed by the specter of communism, questions itself, however slightly or unconsciously. The novel puts a question mark before its choice of Giasuddin and the rejection of Chatterjee as the hero. So Giasuddin is made to acknowledge Chatterjee's heroism, "Who could know that such extreme boldness resided in the heart of such a silent, bashful man? Despite seeing the killing of Chandi, he went forward. Probably he (Giasuddin) himself does not own this much courage" (241). Pannu also remembers, "What Chatterjee said about maleness. He did not agree with the view that only Giasuddin Sahib is the incarnation of maleness....After his death Pannu's interest in him is increasing..." (264). But Chatterjee

dies “not with a bang but a whimper” (Eliot line 98). “The man who held the driver, dropped to the ground” (Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 234). The reader is not immediately informed that “the man” is Chatterjee. The novel does not want to make any fuss about his death. The bearer of the highest sensibilities meets only a pathetic death, not a tragic one. Chatterjee needs to die because his long life would have dragged the novel more toward the path of pure class struggle and emergent structures of feeling for which the novel is not prepared, and the Assamese middle class is not prepared. Another problem with Chatterjee is that he is a Bengali. There is a long history of conflict between the Assamese middle class and the Bengali middle class. The State Language Movement of 1960 made this conflict more sanguine. So for a novel set in Assam written in the sixties and published around 1970, it is difficult to choose a Bengali as its hero, however lofty and advanced his sentiments might be. The Assamese middle class striving to achieve leadership in the socio-cultural and politico-economic spheres of the state must strive to fulfill the slot for the hero in fiction.

The author, known as a socialist in the earlier phase of his career, gives expression to his Marxist sentiments in *Rajpathe Ringiyai* and returns to this Marxist theme of class in *Pratipad* which is immediately followed by his Gyanpeeth-winning novel *Mrityunjoy* based on the freedom movement of India and Gandhian ideals, published in the same year with *Pratipad*. Gobinda Prasad Sarma comments on the ideological affinity between *Rajpathe Ringiyai* and *Pratipad*, “In terms of ideology *Pratipad* is of the same class as Bhattacharyya’s first political novel *Rajpathe Ringiyai*” (“Ardhashatabdir” 27). The author’s transition from Marxism to Gandhian philosophy, and that of the novel from class struggle to freedom struggle, is allegorically marked by the transition noticed in the character of Giasuddin and also in the form of the novel. The theme of class struggle is so much marginalised by the theme of the freedom struggle that a critic Shri Ram Goswami remarks, “In Bhattacharyya’s *Pratipad* patriotism is glaring. The novel is organised with the ideals of the nationalist consciousness and social reform following mainly Gandhism” (126). Giasuddin’s vacillation towards the end of the novel is telling. In the thirty-sixth chapter he appreciates Nasiruddin’s class consciousness, “Isn’t it the talk of class struggle? There is no difference of good and bad of the owners. They are only a class”

(Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 246-247). In the thirty-seventh chapter, he realises that “There is no hope that the strike will succeed. It seems that unified struggle is becoming futile....So Giasuddin Sahib is searching for the path. And he sees the path....The only way left is to remove this government. Congress is saying just this. Tumultuous movement is going on throughout the country. Thousands of volunteers have gone to jail. They are not cooperating with the government. This is the only path” (262). In the thirty-eighth, he appears quite helpless, “I do not know what should be done. My brain fails to work....I will keep sitting here forever” (280). And then Lasmi reminds him of what Chatterjee said about the force of the union, “Chatterjee said just that. None could understand. The union is still there. It’s not dead. Save the union.” Giasuddin, immediately, both supports and stops Lasmi, “Stop Lasmi. You’re right. The union must be saved” (282). The supporter of the union does not allow the continuation of the talk about the union! This simultaneous support and stopping of the talk of the union symbolises the contradiction inherent in Giasuddin’s character and also in the character of the novel. In the final chapter, there is no fuss about the union or class struggle of the workers. “The weather is clear now. Nowhere there is a single cloud.” Pannu says, “I see this is the first crescent moon of a new life.” Giasuddin says, “I am thinking that close by this place I have a piece of land purchased by my father. I will do farming” (285). The hero of the workers, the leader of the proletarian union, is going to join another class, that is, the farmers. The crescent moon does not signify the fresh beginning of another stage of class struggle – farewell to that! It signifies at least two things: it is the crescent moon of Pannu and Giasuddin’s married life and it is the crescent moon of India’s nationalist freedom struggle. So “Giasuddin felt that the moon seemed to be the waist of some beautiful woman. Pannu thought that this moon is the half-moon of the forehead of some Shiva-like groom” (286). The novel ends with a reference to Mrs. Baruah’s freedom-fighter father’s letter, “He has written that if movement outbreaks this time, it will be a terrible movement” (289).

Giasuddin could not find the true cause of the failure of the strike organised by the union. For him, it is the absence of a native government! The author got more than two decades to check if India’s Independent Government was pro-worker to the level of Giasuddin’s expectation. In his 1955 novel *Rajpathe Ringiyai*, the hero Mohan asserted

that freedom was false whereas the 1970 novel's hero Giasuddin puts his trust in the same freedom! Shashi Sharma comments on this ideological shift, "He terms the gaining of right to get organised through the formation of the trade union as 'Pratipad' in *Pratipad* as if as a result of this the working class will march forward towards the full moon of a successful revolution. In *Rajpathe Ringiyai*, he (the author) attuned himself to the communists to say that the government formed after the transfer of power was false and that freedom was a deception. But, in *Pratipad* he says that if the nationalist government is formed then the working class will achieve its aims" ("Birendrakumar" 45). The more probable cause – loneliness and isolation of the struggle – does not dawn on Giasuddin and the novel is also reluctant to reveal it. It is mentioned only once when Baruah says to Chatterjee, "But what will happen if the union is formed only here? Is there any union in the tea gardens? Or is it in the railway?" (Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 115). As Chatterjee, the most advanced man in sentiments, is made the foil to Giasuddin, the less advanced, Lasmi, the most advanced woman in sentiments, is made a foil to Pannu. We have already seen that while Pannu does not marry Ismail because he is not going to turn into a Hindu, Lasmi marries him without any such condition. Both articulate and exercise women's freedom, but it is Lasmi who is freer. Pannu cherishes the patriarchal idea of 'maleness', but Lasmi does not. Pannu receives a beating from her father for her relationship with Chatterjee, but Lasmi can stop her father from joining work against the union's decision, "Father, go if you can trample at my bosom. Have you become so proud that you have come to oppose the rights of so many workers? Let me hear whose force is behind you. Incited by the sahibs, you have quite forgotten the prestige of the workers" (225). When she and Pannu lose their fathers at the firing of the sahibs, it is only Lasmi whose reaction against the oppressors is fierce, "The fire of this girl's sight seems to be more terrible than the firing power of machineguns. Raolat understands that this is the fiery sight of the oppressed and insulted" (238). In the penultimate chapter, when all others remain baffled about what to do, both Pannu and Lasmi remember what Chatterjee said. But here also Lasmi is more precise than Pannu. Pannu says, "It's the work of establishing the rule of the workers, or this will happen always" (280). While Pannu thus remembers the destination abstractly, Lasmi remembers the concrete way to achieve that, "Chatterjee said just that. None could

understand. The union is still there. It's not dead. Save the union" (282). But, the form of the novel undoubtedly makes Pannu the main woman protagonist and Lasmi her foil. The novel starts with the unmarried Pannu and ends with the guarantee of her marriage with Giasuddin. All main three male protagonists – Chatterjee, Ismail, and Giasuddin – fall in love with Pannu. It is made certain that if Ismail had accepted the condition set by Pannu, Lasmi could not have married him. Part of the meaning of the title of the novel comes from the new beginning of Pannu's life with Giasuddin. In the final chapter, Pannu is awake and looking at the crescent moon but Lasmi's final activity is sleep, "She is sleeping beside Ismail – sound asleep in tiredness" (288).

The novel organises the strike or the class struggle in such a manner that it is doomed to failure. The strike's or the class struggle's failure is ascertained by the novel's form right from the beginning. It chooses a hero who is very active and eccentric but does not own a thoroughly emergent structure of feelings, who always confused among class struggle, racial struggle, and nationalist struggle. It kills the hero who has a clearer vision about what to do and how to do it. The most important cause behind its failure is its isolation. The novel mentions it only once before forgetting it very soon and that time also through a passing comment by a minor character – Baruah. The hero finds another cause of the failure which is a pseudo-cause and which allows him to make an ideological shift. The novel organises its materials in a way so that the 'isolation' may be augmented. For example, other classes – shopkeepers, peasants, artisans – are not depicted; their varied contacts with the working class are not explored. There is no shopkeeper, peasant, or artisan in *Pratipad*! Another aspect of this isolation is that people may come to the city from outside but do not usually go away from it. If someone goes outside, then no 'outside' scene is depicted. Nehru comes, Goswami and Balai Chand come; Madhuri and Nanda Bhakat come from Teok. But Nasiruddin's attempt to go away from the city is frustrated. Jebunnisa goes to Dibrugarh for training in nursing and comes back to Digboi, but we do not find any scene in Dibrugarh. Mrs. Fleming goes away in the end but we do not know what happens to her after she departs from Digboi. Her roaming outside Digboi is informed but not described. Thus the workers' contacts with other places and other classes remain undepicted. Because of such isolation, the views of other classes, particularly the mainstream Assamese society around Digboi, about the strike remain

undepicted, unnoticed. Closely allied to the problem of isolation is the absence of any formal system of education. A system of education adds variety to social life and thus lessens the isolation of labour. In *Pratipad* learning is there but no school. Pannu and Lasmi receive education from Jahanara, and Pannu sometimes from Chatterjee also. But there is no school as such. How can there be a school? There are no characters of school-going children in the novel. Chandi's children Shekhar and Sona die of cholera very early. Baruah's child is just born. Jahanara dies without giving birth to the expected baby. Durga and Nayanmoni are just married. Pannu is going to marry Giasuddin only in the end. Lasmi and Ismail are also a new couple. Thus school-going generation is not generated in the novel. So, one important stratum of the lower middle class – the teachers – is simply absent in the novel. The workers are isolated from history also. Most of them have no history or very little history. We do not know from where and how Pradhan, Bodhan, Mala Singh, Nasiruddin, Lasmi, Pannu, Nayanmoni, etc. come and gather at Digboi. Very small and random scraps of information are given. We only know that Chandi and Ismail are from the same village. Giasuddin's father was a clerk in a tea garden. Chandi, Ismail, etc. were tenants exploited by the landlords in their villages. Jebunnisa is born of some sahib's exploitation of her mother. Apart from such disorganised scraps of information, there is no clear and distinct history of any of the characters. They are thus isolated in terms of space and time.

One important way in which the novel dilutes and confuses the theme of class, capital, and exploitation is its confusion about the cause of the workers' plight. Here it talks about the system of capitalist production; there it refers to the individual cruelty of certain officials like Taoler and Jilapsy. When Nasiruddin says, "The behavior of the sahibs – good or bad – is the behavior of the owners" (246), Giasuddin appreciates, "Isn't it the talk of class-struggle? ...There is no difference of good and bad of the owners, only a class" (246-247). But the novel makes every attempt to show that there are good as well as bad owners; if the company had been run by better officials, things would have run other ways. In the twentieth chapter Mr. Fleming, Mrs. Fleming, Taoler, Jilapsy, and Tains get involved in a debate about how to manage the Indian workers. Significantly, "managing", not "giving autonomy to" the workers is the subject. The Flemings support the liberal ways, but the others harsher, more oppressive ways. Mrs.

Fleming says, "If there were good fellows here, these oppressions would not take place" (272). And, "If he (Higgins) were here, this would not take place. (Mrs. Fleming) heard that he was in favour of obeying the verdict of the Conciliatory Board" (270). So neither the logic of capitalism nor the policy of the company is mainly responsible for the workers' plight, it is the individuals like Taoler who wreak havoc on the workers' lives. The novel focuses on Taoler, the cruel individual. "The measures taken by Taoler to rule the workers are the measures of robbers" (132). "Taoler is the devil living in Beerbhadra's mind" (56). "Taoler's policy is to manage the leading men and use force when necessary. He does not want to be lenient" (133). "At such times Taoler's policy of worker management will not only spoil the reputation of the English but also bury the English humanity and culture" (214). "Most of them are like Taoler. They do not go back from harming the Indians to maintain their false prestige" (216). "He (Taoler) has no brain to understand, no ear to hear" (272). Durga says, "Taoler is setting fire to all, Memsahib is sprinkling water of peace on it" (220). How can Taoler do this? There is an attempt to set the company free while answering this question, "It's the nature of the British rulers to give full freedom to the departmental officers in their works" (183). Again, it is neither the policy, nor capitalism, but the individual. Mr. Fleming, and later Mr. Higgins, is set against Taoler. Fleming reinstates the fifty workers discharged by Taoler, "Appoint those fifty men in other works" (104). The doctor reports that the bor sahib says, "Downfall of Britain is at hand. This happens because of people like Taoler" (155). "Bor sahib has resigned...." (143). Durga says, "In this company, only the bor sahib has kindness" (98). But the bor sahib, Mr. Higgins, who joins after Fleming's departure, is presented as very weak. "Mr. Higgins is weak at heart" (270). And we know that the bor sahibs are also instruments of capital, not of labour. The bor sahib says, "Alright, new machines must be installed. But, the workers' discontents are also to be removed. This is the clever policy of Britain" (132). The motherly Mrs. Fleming fails to penetrate the character of capitalist enterprise, so she talks about Englishness, skin, etc., "The dark skin cannot fulfill its justified demands as far as the white skin stays here" (269). Giasuddin also, forgetful of the class character of such oppression, harps on something called 'the English character' on which he had deep faith. He appreciates the sahibs, "I, therefore, like many characteristics of the sahibs. Their eating, dressing, living,

working, loving – all are ideal” (49). “I had profound faith in the English, today it has finished” (188). “For this Memsahib only, my faith in the English character remains a little.” “Do you know, Raolat Sahib, I had deep faith in the English character” (237). So, the hero judges man not in terms of class, but of race, colour, etc.

Rupabarir Palas

In *Rupabarir Palas*, as it is in *Nadai*, the hero runs away from his original place, comes to a new place, and thrives gradually to end with the status of a landlord. Nadai's flight is caused by the torture of close relatives and Babar's by the oppression of landlordism and his reaction against it. The novel says, “From the seventh or eighth decade of the nineteenth century, the landless farmers of Mymensingh and Nowakhali, in the hope of getting rid of the oppression of the landlords and of getting land for farming, started in small groups to take shelter in the soil of Assam” (Malik, *Rupabari* 41). Was this the only reason behind Miyas' migration to Assam? Ismail Hossain writes, “The large scale settling in the *char* (island formed by a river) areas and the low areas of the river-banks were started by the farmers who came to Assam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a result of the invitations of the British administration and Assamese landlords and middle-class people” (93). Hiren Gohain writes, “To date, proper importance has not been given to the colonial exploitation and strategy behind migration. Insisting mechanically on the factors of push and pull as the causes behind migration, the process of history has been rendered meaningless” (*Progotir* 83). Pulin Kalita writes, “Since 1830 the British had been encouraging the Muslim farmers of East Bengal and particularly the residents of Mymensingh to migrate to Assam.” But the novel, not only through its action but also through express remarks, tries to establish that the migration was intended by the Miyas and caused merely by the oppression of landlordism. Pulin Kalita further writes, “Despite the oppression of landlordism and extreme poverty they were not willing to migrate of which two causes may be thought out – one, attachment to the motherland and two, uncertain life in an unknown land....Assam had not been the center of attraction for the farmers of East Bengal till 1880” (51). Here the novel betrays the mythical imagination of many Assamese middle-class people about the cause behind

migration. The middle class at large and the novel also, appear to be blind to the colonial trick behind migration.

This historical evasion resulting from ideology is in continuity with other kinds of evasions. The poverty-trodden challenged life of the common Miya people does not inform the major thread of the action; the general history of ‘failure’ and alienated labour is suppressed by the individual story of ‘success’ and creative labour. Poor Jalal is not given much space, he dies early in the novel. Most of the space is occupied by the successful Miyas – Sarif and Babar. Thus what is migrated Miyas’ story in appearance is only Babar’s and Sarif’s story in reality. To facilitate the story of Babar’s success the novel makes another evasion – the falsification of the true history of dewanitantra (dewani system). Three dewans are portrayed in the novel and two of them – Osman Ali Sikdar Dewani and Dewan Sarif – appear to be broad-hearted, helping, and benevolent. Only one dewan – Imran Ali Dewani – is presented as a notorious dewan. But Imran is given only a little space – two pages! Fazal Ali Ahmed says, “For ages a cruel administrative system, that is, dewani system or *matabbar* system, which is another name of feudalism, has been operating in these *char-chapori* areas” (26). The novel prefers to conceal the cruelty and oppression of the dewani system. Closely allied to this pattern of evasion is the evasive character of Babar, the hero. He is fully aware that his marriage with Rani may cause havoc in Mariyam’s life. Yet there is no “to be or not to be” (Shakespeare 63) kind of situation for Babar. He bypasses the issue by saying to himself, “Allah will do as he wants to” (Malik, *Rupabari* 202). When Muslima declares her unrequited but steadfast love for him he feels a sense of guilt but tries to validate his deed, “There was no way to disobey the village elder” (407). One outcome of Babar’s evasion is his ambivalence and double standard. Muslima hints at this character of Babar, “He neither brought me closer nor sent me away”! (390). The same is seen in his relationship with Girin Borah. Girin Borah says, “We should not extend our help in this war, do you understand?” (111). Babar has high respect for Girin and considers himself to be Girin’s student. “Though Babar does not study in the school, he thinks he is Girin’s student” (113). “Babar does not understand why Teacher Girin says quite the opposite when people from the minister to the village elder and Mubarak advise them to do farming occupying land wherever it is possible. But he did not dare to ask the question”

(111-112). Though it is an evasion, there is a method in it! These evasions enable Babar to rise in life. Leaving aside Mariyam and Muslima he marries Rani and this marriage contributes a lot to his establishment. Babar's incomprehension of Girin's words and his silence caused by his fear of asking Girin to explain the issue, enable Babar to supply things to the military and become a war contractor. It helps him to both respect and disobey Girin and thereby to thrive as a successful member of the middle class. A long quote from Fritz Pappenheim's *The Alienation of Modern Man* (1959) will throw precious light on this aspect of the character of Babar who is alienated unaware, "The 'company wife' who, concerned about her husband's career, chooses her friends more among the 'right people' than among those to whom she feels drawn; ... the political leader who, realising that his struggle for an unpopular cause might doom his chances for re-election, abandons his convictions to secure his political future; the painter who committed to creative but not generally accepted ideas, gives up the struggle of the lonely artist and accepts the attractive fees and the security of a job in an advertising agency – all these persons show how those who are estranged from what is real can no longer be themselves...The individual's alienation from everything which has no bearing on the pursuit of his interests does not necessarily enter into his consciousnessAs a result of his detachment, the alienated man is often able to achieve great success. These, as long as they continue, engender a certain numbness, which makes it hard for him to realise his own estrangement."

In the previous chapter, it is discussed in detail how the condition of creative labour in this novel is not a systemic but fundamentally individual affair of the main protagonists. Here it is sufficient to say that this apparent condition of creative labour is a cover over the real condition of alienated labour. That Sarif donates land to each of his servants does not indicate any condition of free and creative labour as this act of Sarif is purely a matter of his individual choice; it does not establish any right for the servants. This 'pity', this act of 'charity' is conditioned by the system of alienated labour that veils the exploitation of the toiling people. It reminds us of Blake's poetry, "Pity would be no more//if we did not make somebody poor" (Blake 199). Or as Leo Huberman says, "If the Church had not worked its serfs so hard, if it had not exacted so much from the peasantry, there would have been less need for charity in the first place" (15). Despite his

magnanimity, Sarif is still an appropriator of the surplus labour of his servants. Babar's role is almost the same. He also appropriates the labour of not only many common Miya labourers but also Mariyam and Muslima. In the previous chapter, we examined in some detail how he appropriates the labour of his beloveds and how they cannot claim any right over his property part of which is produced and maintained by them. We saw how Babar's wife Rani likes Muslima, the potential rival of her love, for her capabilities for working! There is random information about the poverty, pain, and suffering of the migrated Miya people at large. But they do not form necessary parts of the point of entry or the main thread of the story, that is, the survival and class promotion of the fittest Miya through creative labour. One migrated Miya, Jalal, Muslima's father says to Babar, "He (Bojlu) gave us plenty of hopes and brought us to Assam. Relying on his words we too came. But he has left us in abysmal distress" (Malik, *Rupabari* 144). Let us look at the economic condition of the other families of Rupabari, "Only nine out of almost sixty families have food to eat. Among them only three families can give away food" (415). Even Kamran, the son of a dewan, turns into a pauper, "Kamran's family now cannot afford two meals a day" (416). Thus it is seen that the producers of surplus do not have surplus to consume in adverse, unproductive times. Rupabari's *palas* (alluvial soil) is *palas* only for a few like Babar and Sarif. This covering of the creative labour of the hero is necessary to marginalise the real life-struggle of the migrated Miya people. As Babar runs away from the glaringly conspicuous fighting front of Sonapara, East Bengal, the novel allegorically runs away from the portraiture of the actual hardship of life of the Miyas of Rupabari. As Babar's protest against landlordism is short-lived, sudden, temporary, fragmentary, and unorganised, the representation of common Miyas of Rupabari also is very fragmentary and incapable of directing the action of the plot.

Babar's story, therefore, is less an allegory of the migration of Miyas to Assam than that of the rise of a tenant to a farmer and a farmer to a member of the middle class. He is not a typical Miya, he is not a type. Lukács may be recalled here again, "What makes a type a type is not its average quality, not its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in the extreme presentation of their

extremes” (*Studies* 6). As far as class is concerned, Babar is more upgraded than Sarif. Sarif himself admits it. “The village elder has also been wonder-struck. Babar has earned ten times more money in two to three years than what he could earn through hard work in his whole life” (Malik, *Rupabari* 162). Babar’s class promotion earns him prestige in society, “Nobody now considers him as a servant in the household of the village elder or a workman in his field....Many have begun to respect him after it was known that he had earned money through contracting” (156). But here there is no Henchard-Farfrae kind of conflicting situation. The rich farmer and landlord, Sarif is so appreciative of the war contractor and supplier, Babar that he decides to marry his daughter Rani off to Babar. On the one hand, this marriage is symbolic of the class association of the rich farmers-cum-landlords and the tradesmen, and on the other, it is suggestive of the victory of the middle-class traders over the farmer-cum-landlord class. Why is there no class conflict between Sarif and Babar? Hiren Gohain comments, “They (the middle class) did not want to oppose the dominance of the landlord class in the rural agrarian sector and the continuity of the process of half-feudal exploitation....After the Independence, they (the Assamese middle-class) also could not give the farmers the right to land, since they were the owners of land meant for sharecropping” (*Parampara* 110). But a novel suffers if it withdraws from delineating the potential struggle among the classes. Lukács observes, “Without the interaction of struggle among people ... everything in composition becomes arbitrary and incidental” (*Writer* 134). Babar and Sarif are not seen as giving out the land for sharecropping, but both appropriate the surplus labour of their servants and workers.

The novel deviates from the potential story of class conflict in several ways. First, in the first few chapters, the oppression of landlordism is glaringly exposed and the hero Babar’s discontents are narrated. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Babar’s fight against the oppressive system is very sudden, unorganised, and done on the spur of the moment. He is not involved in any class conflict; it is no class conflict as he does not organise the oppressed, does not spread the discontent among the oppressed, and runs away from the battlefield. Was class conflict historically unimaginable for the novel? No. Babar runs away in 1936. But the Pabna Peasant Movement took place six decades ago and the famous Tebhaga Movement took place only one decade later. It was an age of discontent and uprisings. Yet the novel prefers to imagine its hero as a fugitive. Secondly,

the novel itself says, “In other parts (of Assam) there was the ryotwari system.... *Mouzadars*, *Tahsildars* (revenue collectors), and Village Elders collect taxes from the subjects and give that to the government. ... The peon of the *Mouzadar* seemed to be the messenger of *Yama* (Hindu god of death) for the poor peasants” (Malik, *Rupabari* 38). But, this fact is not dramatised in the action of the plot; the ryotwari or dewani system is shown as benevolent. In Assam, as there was in Bengal, there was a history of peasants’ uprisings against the oppression of this system as early as the nineteenth century. Phulgurir *Dhawa* (the battle of Phulguri) and the battle of Patharughat are two well-known examples. However, the novel prefers to portray a peaceful coexistence with the system. Thirdly, the hero and the point of entry are chosen in such a way that they can put into shade the untold miseries of the common Miya people. Babar the fugitive’s story could well have been the story of either poverty-stricken Jalal, freedom fighter Girin, or the communist activist Kumud. But these characters are not much developed; they are not given much space. Fourthly, the novel tries to make the cultural assimilation of the Miya community into the Assamese society a bigger issue than their economic survival. Right at the beginning of his stay in Assam Babar is advised by Sarif, “Since you will live in this state, you need to learn the language of this state Or how can you be closer to the mind of the people of this state?” (75). Toward the end, it is much emphasised that Babar’s daughter Keteki receives higher education and writes literary pieces in Assamese. That the Islamic aura of the name Babar evaporates in Keteki is suggestive of the process of assimilation of the Miyas into the mainstream Assamese society. The educated Keteki thinks, “What sin have we committed, save being poor, exploited, uneducated, that we do not get the recognition of being Assamese, that the so-called nameplate of ‘Mymensinghia Miya’ does not get removed from us, despite having lived in Assam for half a century?” (395). But, significantly, this problem is also not dramatised in the action of the novel. In the previous chapter, we have seen how Babar’s economic progress and socialisation in Assam are almost without obstruction. The Miyas’ economic hardship is reported in brief, not dramatised. “In the soft, frail, sensitive mind of Keteki, the unspoken pangs of their tortured, oppressed, exploited society beg expression. The people who do not have any permanent habitats, any permanent employment ... who need to hide

in *chars* and *chaporis*, forests, and water-bodies, only to keep living as they are victims of social injustice – the despair, disgrace, dishonour, and inner pains of these people make this small girl named Keteki restless” (394-395). But the point of entry or main story thread of the novel does not dramatise this story of the struggle of the common Miyas. Sarif, Imran, Babar, etc. assimilate into the local society quite comfortably. To address the mainstream Assamese middle-class dream of building a strong Assamese nation based on Assamese language and culture, the novel avoids dramatising the struggle for existence, particularly the economic struggle of the Miyas at large. The novel feels it necessary to show that Miyas like Sarif and Babar, if given scope and opportunity, will contribute to the development of not only the Miyas but also the Assamese. Sarif’s donation to a local M.E. school and Babar’s regular support to Girin Borah’s family prove that the Miyas may strengthen the Assamese nation in various ways.

As the novel refrains from depicting the real socio-economic struggle of the common Miya people, its hero Babar also refrains from such serious struggles or confrontations. We have already seen his physical escape from the battlefield created by the forces of landlordism in East Bengal. His mental escape from the solid ethical-emotional problems of love of two genuine beloveds – Mariyam and Muslima – is in continuity with his first escape. He does not face trouble and when he faces it, he faces it sporadically – not with a plan or pledge to resolve the issue once and for all. He wanted both these girls close by him but would not marry them, and would not fulfill their lives. He tries to explain away these incidents of unfulfilled love with references to destiny. “Allah will do what he wants to” (202), “Love of the poor is meaningless” (407), etc. are his explanatory phrases. But, in truth, “character is destiny” here too. Mariyam’s reading of his weaknesses is partly correct, “First, You have no courage. Secondly, you have no strength of mind. Thirdly, you do not love me” (297). Mariyam is partly incorrect because though Babar lacks the mental strength to fulfill his love, he has it enormously to fulfill his dream of the economic establishment. Caudwell’s remark may enlighten us to understand the situation, “With the exhaustion of bourgeois social relations, bourgeois passionate love begins to wither before the economic blast” (101). Muslima ironically hints at this money-hunting mentality of the middle class, “The contractors know only money, do they know the mind?” (Malik, *Rupabari* 228). Yet, Mariyam and Muslima

want to live with Babar without disturbing his marriage and family life. This is the wish-fulfillment of man's polygamy validated by patriarchy. In the interest of this patriarchal wish-fulfillment and to pave the middle-class way for Babar's self-establishment, the novel finds out an easy solution for a potential conflict of love. "Babar cannot understand Mariyam very well. After his marriage with Rani, Mariyam maintains some distance but has not expressed any displeasure. ... But Babar sometimes feels guilty for some reason – as if he has committed some wrong towards her as if he has deprived her of something. ... Mariyam has not tried to become equal with Rani or has never attempted to snatch away Rani's share of love" (252-253). Thus the story thread of the love quadrilateral and problems thereof does not much affect the main story thread the survival and class promotion of the fittest Miya through creative labour and this fact weakens the over-determination enacted by the novel.

Babar, the lover, is created first by Mariyam's love and then by that of Muslima. Later, their love product, Babar, is owned by one who did not love him before marriage. Thus 'love's labour's lost' for Mariyam and Muslima. Their condition is parallel to the condition of a worker in a capitalist set-up. Mariyam and Muslima cannot own their product but gain satisfaction to some extent through being close to the product. They, therefore, remain unmarried and stay with Babar – unmarried! Cornelius Castoriadis significantly says, "Alienation in capitalist society is not simply economic. It not only manifests itself in connection with material life. It also affects fundamentally both man's sexual and his cultural functions." So, Mariyam and Muslima's labour in love is alienated. The middle-class and patriarchal ideology forces the novel to come to an end with a 'happy ending'. Babar, with Muslima, goes stealthily to his enemy Kamran's house at night and keeps on his veranda a sack of rice and seedlings. This happy ending that shows the hero's magnanimity is devised at the cost of the subjugation of the tragedies of Mariyam and Muslima and the painful oppressed life of innumerable Miya people under the condition of alienated labour. Thus the novel is not concerned about the potential tragedies of even such central characters like Mariyam and Muslima! "The tension in genuine epic always develops out of concern for the destinies of the characters" (Lukács, *Writer* 130). A careful reader perceives that all is not well and that

ends well. Thus the form of the novel also betrays its patriarchal and class bias in favour of a male member of the middle class.

One important middle-class wisdom is the survival of the fittest which requires the virtue of adaptability. In the previous chapter, we saw that Babar has this virtue in plenty. His survival and progress are conditioned by this virtue of his. The angry young man of Sonapara turns into a humble, peaceful being in Rupabari. Anger was necessary not to organise any revolt against landlordism but to run away from it and humility was the weapon to win the hearts of Sarif and others at Rupabari. He utilises the scope of creative labour generated by Sarif and the scope of earning money generated by the war. He does not listen to Girin Borah as Borah's advice comes in the way of his earning money yet respects and helps Borah. His measured dealings with all three women of his life satisfy all of them to varying degrees and keep them away from any conflict. He marries one but retains all three. Thus he adapts to several situations accepting something or somebody here and rejecting something or somebody there. These adaptations may sometimes cause troubling emotional issues for him but they always contribute to his class promotion and economic progress without fail.

As in the other novels discussed in this study, in *Rupabarir Palas* working scenes at workplaces are invisible. Earlier it was noted how such scenes can make the condition and process of alienated or creative labour conspicuous. At the risk of repetition, it may be further noted here that the mechanism of alienated or creative labour can be better judged only in such scenes. Their absence indicates ideological escape and ideological bias of the middle class. Further, it indicates the middle-class assumption that work is tedious and leisure is pleasing. Adorno deals with this question while talking about the ideology behind all talks about hobbies, "Time and time again, when questioned or interviewed, one is asked about one's hobbies....Making music, listening to music, and reading with all my attention, these activities are part and parcel of my life; to call them hobbies would make a mockery of them....There is no hard and fast opposition between my work itself and what I do apart from it" (188-189). That the novelists tend to depict scenes of love, fun, and other such engagements but not of work as such underlies not only the intention to make the narrative more pleasing but also, in the deeper novel, the bourgeois intention to rejuvenate the workers for the next round of alienated labour.

Adorno hints at this, “Free time must not resemble work in any way whatsoever, in order, presumably, that one can work all the more effectively afterward” (190).

Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya

On several counts, this novel is quite different from its counterpart *Seuji Patar Kahini* in particular, and the other four novels in general. First, it exposes the condition of alienated labour much more than the others. Critics appreciate the artistic concentration of the heart-rending narration of the oppression of the coolies in the first four chapters. At Rupohijan their condition gets improved a bit, but the story of exploitation, oppression, and dehumanisation continues. Secondly, in *Seuji Patar Kahini* the labourers do not fight against the system of exploitation, in *Nadai* the hero does not think of fighting, in *Rupabarir Palas* the hero runs away from the scene of a potential fight, in *Pratipad* the organised fight of the workers is defeated, at least temporarily. In this novel alone the fight goes on unabated and with a promise of continual improvement of their condition of life. Thirdly, the oppressed are the main protagonists here; they are given the highest space. Unlike *Seuji Patar Kahini*, here the main protagonists are recruited from the tea garden labourers. Despite all this, the novel betrays the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology – of course to a lesser degree than the others. True, it has focused mainly on the working class. True, it has unraveled the condition and effects of alienated labour more than the others. Yet it needs to be said that it has not utilised the potentiality of class struggle generated by itself to the full. The degree of oppression and dehumanisation depicted in the first four chapters is not felt in the remaining twenty-four chapters; as if even under the condition of alienated labour the life of the workers may gradually improve. And this improvement is not seen as an outcome of the workers’ struggle but that of the magnanimity of the sahibs. Though Tulsi says, “It has not happened due to the sahibs’ grace but due to the workers’ demand” the reader does not witness any dramatisation of such demand from the workers of Rupohijan. Tulsi himself admits, “We have articulated no protest; we have not shouted that we need schools. It happens in other estates” (U. Sarma 227). The school is there because of Finley. “There is no end to Finley’s enthusiasm for establishing the school” (223). One more point is there. The

school is established in the ninth chapter of Book II, but the workers' union is established in the fourth chapter of Book III. Thus the school is prior to the workers' organised struggle. Dr. Chakrabarty also comes to Rupohijan not because of any demand on the part of the workers but because of Finley. "There is a danger if a doctor cannot be brought from the town at least for a week. Finley himself prepares to go" (164).

Further, the utmost concentration and artistry seen in the depiction of maltreatment of the coolies by the sardars and the sahibs, the mysteriousness of the river Chandini and the accident on it, and the earthquake of 1897 is not to be found in the depiction of the organised class struggle, particularly in political and economic matters. Chitta tells the workers about the need for a union, they form a union, some of them get beaten and arrested because of their involvement in the union, and the union, reportedly, turns into a big one. But not a single activity of the union is described in such a huge novel. In the previous chapter, we have seen that the establishment of the school, Arjun's progress in education, the degradation of some members of the community, and the organisation of the *parab* are described with meticulous care. But the union's activity is not even mentioned, let alone its dramatisation. It is comfortable for the novel to depict the workers more as receivers of oppression than as fighters against it. And when they fight collectively it is always a violation of the modesty of some coolie woman that induces them to fight. They are not seen fighting against economic exploitation. Two times they collectively protest against the babus and the sahibs and on both occasions, cases of sexual harassment are dramatised. The first incident takes place in the sixth chapter of Book II when Cheniram attempts to rape Kalondi, Tulsi's wife, and the second in chapter I and chapter II of Book III when Mackenzie violates Bisni's modesty. The workers' union is first mentioned in chapter III of Book III and it is formed in the fourth chapter of the same book. Thus the incidents of their collective protest took place before they established the union. No incident that may be termed as part of a class struggle is depicted after the establishment of the union. In this part of the novel people gather to hold a protest only once and this time it is not the workers of Rupohijan but the mainstream freedom fighters. This incident is described in the eighth chapter of Book III. And from here the novel makes its ideological shift by cornering the class struggle and ushering in the nationalist freedom struggle, by trying to drag the tea garden labourers'

class into the arena of the pan-India freedom movement. In this respect, it follows the track of *Pratipad*. In that novel, like this one, the class struggle gives way to the nationalist freedom struggle, and the exponents of the class struggle decide to join the freedom movement. In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* it is the Non-Cooperation Movement and in *Pratipad* it is the Quit India Movement. The workers' union seems to be orphaned right at its birth. It is born in Chapter IV of Book III, but the novel does not take its care and bring it up in the remaining chapters. The novel finds no time or space to nurture it as it concentrates on other matters like the enlightenment of the coolies through education, the gradual loss of their cultural distinctiveness, the pros and cons of their assimilation with the mainstream, and their gradual involvement in the freedom movement. The last four are the dear themes of the mainstream Assamese middle class.

Why are the activities of the union marginalised in the novel? There are at least two reasons. First, it is a leap of imagination on the part of the author to think of a workers' union at Rupohijan in the life of Tulsi's generation. Historically speaking, workers' unions in the tea gardens of Assam began to be formed around 1939. In this respect Amalendu Guha says in *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, "Several plantation labour unions ... sprang up in the Brahmaputra Valley, while there was a lone one in the Surma Valley. These are listed in the table below" (196). From the table provided by Guha, it is known that the first three plantation Labour Unions of Assam were registered on 27 April 1939. A novel is a fiction. However, the present novel uses a few exact dates and several actual historical references. Therefore, the calculation of the approximate date of establishment of the Rupohijan Labour Union is inviting. We remember that the very first sentence of the novel mentions a date. "Tulsi arrives at Gowalond in the afternoon of 12th June 1886" (U. Sarma 5). He calculates his wife Kalondi's age, "After twelve years of our arrival in the garden, I married you" (183). But at that time they had been married for three years. So we may add fifteen years to 1886 which will bring the action to 1901. This happens in the sixth chapter of Book II. Seventeen pages later, that is, in the seventh chapter of the same book, Chitta mentions the annexation of Assam with Bengal which takes place in 1905. That Arjun is born to Tulsi and Kalondi is announced on page number 237 in the ninth chapter of Book II. There is no clue to calculate the lapse of time between 1905 and Arjun's birth. It may be at best one year or two years. In the eighth

chapter of the last book Arjun is reported as a candidate about to appear in the matric examination. But the fourth chapter of Book III informs us that he is in primary school when he is eleven. “Then his age was eleven” (278). He is in either class two or class three. “The students of class two and three would do sums...Arjun was doing the sums” (279). This implies that his age in the tenth class is seventeen or eighteen. This brings us to 1924 or 1925. At this age, he witnessed a procession related to the Non-Cooperation Movement the duration of which was from 1920 to 1922. In the final chapter, we are informed that Chitta is arrested because of his involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement. Thus the action of the novel is limited to the first quarter of the twentieth century; it cannot come to the fourth decade, not to speak of 1939! So, historically, Rupohijan Labour Union is not possible; it is the author’s imagination that makes it possible. The author, it seems, did not like to push his imagination further to include functions and activities of the union. Secondly, it is the class fear of the mainstream Assamese middle class that cannot allow the plantation workers’ union to move far ahead. One representative of the mainstream, Nakul, reveals, though light-heartedly, this apprehension, “The way you start forming unions, reading, being good people – I feel that the days are numbered. The people of the company will have to run away from here bags and baggage. Probably you will become the owners of the tea estates in the end” (300). So, unionism must be restricted, it must be seen not as the only one or the most dominant one among the social processes which involve the plantation workers. It must be seen as one of the many developments of the coolie life, others are their assimilation with the local people, turning into Assamese, enlightenment through education, etc. These others, compared to unionism, are given more scope and space.

The three books of the novel represent three phases of the development of the life and consciousness of the so-called coolies. Banha, his son Tulsi, and his grandson Arjun respectively represent these three phases. Banha is not depicted as the main protagonist of the first book, but he is one of the central characters. “Banha has no anger, no remorse. He has not even learned to be angry” (8). But this Banha also gets angry in the face of utmost oppression, “You think you will go away leaving us behind. Go and we will make powder of your bones” (24). But this protest is unusual for Banha. Normally he accepts his lot. He represents the voicelessness of his community, “Banha has uttered not a single

word since last night. His voice is stopped in fear or sorrow or frustration” (18-19). “Banha has spoken for the first time after two days” (33). Thus he is not seen as a leader with individual distinctiveness. The first book closes with Banha’s death. “Just before the morning, Banha died” (109). The second book and part of the third book are dominated by the character of Tulsi. He is seen as a social activist and a lover and leader of his community. At the time of the earthquake, he is one of the main rescuers and when diseases outbreak after the earthquake he acts as one of the three assistants of Dr. Chakrabarty. Two times he is seen leading protests of his fellow people against the violation of women’s modesty. Under his leadership, the workers’ union was established. He remains its President till the end. Finley observes and apprehends his leadership quality, “A fear gets stirred in the sahib’s mind. He feels a kind of uneasiness. They have gone away at Tulsi’s words, but not at his words” (192). Tulsi thus represents the class consciousness of the coolies and their fighting spirit. Along with them, he stands for the growth of the individual also. He has no formal education, but he is literate. He is aware of the problems of his people. He knows that they must fight to achieve something. In the last sentence of the second book Arjun’s birth is announced. “As soon as the east becomes white, Kalondi gives birth to a son” (237). This is Arjun. He is the center of action in the last part of the novel. Though with Chitta’s advice and Tulsi’s leadership, the workers’ union is established, the dominant thread of action in this part is Arjun’s education. Two times he opposes the evil forces represented by the miscreant Chunu, but he is not seen involved in any union activities. As Tulsi rescues a mainstream boy in Book II, Arjun also rescues a mainstream boy in Book III. Arjun, pursuing a high school level education, expands the contact between the plantation workers and the mainstream. He represents the highest aspiration of the plantation workers as we saw in the previous chapter in the comments of Dugga and Magho. He is also a man of the community but he is more developed as an individual. He has the highest exposure in the world outside the garden, he makes the highest contact with the mainstream, and he receives the highest level of education among them. He and Rumni are the first coolies to get involved, though unaware, with the freedom movement. His mother Kalondi says, “You are different....Your minds are different, not like ours....You are our children, you are also coolies, But your minds are not like the coolies” (327). Arjun has to struggle against

many obstacles to pursue his goal of becoming an educated individual. It was difficult for him to get admission into a high school outside the garden. His classmates do not like him, some teachers do not like him. Unlike his father he is unpopular in the coolie line; he is unpopular at school also. "He is, in a sense, untouchable at home As he, a coolie of the garden wants to become a babu, even a sahib, instead of becoming a coolie. From one angle he insults the tea garden labourers. He is untouchable in school because he wants to be equal to the babus, he wants to become babus, despite being a coolie" (307). So, he is both attached to and detached from his community.

Thus the novel tells not only the tale of the development of the life and struggle of the coolies in three phases but the story of the growth of the individual as well. Arjun is the most individualised among them. However, this individual does not bother about the economic hardship and political troubles of his community. His wish to become a doctor is purely a personal pursuit. Two times he has conflicts with Chunu but those are on moral lines. He has articulated not a single sentence against either the British rule or the economic exploitation of his people. The novel ends with him. In the end, he is looking at the sunrise in the east. Thus symbolically he sees and represents a new beginning – this new phase will be one of more education, more assimilation with the mainstream, and more involvement in the national struggle; this new phase does not require unionism. So, Arjun is not seen with the workers' union. Once he tells Nakul that the latter has to contribute to the union. Apart from this instance, he is in no way seen linked with or involved in the union. The criticism of the Dickensian character Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* made by Eagleton may be leveled against the character of Arjun also, "Instead, it focuses on the lone individual, Stephen Blackpool, whose deference, confusion and passivity are made to seem more commendable than a struggle for better wages" (*The English* 159). Arjun's pursuit of higher education is also sought to be presented as more significant than his involvement with the workers' union. Thus the Marxian imagination of the novel gives way to the liberal imagination. The working-class leader fathers a middle-class son.

The novel has diluted the theme of class struggle not only through the conceptualisation of Arjun's character but also through several other means. We have already seen how little space is given to the thread of unionism; how it is enveloped and

cornered by the threads of cultural assimilation, enlightenment through education, degradation of some coolie youths, etc. Another significant trick of dilution is the transformation of Chitta's character. He and Ratan are members of the railway workers' union. They taught and inspired Tulsi and other workers in the garden to form a union at Rupohijan. Later, like Giasuddin in *Pratipad*, it dawns on Chitta that there is no difference between workers and non-workers when the country is in trouble. He says now, "I believe, the workers and non-workers have become the same because it is now a problem for the whole country" (U. Sarma 352). And, "It is enough if we understand that our country is our mother. That country is now under the rule of others. This is a huge disgrace for all people of this country. We will not tolerate this insult. We will sacrifice our lives if needed....We the railway workers, we the workers of the garden will not lag." The working class leader transforms into a freedom fighter and gets arrested for his involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement. Bisni, the coolie woman and Chitta's wife speaks in the same vein. "Nobody speaks a word. Every one of them feels something" (355). This silence indicates that they will follow the path traced by Chitta and Bisni. Chitta's ideological shift is suggestive of the novel's ideological shift as he, though not the hero, is the most advanced character. He is always in the field of struggle now as a union member, now as a freedom fighter. He brings the news of the outside world – the annexation of Assam with Bengal, the Non-Cooperation Movement, etc. He inspired the plantation workers first to form a union and then to join the freedom movement. His marriage with Bisni is exemplary. It is a marriage between a coolie girl and a mainstream man. Considering the social taboos of those times Chitta's decision to marry Bisni is revolutionary. Chitta, of course, has limitations in his class consciousness. He is aware of the needs of the workers – "Your children need medicines; you need rice to eat and a house to live in" (275). But he never mentions the exploitation of surplus labour of the workers. He, it seems, is unaware of the mechanism of alienated labour. So later he can see the workers and non-workers as the same in terms of the freedom struggle. The novel, like Chitta, is unaware of the basic class exploitation of the class society formed in the garden. Therefore, the theme of class struggle is diluted in various ways as has been shown before. In *Pratipad* the workers' union circulated leaflets among the workers and sent letters to company officials. These leaflets and letters included many

demands of the workers, the demands reflecting their needs. But, in this novel, the union is not seen in such action. No demand to improve their condition is raised. The penultimate chapter bears witness that the material condition of the life of the coolies has not improved; the health sector remains at the stage of what it was two and half decades ago. The doctor who treats Kalondi says, “She should be taken to some bigger hospital. Sufficient tools and machines are not here at Rupohijan” (348). The garden has no high school. Arjun reads in a high school that is six miles away from Rupohijan Tea Estate. Yet there is no demand. Nobody talks about the needs – the specific needs of the plantation workers.

As the action moves on, the novel focuses more and more on the needs of the middle class in general and that of the mainstream Assamese middle class in particular. The journey of the protagonist from Banha through Tulsi to Arjun is the journey from the community man to the individual man distinct from the community and indifferent to the economic troubles of the community. The novel enacts this agenda of middle-class individualism. Further, as has been mentioned earlier, land is one of the two sources of income for the mainstream Assamese middle class. So, it can allow the plantation workers to have the right to education, but it will be uncomfortable if they achieve the right to the means of production, particularly the right to land. Another very important need felt by this class is the building of a greater Assamese nation and the strengthening of the Assamese language. Therefore, the novel focuses more on the threads of assimilation and Arjun’s education even at the expense of diluting the thread of unionism. The character with the most advanced sentiments is Chitta. But his character is not sufficiently developed. He is not indispensable for the main thread, that is, the life and struggle of the plantation workers. For the workers, he is an adviser, not a leader. Yet he has the potential to drag the workers to the path of struggle as Chatterjee had in *Pratipad*. So, his character must have an early departure. The character with the highest sensibilities, one who can lead the process of social reform, cannot occupy the seat of the hero; he needs to remain a foil of the hero or a minor character. Better be with the dead or stay non-functional. Naren in *Seuji Patar Kahini*, Chatterjee in *Pratipad*, Girin in *Rupabarir Palas*, and Premnath in *Nadai* die. Here Chitta is arrested. In *Surujmukhir Swapna* by Syed Abdul Malik the reformer Chandra is depicted as ridiculous, and

in *Pita-Putra* (1975) by Homen Borgohain the communist character, Soumitra is a drunkard. Hiren Gohain observes, “There is not a whit of doubt in the mind of the reader that Soumitra is a self-centred and worthless man” (*Rachanavali III* 544). Ultimately, a hero struggling against the condition of alienated labour is hard to be found and such a novel with such a hero loses what Lukács calls the “inner poetry” – “The inner poetry of life is the poetry of men in struggle, the poetry of the turbulent, active interaction of men” (*Writer* 126).

Thus it is seen that though the novel, particularly in the first four chapters, vividly portrays the effects of the condition of alienated labour on the coolies, it does not choose their class struggle against that condition of labour as its point of entry. Sufferings are painted bright but the struggle looks pale. That a middle-class ideology is behind such portraiture is made clear by Lukács, “These writers set out to represent a world destroyed and not the battle against the destruction” (*Writer* 100-101). Another illuminating remark of Lukács may be quoted from the same book, “The ideological weakness of the writers of the descriptive method is ... in their seeing the result but not the struggles of the opposing forces” (146). The point of entry – the life and struggle of the plantation workers – is all-inclusive and so loses the focus on the effects of and struggle against the condition of alienated labour. Whatmore, it loses the artistic concentration on the dehumanisation of the coolies represented in the first four chapters. But if it loses on one score, it may gain on another. All inclusiveness of the point of entry may strengthen the process of over-determination in the novel. A closer look at the threads reveals that the gain is not a big one. Their contact with the mainstream is responsible for their learning the lessons of unionism; their pursuit of education broadens their contact with the mainstream. But their unionism does not impact their education or their relation with the freedom movement. Thus the threads are not very closely interwoven and so the process of over-determination represented by the novel is also not very strong. Four more points need to be made in brief. First, the plantation workers learn the lessons of unionism and freedom movement from Chitta and Ratan – two members of the mainstream. Arjun and Rumni’s higher education is possible only with the help of the Head Master and Risi Sir – again two members of the mainstream. The suggestion is that migrant labourers can make progress only with the help of the mainstream. They need the mainstream. Whether the

mainstream needs them remains vague in the novel. Secondly, like the other four novels, this 'working class' novel also shows reluctance to depict labourers at work, that is, in scenes at the workplace. There are a total of twenty-eight chapters but only two – the sixth of Book I and the first of Book III – may be said to be working scenes though in a limited sense. There is practically no scene inside the factory. The factory is mentioned almost thirty times but no scene is set inside it. Thirdly, all three books end in the morning time. And each time there is a cultural function before the end of the book. A *parab* and Banha's death just before the morning closes the first book. A cultural function celebrating the establishment of a school and Arjun's birth at dawn closes the second book. Another *parab* and Arjun and Rumni's looking at the sunrise close the third one. Each book thus represents a new beginning and a cultural event is seen as the harbinger of that. This is another way to dilute the importance of the class struggle in the progress of their life. Fourthly, Tulsi is the President of the Rupohijan Labour Union throughout. But in the end, he is old weak, and lame. It indicates the weakness and lameness of the theme of unionism in the novel. No wonder, the new hero is in no way related to the union.

Impact of Ideology on Aspects of Form

In this section, the impact of ideology on the formal aspects of the selected novels is going to be examined. It is because the aspects of form and style are inseparably linked to the specific history, society, and ideology from which they spring. "Every new style is socially and historically determined and is the product of a social development" (Lukács, *Writer* 119). Lukács further claims, "Compositional principles of a poetic work are a manifestation of an author's view of life" (140). Jameson observes, "What is more important is the influence of a given social raw material, not only on the content but on the very form of the works themselves" (165). He further observes "Here form is regarded not as the initial pattern or mold, as that from which we start, but rather as that with which we end up, as but the final articulation of the deeper logic of the content itself" (328-329). And since the content is informed by ideology; the form cannot be innocent of it. To unravel the impact of ideology on the formal aspects the method of

comparison will be followed. First *Seuji Patar Kahini* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* will be compared and contrasted as both are supposed to be centered on the life of the plantation workers. The second pair of novels for comparison and contrast is *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas* as they focus on the peasantry. Thirdly, the ideologically determined form of *Pratipad*, the only novel based on the life of industrial workers, will be analysed.

Seuji Patar Kahini* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya

It is seen that as far as the condition and effects of alienated labour are concerned, *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* shows a tendency to reveal more, and *Seuji Patar Kahini* to conceal more. This difference is rooted in the difference in their ideological grasp of the condition of alienated labour and that difference, in turn, determines the telling differences of various novelistic aspects in both novels. Let us examine the differences one by one.

Title

Critics appreciate the title *Seuji Patar Kahini* as, for them, it is an ironical title – the connotation of *seuji pat* (green leaves) concealing the disturbing facts of oppression, exploitation, suffering, and pains of toiling people. Irony is a literary device that makes expression indirect; it is hiding rather than revealing. This is in keeping with the whole structure and texture of the novel which works more to hide than to reveal. The novel promises to explore and expose the sufferings of the toiling mass but ultimately it appears evasive; it takes much pain to bypass alienated labour and show us the “green leaves” of a vibrant life. It fails to do so; it can neither show nor hide. Ideology makes every attempt to hide what truth wants to show and truth tears up every covering with which ideology wants to hide. The title also wants to foreground refreshing ‘nature’ pushing ‘man’ aside but man finds its way back into the title through *kahini* (story). *Kahini* is always human, only humans may have *kahinis*. Thus, the novel and its title both are refractive, not reflective. While the title *Seuji Patar Kahini* foregrounds nature, the title *Ejak Manuh*

Ekhan Aranya emphasises “man amidst nature.” Since both novels are supposed to be based on the life of the tea garden labourers, the second title is more to the point. It reminds us of the forest-dwelling stage of man and thus indicates that all is not well with the people concerned. Opposed to the romanticising, idealising connotation of *Seuji Patar Kahini*, *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is more disturbing, more discomfiting, and more evocative of the painful and struggling existence of a large group of toiling people. Thus, the second title is more revealing, more direct, and more descriptive. These qualities of the title also are in keeping with those of the structure and texture of the novel itself. The novel as a whole also reveals or reflects the conditions and effects of alienated labour more than *Seuji Patar Kahini* does.

The Beginning and the End

Seuji Patar Kahini, supposed to be a novel based on the life of the coolies, begins with the manager of Nahoroni Tea Estate, Rountree Miller, and his wife, Ely Seymour. They are on their way back to the estate but have to stop inside the forest as the engine of their car stops functioning. A little later, Nareswar, a wayfarer, meets them. Thus, the beginning, as well as the beginning chapter, does not introduce any coolie character, any producer of *seuji pat*. What is more, in this labour-based novel the first labouring scene is noticed as late as Chapter Twelve. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, on the other hand, introduces the most important representative of the coolies right in the beginning sentence, “Tulsi arrived in Gowalond in the afternoon of twelfth June 1986” (U. Sarma 5). The novel is focused on the exploitation and sufferings of the coolies and their fight against that condition. *Seuji Patar Kahini* ends with the departure of Nareswar which is preceded by the departure of the heroine, Sonia. Nareswar is an outsider and Sonia is born of a British sahib and a coolie woman. Thus, like the beginning, the end also does not feature or focus on a truly coolie character. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* ends with Arjun, son of Tulsi, and the most enlightened coolie. *Seuji Patar Kahini* begins in the evening and ends at midnight. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* begins in the evening but ends in the morning, “Through the clouds, radiating a thousand beams, enlightening the whole world with light, the morning sun rises. The dewdrops fall from the tree leaves,

they keep falling” (371). Thus, *Seuji Patar Kahini* leaves the life of the coolies as it is, whereas *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* depicts the stages of the improvement of coolie life. So, there is more historicity in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* than in *Seuji Patar Kahini*.

The Main Protagonists

Seuji Patar Kahini is widely acclaimed as the first Assamese novel to deal with the life of tea garden labourers. But, surprisingly, the novel appears to be unwilling to have its hero and heroine from this group. The heroine, Sonia, is both attached to and detached from this group, probably because she carries in her body both the blood of a coolie woman and that of a British sahib. The hero, Nareswar, is an outsider. He belongs to the mainstream Assamese people and is not a permanent dweller of the garden. His stay in the garden is short-lived. The story of Nareswar-Sonia is foregrounded while the tea garden labourers form only the background; the labourers are offered conspicuously less space in the novel. But most of the protagonists of *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* are from this group. Most of the space is occupied by them.

Historicity

Seuji Patar Kahini describes the story of only one generation of the labourers. A few past generations are mentioned, but not dramatised in the present of the novel. And there is none in this generation who has the necessary enlightenment to grasp the situation, to have a voice of protest, and to lead her people against the exploitations caused by the condition of alienated labour. Sonia instinctively perceived her situation, but her perception is largely indistinct and very personal and it fails to pave the way for revolutionary leadership. This indistinct and inactive perception leaves her melancholic and prevents her from attaching herself to her people. Finally, she leaves them and goes out of the garden in search of some personal, separate peace or solution. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is neatly divided into three chapters that represent three stages of the subjective consciousness of the coolies in three generations. The first chapter closes with the death of Banha who stands for a coolie subjectivity that accepts without protest that

“To be beaten is part of their work” (135) and “The coolies do not feel disgrace much” (89). Under the leadership of Banha’s son Tulsi, the coolies learn to protest in the second chapter which disturbs Finley, the Manager. “Obeying Tulsi, the coolies come together, and as per his words, go away” (275). This chapter closes with the birth of Arjun, Tulsi’s son. Banha has little voice of protest, Tulsi has but he is without formal education. Arjun, the main protagonist of the third generation, is a dreamer with a successful educational career. Along with him the subjectivity of the coolies gets metamorphosed. His mother Kalondi says, “Your minds are different, not like us. We are coolies, and we regard ourselves as coolies. You are our children; you are also coolies. But your minds are not coolies” (327). The enlightened Bisni says, “We will tell the British... Go away; we will rule our country ourselves” (353). Thus the victims of alienated labour progressively try to overcome alienation and subjugation. How far the novel adheres to the representation of this process is a different matter. Historical sense is impossible without a sense of change which *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* has and *Seuji Patar Kahini* has not. The ahistorical nature of *Seuji Patar Kahini* and the historicity of *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* can be further demonstrated with a few other pieces of evidence. Not only is *Seuji Patar Kahini* content with the drama of only one unchanged generation, but it does not provide any clue to the exact historical period when this generation lived. But, the beginning sentence of *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* begins with the exact date and time – the afternoon of the twelfth of June of 1886. It elaborately describes the earthquake of 1897 and refers to several historical incidents like the proposed annexation of Assam with Bengal.

Workers’ Union

There is no trace of a labour union in *Seuji Patar Kahini*. But, *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* narrates the formation, function, and struggle of the workers’ union in Rupohijan Tea Estate under the leadership of Tulsi. It mentions such unions in other estates as well. Amalendu Guha’s *Planter Raj to Swaraj* tells us that workers’ unions in the tea estates of Assam had not been formed until 1939-40. A 1951 novel *Seuji Patar Kahini* which does not refer to any historical date could have preferred to delineate the formation of such

unions. But for *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, which is particular in its historical references, the depiction of workers' union is simply a dilution of its historicity, as its plot cannot go beyond the first quarter of the twentieth century as has been calculated earlier. All available historical information including those furnished in *Planter Raj to Swaraj* does not tally with this date. An ideological commitment to depicting coolies' struggle and development inspired this novel to compromise with historical facts and ideological withdrawal from depicting the same impelled the other to shun the opportunity.

Delineation of the British

Seuji Patar Kahini allows us to peep into the interior of British life. Their bedroom, drawing room, and clubhouse manners are exposed, and how they talk among themselves is revealed. But, *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* leaves very limited scope to see the life of the British. There is only one situation when Finley talks privately with Mackenjee. This instance apart, the point of view of the labourers is employed throughout. There is hardly a scene that features the British sahib or memsahib in the absence of the labourers. This proves that this novel is more preoccupied with the idea of delineating the life of tea garden labourers than its counterpart, *Seuji Patar Kahini*. So, it uses the point of view of these labourers throughout.

Psychological and Type Characters

The prime interest of *Seuji Patar Kahini* lies in the mysterious and complicated character of Sonia. Aloti and Ely Seymoore are also depicted with some psychological depth and complexity. But, the psychology of the characters of *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* remains unexplored, the characters are presented almost as types, and to a considerable extent, they carry within them the dominant forces of their society. Thus, unlike *Seuji Patar Kahini*, *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is more focused on the history of the tea garden community of Assam than the mystery of certain complicated individuals.

Nadai and Rupabarir Palas: Comparison

The pressure of the middle-class ideology is more felt in *Rupabarir Palas* than in *Nadai* and therefore, the fact of exploitation under the condition of alienated labour is more conspicuous in *Nadai* than in *Rupabarir Palas*. This, in turn, determines the conceptualisation of the hero, his immediate environment, the metaphor of life and death, etc. Both novels, except for the first part of *Rupabarir Palas* which portrays landlordism as demonic, do not question the existing system. *Rupabarir Palas* even contradicts history in presenting the dewani system as considerably benevolent. Both show how despite the system one can survive and thrive through one's industry and labour. This is the reiterated wisdom of the bourgeois middle class. In both novels, the heroes migrate from one place to another and settle in the new places and thrive through creative labour. The already settled people of 'the new places' show different degrees of sympathy for the migrated heroes: Babar receives more sympathy and support from Sarif, the village elder than Nadai from Bhadiya Gayan. It indicates that success for Nadai will be a harder nut to crack. Both find the new places and new peoples better than their native places and peoples. Both start as servants first and through their honesty and industry both make economic progress and end as landowners themselves. Nadai, as a farm labourer, feels the loss of his labour's product but Babar does not feel the same. Initially, Nadai is not given wages and later he is deceived by Bhadiya Gayan as he is given only a pair of calves worth rupees twenty or thirty whereas he should have been given at least four hundred rupees as calculated by Dambaru Bhattacharyya. Babar is offered both land and daughter by Sarif. Thus the exploitation of Nadai is bitterer than Babar's. To own means of production is not easy for Nadai, but means of production come to Babar very smoothly. Gayan would not give Nadai any land, though he extended other supports to him. But Babar gets permanent ownership of land and other occasional help from Sarif. Nadai, the almost illiterate, poses more basic questions about the system than Babar, the literate. Babar protests against the oppression of the landlord but does not question the system itself and he is perfectly content with the dewani system of the new place. Both heroes produce not only for consumption but also to sell in the market. Both heroes share patriarchal values; both crave male children. Though involved in a little bit of trade,

Nadai is more of a farmer than Babar. He sells only his produce and thrives through farming. But, Babar, the farmer, thrives mainly through contract and supply to the militaries. Thus, as a farmer, Nadai is more typical than Babar and Babar is closer to the position of the middle class. Nadai's sense of happiness is almost complete. Babar has a sense of guilt, a trace of sadness, within happiness. Their happiness is inversely proportional to their degree of compromise. In pursuit of material establishment, Babar compromises with his heart which results in his sense of guilt, sadness, and incompleteness, though these senses are very unstable and transitory in his mind. Both of them enjoy the fruits of individual creative labour, both are upgraded from the status of farm labourer or servant but none works to change the system and later both keep others as farm labourers or servants. Nadai, devoted to land and agriculture, abhors modern business. But Babar, the farmer, is a contractor and supplier. Both thus fulfill the wish of the Assamese middle-class but Babar is the dearer child of this class's literary imagination. So, Nadai dies in the story and Babar continues to live.

The exploitative system is crueler in Nadai's story than in Babar's. The sharecropping system threatens the very existence of Kaliya's family and turns Rongai mad. But the dewani system depicted in *Rupabarir Palas* does not have such visibly disturbing consequences. Kaliya's resignation from life puts a question mark on the sense of complete life in Nadai's world and indicates that the system is not without serious limitations and problems. His resignation and asceticism have a palpable influence on the plot: toward the end, Nadai feels similarly, becomes indifferent to the material life, and goes on a pilgrimage with Kaliya during which he dies. That Babar's world also has serious (actually more serious) limitations is signalled by the pathetic life situations of Mariyam and Muslima. But these two women's tragedies could not alter Babar's trajectory of life. Ideology thus affects the unnatural growth of fiction. In both, the Mymensinghians find the circumstances in Assam better than the exploitative system in East Bengal. They are seen gradually strengthened in *Nadai*, but in *Rupabarir Palas* only individual Miyas like Sarif and Babar make material progress. In *Nadai*, Nadai's creative labour transforms not only his own life but Morisuti as well and a school and a hospital are established there. These things appear at Morisuti only after Nadai's arrival. But in *Rupabarir Palas* Babar's creative labour builds up only his personal life and despite

his help to others, there is no transformation of Rupabari owing to his labour. Schools/Madrasas were established there before his arrival. For example, Sarif long ago played a pivotal role in transforming the school into an M.E. Madrasa. Mills, machines, ports, etc. gradually appear at Morisuti as parts of the process of urbanisation. Such changes are not visible at Rupabari. So, conflicts like land versus industry, and justness versus profit-making are inherent in *Nadai*. In *Rupabarir Palas* such conflicts are not visible. Death, decay, destruction, etc. have certain symbolic functions to perform in a novel. They often indicate the exit of an old order and some deeply and disturbingly dehumanising aspects of the current material condition. Death is almost absent in *Rupabarir Palas*. But the story of Nadai is full of deaths and Nadai himself dies in the end whereas Babar continues to live. Nadai wants his sons to become farmers and lovers of the land but Babar has the opposite wish – he does not want to make his children farmers. There is a palpable generation gap between Nadai and his son Mohan which is antagonistic and torments Nadai. Nadai's son becomes, against his will, a contractor like Babar. Contrary to the Nadai-Mohan gap the Babar-Keteki gap is non-antagonistic. Education takes Nadai's sons away from him but brings Keteki closer to Babar and the other villagers. The forceful middle-class ideology of *Rupabarir Palas* celebrates the emergence and development of the middle class represented by Babar and Keteki; this mood of celebration cannot leave space for tragedy, generation gap, etc., and hence finds it imperative to suppress those “negative” elements. The pressure of ideology is inversely proportional to realism. An imposed optimism drags *Rupabarir Palas* away from the real conflicts of life. But *Nadai* does not withdraw from such conflicts, though it has its own ideological bindings.

Pratipad

Appearance versus Reality

The novel cumulatively organises the pattern of appearance versus reality. The leper and his agonised cries function as a symbol of the workers' plight right from the beginning till his death. But Nasiruddin's story reveals that he is no leper but an

unfortunate worker of the company who met with an accident and could not get the necessary assistance from the company. Lasmi is presented as a very light, delightful girl on the verge of frivolity. But later she appears as a committed member of the union and articulates their true need and effectual form of struggle. Chatterjee is thought to be very humble, meek, and lacking in maleness. But he surprises Bodhan with Giasuddin-like talks and dies a courageous death for the workers' cause. Chandi, almost resigned from the practical life, and devoted to religion, sacrifices his life in the interest of the workers. These smaller threads are stitched into a larger thread of appearance versus reality and that is the appearance of the novel as a novel of class, union, and strike while its reality is different.

Title

The title *Pratipad* – the first crescent moon or the first lunar day – looks like a very positive title as it seems to indicate a fresh beginning. Gobinda Prasad Sarma observes, “The novelist, follower of the socialist ideology, reiterates meaningfulness even amidst this failure” (“Ardhashatabdir” 27). But in truth, it is an ambivalent title. As per Hindu Astrology, there are two Pratipads – one begins the fortnight that culminates in *Amabosya* (completely dark moon) and the other in the full moon. The question is: does this Pratipad begin the way for the dark moon or the full moon? The end of the novel signifies two promises: one individual and the other collective. Giasuddin and Pannu are going to be married and Congress is going to begin the Quit India Movement. Giasuddin accepts the failure of the strike and admits that the freedom movement is the way out for the emancipation of the workers in particular and Indians in general. Thus, symbolically, the strike and its aftermath is the dark moon, India's freedom is the full moon and the workers joining the freedom movement is the first moon – the *Pratipad*! So *Pratipad* does not stand for the first organised activity of the workers – the union and the strike.

The Beginning and the End

The novel begins with the workers' plight and ends with a middle-class freedom fighter's letter that carries the promise of a far stronger freedom movement. The first sentence of the novel emerges from the lips of a worker – "I cannot bear it anymore" (Bhattacharyya, *Pratipad* 1) and the last sentence is a piece of information from Mrs. Baruah's father, "If movement outbreaks this time, it will be a terrible movement" (289). The first chapter includes a death – the death of the worker Chandi's wife and the last chapter the promise of marriage – between a worker's daughter and a workers' leader seeking to turn into a farmer and congress volunteer! Thus the novel begins with the industrial working class and ends with the middle class. The beginning "I cannot bear it anymore" lacks the force carried by the ending promise of "a terrible movement". The middle-class, nationalist usurpation of the theme of class and labour is thus completed.

Historicity

The novel is based on several historical facts. The strike narrated here refers to the 1938-39 strike of the workers of Digboi Oil Company. How this strike was a matter of serious concern for not only the contemporary Assam Government but also the contemporary Congress leadership, how a conciliatory board was formed to settle the dispute between the workers and the company, how the British Government declared Digboi a protected area through a war ordinance, how finally the workers are expelled from Digboi – all these are shown in Keshab Narayan Dutta's book *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* (1958). Amalendu Guha's *Planter Raj to Swaraj* informs that these workers bore deep faith in the congress coalition government headed by Gopinath Bordoloi and the novel also depicts this fact. "The Goswami of the novel is the proletarian leader Kedar Nath Goswami of reality. Bolai Chand is Bolairam Pramanik of reality" (G. Sarma, *Birendrakumar* 31). Giasuddin or Dimbeswar Hazarika is also modeled on a true character named Dimbeswar Baruah who was an employee of Digboi Oil Company (48). Though such raw historical facts inform the novel the novel deviates from historicity not only through fiction but also through creating characters without

sufficient history. The characters are presented as almost finished products, not as products of foregone processes of history. We know very little about their past. The bourgeois middle class is more concerned with the product than with the process as the process bears stamps of its appropriation and exploitation of surplus labour.

The Main Protagonists

It has already been discussed above that Chatterjee, the most advanced in sensibilities is relegated from the position of the hero, and Giasuddin, the less advanced, is honoured with the same. Similarly, Lasmi, the most advanced woman in sentiments, is made a foil to the less advanced Pannu. This happens so because the struggle against the condition of alienated labour is not the prime and steadfast concern of the novel. It betrays its mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology in choosing its hero and heroine. It is difficult for the Assamese middle class to be comfortable with a Bengali and communist hero. He may be respected but not loved as a hero as there is every fear that he may drag society on revolutionary lines that may unseat the middle class. For similar reasons, Lasmi cannot be made the heroine as her crystal-clear memory of what Chatterjee said about the union may jeopardise the hero's and the others' ideological shift towards nationalism. So she is stopped by the hero in the middle of her speech and the novel keeps her sleeping in the end!

Symbolism in the Novels

The novels selected for this study are mainly realistic narratives, not symbolic ones. But at crucial moments, particularly at the end, they employ a few symbols. The crescent moon in *Pratipad*, the sunrise in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, the silence and the moon in *Seuji Patar Kahini*, the rain and the paddy field filled with the water of the rain in *Rupabarir Palas* may be cited as examples. The content of optimism in the symbol of the crescent moon works for hiding the failure and diversion of class struggle, that of the sunrise hides the workers' union's struggle against the condition of alienated labour, that of the rain and the water in the paddy field hides the sufferings of Mariyam, Muslima and

the common Miya people. The symbol of silence and the moon as the only companion of Nareswar at the end of *Seuji Patar Kahini* has the pessimistic content that man is ultimately lonely and his/her search for happiness is bound to fail – this hides the potential element of class struggle in the novel. Jameson's remark is revealing, "He employs the first (i.e. symbols) when he is unable to grasp the meaning of that particular reality, or when he cannot accept the conclusion to which the development of that reality leads....And so in art, when an artist leans toward symbolism it is an infallible sign that his thinking – or the thinking of the class which he represents, in the sense of its social development – does not dare penetrate the reality which lies before his eyes" (337). The symbols mentioned here help the novels to divert themselves from the content of class struggle as this sort of struggle is not wanted by the mainstream Assamese middle class.

From the detailed analysis of the ideology of each of the selected novels done above a few general conclusions may be made. What may be the ways of adequate representation of labour in novels? They may be as follows: to take a labour-related storyline as the point of entry; to imagine a hero from the rank of the labourers who confronts the exploitative mechanism of the condition of alienated labour, and fights against that preferably in an organised way; to give sufficient space and scope to the protagonists of this class and events related to them; to depict scenes at workplaces to unravel the mechanism of alienated labour, etc. In each of the selected novels, a labour-related storyline is not taken as the point of entry, or if taken, it is taken inadequately and it functions as a curtain to hide the stories of alienated labour. Such a storyline is taken as the point of entry which can serve the interest of the Assamese middle class. The heroes and the heroines are taken primarily from the mainstream Assamese middle class and even if they are from outside this class, they serve the interests of this class or are promoted as members of this class. The heroes do not work for a radical transformation of society because such radical steps are beyond the intention and imagination of the Assamese middle class. Those protagonists who work for such transformations are either not presented as the heroes, or are killed before the end, or are given very little space, or are presented as frivolous and unconvincing, or are seen as having changed ideology at

least before the end. Under the pressure of this class ideology, the novels divert or suppress all potential struggles for radical transformation. The middle-class ideology makes the hero not a community man but an individual who is distinct from his community particularly because of his individual virtues like industriousness which leads to his success. And if he is not industrious, he is at least different from people around him or distanced from them. The main point is that he is a distinct individual; he is not “one of them”. In some of the novels, working-class characters are not given much space and in others, where they find sufficient space, they are not seen in works. Working scenes, where the mechanism of alienated labour could be gauged more adequately, are very few in these labour-oriented novels. It betrays a prejudice that work is not worth representing and leisure, which is a synonym for pleasure in such novels, is fit for representation in fiction. This is a misnomer specific to the middle class that does not participate in the fundamental process of production. In fine, the above analysis reveals that most of the aspects of content and form are largely determined by the middle-class ideology in general and the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology in particular.

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Chapter V

Conclusion

What is important in the work is what it does not say.

Pierre Macherey

Introduction

This study began with the proposition that the fundamental subject of fiction is man. “However various the données of literature, the basic question is, and will remain: what is Man?” (Lukács, *Contemporary* 19). Man is distinguished from other animals by free, conscious, and creative labour which is the human essence. This essential humanity is lost when labour is forced and alienated. So, ideally, a novel in general and a labour-oriented novel in particular, should address the issues of creative and alienated labour to fulfill its purpose of delineating the “just and lively image of the human nature” (Dryden para. 11). But if a novel retreats from doing just that or does that in a very limited or deformed way, it must be concluded that the novel serves the cause of some ideology. Besides, it is already noted that the creative man creates social processes along with material objects and keeps creating and complicating them throughout history and thus gives rise to an over-determined social reality that cannot be comprehensively perceived without a vantage point, that is, a point of entry. But if “the proper study of mankind is man” (Pope, *An Essay* Epistle II) and the main subject of all art including fiction is no other than man, and man’s essence is free, conscious, and creative labour, then, ideally, the point of entry of a novel should address creative and/or alienated labour. If a novel does not take up creative and/or alienated labour or some story thread that represents it as the point of entry, it must be the consequence of some ideological impact on the novel. It is more so in the case of a labour-oriented novel. This impact of ideology will not be

limited to the delineation of labour or the choice of the point of entry; it will impact many other aspects of a novel, more particularly on formal aspects which are directly related to the content of labour and are like the choice of the hero and the heroine, the portrayal of labour unions and their activities, amount of space given to the working class characters, delineation of the scenes at workplaces, the beginning and the end of a novel, etc.

Since the Assamese novel is a product of the Assamese middle class and since the former reached its pinnacle in the period when the latter consolidated itself as the most dominant power of the state, it is logical to think that the latter's ideology will have a considerable impact on the former's content and form. Sometimes it is seen in the history of literature that authors can transcend their class ideology and thus represent social reality more adequately. Dostoevsky, for instance, wanted to advocate for Christian moral principles as opposed to revolutionary idealism in *Crime and Punishment* (1867) but ended up drawing the readers' sympathy towards the "sinful" hero and the cause of the revolution. Balzac, despite his skepticism about emerging capitalism and his loyalty to the aristocracy, could not but depict the historically inevitable downfall of the aristocracy and the gradual rise of the bourgeois capitalist class. Lukács poignantly comments, "It is precisely this discrepancy between intention and performance, between Balzac the political thinker and Balzac the author ... that constitutes Balzac's historical greatness" (*Studies* 21). Also, "Balzac's greatness lies precisely in the fact that despite all his political and ideological prejudices he yet observed with incorruptible eyes all contradictions as they arose and faithfully described them" (38-39). Further, "However biased Balzac may have been in favour of the nobility, he saw quite clearly the inevitability of its extinction, nor did he fail to see its internal decadence" (40). Such triumph of art over ideology has not been noticed in the selected Assamese novels; they very easily succumb to the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology. So, labour is represented from the point of view of this class, artistic means are employed to envelope alienated labour as far as possible, and class struggle is often marginalised or suppressed, or forgotten under the pressure of other themes the middle class is fond of. The opportunity to make labour the point of entry of the over-determined textual reality is shunned by each of the novels. The David of the Marxian imagination is comfortably beaten by the Goliath of the liberal imagination.

Summary of the Chapters

In the introductory chapter of this thesis, the philosophers' ideas about labour are examined and it has been seen that they are more interested in the division of labour. A few of them have reservations against this but most of them find it profitable not only socially or economically but also morally. Marx finds the division of labour depressive and opines that its abolition is required to attain the human essence which, for him, is free, conscious, creative labour. In class societies, particularly in capitalism, labour is not free but forced; not creative but alienated, and in such labour process, the subject gets separated from the object, the producer from his product, and the man from her essence. Ideally, in productive work, in and through her product, the man realises herself, returns to her essence, expands herself, becomes herself, and enjoys herself and her work. Marx's engagement with the idea of labour appears to be the most serious one as he links it with the human essence. But, though labour, and therefore the economy, is basic to human existence human society is much more than that; it is a complex of many processes each determining and getting determined by all the others in varying degrees. This gives rise to a very complex phenomenon called the over-determined reality to make a comprehensive sense of which one needs a point of entry. This point of entry is that concept which facilitates a theory or a theoretician to make a comprehensive sense of the over-determined totality of reality. It is necessarily incomplete, partisan, and ideological. A novel also, while representing this over-determined reality, the "woven and interwoven" (Eliot 113) complex "web of human lots" (Markels 20), through certain story threads, may choose one story thread as its point of entry. This is its principal thread in the sense that it is inter-determined by or intertwined with the highest number of other story threads. This study endeavoured to see if the points of entry of these so-called labour-oriented novels are some story threads related to labour.

Here arises a theoretical problem. The theory of creative labour as the human essence is part of essentialist Marxism while that of over-determination and point of entry is part of anti-essentialist Marxism. To go ahead with both, their contradiction needed to be resolved theoretically. A section of the first chapter has been devoted to this question.

This researcher's basic argument ran like this: throughout history, man has been creating not only material objects but also social processes. With time man develops and complicates those processes and their relationships; they get more and more intertwined the result of which is over-determination. Over-determination is thus a human creation and expressive of the human essence. Even an anti-essentialist theory is expressive of the human essence. Paul Smith argues that extreme anti-essentialism is a kind of essentialism. Eagleton also, in his *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, says that opposition to essentialism, meta-narratives, etc. is essential to post-modernism. George DeMartino tries to defend the theory of over-determination from the charges of essentialism by arguing that over-determination is not ontological given but a theoretical choice and a theory does not just describe but shape the world. But theoretical choice is a human choice, that is, expressive of the human essence, and to "shape" the world one needs to "know" the world, or how can one differentiate between "shaped" or "pre-shaped" versions of the world? How can one claim that one's theory has "shaped" the world if one does not have a descriptive idea about its previous "pre-shaped" form? So description of the world cannot be avoided. And how can the exponents of over-determinism, who ask "Why do you need a moral anchor?" (qtd. in DeMartino 232) harp on the ideas of "social theft", "class injustice" etc.? These terms may bear force only if one recognises the human essence, that the product is the realisation of the human essence, and that through it man becomes and expands himself. If this product is taken away from the producer, it is an injury to the human essence, an injury to the process of his becoming man. Only in this sense, it is theft and injustice. Or what if someone else takes away the product from the producer, why the over-determinist is so nervous about it? So over-determination is useful in broadening our views, it helps to realise that society is much more complex than we thought before, but unending over-determination will be a contradiction of terms and it will lead us nowhere. Finally, it is expressive of the human essence – creative labour.

In the next section, the study deals with the review of the literature. It has been observed that the theories of labour in general and the Marxist theory of labour, in particular, are not taken as the vantage point of criticism even in the discussion of labour-oriented novels. Sarah Brouillette, Carolyn Lesjac, and Liam Connel have discussed novels addressing mainly the issue of labour and at times come close to Marx's idea of

alienated labour. But, a full exposition of the idea of alienated labour and criticism based on those are not attempted by these critics. In Assamese criticism, it has been observed that the critics have not approached the Assamese novels in general and the selected ones in particular keeping in mind the ideas of creative labour, alienated labour, over-determined reality, and point of entry. Only Hiren Gohain adequately addresses the issue of labour particularly in his criticism of *Seuji Patar Kahini* exposing extensively the exploitation and oppression of the working class, but he also refrains from mentioning the term “alienated labour” and its features, functions, and impacts. Except for Gohain and to some extent, Gobinda Prasad Sarma, the critics are silent about the role of ideology behind the making of these novels.

The second chapter unravels how labour in its alienated and creative forms gets represented in the selected novels. For this, primarily Marx’s ideas of creative and alienated labour propounded in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* are quoted, and whether or not the textual materials of the novels are aligned with these ideas is examined. In each of the novels, the characteristics, functions, and impacts of the condition of alienated labour have been observed in varying degrees. All of them more or less tend to conceal alienated labour by employing different means. The highest exposition of the effects of the condition of alienated labour is achieved by *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, particularly in its first four chapters but this theme and its twin theme of class struggle are so surrounded by other themes like enlightenment and assimilation that it loses dominance in the novel. *Seuji Patar Kahini* more hides than reveals it. Incidents of love, flirting, fun, revelry, etc. are so much piled up over it that the reader finds it difficult to peep into the facts of alienated labour. Further, alienated labour is not so much dramatised in the present time of the novel as it is reported as matters of the past. *Pratipad* incorporates so many themes of other struggles that class struggle, an outcome of alienated labour, is ultimately diverted and marginalised. It ultimately represents the inefficacy of class struggle waged against the condition of alienated labour and establishes that without involving in a nationalist freedom struggle the workers cannot achieve their goal. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* takes a similar course in this regard. In *Pratipad*, the condition and effects of alienated labour are sought to be expressed through symbolic means like the sufferings of Minubai and the leper and also

through leaflets and letters. But a real drama of the pains and sufferings caused for the characters by the condition of alienated labour is not much dramatised. Jebunnisa, for example, is not seen as suffering from economic hardship; her pain is caused by Jilapsy's sexual harassment and Ismail's indifference to her love. In *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas*, the heroes' stories of creative labour and economic success conceal the potential stories of alienated labour of the common mass suggested by the texts. Despite the heroes' creative labour, these two novels also do not suggest any condition of creative labour. A brief comparison with Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Two Leaves and A Bud* is made to see how a labour-oriented novel set in a tea garden of Assam, unlike those this researcher has studied in this thesis, may prioritise the representation of labour in general and the condition of alienated labour in particular. To indicate the universality of the real condition of alienated labour of the plantation labourers a section is devoted to a brief study of such workers in Bangladesh.

Abstract labour finds its exposition and existence through the concrete labourers. Priority given to labour is expressed through priority given to the labourers. In fiction, one way of giving this priority is to draw the hero and the heroine from the ranks of the labourers. In *Seuji Patar Kahini* the hero is not from the tea garden labourers' community; he is in service, but not in productive labour. The heroine Sonia is born to a British sahib and a woman from the tea garden labourers' community. In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* the ultimate hero Arjun pursues higher education and thinks of becoming a doctor, not a worker. In *Pratipad*, the working class leader, Giasuddin thinks of joining the farmers' class and the freedom movement. In *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas*, the heroes from the agrarian labourers' class rise to the class of the rich farmers or landlords. A true working-class hero or heroine is nowhere to be found. If a few of them are from the working class they change either class or ideology or both before the conclusion of the novel. Nadai, Babar, Giasuddin, Arjun – all are such heroes. All these novels show a tendency not to depict scenes at workplaces where alienated labour can best be viewed. It is found that the selected novels show a high degree of reluctance to depict the working scenes which underlies the prejudice that work is not fit for fictional representation. But to show that it may be otherwise a comparison is made with the first chapter of Manik Bandyopadhyay's novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* which represents work with an artistic finish

and in the process unravels the condition of alienated labour focusing on exploitation. Of course, one must admit that social reality is a totality of many interlinked processes, and textual reality, which is the representation of social reality, cannot but depict as many processes as possible through a variety of storylines. Though labour should be the main concern of a labour-oriented novel, it, ideally, cannot but depict other issues to represent the complex, “woven and interwoven” “web of human lots” as mentioned by the narrator of *Middlemarch*. Then how can a labour-oriented novel do representational justice to the issue of labour without marginalising the other issues of the “web of human lots”? This brings us to the ideas of over-determination and point of entry. Whether or not a storyline related to labour is made the point of entry for the over-determined textual reality is examined in the next chapter.

The third chapter enquires about the story threads of the selected novels to see whether points of entry of the over-determined textual realities of the novels are focused on labour (alienated and creative) or anything else. Six to eight story threads for each novel have been identified and it is observed that there is at least one thread in each that is related to labour – creative or alienated. Two things have happened. In *Seuji Patar Kahini*, *Pratipad*, and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, the thread of labour, that is, alienated labour, is not given dominance, is marginalised, or even eclipsed. In *Nadai* and *Rupabarir Palas* the most dominant thread, that is, the point of entry is related to creative labour, but it indicates no system of creative labour; creative labour is limited only to the main protagonists and it conceals the potential stories of alienated labour. The thorough analyses of the story threads yield interesting results. First, it shatters a few myths about the subject of the selected novels. *Seuji Patar Kahini* is supposed to be a novel based on the life of the tea garden labourers which is proven as untrue and it is established that it depicts how the Assamese middle-class views that life. *Pratipad* is said to be a strike novel, but a close analysis of the threads of the strike and class struggle reveals that it is neither a strike novel nor a novel of class struggle. *Rupabarir Palas* is seen as an allegory of the Miyas’ migration to Assam whereas this study finds that the hero is not a representative Miya and his story is quite a story of individual pursuit and establishment. Secondly, the potential of the labour-related threads for being points of entry is seen and how they are relegated to the status of “just

another thread” is closely observed. Not explicitly, but implicitly, this chapter hints at the fact that a labour-related thread is not taken as the point of entry, and when taken, it is not taken adequately; it is limited to the heroes and serves to hide alienated labour, under the pressure of the Assamese middle-class ideology.

Lukács said, “Without ideology, there is no composition” (Writer142) and the role of ideology behind the making of the selected novels is extensively discussed in the fourth chapter. The Assamese novel is an Assamese middle-class product. The author may sometimes transcend their class ideology, but in the selected novels it does not happen. Fathered by British imperialism and bereft of economic freedom, this class based its idea of nationalism on language and culture. *Bhasa* (language) was *janani* (mother) for it. This class never tried to uproot foreign imperialism and native feudalism. Debabrata Sarma shows that the progressive section of the Assamese middle class wanted to include the migrants to build the Assamese nation. Hiren Gohain points out that “The history of the Assamese middle-class is, so to speak, the recognised history of modern Assam. In this recognised and standard history, the peasants’ revolts of the nineteenth century are a storm outside the periphery” (“Madhyabittar Jeevanbed” 1). “They stood against the *raij mels* and helped to crush them” (Gohain, “Asamar Madhyabitta” 559). They have “been leading the people’s movements giving priority to their respective class interests and neglecting the hopes and expectations of the common people” (Gohain, *Progotir* 107). They drew political power from the rural agrarian people but “came away from the people from whom it drew its power” (Gohain, *Parampara* 112). Their sources of income “were mainly service and land given out for sharecropping” (Gohain, *Parampara* 108). So, they competed against the Bengali middle-class on the question of jobs and did not oppose the dominance of the landlord class in the rural agrarian sector, and could not give the farmers the right to land. This class position and ideology of the Assamese middle class of the first half of the twentieth century continued in the subsequent decades and the selected novels bear its imprints.

Seuji Patar Kahini has not turned into a *kahini* (tale) of *seuji pat* (green leaves); it is not about the coolie life but represents how the Assamese middle-class looks at that life. The mainstream middle-class hero of this seemingly labouring class novel is an escapist. His departure and that of the heroine allegorise the middle class’s aloofness

from the people's issues; the centrality of their story symbolises the centrality of the history of the Assamese middle class in the modern history of Assam. The hero would not earn as a coolie earns, so losing his service as a "boy" he bids farewell to the garden. Assamese middle-class fathered by British imperialism and associated with feudalism, cannot think of social disruption. So, characters working for radical social change are not imagined as the hero or the heroine. Sonia's protest is verbal, misplaced, individual, and ineffectual. Her "mysteriousness" is an ideological evasion; it helps the novel to avoid the marriage between a coolie girl and a mainstream boy. A common girl would have married her lover Nareswar. But she is presented as different from the tea garden labouring masses. She keeps her distance from them, flirts with and loves only the mainstream characters and finally forsakes her people in pursuit of her separate peace. In a way her departure allegorises the Assamese middle class's turning back "from the people from whom it drew its power" (Gohain, *Parampara* 112). The novel does not mention any date yet its action must have taken place in the late nineteenth century. History proves that there were cases of revolt in the garden and the text also includes revolting characters like Feku and Durjon. Yet the novel prefers to depict a hero who does not confront the issues of oppression. The hero and the heroine are not seen in any reforming activities either. The only reformer, Naren, dies very early and he is allowed a space of seven pages only.

Already it is mentioned that the mainstream Assamese middle class distanced itself from the peasants' movements and their class interests like land reform. It tried to keep occupying the land. So lack of land was not an issue for its literary imagination. Nadai in *Nadai*, Guloch in *Surujmukhir Swapna*, and Babar in *Rupabarir Palas* get land easily. The action of *Nadai* proves that land is not a problem for the industrious. The sharecropping system turns Rongai mad but hard-working Nadai thrives despite this system adapting himself to it. The representatives of the old exploitative system have died; the victory of the middle class is shown as inevitable. Nadai's success story is an ideological necessity to conceal the stories of alienated labour. Rongai's failure story could have better exposed the story of class exploitation. Reformers and crusaders die or are given limited scope so that the conflict with the establishment may be avoided. Naren dies in *Seuji Patar Kahini*, Chatterjee in *Pratipad*, Girin in *Rupabarir Palas*, Premnath

in *Nadai*. The stories of Rongai, Kaliya, and the Mymenshinghiyas had the potential for class struggle but the bildungsroman of the humble but hard-working Nadai suppresses all. Presented as a farmer, Nadai is actually a member of the middle class. A believer in the individual worth and hard work, he is an explorer and coloniser of Morisuti. He produces commodities and draws power from the market and modern technology. Despite his bond to land and reservation for the emerging middle class, he is a middle-class bourgeois in its embryonic form. The novel, further, limits the story of creative labour absolutely to one individual who appropriates the alienated labour of others. Since service and land given out for sharecropping were the sources of income of the Assamese middle class, a decisive class fight against land-holding and sharecropping was beyond its literary imagination. So the hero needs to rise as a landlord, land must come to him easily and mainly as the result of his individual worth. This wish-fulfillment of the Assamese middle class can be noticed in *Rupabarir Palas* also.

Pratipad is usually seen as a novel of class struggle while it is only one of the major threads. Despite tracing the development of the working class as per the ideas presented in *the Manifesto of the Communist Party*, the novel dilutes the story of class struggle in various ways and finally, this class struggle gives way to the nationalist freedom struggle. Chatterjee's sensibilities are more advanced than those of Giasuddin. Yet not Chatterjee but the latter is the hero. His death is an ideological necessity as a living Chatterjee would drag the plot towards a class struggle for which the Assamese middle-class sensibilities are not prepared. An Assamese novel of 1970 cannot take a Bengali like him as the hero as the state language movement of 1960 made the Assamese-Bengali conflict more sanguine. The Assamese middle class must retain the hero position. The author's transition from Marxism to Gandhian ideals is allegorically marked by Giasuddin's vacillation. A working-class leader of the strike, he loses hope in the strike, wishes to join the farmer class, and puts his trust in the Congress-led freedom movement. *Pratipad* (the first crescent moon) does not signify a new phase of the class struggle; it is the crescent moon of the married life of Pannu and Giasuddin and also of the nationalist freedom struggle. The novel ends with a freedom fighter's letter that speaks about the new phase of the freedom struggle. Lasmi, the most advanced woman, is made a foil to Pannu, the heroine. Unlike Pannu, she marries Ismail without

any religious condition. She is freer and free from Pannu's patriarchal idea of "maleness". Her memory of Chatterjee's talk about the union is more precise. Yet Pannu is the heroine. The novel starts and ends with incidents knitted around Pannu. All main three male characters love her. The title also partly indicates her new life. In the end, she is awake and Lasmi is asleep. The failure of the strike is ascertained from the start. The hero chosen is active but ideologically confused. The man with a clearer vision is killed much before the end. The isolation of the strike is augmented variously. Confusion about whether the system of capitalist production or the individual cruelty of certain officials is the cause of the workers' plight further dilutes the theme of class struggle. Neither the logic of capitalism nor the company's policy but individuals like Taoler and Jilapsy are shown as the main factors behind the workers' plight. So Taoler is more focused on. In truth, not only Taoler or Jilapsy, but all the sahibs are instruments of capital. Mrs. Fleming, unaware of the character of capitalist enterprise, talks about Englishness, colour, etc. Giasuddin also harps on something called 'the English character' in which he had deep faith. Thus the hero judges man not in terms of class, but of race, colour, etc.

Rupabarir Palas betrays the Assamese middle class' mythical imagination that the migration was intended by the Miyas and caused by landlordism; the colonial trick behind it is left unseen. Further, the general history of 'failure' and alienated labour of the common Miyas is suppressed by Babars and Sarif's individual stories of 'success' and creative labour. To do this the novel conceals the oppression of the dewani system. The condition of creative labour here is not a systemic but an individual affair. Sarif donates land and Babar helps others. Yet they are appropriators of surplus labour. Babar's story is less an allegory of the migration of the Miyas to Assam than that of the rise of a tenant to a farmer and a farmer to the middle class. He is not a typical Miya. His marriage with Sarif's daughter, Rani, is symbolic of the class association of the rich farmers-cum-landlords and tradesmen. "They did not want to oppose the dominance of the landlord class in the rural agrarian sector" (Gohain, *Parampara* 110). The novel severally deviates from the potential story of class conflict. The time of Babar's flight is preceded and followed by several instances of class struggle. Yet, the novel shuns its potential class struggle. But a peaceful coexistence with the system is portrayed. Thirdly, the hero's story and the point of entry put into shade the miseries of the common Miyas. Fourthly,

the cultural assimilation of the Miyas into the Assamese society is made a bigger issue than their economic survival. As the novel shuns Miyas' real socio-economic struggle, its hero also refrains from such struggles or confrontations. His physical escape from Sonapara and mental escape from the problems of love prove this. To satisfy his patriarchal desire for retaining more than one woman and his middle-class desire for self-establishment, an easy solution for a potential conflict of love is obtained: all contending lovers somehow adjust to one another. Mariyam and Muslima create Babar as a lover and this love product is owned by Rani. So, their labour in love is alienated. The middle-class and patriarchal ideology forces the novel to close with a 'happy ending' that shows the hero's magnanimity at the cost of the tragedies of Mariyam and Muslima and the painful oppressed life of innumerable Miya people. Adaptability is a middle-class virtue that Babar has enormously and his adaptations always contribute to his class promotion and economic progress.

Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya exposes the condition of alienated labour more explicitly. In it, the fight goes on and the main protagonists are taken from the oppressed. Yet it betrays the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology. The potentiality of class struggle is not fully utilised. The degree of oppression depicted in the beginning is not felt in the rest. The workers' progress is not seen as resulting from their struggle but from the sahibs' goodwill. The progress of their awareness is seen as a result of the mainstream's help. The union is formed but not a single activity of it is described. The workers' collective fight is always against the violation of the modesty of some women but never against economic exploitation. The class struggle gives way to the nationalist freedom struggle. The workers' union seems to be orphaned right at its birth. Other matters like enlightenment, assimilation, etc. – dear themes of the Assamese middle class – suppress the class struggle. The three books of the novel represent three phases of the development of the life and consciousness of the so-called coolies. Banha represents his community's silence. Tulsi represents its class consciousness and fighting spirit. He stands for the growth of the individual also. Arjun represents its highest aspiration. He is more developed as an individual. He does not bother about the economic and political troubles of his community. His wish to become a doctor is purely a personal pursuit. The novel ends with him looking at the sunrise in the east. This symbolises the beginning of a

new phase of more education, more assimilation with the mainstream, and more involvement in the national struggle; it does not require unionism. The working-class leader, Tulsi, fathers a middle-class son, Arjun. Chitta, the working class leader transforms into a freedom fighter. His ideological shift is suggestive of the novel's ideological shift. The journey of the protagonist from Banha through Tulsi to Arjun is the journey from the community man to the individual man. The novel enacts this agenda of middle-class individualism. Further, the land-hungry mainstream Assamese middle-class can allow the coolies to have the right to education, but not the right to land. This class feels the need for the building of a greater Assamese nation based on the Assamese language. So the threads of assimilation and Arjun's education eclipse the thread of unionism. So the class struggle is not taken as the point of entry. The all-inclusive point of entry – the life and struggle of the plantation workers – loses focus on the condition of alienated labour.

Ideology controls several formal aspects of the novels. The title may be considered first. *Seuji Patar Kahini* is an ironic title. The connotation of the green leaves (*seuji pat*) hides the fact of oppression and pain of people. Irony more hides than reveals. This is in keeping with the novel as it also more hides than reveals. The title of *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is more evocative of the sufferings of the toiling mass. This novel is also more revealing of alienated labour. *Seuji Patar Kahini* starts and ends with the mainstream but *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* with the coolies. Both start in the evening but whereas the former ends at midnight, the latter ends in the morning. The former delineates only one generation of the coolies but the latter three distinct stages that continually develop. Workers' union is not there in the former, but it is there in the latter. *Nadai* is more revealing of alienated labour than *Rupabarir Palas*. The exploitation of Nadai is bitterer than Babar's. Means of production come to Babar easier. Almost illiterate Nadai's questions about the system are more poignant than those of the literate Babar. The system in *Nadai* makes Rongai mad but that in *Rupabarir Palas* has no such conspicuous effects. Nadai is a purer farmer than Babar. He sells his own product. Babar supplies other materials to the military. Nadai's growth influences the growth of the surroundings. But Babar's growth is almost entirely individual. Nadai wants his children to become farmers. Babar wants his children to become educated and removed from

farming. Thus the impact of the Assamese middle-class ideology is deeper in *Rupabarir Palas* than in *Nadai*.

There is a pattern of appearance and reality in *Pratipad*. The central thread of appearance and reality is that the novel looks like a novel of class struggle but in reality, it is not; the middle-class ideology bars it from being a novel of class struggle. There are several other such minor threads. The leper in reality is no leper. Lasmi appears to be frivolous but she is a committed union member. Chatterjee looks humble but dies a heroic death. Chandi seems to resign from life but dies for the cause of the workers. These cumulatively build up the pattern of appearance and reality. The title *Pratipad* does not indicate a new beginning of the workers' struggle. It is a new beginning of Pannu and Giasuddin's relationship and a new phase of the freedom movement. It begins with a worker and ends with a middle-class freedom fighter. The novel depicts a truly historical event but the characters except Giasuddin, have little history. The most advanced Chatterjee and Lasmi are not taken as the hero and the heroine. Now the impact of ideology on symbolism may be discussed. The content of optimism in the symbol of the crescent moon in *Pratipad* works for hiding the failure and diversion of class struggle, that of the sunrise in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* hides the workers' struggle against the condition of alienated labour, that of the rain and the water in the paddy field in *Rupabarir Palas* hides the sufferings of Mariyam, Muslima and the common Miya people. The symbol of silence and the moon as the only companion of Nareswar at the end of *Seuji Patar Kahini* has the pessimistic content that man is ultimately lonely and her search for happiness is bound to fail – this hides the potential element of class struggle in the novel. Jameson's remark is revealing, "When an artist leans toward symbolism it is an infallible sign that his thinking – or the thinking of the class which he represents ... does not dare penetrate the reality which lies before his eyes" (337). The symbols mentioned here help the novels to divert themselves from the content of class struggle as it is not wanted by the mainstream Assamese middle class.

The first objective of this study was to examine how the selected novels represent labour in general and alienated and creative labour in particular and what role the

Assamese middle-class plays in delineating creative and alienated labour. The Assamese novel is the product of the Assamese middle class. Eagleton's general remark on the birth of the form of the novel may be quoted here in support of that claim, "If it is a form particularly associated with the middle class, it is partly because the ideology of that class centers on a dream of total freedom from restraint" (*The English* 2). The Assamese middle-class ideology betrays itself in varying degrees and various ways in the formulation of the main protagonists of fiction, particularly the labour-oriented novels we are analysing. The hero is a male, mainstream, Assamese middle-class individual. The Assamese middle-class striving to achieve leadership in socio-cultural and politico-economic spheres of the state strives also to fulfill the slot for the hero in fiction. If he is not from the mainstream, he should, at least, earnestly try to assimilate into the Assamese language and culture. In other words, such a hero must serve the class interest of the Assamese middle class, that is, to strengthen Assamese nationalism through cultural means. In support of these claims, it may be stated that though *Seuji Pator Kahini* appears to be a novel based on the life of the tea garden labourers, the hero, Nareswar, is recruited not from this community but from the mainstream. The heroine, Sonia, is also not a coolie girl in the exact sense of the term. There is no scene in the novel where one or both of these two are absent. The characters of the pure tea-garden labourers are given relatively much less space. The novel begins and ends with the mainstream character Nareswar. In *Nadai*, Nadai, the mainstream character, is the main protagonist, and in *Pratipad*, Dimbeswar alias Giasuddin. In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* the main protagonists are taken from the tea garden labourers' community, but here also the ultimate hero Arjun is going to fulfill the Assamese middle-class dream of strengthening the Assamese nation through education and assimilation; Arjun, unlike his father Tulsi, maintains distance from the workers' union. Babar in *Rupabarir Palas* is a migrant Miya, but he does his utmost to get assimilated into the Assamese community, and his daughter, Keteki, not only bears an Assamese name, but practices writing poetry in Assamese.

The hero should not be a crusader against the existing social system; he may at best adjust himself to it. This indicates the middle-class fear of a ruthless or radical change of the social system that helps its parasitical life to thrive. Thus escape or

withdrawal, but not confrontation is the basic character of the hero. The fictional form of this fact is that most of the heroes of the selected novels are fugitives: Nareswar, Sonia, Nadai, Tulsi, and Babar – all are fugitives, and all are displaced. Nareswar, a victim of injustice, runs away from his village leaving behind poor Maloti and his people. He runs away from the garden also leaving behind the suffering multitude. He does not mention oppression, let alone fight against it. Sonia's escape from the garden is also a kind of flight from the issues faced by her own people. Nadai does not confront his cruel uncle; he prefers to run away. Later also he does not fight against the exploitative landlords, rather finds it more comfortable to go away from that village and start a colony at Morisuti. Babar's fight in the beginning against the landlord is purely personal and temporary; he leaves his ground and runs away to Assam. If by chance, the hero is a fighter, a protester, he must change his course, soften himself, and adjust himself to the system upheld by the mainstream Assamese middle-class at least before the end of the novel. All is well that ends well! We see this in the characters of Nadai, Babar, and Giasuddin. Giasuddin, the bold working class leader, realises that the working class can succeed only through the congress-led freedom movement. Thus he wants to drag the class struggle to the nationalist struggle. Chitta does similarly in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*. Babar in *Rupabarir Palas* starts with fighting against oppression. But, once in Assam, he becomes humble and liberal, one who helps even a wicked enemy. If the hero is a worker, he should not be seen working at his workplace, where his economic exploitation may be more visible. His exploitation should be reported, but not dramatised. He should rather be seen in activities like love-making, merry-making, protesting, helping, or assisting others.

The second objective was to explore how the novels represent over-determined reality and what points of entry are chosen to do that. It is found that the labour-oriented novels created by the Assamese middle-class authors are quite unwilling to take labour as the point of entry. *Seuji Pator Kahini* has several story threads like 1) the life of the tea garden people of Assam before the Independence, 2) the class struggle of the tea garden people against the condition of alienated labour, 3) the love affair between Nareswar and Sonia, 4) Prema-Aloti-Boiragi love-triangle, 5) the myth and history of the Oja family, 6) social reform activities of people like Naren and challenges ahead and 7) failure of the

search for happiness, peace, and humanity away from all conditions of oppression, injustice, cruelty, and inhumanity. The novel makes the last one its point of entry which is the expression of a middle class that is quite dependent on British colonial imperialism and which cannot delink itself from the neo-Vaishnavite idea of taking this world as a *maya* (illusion). This researcher wrote elsewhere, “Within this class, from the past to date, some medieval, feudal, patriarchal values have been being mixed in varying degrees with the liberal humanist this-worldly consciousness ... In the case of Assam, the heritage of neo-Vaishnavite tradition of regarding this world as ‘a transitory respite’, *maya* etc. may additionally be seen among this class” (Dutta 133). The story threads in *Nadai* are 1) the making of a farmer, 2) survival of the fittest, 3) exploitation of the sharecropper, 4) class conflict between the farmers and the landlords, 5) conflict between rural/pastoral simplicity and modernisation, 6) impact of the freedom movement on an interior village of Assam and 7) creative labour’s production of forces that it cannot control. The last is its point of entry. *Nadai*, of course, has built its point of entry around the subject of labour. But, it has already been shown that creative labour here is not systemic but limited to the exceptional hero’s individual life and the story of creative labour suppresses several potential stories of alienated labour and class conflict. It thus serves to promote middle-class values like competition, hard labour, adaptability, individualism, etc., and the Assamese middle-class’ distaste for revolutionary class struggle.

Pratipad also interweaves several story threads. They are 1) the failure of a strike organised by the oil well and refinery workers of Digboi, 2) the class struggle of the oil-well and refinery workers of Digboi against the condition of alienated labour built by the Digboi Oil Company, 3) the struggle, particularly of women, against various forms of patriarchal repression, 4) the impact of the freedom movement of India on the oil-well and refinery workers of Digboi, 5) love and marriage, 6) the struggle of men and women living at Digboi for a happy life free from oppression, repression, and exploitation. Even though the ground for organised class struggle remained lying fallow, the novel marginalised this potential by diluting the theme of this specific struggle with the fluids of other kinds of struggles. Suppressing the class struggle of Marxian imagination the novel facilitates all kinds of struggles of the liberal imagination of the middle class. So, the struggle of men and women living at Digboi for a happy life free from oppression,

repression, and exploitation becomes the point of entry. The story threads of *Rupabari Palas* are 1) the migration of Miyas to Assam, their settlement here and their gradual assimilation into the Assamese society, 2) the struggle of the Miya people to settle in Assam and to assimilate into the Assamese society and the conflict there from, 3) love-quadrilateral and the problems thereof, 4) involvement of the Miyas into the question of the creation of Pakistan, 5) impact of the Second World War on a backward region of Assam mainly inhabited by the Miyas, 6) landlordism in East Bengal and the class struggle it entails, 7) famine in Bengal and the human tragedy, 8) the survival and class-promotion of the fittest Miya through creative labour. The last one is the point of entry. As in *Nadai*, in this novel also the point of entry addresses the question of labour. But, as in *Nadai* again, creative labour here is not systemic, it is an individual affair of the main protagonists and it functions to eclipse the stories of alienated labour of many. Like *Nadai* it also serves to promote middle-class values like competition, hard labour, adaptability, individualism, etc., and the middle-class distaste for revolutionary class struggle. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* does not have too many story threads. Some threads are simply extensions or elaborations of the main thread or the point of entry and some others are not threads but episodes only. These threads or episodes are 1) The tea garden labourers' life under the condition of alienated labour and the gradual development of their fight against that condition, 2) contacts between the tea garden labourers and the mainstream Assamese people, 3) the formation of workers' union and the coolies' fight for the improvement of life-condition under it, 4) enlightenment of tea garden labourers through education symbolised by Arjun's and Rumni's schooling, 5) impact of the freedom movement, 6) accident in the river Chandini, death of Manager Fredrick and its aftermath and 7) the earthquake of 1897 and its impact on Rupohijan Tea Estate. The first one is the point of entry and doubtless, it directly addresses the issue of alienated labour. Despite this, it has been seen that this novel also dilutes the issue of representing the condition of alienated labour and the struggle against it through several means. One important means is to make the struggle more cultural than politico-economic and another is to divert the struggle from class to nationalist. Lurking behind all this is the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology.

The third question this study is meant to deal with is if the Marxian imagination plays any role in the making of the selected novels. Julian Markels defines the Marxian imagination in this way, “This is the imagination of the enlargement of life and freedom specifically promised by the abolition of class when class is understood as an over-determined process of appropriating and distributing surplus labour without consulting those who perform the labour” (12). This is opposed to the liberal imagination advocated by Lionel Trilling which he defines as a “great primal act of imagination by which it establishes its essence and existence – in the interest, that is, of its vision of a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction of human life” (xiii). Thus both types of imagination – liberal and Marxian – crave the general enlargement of life and freedom, but the latter is distinguished from the former by the fact that it believes that the general enlargement of life and freedom is possible only through the abolition of classes. An imagination of the abolition of classes cannot but see the classes, their contention, their positions in the system of production, and the fight of the exploited classes against the appropriators of the alienated labour. Given the limitations of the historical situations, a novel may not be able to visualise a free and enlarged life achieved through the abolition of the classes, but it can certainly represent that desire and depict the class struggle which is the path to achieve that life. In this regard, the selected novels represent varying degrees of curious mingling of the liberal and Marxian brands of imagination and in the last instance allow the liberal imagination to get the better of the Marxian. This results from the impact of the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology.

Shashi Sharma remarks, “The contribution of *Seuji Patar Kahini* in invigorating the trend of the Assamese progressive novel must be recognised because it has been able to show hatred toward the oppressors and sympathy towards the oppressed” (“Asomiya” 44). One implication of Sharma’s remark is that the novel incarnates the Marxian imagination. But, it is far from the truth. *Seuji Patar Kahini* examines the society of the late Ahom rule, the pre-Independence society of the Ojar Gaon, the tea garden society, and the society of the British officials in Assam to explore the possibility of a free and enlarged life. “How can man escape from the prison of humanity?” (Gohain, “Birinchī” 375). The novel, like Rabindranath, means to say every time, “Hetha noy, hetha noy, anya kotha, anya konkhane” (qtd. in Gohain, “Birinchī” 375). Thus the search

is shown as a failed search and this failure makes the novel a tragedy. Clearly, this cannot be a position that a Marxist imagination will take. Lukács says, “Those who wish to despair may find cause enough and more in our everyday life....Where the philosophy of despair weeps for the collapse of a world and the destruction of culture, there Marxists watch the birth-pangs of a new world and assist in mitigating the pains of labour” (*Studies* 2). None in the novel systematically works for “mitigating the pains of labour”. The pain of labour may be mitigated only through working for the abolition of the classes which, in turn, requires an organised struggle against the condition of alienated labour. Despite the potential for such a struggle, inherent in the condition depicted in the novel, it prefers not to utilise that potential. The departure of the hero and the heroine from the garden is an allegory, not only of the departure of the Assamese middle class from the people’s struggle against the harsh realities of life but also of the novel’s evasion from the theme of class struggle. That sadness and failure of the search are seen in all the societies depicted indicates that this sadness and failure is the universal human lot. Repetition leads to universalisation. The Assamese middle-class that emerged and developed only under the patronisation of British imperialism could not be this-worldly like its European counterpart and so the other-worldly philosophy of the Bhakti movement kept influencing it. “The new Assamese middle-class became extremely conscious of the Mahapurusiya tradition of the past Assam” (Gohain, “Mafizuddin” 408).

Nadai starts with a few basic questions regarding the unjust economic system of society. The hero asks, “Why do only a few people own all the land?” (D. Sarma 167). He resolves, “There must have been some blunder, otherwise this cannot happen” (180). He hankers after the basic means of production: a pair of bullocks and a piece of land. Thus, a dream of freedom and enlargement of life is there in the beginning and so a kind of Marxian imagination is operative at the beginning of the novel. But, the hero is chosen in such a way that he is capable of adjusting to the system but quite incapable of struggling against it, whereas an organised struggle against the system is mandatory to pursue the dream of abolishing class and achieving freedom and enlargement of life for all. This hero, who is unconscious of the class-exploitation, cannot be the flag-bearer of the Marxist imagination; he can rather build up his individual life by adjusting to the exploitative system and himself becoming an appropriator of the surplus labour of others.

The potential of class struggle in the life story of Rongai is not utilised by the novel as it prefers to tell the story of a successful, industrious, and adapting hero. The sharecropping system wanes, and the sharecroppers start to disappear, not because of any conscious fight against it, but because of the system's inherent problems; if its fall is inevitable, conscious human agents are not required for that! "The free and enlarged life for all" remains elusive in the end as the free and enlarged life of the successful hero comes to an end. The landlords and the sharecroppers die; the middle class emerges and develops. Classes change, but not abolished; nobody works for its abolition and nobody dreams of its abolition. Thus the historical changes are marked as it is marked in Marxist history, but the literary imagination of the novel cannot be said to be Marxist.

Pratipad clearly cherished a Marxian imagination, but side by side a liberal imagination also was actively engaged. Finally, the latter got the better of the former. The novel delineated the proletarian struggle against the condition of alienated labour, Chatterjee even dreams of the rule of the workers. In the conversation between Baruah and Chatterjee, Baruah asks about the necessity of the union after the fulfillment of the workers' demands. Chatterjee says, "The union is needed for political reasons. The sahibs will leave our country one day. The workers will have to run the company then" (Bhattacharyya 115). "Freedom means the rule of the workers" (119). But as has been shown in Chapter III the novel does not take the class struggle as its point of entry, it is diluted in many ways particularly diverting the struggle from class to nationalist. Class struggle is shown as only one struggle out of many – moral struggle, gender struggle, racial struggle, religious struggle, freedom struggle, etc. Chatterjee who could lead the class struggle better than all the others, is not taken as the hero and is killed before the end. An active, courageous, but ideologically confused man, Giasuddin, is taken as the hero who makes an ideological compromise and thinks of working for the cause of the workers by chasing the British, not the capitalists, from India through the nationalist freedom struggle led by Congress. The novel began with Chandi, a worker, but comes to an end with a reference to a letter from a freedom fighter, a member of the middle class. Thus the novel means to say that the dream of "freedom and enlargement of life" will materialise into reality less through the class struggle than through the freedom struggle. Finally, the absolute "[f]reedom and enlargement of life" is shown as the outcome of all

sorts of struggles, not only the class struggle. The Marxist imagination thus gives way to the liberal imagination.

Rupabarir Palas begins with a vivid portrayal of the landlordist oppression which the hero's father accepts as natural but the hero protests against. The description of cruelty leveled against the tenants and servants by the landlord and his associates is itself an implicit criticism of the system – a criticism that awakens in the reader a yearning for “freedom and enlargement of life” for all through the abolition of class differences and class exploitation. Thus Marxian imagination, though limited, is at work in the first few chapters of the novel. It is limited because it sees the adverse effect of the class society but does not envisage a way to overcome it. The time depicted in the novel was both preceded and followed by incidents of peasant uprisings in East Bengal. Yet the novel prefers not to dramatise any such organised struggle against landlordism and shows its hero as a run-away character. The novel along with its hero runs away from the battlefield, runs away from the class struggle, and from its Marxian imagination. It does this by shifting the action from the battlefield of Sonapara, East Bengal to Rupabari, Assam, and presenting this new setting as much more friendly to the individual worth. That the ryotwarisystem of the new setting is also based on class exploitation is sought to be concealed under the coverings of the saga of Sarif's and Babar's individual diligence, magnanimity, and success. The characters that do not succeed in life do not succeed in being the major characters of the novel. Thus the class bias of the novel is seen even in its characterisation. The landlord of Sonapara is a type, but Sarif and Babar of Rupabari are individuals. They thrive through exacting the surplus labour of their servants and appear broad-hearted through distributing some surplus among the surplus producers. The final message implies that the freedom and enlargement of life will come through the acts of individuals “who loveth best// all things both great and small” (Coleridge line 614-615), who loves even their enemies. No fight on the class line needs to be fought; abolition of classes is not required. Thus the initial trace of Marxian imagination is completely subverted by the liberal imagination of the middle class.

In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* also, the cruel oppression of the coolies is very vividly portrayed in the first chapters. Doubtless, the brutal oppression is depicted with a rare sympathy for the oppressed. Yet it does not necessarily contribute to the Marxian

imagination. The oppressed people are not a surplus-producing class in the first four chapters, they start producing surplus only after they become coolies in Assam. Class is not a matter of rank or status but it signifies how people are related to the process of production. In the first four chapters, they are not a class in this sense; they are only a potential class. So, the yardstick of class abolition to measure the Marxian imagination cannot be fully applied to these chapters. The theme of class exploitation continues in the subsequent chapters. But the portrayal of extreme oppression, in the beginning, helps to project their life at Rupohijan as better. So, the class exploitation at Rupohijan could not be depicted with the same intensity; the intensity of oppression and artistic intensity of representation of that intense oppression reaches its zenith in the beginning, compelling the rest to have lesser intensity of oppression and lesser intensity of artistic representation of that oppression. So, the rest looks like a relief and this relief is achieved without any class struggle and its representation. The beginning thus is powerful in its own right but it steals the potential power of the rest and thus contributes to weaken the Marxian imagination. So, class exploitation is not intensely felt, a fight against it is not intensely desired and the depiction of the organised activities of the union is not at the centre. The theme of class struggle is diluted by the theme of class promotion; abolition of the classes is not a dream but enlightenment through education and assimilation with the mainstream are the dreams. The novel comes to an end with Arjun and Rumni, the educated duo, looking at the rising sun – a symbol of a new beginning, although there is no change of relation of production in the garden. So, the novel cannot be said to have a Marxian imagination.

The findings may be summarised in this way: first, the representation of labour in general and alienated and creative labour in particular in the selected novels are largely conditioned by the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology. Secondly, the representation of the over-determined reality and the choice of the point of entry in each of the selected novels are largely influenced by the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology. Thirdly, the selected novels blend the Marxian and liberal imagination in various ways but finally, the liberal imagination wins over the Marxian imagination in each of the selected novels as a result of the impact of the Assamese middle-class ideology.

To conclude, Man is the main focus of the novelistic representation and man's essence is free, creative labour. Therefore a novel ideally, has to represent creative labour or its opposite alienated labour. Although labour is fundamental to human existence, human life, and society are a much more intricate "web of human lots", that is, they are complexes of many over-determined processes. A novel cannot avoid giving adequate representation to all such processes. But to remain faithful to its primary task of representing the human essence, a novel can, nay should, take labour as its point of entry while not denying representational justice to other processes of the over-determined social reality. This applies to all novels and more particularly to labour-oriented novels. The five key Assamese novels selected for this research are generally taken for labour-oriented novels and they were published in a period that consolidated the power of the Assamese middle class as the strongest leading force in the state of Assam. Close analysis reveals that creative and alienated labour are not adequately represented and the point of entry of each of these five is also not adequately based on creative or alienated labour. This research finds that it is the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology that causes the inadequacy of representation of labour in each of them. The artist's faithful dedication to his art sometimes enables her to transcend her class ideology and thus to represent the truth of society more adequately. Such transcendence of ideology by art could not be noticed in the selected novels. Each of them somewhat addresses the interlinked issues of labour, alienated labour, exploitation, and struggle, but ultimately dilutes these issues, deviates from them, diverts them, and suppresses them only to serve the ideology of the mainstream Assamese middle class. This impact of ideology is seen not only in the content but in the aspects of form as well. One last word about the theoretical foundation of this research: one need not be theoretically deterred by the fact that the concept of the human essence and the concept of over-determination may theoretically clash as the first is part of essentialist Marxism and the second, of anti-essentialist Marxism. Over-determination broadens our view of human society but unending over-determination will lead us nowhere. Besides, over-determination itself is expressive of the human essence.

Scope for Further Study

The selected novels were published in a period – between India's independence and the Assam Movement – which consolidated the middle class in Assam as the leading socio-cultural and political force of the state and also the Assamese Novel as the dominant literary form. There is no doubt that the material condition of a class continues to be modified and altered, and therefore, modifications of its ideology throughout the decades are also certain to take place. It is logical to think that the ideology of the Assamese middle class in the 1950s must be different, however slightly, from that of the 1980s. Sundar Konwar, the revolting hero of *Karengar Ligiri* (1930), a play by Jyotiprasad Agarwala, gives way to Indranath, the withdrawing hero of *Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Haoda* (1988), by Mamoni Roisom Goswami. The Assamese middle-class which led the State Language Movement in the 1960s and the Language Medium movement in the 1970s, hankers after English medium schools at the turn of the century! How the Assamese middle-class ideology has been modified and what have been its impacts on literary representations could have been a significant research work. However the study of such vicissitudes of ideology must be founded on a complete history of the Assamese middle class from its inception up to the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, all the scholarly historians – Hiren Gohain, Amalaendu Guha, Prafulla Mahanta, Anil Raychoudhury, Sailen Borkataky – who wrote the histories of the Assamese middle class limited their studies till the Independence. New researchers may come forward to construct the history of this class after the Independence to date emphasising its ideological transformations that affected its literary representations. It will surely throw newer lights on the selected novels. Secondly, feminist readings of the novels are possible with a special focus on the pressure of patriarchy felt on the aspects of form. For example, despite the tragedy of the lives of the leading women characters, *Rupabari Palas* is forced to have a happy ending. *Seuji Patar Kahini* ends with Nareswar, not Sonia though Sonia is the most advanced and most interesting character. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is divided into three books which represent three generations of plantation labourers. But these three generations are marked by three men: Banha, Tulsi, and Arjun.

Thus this element of form also excludes women and privileges men. *Pratipad*, although delineates several new women, celebrates through formal means an idea of “maleness”. Giyasuddin, who is less advanced than Chatterjee and who, hankering after a male child, forsakes his childless wife, Madhuri, is taken as the hero. Thirdly, this researcher attempted to resolve the contradiction between the essentialist Marxist theory of creative labour as the human essence and the anti-essentialist Marxist theory of over-determination. This researcher does this job only to that extent which facilitates this study to go forward without a theoretical mess, that is, without an antagonistic theoretical contradiction. Much more needs to be done in this respect. Future researchers, particularly from the domains of Philosophy and Economics, may carry forward this theoretical job from the starting point inaugurated by this researcher. Fourthly, future researchers may apply the theoretical ideas involved in this researcher’s approach to other media of art as well, more particularly to cinema.

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Appendix

A. Research Publications in Journals (2017-2022)

Dutta, Shivajit. "Sahitya-Tatwa Aru Matadarshar Kunwali." *Uttaran*, Nov, 2022, pp. 63-68. ISBN 978-93-95103-59-6.

Dutta, Shivajit. "Mahim Borar *Kathoni Barir Ghatot* Nimna-Madhyabitta Shrenir Jeevanadarsha." *Dogo Rangsang*, Vol IX, Issue XVI, 2022, pp. 132-139. ISSN 2347-7180.

Dutta, Shivajit. "Ideas of Creative and Alienated Labour, Over-determined Reality and Point of Entry in the Discussions of Novels; Dinanath Sharma's *Nadai* – A Case Study." *Aitihya – The Heritage*, Vol XIII, Issue I, 2022, pp. 180-190. ISSN 2259-5399.

Dutta, Shivajit. "Ideological Representation of Creative and Alienated Labour in *Nadai*, an Assamese Novel." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, Vol 9, Issue 3, July-September, 2021, pp. 105-112. ISSN 2395-2636 (P), 2321-3108 (E). DOI 10.333.29/rjelal.9.3.105.

Dutta, Shivajit. "Ideological Representation of Creative and Ailienated Labour in *Rupabarir Palas*, an Assamese Novel." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, Vol 8, Issue 3, July-September, 2021, pp. 76-85. ISSN 2395-2628 (P), 2349-9451 (E). DOI 10.33329/ijelr.8.3.76.

Dutta, Shivajit. "Alienated Labour and its Effects in *In the Forest, the Songs and Shackles*." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, Vol 9, Issue 2, April-July, 2021, pp. 113-116. ISSN 2395-2636 (P), 2321-3108 (E). DOI 10.333.29/rjelal.9.2.113.

Dutta, Shivajit. "Intertextuality between *Rupalim* and *The Artist's World*." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, Vol 8, Issue 2, April-June, 2021, pp. 93-97. ISSN 2395-2628 (P), 2349-9451 (E). DOI 10.33329/ijelr.8.2.93

B. Research Publications in Conference Proceedings (2017-2022)

Dutta, Shivajit. “The Tragedy and Trauma of India’s Partition in *Savage Anguish*.”
Perspectives, Feb, 2018, pp. 766-769. ISBN 978-93-80247.

